

Executive coaching in turbulent times

Erik de Haan
Director of Ashridge Centre for Coaching
Ashridge Business School

Abstract

These are extraordinarily difficult times for the global economy. We are witnessing the deepest recession of a lifetime and a drying up of credit in (almost) all quarters. This has created a situation where many of those who have the capability and desire to turn this economy around and create new growth and new wealth are unable to bring the required upfront investments together. Moreover, insecurities and turbulences seem to abound as precisely the main providers of credit, the leading major banking institutions, cannot accurately assess their own balance sheets and market valuation. This creates financial insecurity, job insecurity and exacerbated contrasts between the haves and have-nots. It all amounts to a huge potential for conflict, and we have already seen outbursts of conflict and mass protestations, even in the developed world: in Greece, France and the UK, to name only a few prominent examples.

This article aims to make a case for the potential for learning and growth that is embedded, albeit hidden, in the turbulence and conflict that we see around us. I believe that the executive coaching and in a wider sense the organisation development consulting professions – professions which are themselves very exposed to the turbulence and conflict in the marketplace as they are expendable without direct negative impact to an organisation's bottom line – do have something to offer regarding the understanding of conflict and the unleashing of the potential for growth and learning that every conflict contains.

In particular the executive coaching profession has much experience working with (internal and interpersonal) conflict. And what I find really interesting is that in its maturation over the last ten years, this profession has also sustained a remarkable feat of conflict resolution, where a wealth of different approaches have now been transformed into a conception of the profession which not only fully honours *all* the previous differences and allegiances, but also integrates the very best of what they had in common (the so-called 'common factors', such as space for thinking, expectancy, a helping relationship, and allegiance to an informing model or conception of coaching) into a core focus of interest. I will provide an account of the types of learning hidden in turbulence and a short overview of this so-called 'relational turn' in the profession of executive coaching.

I Understanding conflict

There is a strong sense in the professional world that we are all going to have to live on fewer resources and on less credit – and that we are simply not ready for that. That instead of giving up any of the gratification of our endlessly renewable desires, we'd rather engage in conflict over the same scarce resources. This means that we are rather more likely to fight very hard to win work and to keep our jobs at the expense of others who might not, than to

adjust to a position where we have a smaller carbon footprint and adjust willingly to a less resourced or less remunerated desk.

So as we are all edging closer to the wolves' existence that Thomas Hobbes so powerfully described¹, let us set our sights closer. Let us examine some of these conflicts, what they mean and what they may teach us.

I won't be talking very much about what I would call everyday conflict. For years now, at around 6 pm every day, particularly on busy days, there has been conflict between my two young daughters. Generally they find an object which is unique, which they cannot share – one takes it, and the other wants it. Or else one pushes the other in play, a gesture which is then not taken as play but as an infringement by the other, and the conflict begins.

Conflict is a fairly everyday occurrence with adults as well, especially when we are tired or under pressure. Conflict is a result of a ubiquitous biological impulse, which tells us to fight or run when something appears that is unexpected, or that looks too big to handle, or that is in some other way threatening.

Another form of everyday conflict, more positive, less reactive, is the result of asserting ourselves, both at work and at home. Here we are looking at much more 'functional' conflict, which we engage in to express ourselves, to test our boundaries, to negotiate, to create some space or attention for something that we believe in.

Sometimes one of these everyday forms of conflict is taken for the other. For example, we mistake a person who is anxious and insecure for someone who is particularly assertive or controlling – or the other way around. Anxiety and assertiveness seem flip sides of the same coin. Asserting ourselves makes us anxious at the same time; or again, when something makes us anxious, one of the ways to get rid of that anxiety is by becoming 'assertive', or combative. I am pretty anxious as I stand here, and at the same time (hopefully) assertive enough to face this 'crowd' and present what I believe to be important.

Here we are approaching a deeper form of conflict, still very everyday but verging onto a deeper level, a form of conflict that we can also find in our clients' 'material' in many a coaching session, and one which I believe is born of *ambivalence*. Ambivalence, again, is a common phenomenon of the working of our minds, whether alone or in collaboration. How often are we wary of others, yet still can't create/be/live without them? How often do we want something and not want it at the same time? Or give up something and not pay the price? In fact, ambivalence seems to go along with all of our desiring. Our desires may at some primordial time have been pure and simple, where we want, we need, we relish something; such as a cup of coffee, peace and quiet, a promotion, or a new client to work with. However, we have long left this pre-paradisiacal environment where we can legitimately want an apple from that tree of knowledge without the concomitant fear of the wrath of God. Clearly, already in the Garden of Eden things were different and desires were mixed with prohibitions and ambivalence. Nowadays, with our desires having got us where we are, in an unsustainable economy, there are increasing tendencies towards a desire to be wary of desiring, to rein ourselves in, to work actively against the desire itself, which I believe is only a new stage in the ongoing cycle of desires, anxieties and defences.

¹ In *Leviathan*, 1660.

Summary: what I have said so far is that, in my opinion, the present state of the economy and of our profession within it, are helping us to think more deeply about turbulence and conflict. Irrespective of the state of the economy – or the profession – conflict is an everyday phenomenon if ever there was one. Conflicts between parties and conflicts within a party, ie internal conflicts or a conflictedness of the mind, are very similar, and in a powerful way both mirror and provoke each other, as they are both essentially based on ambivalence.

II Internal conflicts

Freud² was acutely aware of this rather ubiquitous ambivalence and conflict that seems to shape our lives and life's choices. For this reason he coined the term *psychodynamics*, taking its meaning from classical physics and thermodynamics, where the collision of particles explains things such as temperature, pressure, turbulence (there is our title again!). With psychodynamics he was setting out to embark on a project where internal ambivalences and conflicts would offer an explanation for higher-order aspects of outward behaviour, such as 'personality', 'performance' or 'strategic thinking'. The Latin *conflictus* means 'stricken together', a meaning very close to collision. Freud's proposal amounts to studying:

- collisions among conflicting desires
- collisions between desires and anxieties about having these desires
- collisions of defences with the desires and the anxieties – and also with other defences.

The fact that all this goes on as a daily routine for each and every one of us can be checked by trying to meditate for just one minute – and then noticing the distractions that will take you away from your desire to meditate, or your desire to notice only your breath, or your desire to be thinking about 'nothing'.

I would like to give an example from coaching; one I recently encountered in a coaching conversation, quite typical for the times we live in. My client and I were discussing a strategy document that she had been drawing up for the Board and the CEO, her boss. Her boss had responded in detail to the document, and she pulled the document out from her briefcase – an unusual thing in our coaching relationship – to show me his comments, which she had highlighted with a marker pen. She went on to talk less about the document, and more about how her CEO failed to understand both the document and the present output of her division ("He is like a baby playing with the toy of an eight-year old" she said) and her difficulty in challenging him, particularly in view of his incapacity to deal with criticism ("He becomes childlike when challenged"). At one point I asked her: "What is your greatest fear?" and out came, with a lot of emotion and much to my surprise, the response: "That I will get fired". Here we have:

1. Desires:
 - a. to formulate and bring alive a new strategy
 - b. to protect the high-quality 'output' coming from her division
 - c. to improve one's relationship with one's boss
 - d. to be trusted in role, longer term
 - e. to handle and use constructively one's own (perceived) superiority towards one's boss.

² The term 'psychodynamics' was first introduced in the 1874 publication *Lectures on Physiology* by German scientist Ernst Wilhelm von Brücke, and taken up by Freud in *The Ego and the Id* in 1923.

2. Defences:

- a. to formulate and reformulate and formulate again – compulsive behaviour with the strategy document
- b. to turn against the self and self-criticise
- c. to suppress any feedback *vis-à-vis* the boss, e.g. by not responding to his suggestions
- d. to dramatise and exaggerate within the coaching relationship (a paranoid defence).

This is just a simple example that we can appreciate in a few minutes. However, in most coaching sessions I notice that it can take a while, sometimes several conversations of careful consideration and scrutiny, to begin to form an image of all the interrelated wishes ('objectives'), anxieties ('concerns') and defences ('obstacles') (see also Malan, 1979).

Just to be present here today we have to deal with a lot of conflict. I always struggle when asked to present a lecture, and part of me would have just wanted to stay in bed this morning, or take the kids to the zoo. I am quite ambivalent about lectures, both for myself and what motivates me, and from the point of view of learning and change – has ever anyone been changed by... a mere lecture? Is the whole set-up not contrary to learning? Me sweating, you consuming – how can such a split division of labour be good for anyone?

And I'm sure you must be quite ambivalent too. Is this going to be worth your time? Are you really going to learn anything today, hear anything new? Some of you must be thinking things like "I've already attended another one with Erik de Haan" – or "I've already read this article by him – how is this key-note going to make a difference?" – or "Would it not be much more productive to have made this a *billable* day, by scheduling in a couple of clients?"

Quite apart from the ambivalences in emotion generated by the fact that it is actually a billable couple of hours for me, not for you.

Maybe we can find a way of talking about the ambivalences and conflicts that are actually most relevant here and now, between ourselves as we are coming together at this event?

Let me begin by taking you on a brief journey into the history of psychotherapy, following the theme of conflict around in the different schools. I will limit myself mostly to schools of psychoanalysis, to make it all a bit more digestible for you as well as more manageable for me.

To look at ambivalence and conflict, we need to look first at what drives us, because that is what brings us into conflict – both within ourselves as we have seen, and with others. There have been many hypotheses through the years about what drives us, and they are probably all true. It is interesting to follow some of those hypotheses and see where they come from and what their take on conflict might be.

- **Freud:** libido, we are driven by Eros, or *love*, pleasure, and the possession of that which we are attracted to.
- **Adler:** *power*, self-expression and asserting oneself.
- **Jung** – and later the existentialists: *meaning* and sensemaking.
- **Fairbairn** and the object-relations school: 'We are drawn towards objects, which are actually if you come to look at it more closely, parts of ourselves. We are driven towards linking up with, and possessing, parts of ourselves, which (we hope) then gives us a handle on others whom we have to deal with in reality'. This is a turn from pleasure/power/wisdom seeking to actual object-seeking. It is not so much the drive that drives us, but the *object*.

- **Relational psychoanalysis:** we are drawn towards *relationship*, we passionately want to be in relationship and express ourselves through relationship. In this regard we are all very much like fallen angels who once knew very intimate relationships, where part and whole, self and other, were barely distinguishable, and we all long back to that original state, even if it wasn't exactly a *blissful* state, or at least not for all of us, and not at all times. We long back to similar relationships, the relationships our nuclear family provided us with – which are after all the only intimate relationships that we have now demonstrated that we are able to cope with, as we have indeed survived them.

When looking at all of these suggestions, we can be sure that all of them in a way 'get us into trouble'; they all provide a sufficient explanation for encountering ambivalence and conflict, precisely because they are all aspirations, wishes, motivations. The one that in a sense explains least is the one from the relational psychoanalysis, because it builds the same ambivalences that we are trying to study into the core of the drive. It suggests that ambivalence is already built in at the core of our being, as our most formative experiences are those of ambivalently exploring being and change in relationship.

Moving from inception to development of conflicts: we all know that conflicts take a long time to heal, and that they tend to heal in a 'compromise', in other words, they remain ambivalent. It is not the case that we can lay a conflict to rest one way or the other. Rather, our experience is that we will always have to live with them one way *and* the other. Healing is more of a gentle easing of the associated cathexis, or in other words a gradual losing of the interest. Conflicts can therefore flare up at any time, once interest is returned to the particular underlying ambivalence. Healing is less of a cleaning or cleansing process as it is a transforming process, where a conflict acquires new meaning and significance, and gradually loses interest as it is understood differently. Put yet another way: healing can be likened to resolving, but only in the sense of re-solving in a (liquid) solution, not in the sense of finding a (final and solid) solution, as one does with problems of a more practical / mathematical nature.

A few words on the present conflicts on the planet. I believe that now we are increasingly part of a global community, our conflicts are also becoming increasingly global, and therefore our need to understand and come to terms with conflicts is increasingly shared among all. Fewer and fewer people can afford to be engaged in primitive acting out and other ways of escalating the conflicts they are experiencing – as the possible price for that is asymptotically approaching extinction for the species. We therefore have to de-escalate and to reflect, and I believe we as organisational coaches are in this business – the business of reflection and de-escalation. Our highest aspiration in this profession might be to be frontrunners in this global 'arms race' towards understanding, coming to terms with and handling conflict. For this we must understand (come to terms with and handle) our own deeper conflicts and we must understand relationships and how to maintain relationships in the presence of ruptures.

Needless to say these are as a matter of fact rather urgent requirements. We are living in a time and a place of unprecedented conflict, with hugely entrenched ambivalences (which in extreme cases lose all outward semblance of an ambivalence, and look like pure conviction) – such that our leaders and representatives allow themselves to go as far as:

- calling for the end of the Geneva conventions – which had been putting a lid on and providing a boundary to armed conflict for almost 150 years
- purposefully killing children and non-combatants

- killing themselves as a sacrifice to ‘the cause’, giving up literally all they have to be able to strike back and escalate further.

All in order to keep the interest in the conflict alive and to defer resolution. Many large-scale conflicts now have become vested interests.

I think what we need to do is become still better at handling conflict, i.e. approaching conflicts also on the deeper levels that I have just tried to map out. We need to go beyond the great aids and tools that we have – I could refer here to Rosenberg’s book *Nonviolent Communication* (1999) or to Thomas & Killman’s conflict mode instrument (1974). However, we have to allow ourselves to acknowledge ambivalence, ambiguity and self at all times – after all the conflicts we work with resonate within us and stir up our own lingering conflicts.

Rather than the picture of two people conversing in a room, or Freud’s picture of a clear, transparent and reflecting surface meeting a muddled and muddied client, this is the picture that for me represents best coaching in turbulent times: a cup of cappuccino where one cannot tell at what point the coffee ends and the milk takes over. A simple integrated and truly interpersonal picture of what happens in helping conversations.

Summary: What I have said so far is very similar to the Fourier transformation in theoretical physics or the move from ‘particles’ to ‘strings’ in modern particle theory. Rather than having distinct nodes of activity, such as in a coaching conversation the ‘client’ and the ‘coach’, or in material from the ‘clients’ and ‘others’, or within the strivings and ambivalences of the client ‘drives’ and ‘objects’, it is probably more sensible to think in terms of the *in-between*, the relationships, or in Fourier terms the waves generated by nodes interacting, whether colluding or colliding. In this scenario, ambivalence, conflict and relationship are different aspects of a ‘wave function’ which depending on events can be seen under the perspective of ambivalence, relatedness, conflict, resonance, etc. The wave function presupposes nodes of activity such as persons, impulses, drives and objects – but essentially summarises all of their activity in a single ‘measurement’ or ‘event’ or ‘interaction’. In coaching wave functions of client and coach begin to interact, mutually oscillating, dampening and amplifying aspects of each.

III Conflicts within the coaching profession

I have noticed over the years that many conflicts in the coaching profession are born from the perennial question: “What works for this client right now?” The question itself is fraught with ambivalence and indeed, conflict. There are so many options, there is only one Right Now, and there are so many aspects to the question that we find the question bewildering if we really try to think about it. To sum up just some of those aspects:

1. the particular relationship in which this question is asked
2. the state of that relationship
3. the person of the client
4. the context and what went before
5. the objectives and what we hope to achieve
6. the person and capability of the coach.

Each of these may have different requirements (‘desires’) which may actually run counter to each of the others. Moreover, what answer are we looking for? Simply, the best? The best

thing to do or not to do here and now in this relationship? Or is a 'good enough' answer also professional? What then makes an answer good enough?

I believe that the fact that we don't have – and never will have – unequivocal answers to this very question "What works right now?" leads to a lot of internal conflict, and a lot of conflict between coaches. Somehow, somewhere, we keep feeling we ought to know the answers and we feel inept. At other times we pretend we know the answers and we may start to believe in our answers, which makes us more omnipotent and fanatical, ready for a fight with other professionals who advocate different answers.

As I have been arguing, the conflicts in the coaching profession mirror the conflicts of our clients – and they sometimes amplify them, which in my humble opinion would probably not amount to 'good enough' coaching.

1. We know from our own 'critical moments' research programme (De Haan, 2008a and 2008b) that coaches are acutely aware of doubts and anxieties in working with their clients, stemming from the fact that at some level they know that they do not have all the answers, they do not even have any (hard) answers, and at another level they feel they ought to have these answers given their fees and the expectations coming from their clients. All very similar to what leaders in organisations experience in their own most 'critical moments': a pressure coming from their colleagues / direct reports / the organisation to have answers whilst knowing that they don't have them any more than the others do.
2. Coaches form strong allegiances to their mentors, coaches and training institutes, forged by the learning, the time spent together, and the mutual reinforcements. We know that allegiances are important common success factors in psychotherapy (Wampold, 2001), so these allegiances themselves form strong and beneficial informing principles in their work. Again similarly, our clients, the leaders in organisations, are not always fully aware of the extent to which they are wedded to their current approaches, allegiances and ideas.
3. Many of the doubts and anxieties are further laid to rest by active reaction formation: 90% of therapists think they belong to the elite group of the 25% most effective therapists (Cooper, 2008), and I am sure this is true for coaches as well, and very likely also for leaders and managers.

Summary: There is enormous potential for rigidity and dogmatism as a defence against the many doubts and anxieties that beset the coach. And at the same time some of this rigidity, in the form of *allegiance*, has been demonstrated to be a helpful thing for coaches in their work. Wampold (2001) compares and contrasts very productively the ideas of 'allegiance' (where you are convinced you are doing what you believe in and what is therefore the right thing) and 'adherence' (where you are slavishly following protocols and manuals and purposefully limit the breadth and depth of your interventions). The empirical facts are straightforward: the first is associated with higher effectiveness, the second is not.

IV A feat of integration.

In our profession, we do not only have many decades of personal experience with these sorts of conflicts, but we also have a great integrating movement which it is worthwhile to consider. The so-called *relational turn* in psychoanalysis, the origins of which can be traced back to 1983 (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983), then in psychotherapy, and now also in

coaching, has achieved a remarkable feat of conflict resolution, which I believe we can learn from. This 'turn' of thinking achieved four remarkable reconciliations, all at the same time:

1. The 'turn' preserved and integrated the conflicting and competing philosophies from Freud and most of the schools that followed, such as ego psychology, interpersonal theory, self psychology, and object relations.
Among other things this has led to a rethinking of drives, but also of the links between fantasy and reality. Older schools focus very much on 'fantasy' and aim at turning it into reality, whilst newer schools are more interested in finding ways for fantasy and reality (or, in other words, primary and secondary process thinking) to co-exist. Rather than turning them into opposing realms, where reality needs to be sought, created, and pumped up out of fantasy in a similar fashion as (according to Freud's famous remark) the Zuiderzee once was replaced by the more orderly IJsselmeer. Indeed, the Zuiderzee disappeared as a sacrifice to the reality principle; that livelihoods were destroyed and important fauna was irreversibly lost whilst more land was won for ego occupation. I know because I was born on its shores.
2. The 'turn' opened up Freudian thinking to Heideggerian notions of being and post-modern philosophy, where one can define and make meaning of reality in so many different ways that it becomes better to talk about realities (plural) rather than one single reality.
Just look at the contrast between relational approaches and the book that started off psychotherapy, *Studien uber Hysteria* (Breuer & Freud, 1895), where it was clearly *the* origin, *the* ultimate truth and *the* solution of the symptom and the trauma which the authors were after. Nowadays, thanks in part to the relational turn, practitioners realise there are more ways than one to skin a dream or a fantasy.
3. The 'turn' managed to integrate thinking across all therapeutic schools in a broader sense, as relational therapy is finding strong resonance within CBT and 'humanist' schools including person-centered, Gestalt, TA.
4. The 'turn' integrated not only the various schools and 'dogmas' in our field very well, but also managed to amplify the most reliable quantitative findings we have from empirical research, which tell us that the relationship is actually the best predictor of outcome of any therapeutic intervention.

Understand me well, the conflicts are all still there – partly they represent quite fundamentally opposing philosophical outlooks, partly important personality differences between 'founding fathers' still apparent in their followers. What were originally rivalrous and mutually excluding ways of thinking have now been transformed into an integrated framework. We all recognise that it is not helpful and downright impossible to be 'non relational' in this profession, and that is precisely how this has worked: by creating a container or common denominator that is so broad (and almost, but not quite, empty and meaningless) that it honours all the various professional approaches.

One could talk at length about each of these four points. Let me just recommend the fourth point – it is the one least proposed within the 'relational' literature. My book *Relational Coaching* (2008) summarises the best and the latest in quantitative research in psychotherapy as follows:

1. *primum non nocere ... in dubio abstinere* (first do no harm – and when in doubt, abstain)
2. have faith: any professional approach works
3. commit yourself fully (even to your model)
4. feed the hope of your client

5. view the relationship through the eyes of the client
6. build that relationship
7. dare to swap therapist / coach
8. take good care of yourself
9. remain fresh and receptive
10. don't worry about the specifics (ie your model, or the specific things you say or do).

. These 10 'commandments' do not point unequivocally to relational approaches, in fact, *any* professional approach seems to be as good as any other. But they do emphasise the importance of the therapeutic relationship or working alliance.

Dogmatism is part of the history of ideas, and also of the history of coaching. In the spirit of ambivalence, we may recognise 'dogmatism' as both a helpful and also an unhelpful trait in executive coaches.

I believe that the history of our own profession teaches us a very positive way to transform conflicts:

- Recognising that every viewpoint is of equal 'value' and that no view or position is 'better' than any other
- Valuing the common factors, such as commitment and even conviction regarding one's approach / viewpoint
- Teaching that common factors such as commitment and allegiance could be explored and exploited further.

Essentially, this form of conflict resolution is a bit like realising that an annoying or obstructive colleague is actually also a loving member of his own family, where he looks rather similar to ourselves.

Summary: What this means for our own attitude is that we are willing and able to consider other ways of looking at the world. We can be opinionated, partisan, even dogmatic – as I believe I have also been with regard to Relational Coaching – as long as we are willing and able to consider our convictions and beliefs from entirely disjunct perspectives. As long as we can take a role or a stance towards our own convictions which smiles at them, mocks them...and transforms them into sources of compassion.

References

1. Breuer, J. and Freud, S. (1895). *Studien über Hysterie*. Leipzig/Vienna: Verlag Franz Deuticke. Translated as *Studies on Hysteria* by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume II. London: Hogarth.
2. Cooper, M. (2008). *Essential research findings in counselling and psychotherapy – the facts are friendly*. London: Sage.
3. Greenberg, J. & Mitchell, S. (1983). *Object relations in psychoanalytical theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

4. Haan, E. de (2008). *I doubt therefore I coach – critical moments in coaching practice*. Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research 60.1, pp. 91-105.
5. Haan, E. de (2008). *I struggle and emerge – Critical moments of experienced coaches*. Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research 60.1, 106-131.
6. Haan, E. de (2008). *Relational coaching*. Chichester: Wiley.
7. Malan, D.H. (1979). *Individual psychotherapy and the science of psychodynamics*, Chapter 10. London: Butterworth.
8. Rosenberg, M. B. (1999). *Nonviolent communication: A language of compassion*. Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press.
9. Thomas, K. W., & Kilmann, R. H. (1974, 2007). *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*. Mountain View, CA: Xicom, a subsidiary of CPP, Inc.
10. Wampold, B.E. (2001). *The great psychotherapy debate: models, methods and findings*. Mahwah (NJ): Lawrence Erlbaum.