

Perspective: is this your best?

Are you the coach you think you are? Erik de Haan shares research comparing coach and client perspectives

By Erik de Haan

Executive coaches have a wide array of possible behavioural responses at their disposal which can be dizzying and a source of doubt and anxiety for coaches. As coaches mature and 'professionalise' they'll continue to reflect on which 'intervention' to use and when.

At the same time, coaching clients will wonder what to say, and when, and how to invite the coach in with their responses.

Meanwhile, both parties are forming views of each other's behaviours, and coaches are making inferences about what those behaviours tell them and how to respond.

In the coaching literature there's been much discussion and a proliferation of models around 'the coach's best behaviours', ie, which interventions to use and when. Thus far, most of this debate has been without much evidential support. We don't know much about which behaviours coaches think they use and which behaviours clients think they receive (and vice versa!). Measurements of coach behaviours or coaches' and clients' views on coaching behaviours have been rare (exceptions include *Ianiro, Schermuly & Kauffeld, 2013*, and *DeHaan, Culpin & Curd, 2011*).

To investigate coaching skills and reliably measure the full range of interventions, we need a basic tool which is general and broad, not too detailed and complicated, and with limited classes of interventions. It needs to be high validity as well: clients and coaches need to be able to recognise each class of intervention from a short description, and their ratings should conform to their intuitive appreciation of the interventions.

Here at Ashridge, we've found such a model in the Coaching Behaviours Questionnaire (CBQ) with 72 items, an adaptation of the Heron (1975) model of counselling interventions.

The research

Ashridge recently studied coaching behaviours as reported by executive coaches, consultants and managers, and by these coaches' clients. The latest version of its Coaching Behaviours Questionnaire (CBQ) was used in a large-scale study of coaching behaviours, among 537 coaches, 196 consultants, 559 manager-coaches from 54 countries, and 221 clients of coaching. The study demonstrated significant differences in perceived behaviour by subjects who differ in age, gender, and nationality, and according to whether people identify themselves as managers, consultants or coaches, and for clients of coaching.

THE TOOL

The CBQ has three 'push', coach-centred (directive) sets of behaviours – *Prescribing, Informing* and *Confronting* – and three 'pull', client-centred (nondirective) sets of behaviours – *Exploring, Supporting* and *Releasing* (see Figure 1). The six classes of intervention illustrate the broad range of interventions at coaches' disposal.

At any point in time in a coaching conversation, these are the options:

- not doing anything, devoting energy to following the client and to listening;
- offering direction, through advice or suggestion (*Prescribing*) or with information that might help the client (*Informing*);
- offering a challenge to the client, consisting of a different way to look at their issues (*Confronting*); or
- offering facilitative interventions, through warmth and support (*Supporting*), an effort to summarise and enquire more deeply into the issues at stake (*Exploring*), or an invitation to open up emotional undercurrents to the issues and the conversation itself (*Releasing*).

With the CBQ, coaches and consultants have a reliable and intuitive tool at hand to measure coaching behaviours through the eyes of coaches, consultants, manager-coaches, clients, and even observers. The tool's statistical properties mean it can be used to make measurements that result in highly personal feedback to coaches, either

given by themselves or by others. In the current version of the CBQ this feedback is related to a large norm group of managers, consultants and coaches.

Thus, participants are automatically compared with the norm-group results of the group they belong to. Moreover, all participants receive percentile scores that indicate what proportion of the norm group with their particular job description (manager, consultant, coach) score lower than they do on each of the six dimensions.

In our research, we showed that the CBQ is reliable and valid, and even that self-reported coach profiles change significantly with coach demographics such as age, gender, job description and nationality. Finally, we found client-reported behavioural profiles are different from self-reported profiles of the same coach.

The systematic differences we found between various groups of coaches and also between coaches and their clients are set out below.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

Women score themselves higher on non-directive interventions and lower on directive interventions than male counterparts, while they don't differ significantly in the amount of 'challenge' and 'support' they think they give clients. There's also other evidence that female coaches are slightly more effective in clients' eyes than male counterparts (*DeHaan, Grant, Burger & Eriksson, 2016*).

AGE

Older coaches/consultants/managers score significantly lower on directive interventions than younger colleagues. They reported giving less active support while their emotionally releasing interventions are more prevalent in self-scores.

JOB ROLE

Job role influences the scores too with manager-coaches, consultant-coaches, and 'professional' coaches self-scoring progressively lower on directive and supportive interventions, but progressively higher on nondirective (Exploring and Releasing) interventions. Thus, participants who describe their role as 'coaches' report a more 'coaching' (nondirective) profile in their scores.

This may be the influence of progressive 'acculturation' in consulting and coaching professions, where coaches learn to think about their interventions progressively in terms of more 'typical' coaching interventions, ie, the 'pull' behaviours within Exploring and Releasing. In fact, we find that if client scores are compared to all three categories, the discrepancies are largest for professional coaches – coaches may be changing their self-perceptions more than their actual coaching behaviours.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

There are some significant differences in scores when measured against country of origin. The number of Confronting interventions reported were highest in the Netherlands, mid-level in Belgium, and lowest in the UK. Similar contrasts of 'directness' and 'nonavoidance' were reported by Van Meurs (2003) in her PhD thesis on negotiations between Dutch and UK managers. From personal experience and studying cultural assessments of national cultures (eg, the dimension of internal vs

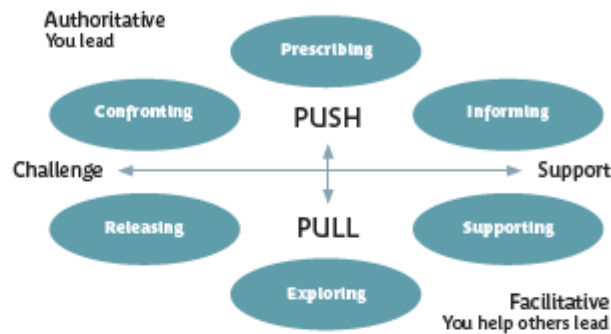


Figure 1: The so called 'Heron Model' of counselling and coaching behaviours (after Heron, 1975), stretching from highly directive to highly facilitative interventions, and from challenging to supporting options

external control in Trompenaars' well-known seven dimensional model), we recognise the progressive increase in Confronting from the UK, to Belgium, and then to the Netherlands.

Coach profiles from Northern America and the Middle East were also significantly different.

WORKPLACE CONTEXT

Clients of workplace coaches score coaches significantly higher on directive interventions and significantly lower on some nondirective interventions. Three effects are significant: clients see their coaches doing more Prescribing and Informing and less Releasing than coaches score themselves doing.

We believe this shows that coaches may be more central in their interventions than they realise, giving more advice (Prescribing) and information (Informing) than they think. Moreover they don't go as deeply into the client's inner world and emotions (Releasing) as they perceive themselves as doing.

We don't know if any of this 'general feedback for coaches' is related to skill; however, it's tempting to think that

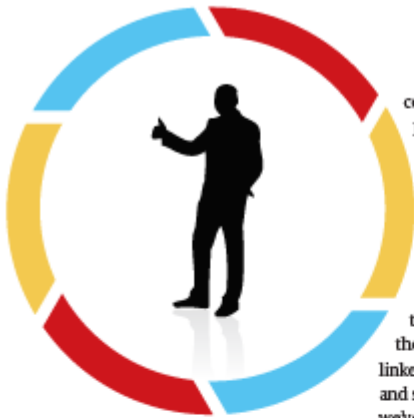
these coaches are sometimes so busy with their own ideas and suggestions that they attend less to their clients' emotional process to be truly effective coaches. Certainly their clients are saying to some significant extent that the coaches are doing this more than they themselves think.

It would be worth testing if clients also wish their coaches to be less advisory, informing and more in tune with their own personal emotional experience. We know from other studies that clients may perceive the empathic behaviour of coaches differently from coaches themselves (Will, Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2016) and that they perceive effectiveness of coaching quite differently from their coaches (DeHaan, Grant, Burger & Eriksson, 2016).

Given the client sample is still small and the effects nonetheless large, more research needs to be done.

SELF-PERCEPTION

We've found evidence that the differences in self-perceptions of coaches are not replicated by their clients, namely for the 'gender' and 'job description' dimensions where this



coaching as more a 'female' profession with females perceiving more 'typical' coaching skills in their own work.

Finally, there's evidence of coaches adapting to their national cultures and becoming more confrontational, direct or explorational in cultures where that's more the norm. However, these systematic patterns need to be linked back to measurable behaviours and skills – as this is not yet the case we've only found evidence for patterns in the perceptions of coaching skills.

NEXT STEPS

It would be interesting to bring in the observer's perspective (in live sessions and on the basis of recordings), and to compare scores directly on the same coaching relationship or session. The CBQ tool could be further modified to rate observed behaviour for frequency of occurrence and impact/effectiveness. Ultimately, a tool like this can be

used to assess the efficacy or skill of a coach to produce desired outcomes, namely when scores on this instrument are correlated with reliable outcome measures, eg, in randomised controlled trials. Only then will we be able to establish whether the significant differences we've found between different coaching professionals indicate a different approach in their conversations and whether they correlate with differences in competence and ultimately, in their effectiveness as coaches.

● Erik de Haan is director of the Ashridge Centre for Coaching at Ashridge Business School

¹The first version of the questionnaire was created by Richard Phillips in 1994. Subsequent versions were developed with help from Alex Davda, Helen Lockett, Judy Curd and Viktor Nilsson at Ashridge. For the questionnaire and client feedback version email: sarah.brooks@ashridge.org.uk

could be tested. Given the small sample, we need to be cautious in drawing conclusions, however it seems that perhaps self-identification of female and professional coaches is more non-directive, while this does not show up as different behaviour towards the clients. It's always possible that perhaps more sophisticated coaches change something about their behaviour the client doesn't notice while still being impacted. However, as yet there's no evidence for a differential impact.

This study shows we can now reliably measure a wide range of coaching interventions and make powerful comparisons between samples of coaches and between the client and coach perspective on those same interventions. There seem to be systematic scoring patterns in terms of directive and nondirective coaching styles; and also in the amount of support or challenge provided by the coach/consultant/manager.

The patterns we found can be seen as indicative of development and adaptation, with older and professional coaches perceiving more 'typical' non-directive and client-centred coaching behaviours over time and as they specialise more. We've found some indications that these are mainly self-perceptions of the professional coaches, not shared by their clients. We found some confirmation that one can see

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