

What is Coaching?

I found myself, when preparing to write this paper, practising the ancient art of procrastination. Perhaps, it was the vastness of the thinking and published work which has struggled to create clarity in answer to the question “What is Coaching?”. Perhaps, it was that I personally find it difficult to answer the question. When casually asked by a stranger upon meeting them for the first time the inevitable question “So what do you do?” fills me with dread. How do I answer that, without sounding pompous or trite and provide an answer that does justice to what Coaching is, to someone who isn’t within the profession. However as I began the process of collecting and writing my thoughts, about what seemed like a vast subject, became much clearer for me.

To answer the question “What is Coaching” I propose to explore three distinct aspects: Firstly, how coaching is defined currently within our industry? Secondly, to detail my personal reflections on the “elements” of coaching. Here, I have deliberately chosen not to detail interventions or approaches, but to explore the ingredients which create the coaching experience. Thirdly, I propose to contrast coaching in two ways. Coaching with Training and Coaching with Person Centred Counselling. My conclusions will draw on these explorations and present my own thoughts about “What is Coaching?”.

1. How is “Coaching” currently defined within our Industry?

Historically when asked to define Coaching I have pointed towards John Whitmore’s definition “*Coaching is unlocking people’s potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them.*” (Whitmore, 2009 p10). I find its clarity useful, for delegates attending training courses I run on coaching, as a starting point to explore the subject of coaching. The second sentence is one I encourage reflection upon to make the point that coaching has, as just one of its foundations, a non-directive philosophy. However, does this define coaching or could Whitmore’s definition also be applied to other activities just as easily? Mentoring or counselling for example, do they not also unlock a person’s potential and or help them to learn?

Simon Western provides another succinct definition, although in this instance he attempts to articulate what a “coach” is. He states “An expert in facilitating another’s personal

journey, focusing on both personal and organizational success” (Western, 2012. P44). Inherent in Western’s definition is that coaching requires expertise and is in some way linked to organisational objectives. If a coach requires expertise, what might that expertise be in? There are a number of coaching methodologies, discourses or approaches which can be skilfully utilised by a coach, which are the techniques an “expert” might utilise during a coaching intervention. But it seems to explore these moves us away from “What is Coaching?” to a discussion about its various guises. I have also in my personal coaching practice encountered situations which are definitely not linked to organisational objectives, in fact on occasion where they specifically contradict them.

Peter Hawkins and Nick Smith in their work *Coaching, Mentoring and Organisational Consultancy* (Hawkins and Smith, 2013) offer their thoughts with a definition which reads: “Coaching is the focused application of skills that deliver performance improvement to the individuals work in his or her organisation, through robust support and challenge. The coaching process should yield learning and personal development for the coachee, and help them to contribute more of their potential. This collaborative relationship will be short term and practically focused, and will be marked by clear, strong feedback, and the rehearsal of new appropriate behaviours.” (Hawkins & Smith, 2013 p29). In an attempt to encompass the various aspects of coaching, Hawkins and Smith have a longer definition which attests to the complexity of coaching practice. Of interest is the inclusion of a description of the coaching relationship and process within the definition. In contrast to Western they make no mention of expertise but make a point of detailing skills, characteristics and activities. They also point to a short term process. Would someone seeking a coach to help them clarify purpose, values or explore spirituality wish for a short term process? It seems that to define Coaching in a single sentence can provide an indication of what it may be but also highlights that differing approaches and methodologies, will offer their own versions. I think it is appropriate to step back further and to explore the elements of coaching that might apply across all the various aspects of the coaching landscape in an attempt to consider “What is Coaching?”

2. Elements of the coaching landscape

My personal coaching practice draws on many influences. I find my practice as a coach is one which rarely falls into any one specific style drawing on many applications and methodologies. But beyond that I bring my beliefs and values about what coaching is, into my practice and approach to coaching. I have been practising coaching for 25 years and facilitated “Introduction to Coaching” courses for the last 10. However the training, about coaching, I personally received and also the courses I run, are more focussed on skills and competencies. For this assignment I have reflected on some core elements of my approach and how they may apply in answering the question posed.

a. Coaching is Relational

In the vast majority of instances coaching is delivered via a one to one process. This means a coach and coachee come together in what is a unique relationship. The coach’s focus is on the coachee. Their sole purpose is to work with an individual in a way rarely experienced outside of the coaching process. Erik de Haan in his book *Relational Coaching* (de Haan, 2008) uses over 300 pages to present his thinking that the relationship within the coaching process is the key to effective coaching. He makes a strong case that the coaching relationship is a succession of critical moments. He states “Coaching relationships can be seen as a succession of ‘critical’ moments, moments that define the relationship and make it the relationship that it is” (de Haan, 2008 p56). However, it could be argued that, underpinning all of those critical moments, is the trust and rapport between coach and coachee. Which would need to be at the highest level in order for those critical moments to be constructive.

For coaching relationships to function properly they require trust. A coaching exchange which didn’t have trust at its core would inevitably fail. If the coachee wasn’t able to trust their coach anything discussed or explored would be questioned, interpreted for hidden meaning and be unlikely to be acted upon. Trust therefore is intrinsic to coaching. Stephen M.R. Covey explores what trust is and the philosophy behind building it in his book *The Speed of Trust* (Covey, S.M.R, 2006). Covey presents as the starting point for his work the concept of personal credibility and its role in trust. Covey describes four cores of credibility the four are: Integrity, Intent, Capabilities and Results (Covey, S.M.R 2006 p57). It is the first

two which interest me in respect of a coaching relationship, as capabilities and results would fall under the approach or strategy deployed by a coach.

In describing ‘Integrity’ Covey details: Congruence, Humility and Courage. He describes congruence in this way “People who are congruent act in harmony with their deepest values and beliefs. They walk their talk. When they feel they ought to do something, they do it.” (Covey, S.M.R, 2008 p62). With regard to Humility, Covey suggests “A Humble person is more concerned about what is right than being right, about acting on good ideas than having good ideas” (Covey, S.M.R. 2008 p64). I believe this is a way to describe the place of ego within a coaching relationship. A coach who is more concerned about sharing their wisdom and knowledge with a coachee or wanting to look good as “the font of all wisdom” or seeing coaching as a success when they have asked the “Killer question” then the relationship becomes more about the coach than the coachee. In terms of courage Covey sums it up in a single sentence “Integrity also includes the courage to do the right thing – even when it’s hard” (Covey, S.M.R. 2008 p64). A coach that avoids making an observation or asking a question because it is easier not to, won’t be serving their client.

With regards to ‘Intent’ Covey mentions: Motive, Agenda and Behaviour. Motive he states as “your reason for doing something. It’s the ‘why’ that motivates the ‘what’. The motive that inspires the greatest trust is genuine caring – caring about people, caring about purposes, caring about the quality of what you do, caring about society as a whole. Think about it: are you going to trust someone who could care less about you, or about work, or about principles, or values, or anyone or anything else?” (Covey, S.M.R. 2006 p78). In these sentences Covey provides us with a ready-made reflection on the coaching relationship and its foundations for success. In terms of Agenda, Covey further adds “Agenda grows out of motive. It’s what you intend to do or promote because of your motive” he includes a quotation which he attributes to Jim Meehan, a British Psychologist and Poet “Having spent many years trying to define the essentials of trust, I arrived at the position that if two people could say two things to each other and mean them, then there was the basis for real trust. The two things were ‘I mean you no harm’ and ‘I seek your greatest good.’” (Covey, S.M.R. 2006 p80). Perhaps in those 10 words Meehan has inadvertently created a definition for coaching and the coaching relationship. In concluding his exploration of intent with behaviour Covey writes “Typically, behaviour is the manifestation of motive and agenda.

The behaviour that best creates credibility and inspires trust is acting in the best interests of others.” At its core a coaching is about a coach is acting in the very best interest of his client.

I have detailed Covey’s thinking as I think it provides a succinct summary of some of the key ingredients within the coaching relationship. I strongly believe that the relational aspect of coaching, as described here, can be used to show what sets it apart from other activities it maybe compared to, for example Mentoring and Training. For instance a Mentor may actually wish to share their wisdom and knowledge with their mentee and potentially need to be right rather than concentrate on what is the right thing to do for the mentee. In the training room it is possible to see the ego of the trainer as well as their knowledge and wisdom displayed during a training session. Attendees on training courses will often challenge the message which is being communicated. The trainer’s role then becomes one of convincing the group the proposed way of thinking or model is the right one and demonstrating their superior understanding. In exploring the relational aspect of coaching I have attempted to detail my thoughts about what it is, to provide an analysis of why I make the claim that the coaching relationship is unique.

b. Coaching is Confidential

The coaching exchange remains the intellectual property of the parties involved. To achieve the level of trust and commitment for the coaching exchange to be successful confidentiality needs to sit at its core. If a coaching client felt that what was discussed during a session would be relayed back to others would they truly be open or would they be more likely to censor their thinking and expression? To feel free to express thinking or concerns, to share dreams without fear or ridicule, can be a liberating experience. In the Complete Handbook of Coaching (Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck, 2014) Diane Brennan and Leni Wildflower author the chapter titled Ethics in Coaching. They explore confidentiality and make the following observations “The confidential space created between client and coach allows for openness and honesty that may not occur anywhere else in the individual’s life. It is not uncommon for the coach to hear sensitive and personal information about the individual, or others within the organization or the organization itself.” (Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck, 2014 p436). They also make reference to organisational objectives within the coaching

relationship “Coaches working in organizations, either internally as employees, or externally as contractors, face an added dimension of complexity around confidentiality.

Organizations funding coaching for an individual or team often require, at least initially, a periodic report on the value of the coaching experience.” Further stating and highlighting “The importance of a clear agreement to define the reporting process at the beginning of the relationship” (Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck, 2014 p435). In my own coaching practice as an external coach I have experienced, on more than one occasion, the challenge created by contradicting personal and organisational objectives. At the commencement of a coaching relationship and having established clear contracting, which included confidentiality, I have then immediately been informed by three different coaching clients that they wish to leave the organisation who is paying for their coaching sessions. My responses to these situations were guided by discussion with the candidates and the contracting put in place at the start of the process. However, without the confidentiality of the coaching session none of these admissions would have been shared. Each of those candidates all took differing actions which benefited them and their organisations.

c. Coaching is Change

It is fundamental to the process that the coachee enters into coaching willingly, whilst coaching may have been chosen for a coachee by someone else, for the process to function the coachee must be intrinsically motivated to want to engage. Fundamental to this process is that the coachee recognises a need to, or wishes to, bring about change for themselves. The coaching intervention requires an outcome to work towards. In the opening line of the very first chapter of their book “Changing for Good” James Prochaska, John Norcross and Carlo DiClemente make the following assertion “If one system of psychotherapy had ever demonstrated clear superiority over the others in helping humans shed undesirable behaviour, the name of that system would be a household name by now” (Prochaska, Norcross & DiClemente, 1994 p 21). Perhaps this statement best asserts why there are many different coaching discourses, each one with its own methodology for working with a client and guiding them through change. If a person did not seek some kind of change, they would not look for assistance and to find it, turn to coaching for help. Even the individual, who is content and happy but seeks coaching to be even more successful, is seeking change.

d. Coaching is Space

Modern life is often exceptionally busy, we can find ourselves moving from one thing to another both professionally and personally. Never finding the time to pause and think about our actions, patterns and desires, both positive and negative. The coaching session forces the coachee to pause, providing a moment in the coachee’s life where they can focus entirely on themselves free from distractions and interruptions. Whilst activities such as meditation can also provide space, meditation is a very internal process driven by the individual. Coaching space has an additional external aspect, in so far as there is another person who is there in the same space with the individual. The coach can challenge thinking patterns, habits, reframe perspectives, highlight observations etc. which the individual may not even be aware of. Which, without the external perspective provided by a coach, would otherwise go unrecognised or unchallenged. In Presence Based Coaching Doug Silsbee (Silsbee, 2008) presents a methodology which encourages the concept of space within the coaching relationship. He describes “Spaciousness: This quality is inherent in presence. There is a spaciousness in the absence of conditioned habits, the recognition of a myriad of choices in the present moment, and a clearer view of the more expanded context in which we exist” (Silsbee, 2008 p118). I believe that coaching provides the opportunity to pause for both the coach and the coachee and offer unprecedented space in our modern times.

e. Coaching is Self-Awareness

I would argue strongly that coaching’s main benefit for an individual is increased awareness. There is vast amount of published work which centres around the techniques of coaching. If one steps back and reflects on those approaches and styles one could present a robust argument that they all, to a greater or lesser degree, build greater self-awareness. Michael Stone describes the philosophy of Yoga in his book *The Inner Tradition of Yoga* (Stone, 2008) in Yoga there is a term which captures a lack of awareness is ‘Samsara’. Stone translates it as “literally a going round in circles.... Samsara is the sense of being caught in a wheel that spins and spins yet we can’t find our way out of the cycle” (Stone, 2008 p22). Stone makes the point “Most of the patterns we repeat are being repeated because they are unconscious and, by definition, outside of our awareness” (Stone, 2008 p23). The Yogic way of breaking this process of repeated patterns is to practice “vidya” which is described as “being with

things as they are”. Which is, in essence, increased self-awareness or seeing things as they are not as we think or wish they are. The Yoga Sutra, according to Stone, is attributed to Patanjali in the third century BC (Stone, 2008 p7) it was this work which outlines the approaches Stone details. I find it fascinating that over 2,000 years ago Humans were seeking self-awareness and turning to philosophies such as Yoga to find ways to achieve it. In our modern times a coach will work with an individual to facilitate that same outcome. Is the approach so very different from that which was described in the third century BC? I suspect not as much as we might like to think. However today coaching allows for many different approaches to achieve it. When defining coaching most thinking focusses on the way of coaching, or the “How”. I find myself in complete agreement with Erik De Haan when he says “My view of coaching now is that coaching is predominately an exercise in self-understanding and self-changing on the part of the coachee. This exercise takes place only partly in collaboration with an outside professional, the coach. The ability of the coachee to bring about the intended understanding and change is many times greater than the ability of the coach to bring about change by means of a considered choice of interventions.” (De Haan, 2008 p52).

In attempting to define “What is Coaching?” I have sought to provide a framework within which coaching may take place. The various methodologies would be applied within the framework I have outlined. The elements I describe warrant further investigation and critical analysis. However, in exploring the differences between coaching and training and coaching and person centred counselling, I will continue to utilise them to see in what ways they provide for a distinction between the disciplines.

3. Contrasting Coaching with Training and Person Centred Counselling

I chose these two activities to contrast coaching with as they offer, to my mind, an interesting balance. Most notably with training the difference is in numbers. Training is traditionally one to many, traditionally coaching is one to one. Training is agenda lead. For example one arrives at a training session and the topic will be set for the day. For this day there will be a plan with stated outcomes and a timetable which will be followed, with topics explored within a set time frame. A coaching session will not follow a set agenda it is coachee lead with the coach responding to what is explored. When exploring the

differences between coaching and person centred counselling the initial differences are less clear. Counselling is one to one, as coaching is, the counsellor responds to what is raised by the client, as a coach does, counselling is not agenda driven as coaching isn't. With obvious differences less apparent it is necessary to look deeper.

Coaching is Relational

- Training v coaching

With short course training, a one day seminar for example, the relational aspect of training is minimal. In fact the main driver in short course training would be to inspire those attending through knowledge and presentational style. In terms of coaching the coach will build credibility through intent and working closely with an individual in a unique way. If a training programme is delivered over a period of time with several modules spread out over a year for example, the relational element may increase. But with one trainer for a group of attendees it is very difficult for the trainer to provide the focus and time that a coach can. Can a trainer really act in the best interest of each and every one of their attendees? In managing a group dynamic a trainer has to be mindful of the needs of the majority of the group rather than individuals.

- Person Centred Counselling v Coaching

The relational aspects of Person Centred Counselling are very similar to those of coaching. To find a point of potential difference we can look to de Haan's notion of the coaching relationship being a series of “critical moments”. (de Haan, 2008 p56) Intrinsic to de Haan's thinking, is the concept of challenge, which would drive those critical moments. In contrast Person Centred Counselling holds at its core empathy. The aim for the Counsellor is to experience what life is like for the client, for the client to feel they are completely understood. Empathy and challenge can be opposite ends of a spectrum.

Coaching is Confidential

- Training v Coaching

Confidentiality within the training room is often established to allow free discussion within a group. However the type of confidentiality created will only be for topics those attending are prepared to make public. An individual’s comfort with sharing personal opinions and thinking will potentially be censored in a way that within coaching it might not be. The training room is highly unlikely to provide confidentiality that “allows for openness and honesty that may not occur anywhere else in the individual’s life” as described by Brennan and Wildflower (Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck 2014 p436)

- Person Centred Counselling v Coaching

Staying with Brennan and Wildflower this type of confidentiality and the openness and honesty it creates may well be part of the counselling experience. Carl Rogers described in his paper *The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change* (Rogers, 1957) six conditions the second one states “The first, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious” (Rogers, 1957 p1). When working with clients who may present in this way a counsellor will need to be acutely aware of confidentiality. As a result ethics, boundaries and self care for the counselling disciplines are well researched and developed, they exist to both protect and guide Counsellors in their activities.

Coaching is change

- Training v Coaching

Both training and coaching can deliver change but in differing ways, training can deliver change in an individual’s knowledge and understanding. But how they may be able to apply that knowledge is entirely left with the delegate as they walk out of the door of the training room. The trainer may have had little opportunity to clarify, work with the attendee to explore how they may specifically apply learning in their circumstances, or answer additional questions due to time constraints. Coaching can delve much deeper into personal situations, frames of reference and considerably increase understanding. All of which increases the opportunity for a coachee to bring about change for themselves. People are often “sent” on training courses which are not selected by them of their own

volition. This will inevitably impact their response to the training session and willingness to apply any actions.

- Person Centred Counselling v Coaching

Whilst counselling can bring about change it may not be the main driver for an individual seeking counselling. Those who choose counselling may primarily be wanting help and support with difficulties in their life. Counselling can facilitate change as a result of the process it offers. Whereas, when a coach is engaged, typically, an individual seeks an outcome. Anthony Grant in his chapter on the Past Present and Future, which explores the evolution of professional coaching, in the Handbook of Coaching Psychology (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008) makes this observation “Where clinical and counselling psychologists tend to work with the client who is distressed and/or dysfunctional, coaching psychologists work with well functioning clients, using theoretically grounded and scientifically validated techniques to help them to reach goals in their personal and business lives” (Palmer and Whybrow, 2008 p23)

Coaching is Space

- Training v Coaching

The training environment does indeed create space for those attending to think and reflect on their activities. However, it will be limited to the topic which is being covered during the training course rather than the wider context for the individual. For example time management training may provide a series of useful techniques and ideas but may not encourage and exploration of values and beliefs about time. It will also be limited to the degree to which the delegate is prepared to enter into that space, perhaps they get bored and switch off. Coaching in contrast will provide a much more intimate space and be far more focussed on the individual and their experience.

- Person Centred Counselling v Coaching

The kind of space, as described in this assignment, created during counselling is equal to that of coaching. In fact when reflecting on person centred counselling it could well be in excess of. Carl Rogers fifth of his six Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality

Change (Rogers, 1957) states “The therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavours to communicate this experience to the client” (Rogers, 1957 p2). This means the space created within the person centred counselling experience is of the highest empathic order. However when reflecting on Silsbee’s description of spaciousness (Silsbee, 2008 p118) and its recognition of a “myriad of choices” the Person Centred Counsellor might not seek to highlight those, but leave them to the client to find for themselves.

Coaching is Self-Awareness

- Training v Coaching

Training will seek to raise self-awareness usually via the communication of ideas, techniques and exercises in a structured way to arrive at a learning outcome. Once again its agenda driven process may restrict the freedom of thinking and experience for an attendee. De Haan’s observations about a “considered choice of interventions” (de Haan, 2008 p52) are the only tool available to a trainer in a training room to raise self-awareness. In contrast coaching’s none adherence to an agenda allows for far greater levels of awareness to be achieved as the coach can focus and take time to explore the frames of reference an individual holds in a way not practical in training.

- Person Centred Counselling v Coaching

In discussing this assignment with a third year student on Warwick Universities Person Centred Counselling and Psychotherapy Foundation Degree Course they made an interesting observation. In particular we were discussing Whitmore’s definition of Coaching and “Helping them to learn rather than teaching them”. (Whitmore, 2009 p10) They thought if you changed ‘learn’ to ‘discover’ this could describe counselling. Perhaps they have summed up the different styles of self-awareness that might exist between Person Centred Counselling and Coaching. Counselling is about self-awareness so as the client discovers for themselves whilst coaching is about self-awareness so as the coachee learns for themselves.

4. Conclusions

The elements I have listed here are in no way a definitive exploration of what coaching is and represent my thoughts about its philosophy. De Haans states “Coachee’s can and will use coaching in their own best interests, but it is and remains a change carried out for and by themselves” (de Haan, 2008 p52). I agree with him. So why then, would someone engage the services of a coach, if they will be doing all the work anyway? I believe it is because of the elements I have listed in this assignment. Coaching provides an opportunity which is unique. The uniqueness of coaching is driven by the Space it offers, the Self Awareness it raises, the Change it facilitates, which are created by the Confidentiality of the exchange and the Relationship with a coach.

This paper’s question “What is Coaching?” has taxed many brains. Each of which has provided differing definitions usually driven by a particular approach to coaching. My experience and practice of coaching believe it to be far more than a set of words that attempt to define it. Of course the need for clarity as the coaching industry seeks to distinguish itself from its peers will continue the drive for that definition. Perhaps it’s many and varied landscapes and approaches mean there never will be a single agreed statement. Could coaching become a catch all term in the same way “therapy” is interchangeable with its various approaches.

In writing this paper I have attempted to provide a clearer belief and understanding about what coaching is. For me, it is a philosophy. Yes it’s an act or skill, yes there are techniques, yes there are approaches, yes there are adjacent disciplines, yes there are outcomes and yes there are people who choose to engage a coach for all sorts of reasons, personal and professional.

What is it? It’s Space, Self-Awareness, Change, Confidentiality and a Relationship which provides a unique experience. The reasons one might want that are as many and varied as are the outcomes which arise. But for me, at its core, this is “What Coaching is”. All I need to do now is bump into a stranger and tell him what I do.

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