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In conversation with Professor Erik de Haan

Erik de Haan & Mary Hughes

Professor de Haan appeared as a keynote speaker at this year's Annual Wales Coaching Conference. He kindly agreed to give his time afterwards to be interviewed for The Coaching Psychologist by Mary Hughes from the Wales Coaching Centre. In this interview a number of themes from Professor de Haan's research, such as team coaching, supervision and contracting, were explored.

MH: Thank you very much Erik for agreeing to this interview. I am going to start by asking you a wide, wide, open question and we can take it where you want to take it: What intrigues you most about coaching right now?

EdH: In practical terms, I am very curious about the development of team coaching and what's happening there. Obviously, there is an enormous growth in the number of mentions of that term, as well as people who tweet out some ideas. As is so often the case, you know, practice is way ahead of research. There is nearly no research on team coaching, so I am very intrigued about how that practice develops further – and then maybe research can also catch up with it. In terms of my first presentation today, which was about the effectiveness of coaching, I am interested in the questions that I raised about what we as coaches do – the things that we believe in as coaches in our sessions – that research could one day maybe demonstrate or disprove their effectiveness.

MH: One of the things that first attracted me to your writing was your contention that it doesn't matter what a coach's approach is; the key consideration is that the coach has to believe in it. I think the phrase is 'heart and mind, body and soul': Believe in what your approach is and then it will be efficacious. How did you yourself develop your own belief? Your own approach?

EdH: Personality-wise, just in terms of satisfying my own intellectual curiosity, I was drawn to psychoanalysis at the beginning. I think that's where I fit – and some of my clients also fit there – so I like the practice and depth of psychoanalysis. I am fully aware that it may be a lot of hassle to develop that and, of course, it may not be more effective than other approaches, but psychoanalysis is where I feel most at home. Over the years I've done other approaches.

I remember my first substantial training in coaching was actually in person-centred, non-directive counselling at Metanoia, where I learned about Rogerian counselling. That was because I was working more as a consultant at the time with groups and boards and presenting our findings to them from interviews. A senior person – I was only in my early 30s – a senior partner of our firm in Amsterdam said to me, 'When you present and then they ask a question or they raise some criticism, you don't actually listen. You don't listen very well, Erik'. That was my motivation to then go and do a year of part-time study at Metanoia around listening.

MH: Could you tell me some more about that? In my experience coaching and providing coaching supervision, I note that when my listening is disassociated from my own troubles – my 'dark side', as you would have it – then things happen for the other. Can you tell me a little bit about how you learn to listen?



EdH: I like that – what you just said – because of course I was very worked up about doing presentations well, intervening in the organisation, and just thinking ‘Do they get it? Are they now listening to their people and what their people have told us?’. So I was probably very anxious – very young as well. My listening – just because of that – was already at a very low level. I was listening for agreement, maybe, or just for my own survival there at the top table in that organisation. I was listening for certain cues, or even cues to the contrary which would make me more anxious, but I wasn’t really aware of where they were, I think, in those circumstances, so I completely agree with you.

MH: Again, to borrow your language if I may, can you recall anything around the critical moment when you became aware of them: That you were listening and hearing them, as opposed to your own inner voices?

EdH: Well, I guess that was a major intervention, that this person who was 20 years older than me said, ‘You know, I see that you have shut down. You don’t function very well after presenting. Are you just trying to hold on or defend yourself in the session?’

When you present something or when you arrive in a board, you need to be very open to what goes on in that moment. So that was a major moment for me when he said that. I really... I made lots of changes. I first went back to my mentor, as I called my supervisor in those days – it was 1995 – and then I also went through to Metanoia.

Now I think I’m okay. As long as I am okay within myself, I probably listen quite well. There are still moments, of course, when there is more anxiety in the room, that my listening gets affected still. So, I think we are always working on that cusp of ‘Are we with our clients fully and with our shared present moment in particular?’

MH: Onto supervision: You’ve written quite a bit about it. How much of you is given to research in and around supervision? I’m particularly interested in some of the work you have done with supervising internal consultants, for example.

EdH: I think this is a big part of my practice. I probably work slightly more as a supervisor than as a coach now. So, it is really important to me – and not just as part of some of the programmatic training we do. Supervision

is a key part of the training at the Ashridge Centre for Coaching, and it's a very helpful part, where their practice is really invited into the room fully. However, I also have a very high regard for supervision for more senior professionals; those who are long out of training and who might become... some of us might become quite 'cavalier' about certain things that we used to take more seriously. Supervision can really hold our feet to the fire and stay contained in our practice.

And within supervision, I don't make much of a distinction between coaching supervision and consulting supervision. I know I've written about that, but I see coaching as a part of OD; just a very focused part focused on an individual client, but the whole of the rest of OD – organisational process consultation, team coaching, and so on: all of that benefits from supervision. In fact, if you have more immersion within the organisation, as consultants tend to have, then you have even more relevant parallel processes to observe and review during supervision. So, it can be a lot of fun to supervise a team of consultants, because you often see dynamics between them which are relevant for their client organisation.

MH: You inspired me through talking about consultancy as a legitimate subject for supervision. I have done a very short intervention supervising policymakers within my background as a civil servant, so policy being the business of the civil service and – of course – what are they other than internal consultants for the government? I found it very interesting and I am very grateful to your book *Supervision in Action* and the diagrams with the many circles as to where the energies were coming and the relationship between monocultures and the lack of interplay between them. So, looking at things like boundaries and ethical considerations around those...

EdH: Yes, and this was with teams as well as people who knew each other. Very interesting.

MH: With your interest in team coaching, there's not much evidence but there is a lot of practice. What do you think is driving that practice? What is different from practices that came before it?

EdH: Good question. I think the same thing that's been driving executive coaching for a longer period – that has also grown so hugely – and I think that is because of societal developments. The fact that everything has to go faster, everything is becoming more complex and anxiety-provoking. Your future is no longer predictable from your past: from where you grew up. You don't take the job of your own father or mother anymore. You have to find or invent the wheel for yourself. It's a very different society and, I think, as long as that is developing in such a way and creating more and more pressures, I think coaching will be in demand in an equal way.

I think team coaching is just a gradual discovery by teams that they can actually benefit from reflection, and from whole-team decision making. There have been some very good studies about the importance of reflection in teams: that it helps to make better decisions or be more innovative. Michael West is somebody who has done some excellent research, I think. So, I believe more and more teams are discovering team coaching, but it's really a consequence of how our society is changing.

When I started, there was a lot of team facilitation, so the consultant was always in the lead of the reflective meeting or away day. What we now define as team coaching wasn't really happening very much, but it is now growing. A coach who is relatively abstinent and just sits observing the team, whilst occasionally feeding back some observation, hypotheses or support to the team, that is – I think – fairly new and growing.

MH: You talked in one of your presentations today about, in the context of leadership, the difference between effective leaders and successful. In terms of team coaching, I was struck by parallels between coaching and lead-

ership as elements, in as much as there's no brief definition for coaching, just as there is no brief definition for leadership. Therefore, when you're trying to measure something...

EdH: I personally think we have almost got too many definitions of coaching while we have nearly no definitions of leadership. All the coaching definitions are kind of pretty true, overlapping and helpful. And there are lots of coaching articles that, almost ad nauseam, spend time in the introduction defining coaching, citing a multitude of authors who have defined coaching. In leadership the situation is quite the opposite: hardly any author defines the topic before writing about it. I think academically it is still good practice to at least be able to define your topic; obviously, it seems so much easier to define coaching than it is to define leadership. When it comes to team coaching, because there is such a tradition of process consultation, facilitation, chairing meetings by outsiders; so there's all this overlap between maybe pure team coaching and all these other interventions that we can do, so then it becomes slightly more difficult to define. However, in leadership it is more of an Augustinian conundrum ('What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know') – we are always 'in time', so we struggle to define it. Similarly, we are surrounded by 24/7 leadership from the moment we are born, so we can't quite tell what it is. See also Plato's *Meno* or my book *The Leadership Shadow*.

MH: Just on a practical level, I still get what I call 'the Svengali response' from a lot of people who are sponsors. That thing of the 'Here is my poor so-and-so. Make him or her do this. Fix them. Make them sing like the gorgeous bird I know they can be.' And the struggle that I then have to effectively coach the sponsor prior to entering into any meaningful relationship with the actual client, so I find your three-way focus on the boundaries around the client and yourself... the absolute solidity of that boundary...

EdH: I've changed a little bit over the years, so I'm now more willing... In the past I think I was quite keen on either having a triangular conversation where everybody is in the room, or having a conversation only with the client, like you can get with partners of firms, where they bring their own budget anyway, so in many cases they don't even want to know from their boss. In these instances, you can just ask them, 'What do you imagine your boss wants out of this?', and you let them associate to that. You still have the organisational lens on the coaching, but you intuit it from what your client says. So I used to work either in the triangle or one-to-one and then just asked the client for their perspective of what they should learn and that will give me enough to then later review or challenge them on the outcomes.

Nowadays – maybe I shouldn't say this in the interview – if a top person calls me up and says, 'I've got somebody lower down in the organisation and this is their problem. Please could you see them?', I take the call, I take notes and I say, 'Okay. I'm going to meet them. Can I tell them also what you just said about them?'. I'm much more open to being this kind of conduit for them, even though I care less about whether they've told them this or not – or whether they are willing to put their money where their mouth is and meet the client and say those same damning things, which often people find difficult to say more directly. So I try to gain permission to meet the client and say, 'Would you be interested if I share with you what your boss just said about you. And what my impression of that was?'. Of course, everyone says 'yes' to such a question.

I'm now quite happy to say, 'Okay, you want to hire me to work with that person, so I'll be there on behalf of that person. I'll be fully confidential and safe for them. And, whatever you just said – all these rather blunt criticisms – I just want to kind of work with them'. So, I meet the client now and say 'I had that first call from that person and they were quite negative. Are you aware that they say 'you this' and 'you that' and 'you

so-and-so'. How much are you aware of that? Could that inform our coaching contract?'. So, I'm more willing to just go with the flow. And I am dead keen that I do not sit on any information, either from others in the organisation or from within myself: I do not want any 'information advantage' or 'knowledge power' over any of my clients.

MH: In one sense, coaching one-to-one has a boundary of trust around it...

EdH: I might once have wanted to coach the commissioner into becoming a good boss or at least a good commissioner and I think I've given that up. I'm now thinking that I need one client, so the commissioner is not the client: they are only paying the bills. I may think they are pretty impressive, or very paternalistic, for example, but I keep that to myself, because they are not the client. So I might say to the client, 'Do you think that person is maybe a bit paternalistic?' or 'Do you think you might be colluding somewhat with what strikes me as a paternalistic boss?'. I might say that, although it sounds a bit gossipy as I say it, so not a great intervention perhaps even if not ethically questionable in my view.

I used to much more want to have the triangular contracting that is in all the handbooks, but you don't always get that. And when you do get the triangular conversation all too often the boss is very diplomatic and doesn't speak their truth. And then what's the worth of it?

MH: ...and that that's the other interesting thing on trust with me. The conversation with the boss who tells you all this stuff for that vulnerable person. There is a contract with them to say, 'Well, I'm going to take what you told me into that safe place with my client. However, I'm not going to take anything out of that safe place with my client and go back to you with it.'

EdH: Exactly. You might say to your client, 'You and I know that you are under pressure here. Please trust me that I am working for

you, for you only, and that I am on your side completely. I might challenge you, because that may be what I think might be helpful in order for you to respond more robustly to the pressure, but I will never say anything to any of your colleagues about what we do. I will never work with them on their side, because I am contracted to you. If you want to invite your boss into one of our sessions, I am very happy too, and it might open up some interesting ideas – but I will then still maintain that I'm only focusing on your side, not their side'.

MH: I'm always interested in how you notice the impact of coaching. The correlation of, because the coach said so-and-so to the client, this outcome happened. This is not always possible...

EdH: ... or never possible. We know nothing about that sort of thing yet. Maybe in the future we can know something about it, but it's not been researched yet and in fact it is very hard to research well.

MH: I would just love to see that piece of research that's like magic dust that somebody sprinkled something over and then it happens. Hey, how did that happen?

EdH: In any case, how relevant are the coach's interventions if we would have to agree the client has generated the successful outcome. In my work at Ashridge, I tutor or coach somebody towards an exam, and then sometimes they pass, and then they thank me for the high mark if they got one. If they do that I say, 'Please, can we agree, this has been you. You've been doing that. You've got that mark. What I've done – I've just been alongside you, on your side, and we had a few conversations...' It would be nice if you can trace something of the effectiveness of coaching interventions, it would be nice to see there's something in the sessions which you can demonstrate makes the difference, or a difference. It would definitely be nice, but we currently have nothing in that regard.

MH: It would be nice to find out. I totally agree and maybe that's something that readers of this article might feel is a gauntlet for them to take.

Let's come back again to the listening that you talked about, because I understand myself to be listening when I know that it's the other person who then does something and I just give him peace. I have listened if it's about them and not about me. That can be a struggle. That is a very interesting part of good leadership and good coaching that ability to... ehhm...

EdH: Yes ...and what you're saying is that you, in your practice, find it quite challenging to take up that role. You have that sort of important...

MH: I notice that, if I am going to wobble at all, it is that I doubt therefore I coach phrase. It's when that slips in. It doesn't matter how experienced I am, it's that kind of 'Ooh – where was that coming from?'. How honest – how much real listening was that? Or was that about me? Those sorts of questions.

Finally, I have always been fascinated by your ability to look outside of coaching; to look outside of psychology. I love doing that: everything from *Alice in Wonderland* through to mid-1960s rock and pop songs... All sorts of things will feed me into thinking, 'Gosh, yes, that's about coaching'. Do you find yourself frequently dumping the coaching train and the coaching bandwagon? Thinking, 'Let's go outside. Let's have some fun. Let's read Thomas Piketty. Let's go...'

EdH: I do sometimes offer – not so often in coaching – but I do sometimes ask a client to read a poem or attend some kind of performance or art exhibition... you know, just for inspiration. That's the fun about being also a supervisor, because in supervision I think this is much more legitimate. Now, I had an individual supervision session – I think the day before yesterday – where I mentioned René Girard, who is an interesting French philosopher, about mimetic desire and envy.

So I can just mention that in supervision and it sparks a wildfire of associations. The client became very lively when I said that and is probably going to read at least one or two of his books. Then, next session, we will see how that's relevant for practice – which I believe it is, not many people have understood human unconscious drives as well as Girard – that is a lot of fun, I think.

It is purely associative, because my reading is very limited – especially nowadays. I do sometimes read of course, and I still love reading – in a session suddenly something pops up and yes, I try to use that. With coaching, less so, because I don't want to impose my own inspirations onto my clients. As a supervisor, there is more of an invitation to give your supervisees ideas or inspirations or even teaching – but with coaching, you want to stay out of there, before you know you'll be a guru or guide and who is central to the work? You!

I think also with coaching, I don't want to offer any form of obligation, because there's such tremendous potential for guilt. That is why, for many years now, I never offer an evaluation form, because then you leave somebody with an obligation or at least a request to write something, a task to do for you.

Supervision, yes – fine, because you are more in charge; you sign off their practice, at least symbolically, so you have a responsibility for their practice and you can say, 'Why don't you read that book it may help to be inspired as a coach'. But as a coach – I'd like to remain very naive about what makes them a better leader, so I really rarely mention inspirations. The last one I remember was *The Power of Bad*, a sophisticated self-help book, and it was ignored by the client which I was absolutely fine about.

If I did mention something, like maybe a play such as *Antigone* for female leaders or the *Figaro* trilogy for male leaders, then I would hope to do it more tentatively like, 'That kind of narcissistic personality which you are afraid of being is also in that play, you know'. For example, there is a famous Ibsen play with a deeply narcissistic banker,

John Gabriel Borkman, so I might be working with a banker and I say, ‘Okay, there’s a figure like that, like you fear you’ve become after your recent loss of influence, in Ibsen’s play. You might have a look at that’. Most clients won’t anyway. They won’t even take it up, because they’re not used to going to plays, either, so it is more my own professional deformation. Supervisees are definitely more open to my idiosyncrasies.

MH: Why I’m smiling at this is because I occasionally have people who come to me for coaching – who walk into my world – and start talking about Shakespeare, for example, and I have to then contain my own enthusiasm.

EdH: Yes – absolutely! I get very excited, but you would hope that you can just listen it out, because otherwise it impacts your listening again.

MH: Thank you so much on behalf of *The Coaching Psychologist*. On the back of your keynote and your workshop, I think you’ve been talking continuously for about three hours!

EdH: ...and I’m not a talker – I’m a listener! It has been my pleasure. Thank you.

Mary Hughes

University of South Wales
olwen.hughes@gmail.com

Erik de Haan

Ashridge Business School
Erik.deHaan@ashridge.hult.edu