
Group Coaching for Leaders in Transition to Senior Leadership Positions

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Dedicated to the memory of

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Abstract

This study explores how group coaching can support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions, and develops a theoretical and practical framework to inform group coaching practice. Leader transitions are not measured, though they may be a factor in leadership failure, as transitions are known to be difficult at senior levels. The preparatory phase of the research triangulated the secondary data and updated understanding of the challenges facing leaders in transition, and how dyadic coaching supported them. This was based on interviews with leaders and coaches, and it guided the development of a group coaching programme. The action phase of the study involved the application and exploration of an online group coaching programme, through two cycles of action research. This was followed by a reflexive thematic analysis of the data.

Findings reaffirm how leaders can experience a disorienting and tumultuous period in transition, based on the nature of the roles they step into, the context within which they are leading and the psychological challenges associated with personal transition. Group coaching served to normalise these challenges and resource senior leaders. Outcomes included clarity around what it meant to be a senior leader, how to relate to and engage with others, and how to lead in a senior position.

Theoretical contributions to knowledge relate to how group coaching works, through the identification of three sequential steps: co-creating a safe and productive space to work in, offering many relevant inputs into the space, and leaders processing these inputs. Contributions to practical application include a two-part framework which outlines how to establish a group coaching programme and what this involves for the coach. The study also contributes to knowledge about senior leader transitions by updating understanding of the challenges leaders face, clarifying the process of transition, and summarising the basis of the coaching inquiry. Further contributions include how group coaching can support leader and leadership development. This research confirms knowledge that may be obvious to those working and researching in the field of senior leader transitions, groups and coaching. However, it offers novel insight into how group coaching works, the impact of the challenges of contemporary senior leadership, and how leaders coming together for their own development can also develop leadership in organisations.

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1 Introduction

This study aims to explore how group coaching can support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions and to develop a theoretical and practical framework to inform group coaching practice. These are important aims. Recalling a point made by the leadership scholar, Warren Bennis, Day and Antonakis remind us that ‘the quality of all our lives is dependent upon the quality of our leadership’ (Day and Antonakis, 2018). It therefore follows that anything that could support the development of leaders to improve leadership is important. The exploration of group coaching is worthwhile, as it is becoming increasingly popular (Ostrowski, 2019, p. 83), yet research into it is described as twenty years behind that of dyadic coaching (O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017). Addressing these aims together offers an approach to improve the quality of leadership, and to extend knowledge about group coaching, through empirical research.

1.1 Background

This study was born out of both professional and personal curiosity. My corporate and consulting background involved managing and implementing change, and I noticed the impact that this had on people. My master's dissertation explored the attributes that enabled leaders to adapt to change. With over ten years' experience working with leaders to adapt to change, often through transitions, I remained curious about how some leaders were apparently able to cope so well, whilst others struggled. I recognised systemic, relational and psychological effects of transitions, and the desire to gain a deeper understanding about what could be happening brought me to a PhD.

The significant challenges associated with moving into senior leadership positions are well documented and understood (Freedman, 1998; Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011). Factors affecting the transition and approaches to help senior leaders have been identified (Terblanche and Albertyn, 2018; Wiggins, 2019). However, the use of group coaching for this transition has not been explored. Whilst the empirical study of group coaching is limited, it has been shown to support the development of leaders at work (Fusco, O'Riordan and Palmer, 2015; O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017).

Outside work, it has also been shown to support leaders through transitions (Graifoner, 2009; Whitely, 2013). This study covers new ground by exploring group coaching for transitions within the workplace. There is an element of risk, as it involves leaders who are at a 'uniquely challenging point' in their career (Terblanche, Albertyn and van Coller-Peter, 2017, p. 8) and leadership failure can have a considerable impact upon organisations and individuals.

The increasing use of coaching in organisations has created a 'demand for a specific body of knowledge to understand the practice' (Jackson and Cox, 2020, p. 3), and the academic understanding and application of group coaching is in its infancy. It is not possible to say how much group coaching takes place due to the lack of a commonly agreed definition. Anecdotal indications suggest that the term is used for groups as small as three people and as large as fifty. Its use aligns with organisational and societal trends towards improving access to coaching, as well as more collaborative working. Yet there are opposing views towards working in groups. Some have 'naïve faith in groups' (Grint, 2022, p. 1527) whilst others show more hesitancy, recognising that there is potential for achievement and devastation (Turner, 2012). It was this paradox that drove my curiosity to explore group coaching for leaders in transition to senior leadership positions. My perception, based on experience, was that working in groups involved more floundering than goal attainment (O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017). The use of groups in therapy and self-development also raised questions for me about what part they could play in the workplace, especially for senior leaders. However, the review of literature demonstrated that group coaching did hold the potential to support senior leaders in transition, so were worth exploring.

I had no previous experience of group coaching, though had previously attended accredited training and gained experience as a professional team coach. In preparation for the group coaching, I attended a course on understanding group dynamics, run by the Institute for Group Analysis, which proved useful and gave me the confidence to begin. This meant that the study was for my own edification, as much as to inform others, and contribute to an understanding of how to help leaders in transition adapt to change.

1.2 Research aims, objectives and definition of terms

The aims of this study are to explore how group coaching can support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions and develop a theoretical and practical framework to inform group coaching practice. A series of research objectives were defined and are listed below:

- Research Objective 1 (RO1): To critically review the literature relating to the transition to senior leadership positions, the process of personal transition, the support available to leaders through transition, and group coaching to support leaders through transition to senior leadership positions
- RO2: To empirically explore how leaders experience the transition to senior leadership positions and how dyadic coaching supports them
- RO3: To develop a group coaching programme based on the findings from the empirical exploration
- RO4: To apply and explore the group coaching programme, taking an action research approach, with a group of leaders in transition to senior leadership positions
- RO5: To contribute to theory on personal transitions, coaching for senior leader transitions, group coaching and the practice of group coaching as a way of supporting senior leaders in transition

An explanation of terms and the boundary of this study now follows. The term 'leadership' is in common use, and people make assumptions about what it means (Carroll, Ford and Taylor, 2019). For those stepping into a senior leadership position, its definition and meaning need to be understood, so that it can be accomplished. Leadership is described as a 'contested concept' (Grint, 2005a, p. 1) and literature on the subject is abundant. It ranges from autobiographical accounts and opinions, to theoretically based academic studies of different perspectives (Bryman, 2011).

Leadership at its simplest level is a process in which an individual influences others to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2019). Recognising how it is embedded within context, Day (2000) extends this to see it as a complex interaction between people and environment, which emerges through the system. Carroll *et al* (2008) build upon this by describing a shift away from competencies of leadership towards leadership as practice. Contemporary descriptions of leadership include terms

such as emergent, relational, collective (Kennedy, Carroll and Francoeur, 2013; Ciuk and Schedlitzki, 2022). And that it is fluid, temporal and situated in practice (Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2012). Taken together, these definitions suggest that leadership is a practice that responds to the people, the time and the place within which it is happening. The different focus of the definitions and descriptions show how leadership is both contested and ambiguous (Ciuk and Kostera, 2011).

Attempts to define senior leadership positions are difficult, due to the myriad types of organisations that exist, the different environments in which they operate and the complexity within the organisations themselves. The term 'senior leadership' is commonly understood to mean leaders towards the top of an organisation, who may be more experienced and have higher rank or status than others. Extant empirical research into transition coaching for senior leaders has focused on leaders moving into specific roles. For example, the senior executive team, heading up a business unit or service line or operating at one or two levels below the executive team (Terblanche, Albertyn and van Coller-Peter, 2017; McGill, 2019; Kilpatrick, 2022). This study takes an alternative, broader approach and focuses on the journey leaders make towards senior positions.

A pathway model, which was developed in the 1970s and has been subsequently tested, forms the basis for much of the literature. It describes the expanded requirements of the role as people move up through organisations (Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011; Freedman, 2011). Other practitioner and psychological models show an ascent through levels (Barrett, 1998; Collins, 2001; Rooke and Torbert, 2005). Taken together, a common point can be identified that represents a shift away from much of what is familiar in terms of responsibilities, relationships and perspectives. This study is using the term broadly, when three key shifts in the role are evident:

- A shift *away from* familiar functional responsibilities *towards* broader, unfamiliar, whole business or organisational responsibilities
- An expansion in the number of new relationships and changes to the basis of existing relationships
- A need to operate through higher levels of psychological development, taking broader perspectives.

Depending on the size and type of the organisation, this shift can happen well before roles located close to or within the C-Suite, such as Chief Executive or Chief Operating Officer.

The word transition is widely used and understood in all walks of life, including in the workplace relating to career transitions. However, during this research, when I explained to potential participants that I was working with transitioning senior leaders it caused some confusion, as the word is currently, commonly associated with gender transitions. This presents a risk if the use of the term is restricted, as it may limit awareness and understanding of what people are experiencing when they go through any transition.

Much of the transition research overlaps, in terms of theories about what happens (Lewin, 1946; Bridges, 2004). It has also been explored in relation to work role transitions (Louis, 1980a; Louis, 1980b; Nicholson, 1984) and aligns around a staged process. These are summarised in figure 1.1.

Pre-transition	Taking up the position	Letting go	Being betwixt and between – liminal phase	Integration

Figure 1.1: Summary of stages in a process of personal transition

There are, however, few empirical studies into the process of personal transition, and leadership transitions are also under-researched (Halliday, 2012; Wiggins, 2019). Related to this, measurement and evaluation of transitions in the workplace appears to be limited. It is restricted to the outcomes of the process, such as leader performance and retention, as opposed to evaluation of the process itself (Wiggins, 2019). Indicators that leadership transitions are problematic include reports of leadership failure and derailment. One commonly cited figure is that between 30% - 50% of leaders fail, meaning that they underperform or fail within the first 18 months (Capretta, Clark and Dai, 2008; Sutton, 2008; Watkins, 2013b). Derailed leaders are those who were on track in terms of a positive, upwards trajectory in their career and then failed. One focus in the derailment literature attributes failure to the traits of the leaders, describing them as evil, incompetent, or mentally unstable

(Furnham, 2010). This study will explore how the process of transition could impact leaders, irrespective of their traits, and will offer group coaching as a potential avenue to provide support.

The investment in coaching for leaders in transition is a sign that leaders can benefit from support. Studies have focused on the benefits of dyadic coaching for leaders through transition (Reynolds, 2011; Gill, 2017; McGill, 2019; Kilpatrick, 2022), as well as how it can support people through change and transition (Harding, 2013; Terblanche, Albertyn and van Coller-Peter, 2017). No studies have been identified that use group coaching specifically for leaders in transition, though there are studies exploring the use of group coaching in the workplace for leadership and identity development (Stelter, Nielsen and Wikman, 2011; Fusco, O’Riordan and Palmer, 2015). Empirical studies also exist into group coaching for transitions and adapting to change (Grajfoner, 2009; Whitely, 2013). However, no studies combining transitions for leaders in the workplace have been identified.

One of the difficulties associated with studying group coaching is the lack of clarity about how it is defined and implemented (O’Connor and Cavanagh, 2016). What does exist is often practice based, or opinion pieces, as opposed to being based on empirical study (O’Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017). Descriptions and definitions of group coaching are emerging with some common features. Figure 1.2 summarises their chronological development.

Description	Source
'A facilitated group process led by a skilled professional coach and created with the intention of maximizing the combined energy, experience, and wisdom of individuals who choose to join in order to achieve organizational objectives or individual goals'	(Britton, 2010, p. 6)
'Bringing together small groups (often four to eight individuals), group coaching is an intimate conversation space. It is a rich area of deep dialogue, sharing and discovery. Key to the group coaching process is the focus on goals and ongoing accountability' 'A major benefit identified by many group coaching clients is the peer accountability formed. Coaching is not just any conversation, rather it is a conversation with intent geared to support new awareness, and movement into action towards the goals they have set for themselves'	(Britton, 2015, pp. 117-118)
'... group of people that do not necessarily work together, participating simultaneously in a coaching process ... to use the knowledge and experience of the group to receive feedback ... develop solutions, enable learning through peer experiences and provide support from others who are in the same position'	(Mühlberger and Traut-Mattausch, 2015)
'A collaborative small-group process taking place over a limited time period, using coaching principles to work with a group of individuals on their personal goals'	(Sutton and Crobach, 2022, p. 36)

Figure 1.2: The chronological development of descriptions and definitions of group coaching

The above descriptions recognise that this is a coaching process which brings together people who are not working together, in conversation, to share experiences, to raise awareness and/or provide support, to achieve a purpose such as achieve goals, develop solutions or develop personally. This study will add to the field by offering an empirically based description of what happens during group coaching for leaders in transition.

1.3 Approach to the study

I approached this study with a pragmatic philosophy. This recognises that fixed ontologies and epistemologies fail to capture reality, and set limits to the processes by which knowledge is generated (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019). It accepts the objective reality of a change in role and responsibilities, as well as the subjective experience of the leaders experiencing their transition. And it recognises that there are many different ways of interpreting the world and undertaking research, so it is possible to work with different types of knowledge and methods (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Pragmatism starts with a problem, and the research question drives the choice of methods. The value of the knowledge generated is defined by how it enables action to be carried out successfully.

To explore how group coaching could support leaders in transition, it was first necessary to understand what they would be experiencing in transition, so that the support could be designed to meet their needs. This meant that four research questions were posed to address the aims outlined previously in section 1.2:

1. What makes the transition to senior leadership positions problematic?
2. How does dyadic coaching support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions?
3. How can group coaching support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions?
4. How do the findings develop and inform group coaching practice?

The study was designed in two phases, recognising that the first two questions would guide the exploration of practice needed to address the last two questions.

The **preparatory phase** focused on addressing the first two research questions. Designed to serve as a triangulation of secondary data, interviews were conducted with leaders and coaches to explore how leaders experienced the transition and how dyadic coaching had supported them. The exploration of dyadic coaching was necessary given the absence of group coaching experience for this transition, and this was what the leaders and coaches had experienced. A reflexive thematic analysis of the data collected during the interviews allowed for the recognition and organisation of

patterns within the content and meaning of the data (Willig, 2013). It also recognised the subjectivity that I brought, as a researcher experienced in working with leaders in this transition (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). The findings from this phase clarified the challenges associated with the transition to senior leadership positions and how dyadic coaching could support senior leaders. Based on these findings, a group coaching programme was developed that could be applied and explored in the next phase of the study.

The **action phase** employed different approaches to address the last two research questions. The first approach involved applying the group coaching programme, with a group of senior leaders in transition, through action research. Action research was selected because the focus for this study is on the improvement and understanding of practice (Robson, 2002). I worked as the coach, with the participants as representatives of group coaching, and I used the action to create knowledge about the action (Coughlan and Coughlan, 2002). Two group coaching programmes were run online, consecutively, with senior leaders from British Transport Police. Each group was made up of five leaders. The first cohort included staff members within the finance and HR functions, the second included officers within the senior ranks. Each group coaching programme made up one macro cycle of action research, within which four workshops made up micro cycles of action research. I developed an approach with which to analyse the data from the workshops and programmes. It considered the type of data being collected and the questions being asked of the data at that time, which were how to adapt the workshops and programmes to make them more effective for the next time they were delivered (Coughlan and Brannick, 2014).

A conventional approach, using action research, would have been to generate themes between workshops. However, the data collected between workshops was limited, so this was not possible. Instead, given the focus on practice, a meticulous and rigorous process was used, which involved logging and categorising each item of data collected from anonymous surveys and fieldnotes. The categories related to the design and delivery of the group coaching, and anything else about which I was curious. These were further subdivided into things to keep, drop or develop. This was based on the concept of successful adaptation to thrive from evolutionary biology (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009). By the end of the first group coaching programme, it was clear that theme generation

to adapt the programme was not necessary. The programme was based on strong empirical, theoretical and practical foundations, and the feedback in surveys and interviews provided evidence that the overall structure and approach to group coaching had supported leaders. The same meticulous process to analyse the entire dataset from the first programme was conducted to prepare for the delivery of the second programme. This process was repeated during the second programme to ensure consistency.

Once the group coaching programmes ended, the data was analysed again, to explore how group coaching had supported leaders through their transition. This involved a return to reflexive thematic analysis, which recognised the subjectivity that I brought as both coach and researcher, and the need for reflexive engagement with theory, data, and interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). Each phase of the study and the choices made are explained and justified in Chapter 3.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 critically reviews the literature in the fields of leadership, transitions, leader and leadership development and group coaching. It reveals reports which estimate the scale of leadership failure and the impact that this has on organisations (Capretta, Clark and Dai, 2008; Watkins, 2013b), and why leaders may be struggling to transition (Wiggins, 2019). It then goes on to investigate what is involved in the transition to senior leadership positions. This includes a review of the requirements of a senior leadership position (Rooke and Torbert, 2005; Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011) and what a process of personal transition involves (Halliday, 2012). A review is then presented of the support available through leader and leadership development and of the empirical studies into dyadic coaching for senior leader transitions (Reynolds, 2011; Gill, 2017; Terblanche, Albertyn and van Coller-Peter, 2017; McGill, 2019; Kilpatrick, 2022). This is followed by a review of emerging studies into group coaching and working online (Grajfoner, 2009; Whitely, 2013; Fusco, O'Riordan and Palmer, 2015; Jackson and Bourne, 2020; Nacif, 2020). The review concludes with a summary of the potential and limitations of group coaching.

Chapter 3 describes the methodological approach to the study, beginning with an introduction to my pragmatic philosophical approach. It goes on to present an overview of the research design, followed by the details of each phase. An explanation is provided about how reflexive thematic analysis was selected for the preparatory phase of the study. This is followed by a description of how the data was sourced and collected from leaders and coaches, to guide the development of a group coaching programme. Moving on to the action phase, an explanation of how action research and reflexive thematic analysis were selected is followed by a justification for this dual approach. A description of how the data was collected, the participants and sources of data are provided, before a discussion of my role as practitioner and researcher. An outline of how the data has been analysed is provided, whilst detailed descriptions are included in each of the findings chapters, to put them into context. A discussion of the quality and ethical considerations is followed by summary of how the findings are presented.

Chapter 4 describes the preparatory phase of the study, which was designed to guide the development of the group coaching programme. It begins with a description of how the data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. It then goes on to define and describe the themes relating to the experience of the transition to senior leadership positions and how dyadic coaching supported leaders. This is followed by an introduction to the group coaching programme, which includes an overview, a summary of each workshop, the coaching approach and the initial plan for delivery.

Chapters 5 and 6 present the findings from the action phase of the study. Chapter 5 describes how the group coaching programme was applied and explored using action research. It explains how the data was analysed between each workshop and programme. This is followed by a description of what happened in each workshop and how it was adapted for the next workshop. A summary of learning and adaptations for the second programme is provided, before the findings from that programme are shared. A comparison between the two programmes is made, before a summary of the findings from the action research is provided.

Chapter 6 describes how group coaching supported leaders. It begins by describing how the data collected during both programmes was analysed for a second time, using reflexive thematic analysis.

It presents the findings relating to how group coaching supported leaders through a review of coaching goals and outcomes. It then goes on to define and describe the key themes relating to what happened in group coaching to support leaders. A summary of these findings concludes the chapter.

Chapter 7 discusses the findings from the preparatory and action phases, in relation to the literature in the field. It presents claims for how they make theoretical and practical contributions to knowledge. These include updating and expanding understanding of the multifaceted challenges associated with making the transition into senior leadership positions: the development of conceptual models to describe the psychological process of transition for leaders in transition and how coaching can support them; the identification of sequential steps in group coaching that supported leaders in transition; and a practical framework that coaches and organisations can use to deliver group coaching.

Chapter 8 concludes the research study. A summary of how the research objectives have been achieved is followed by an explanation of the theoretical, methodological and practical contributions to knowledge. The limitations of the study are outlined and avenues for further research are suggested. A reflection upon my journey as researcher and coach brings the thesis to a close.

2 Literature Review

The aims of this study are to explore how group coaching could support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions and to develop a theoretical and practical framework to inform group coaching practice. This review critically examines the literature relating to senior leader transitions and group coaching to understand what is known and what could usefully be explored. The first research objective of the study, RO1, specified the focus of the review. It is to explore literature relating to the transition to senior leadership positions, the process of personal transition, the support available to leaders through transition, and group coaching to support leaders through transition to senior leadership positions. The review is split into three parts. The first part explores what leaders in transition to senior leadership positions might need support for. The second part addresses how leaders could be supported through transition. The third part examines how group coaching could support leaders.

Relevant literature was within the fields of business and management, psychology, coaching, and learning and development. The structure and scope of the review is shown in Figure 2.1.

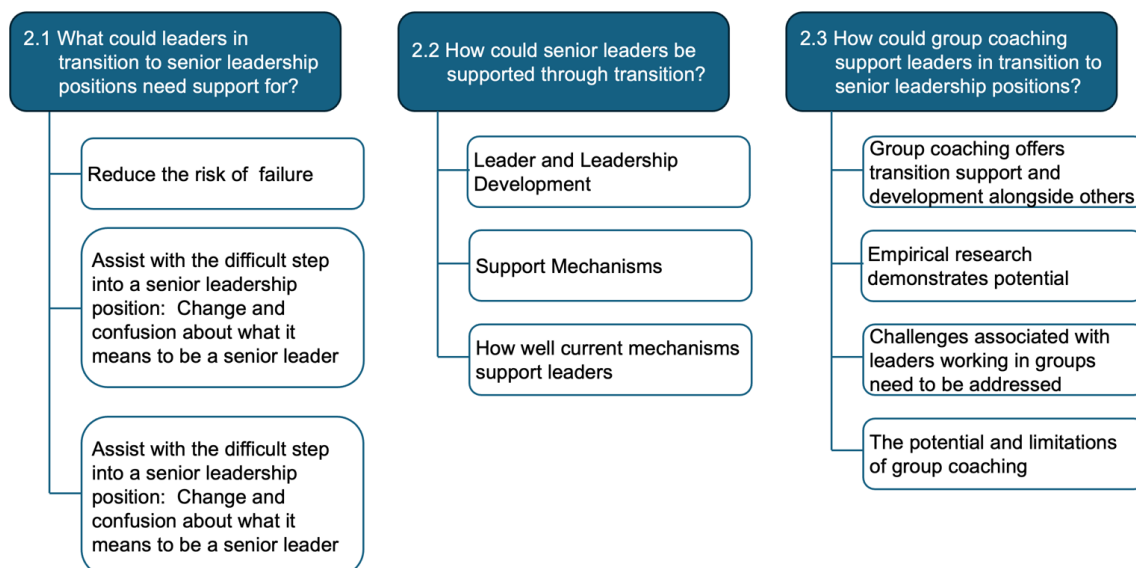


Figure 2.1: Structure and topics covered in the literature review

Identifying and reviewing literature has been a constant and iterative feature of the study. For example, I began by exploring the psychosocial aspect of the process of personal transition. Halliday (2012) recognised that people strive for a sense of congruity between how they see themselves, their roles and relationships. She went on to develop and test the Gap Management Model, which shows how people act to address the distress caused when there is a lack of congruity. This introduced topics such as identity and Swann's Self Verification Theory (Swann and Buhmester, 2012). This process of following up references within the papers and publications that I was reading continued up until submission. Key search terms were *transition* and *transition coaching*, *senior leaders* and *leadership*, *leader development* and *leadership development* and *group coaching* and *groups at work*. I searched across a range of business and psychology databases such as Business Source Complete, Psycinfo and Brookes RADAR. I also used Google Scholar, the Oxford Review, which provides research briefings (Wilkinson, 2016), and grey literature for opinion pieces, such as McKinsey.

2.1 What could leaders in transition to senior leadership positions need support for?

This section of the review explores the literature relating to the transition to senior leadership positions. It begins by summarising the reported scale and impact of leaders failing to perform, and goes on to explore what makes the transition to senior leadership positions difficult. It includes an examination of the challenges associated with being a contemporary senior leader, as leadership is defined at this point in time, in the early part of the 21st century. The final part of this section examines what has been written about the process of personal transition that leaders may experience.

2.1.1 Support could reduce the risk of failure

Measures of success and failure in leadership transitions are limited (Wiggins, 2019), and evidence-based studies to specify the scale of failed transitions are absent within existing literature. Any mention of measures of success include how quickly leaders are productive, for example during an onboarding programme (Conger and Fishel, 2007), and retention (Bond and Naughton, 2011;

Wiggins, 2019). Amongst practitioner opinions and reports, there are figures that suggest that between 30% and 50% of leaders underperform or fail within the first 18 months (Capretta, Clark and Dai, 2008; Sutton, 2008; Watkins, 2013b). Freedman (2011) cites a report by the Emerge group in 2004, based on interviews, surveys and focus groups of Fortune 1000 firms, suggesting that only 25% of executives had fully transitioned, which was defined as doing their jobs in the way that they were expected to. A more recent report by the global leadership consulting firm DDI suggests that things are not improving. According to HR leaders from more than 1,700 companies, 47% of external executive hires and 35% of internal executive hires are considered failures (Neal and Rhyne, 2021). Even recognising that it may be in a consulting firm's interest for the figure to be high, the implication that more than one in three leaders may be failing is significant. Both reports are from the US, but in the absence of any data from the UK, they indicate that being successful as a leader may not be easy.

Further reports go on to explain the impact of these failures. If a leader exits the organisation, it has been estimated that the direct and indirect costs of turnover could be up to 24 times the departing leader's salary (Manderscheid and Ardichvili, 2008). One report recognises the impact of working with a failing leader, estimating that 12 people could have their performance 'significantly compromised' (Watkins, 2004). And there are other effects on retention, levels of engagement and morale of those who work for a failing leader (Sutton, 2008; Inyang, 2013). The personal struggles are described in studies of coaching leaders in transition, who refer to having to deal with self-doubt, and lack of confidence and self-belief (Reynolds, 2011; Gill, 2017; McGill, 2019; Kilpatrick, 2022). This may be further reflected in a survey of leaders, 80% of whom rated 'transition anxiety' as second only to dealing with divorce, (Bond and Naughton, 2011, p. 167).

Recognition of the scale of the challenge of transitions in the workplace is nothing new, with literature published in the early 80s referring to how coaching could help with this (Wolf and Sherwood, 1981). The efforts of organisations to address these challenges do, however, appear to be lacking. In 2006, over 50% of those responding to a CIPD survey reported that support for new leaders was managed ineffectively (Bond and Naughton, 2011). More recently, only a third of executives who had transitioned felt that they had meaningful support (Byford, Triantogiannis and Watkins, 2017).

Although in 2009, 87% of HR professionals agreed or strongly agreed that transitions are challenging times (Watkins), by 2014, in a survey of leaders, 90% reported that transition development could still be improved (Sinar and Paese). A more recent report suggests that 83% of leaders felt unprepared going into a transition (Keller and Meaney, 2018), indicating that while things might be changing, these improvements are only slight.

Reports into the scale of leadership failure suggest that it is a significant problem for the individual leaders themselves and others working around them, and, ultimately, it affects the bottom line of the organisation. These figures are not evidence based, and the measures of transitions are also limited. However, when leaders transition into a senior position, there is an even greater risk and chance of failure (Freedman, 2011; Terblanche, Albertyn and van Coller-Peter, 2017). Measurement of transition success and failure and the accompanying impact on organisations would contribute to a greater understanding of the scale of the problem. It could also lead to improvements in transition support, to reduce the risk of failure. In the meantime, the next section will explore the literature relating to what makes the transition to senior leadership positions difficult.

2.1.2 Support could assist with the difficult step into senior leadership positions

Leaders will have experienced many transitions, both in and out of work, before they make the transition into a senior leadership position. However, a review of the literature shows how this specific transition brings challenges associated with the nature of the positions that leaders are moving from and to, and with what it means to be a contemporary leader. Contemporary is defined as someone who leads in the early part of the 21st century. This section will explore what is known about the challenges associated with moving into senior leadership positions, specifically the new and different responsibilities and ways of working involved. It will then go on to explore what has been written about what it means to be a leader in such a position.

Significant changes are required to hold a senior position

This section examines changes for leaders as they move up into senior leadership positions. Whilst senior leadership positions are not precisely defined, leadership journey models have been

developed from academic and practitioner backgrounds. Five models have been selected and examined based on their theoretical and practical underpinnings, to present the different perspectives and aspects associated with moving up through organisations. The models are presented in full in a table in appendix 1, and will now be discussed. Three of these models describe how responsibilities change, one explores ways of working, and another, the psychological shifts involved as leaders move up through organisations.

Two of the models are based on work by Mahler in the 1970s. Pathways and Crossroads (Freedman, 1998) and The Leadership Pipeline (Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011) focus on the journey in terms of the scale of responsibilities that the leader takes on. The first stage involves *managing self* and moves on to *managing others*, then to *managing functions*, to *managing businesses*, to *managing a group of businesses* and finally to *managing an enterprise*. This model is widely referred to in literature, is used with clients in practice, and is still regarded as relevant, 40 years after its first publication. The use of the term 'management' does, however, suggest a focus on task and skill as opposed to leading people. The expansion of responsibilities from self outwards is echoed in The Level 5 Hierarchy model from Collins (2001), which is based on 28 company comparisons and focuses on the hierarchy of executive responsibilities. The steps move from *competent individual* to *team manager*, to *effective and efficient achiever of objectives*, to *visionary leader*, ending with *building greatness through humility and will*. These three models originated and have been developed by people who work in business, or are consultants, so they offer a practical, as opposed to academic or theoretical, perspective. They are focused on task and responsibilities.

Also from a corporate background, Barrett's model approaches leadership from a human value-driven perspective that calls for bringing the whole self to work (Barrett, 1998). It describes the journey in terms of levels of consciousness. The Seven Levels of Leadership Consciousness model presents three lower levels with a focus on self-interest, and three upper levels with a focus on the common good. Level four is presented as a turning point, moving away from looking for satisfaction externally and toward meeting internal needs, such as the need for self-actualisation. As opposed to describing responsibilities, this indicates how moving higher up the organisation calls for different ways of working, from being an *Authoritarian* at the first level, to a *Paternalist*, a *Manager*, a

Facilitator, a *Collaborator*, a *Partner* and finally a *Visionary*, with a focus on society at the top of the organisation.

Similarly focusing on the leader as a person, with input from developmental psychologist Cook-Greuter, Rooke and Torbert describe their Seven Ways of Leading model (2005). This suggests that leaders develop their action logic, defined by how they interpret and react to what is going on around them. It follows a similar pattern to the previous models, with a focus on self to start with, in a phase called *Opportunist*, then it moves through *Diplomat* in the search of belonging, then on to *Expert* and *Achiever*. An alignment between personal and organisational goals takes place as an *Individualist*, then *Strategist* to drive transformation, ending as an *Alchemist* with a broader focus on societal transformations.

These models show how leaders need to change and adapt what they are doing throughout their career. By the time that leaders get to a senior position, they will have had experience of adapting to new responsibilities and different ways of working, and of developing psychologically. What makes the shift to senior positions distinctive are the types of adaptations needed at this point. The names of this stage in each of the models are the *Manager of a Single Business* (Freedman, 1998), a *Facilitator* (Barrett, 1998), an *Effective Leader* (Collins, 2001), the *Individualist* (Rooke and Torbert, 2005) and at *Passage Four* in The Leadership Pipeline, from *Functional Manager* to *Business Manager* (Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011). The move to become a *Manager of a Single Business* or a *Business Manager* recognises the shift away from functional responsibilities and towards whole business responsibilities. It involves a step away from the familiar, towards unfamiliar tasks and functions and engaging with a wider variety of people. It is also described as one of the hardest transitions (Freedman, 1998; Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011). The move to *Facilitator* and *Effective Leader* describes a need to lead change through catalysing commitment to vision and transformation (Barrett, 1998; Collins, 2001). Meanwhile the shift to *Individualist* recognises the need to think differently and interweave personal and organisational needs (Rooke and Torbert, 2005). Taken together, these descriptions show how leaders need to act, work with people and think differently as they move to senior positions. Coming from a practical standpoint, Kates and Downey (2005), summarise this as *Letting Go* and *Adding On* in three areas: knowledge about things you don't know;

time horizons shifting from short term to long term; and strategic thinking – from ‘can we’ to ‘should we’ do something.

The most recent of the models identified is over ten years old, and is based on work conducted in the 1970s, so none of the models can be defined as contemporary. The lack of any contemporary models could mean that the existing ones are recognised as standing the test of time and sufficient to work with. In the absence of a definition of senior leadership within the literature that was reviewed, these models serve as an indicator of what it involves. A summary of the key features of a senior leadership position are shown in figure 2.2, and a detailed description is provided in appendix 2.

Feature	Description	Reference
Holding responsibility and accountability for aspects of a business	This is as opposed to, or as well as, functional performance and letting go of previous responsibilities. From familiar to the unfamiliar	(Freedman, 1998; Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011)
Many types of interdependent relationships	Including leading others, collaborating with peers and reporting to and influencing more senior levels to catalyse commitment to vision and transformation	(Barrett, 1998; Freedman, 1998; Collins, 2001; Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011)
Psychological development	Working to meet internal as opposed to external needs. Embraces transformation and greater sophistication in how leaders interpret and react to what is going on	(Barrett, 1998; Rooke and Torbert, 2005)

Figure 2.2: Features of a senior leadership position

The table shows how the move into a senior leadership position may be difficult for leaders because of what they need to give up and move away from, and what they need to embrace and develop in terms of their new responsibilities. In addition, they need to change who they engage with and how they engage. The move affects their motivation, through having to focus on a different set of goals, how they meet the goals through the common good, and how they meet their own needs internally, as opposed to externally. In summary, the literature suggests that leaders need to adapt what they do, how they do it and how they think. Investigating this transition is an opportunity to confirm or disconfirm whether these challenges arise for leaders making the transition into a senior leadership position, and how they impact them. Also missing within these models is any exploration of what it means to be a leader at a senior level.

Confusion may exist about what it means to be a senior leader

As leaders get to grips with what is required in senior leadership positions, they face a confusing landscape if they look for answers to questions about what it means to be a leader. This section will discuss how the confusion arises, by exploring the literature on leadership, how it is evolving, and what that means for contemporary leaders.

In the search for some clarity about what it means to lead, leaders may draw upon myriad practitioner and opinion texts. Even within academia, the offerings are extensive. During his study of the field, Northouse came across no fewer than 200 definitions of leadership (Northouse 2019, p. 1) and 65 different classifications over 60 years (Northouse 2019, p. 4). Examples include *Servant Leadership* (Spears, 2004), *Authentic Leadership* (Avolio and Gardner, 2005), *Situational Leadership* (Blanchard, 2007), *Adaptive Leadership* (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009) and *Feminist Leadership* (Batiwala, 2010). Awareness of this is relevant, as this snapshot presents the diversity of terms used, the frequency with which they appear, and the potential for leaders to be overwhelmed. This is significant because seeing themselves as leaders is critically important to their development, creating the drive to seek out experiences to enact leadership (Day and Harrison, 2007). With so many potential options to consider, leaders may struggle to work out how they want to lead and be seen.

Furthermore, according to social identity theory, we identify ourselves by the groups to which we belong, so joining a group of senior leaders will affect identity (Turner, Brown and Tajfel, 1979). Self-discrepancy theory adds that we view our identity from two points, how we see ourselves and how we think others see us, and discrepancy causes problems (Higgins, 1987). If leaders think that they ought to be viewed in a certain way and they do not see that in themselves, it could cause shame, embarrassment and fear.

In addition to the confusion about what it means to be a leader, the context within which leadership takes place makes it confusing. At the end of the last century, Lewin and Regine suggested that society, along with business organisations, would be facing a future that would involve 'riding the Tsunami of Great Change' (Lewin and Regine, 1999, p. 342). This is evidenced by transformations in the way we live and work in response to the development of technology and globalisation. New businesses such as Amazon have grown up, embracing the opportunities; established businesses such as Lego have responded by adapting, whilst the increases in corporate restructuring and bankruptcy filings demonstrate that not all organisations respond effectively (Hartge, Callahan and King, 2019).

Amidst all this change, COVID-19 brought into sharp focus the challenges of leading in complex and uncertain environments. Instead of an environment that was understandable and engineerable (Newell and Munro Turner, 2008), leaders faced the challenge of complex adaptive systems that were non-linear and highly interactive (Lewin and Regine, 1999). Covid offered an example of hypercomplexity, which renders clear cut and unambiguous understandings impossible, as everything can be described and arranged in a variety of ways (Stelter, 2014). Leaders in organisations throughout the world were faced with making decisions about things that they had no experience in and may never even have contemplated. At a governmental level, leaders were forced into making decisions about closing borders, restricting freedoms, and supporting the economy. All this as data was initially limited and then changing, with many and varied voices vying to be heard and taken notice of.

Acknowledging the confusion caused by the complex and uncertain environment, the typology of problems and leadership responses (Grint, 2005a; Grint, 2005b) (see figure 2.3) offers a framework to consider. The framework recognises that different situations call for different responses. Where critical and tame problems call for more familiar command and management responses, wicked problems call for more open collaborative approaches. However, in a subsequent essay, Grint recognised that there may be disputes around how different people construct the problem, and, whilst collaboration is necessary, it is 'neither simple, nor sufficient' (Grint, 2022, p. 1526).

Typology of Problems and Responses

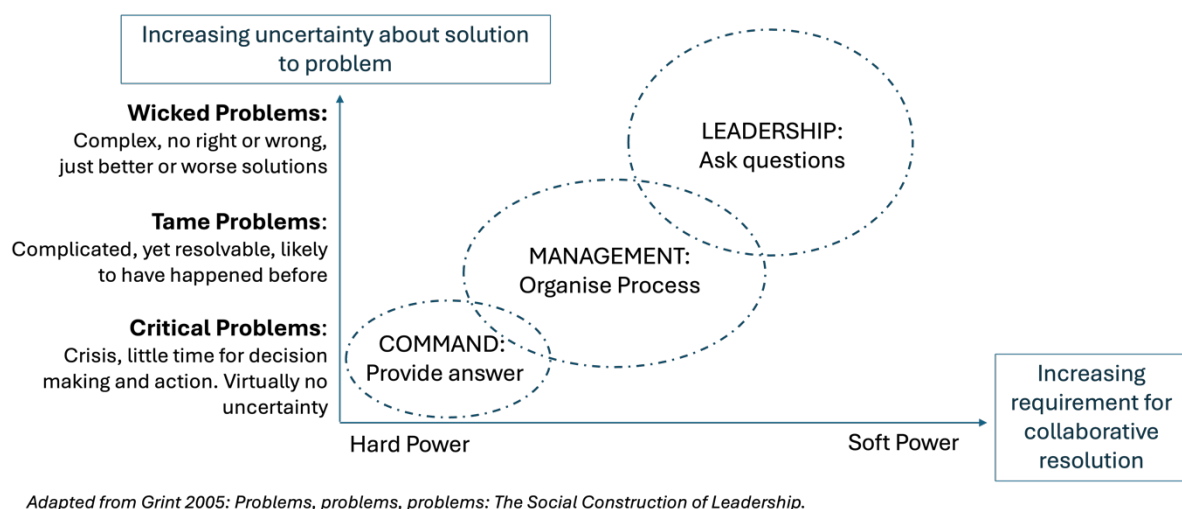


Figure 2.3: Typology of problems and responses

The challenges associated with the environment will be exacerbated if the leader is coming in from outside the organisation. Organisational culture has been cited as a primary reason that leaders fail (Watkins, 2013b; Byford, Triantogiannis and Watkins, 2017).

The lack of clarity about what leadership is and involves, coupled with the complexity within the environment, means that leaders stepping into senior leadership positions may draw on their own ideas and assumptions about what it means to lead. However, if these are unexamined, this may add to the confusion. For example, traditional assumptions about leaders suggest that certain traits reside

within heroic individuals, which allow them to influence organisational outcomes (Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985). These would be in opposition to the contemporary definitions of leadership and needs of the context, as outlined above. Eagly and Karau confirm this, describing how leader stereotypes are shifting to be more androgynous 'incorporating more culturally feminine communal qualities to accompany the culturally masculine agentic qualities traditionally preferred in leaders' (Eagly and Karau, 2024, p. 312).

Contemporary views introduce ideas that leading is about mindsets, practices and relationships. For example, the adoption of a dialogic mindset contrasts with the command-and-control approach. A dialogic mindset (Bushe and Marshak, 2016) focuses on achieving change through inquiry and learning. It suggests the need to focus on reducing the anxiety of followers by seeing them as equals, and approaching issues through the lens of openness and inquiry. It also calls for the need to be an individual, whilst staying connected to others. As opposed to focusing on competencies, viewing leading as practice grounds it in everyday habits, systems and processes (Carroll, Levy and Richmond, 2008; Kelly, 2019). Relational leadership sees leadership work as social processes of co-creation, in which emergent coordination and change are produced and the attention is on the interactions and relations within which the processes unfold (Crevani, 2019).

The shift in beliefs about what it means to be a leader aligns with the need to be able to work at higher levels of cognitive and ego development (Rooke and Torbert, 2005). This involves leaders being more reflective and critical of their thinking, as well as recognising a shift towards meeting internal needs and alignment between personal and organisational goals. This calls for leaders in senior positions to ask themselves what their internal needs and personal goals are, and use this awareness to respond to the situations they face, and engage differently with those they work with. The difficulty facing leaders is that they may not be aware of the shifts in what it means to lead, they may lack understanding of what different ways of leading look like, and may struggle to lead in a different way.

Summary of what makes the step into senior leadership positions difficult

The literature that has been reviewed describes how demanding the step into senior leadership can be. The expansion of responsibilities and relationships calls for a move away from what was familiar, towards meeting personal needs internally, through growth and personal development. Put another way, they have to change what they must do, how they must do it, how they engage with others, and how they must think. At the same time, the contested and ambiguous nature of leadership itself could be overwhelming, as well as confusing. The complexity and uncertainty of the environment in which they are leading adds to the challenge. As well as grappling with the changes and challenges associated with stepping into senior leadership positions, leaders will also be experiencing a process of personal transition, which will now be explored.

2.1.3 Support could help leaders navigate a turbulent process of personal transition

This section reviews the literature relating to personal transitions, what they involve and how leaders could be affected by them.

A disorienting process of flux between two states

Though under-researched in terms of empirical study (Halliday, 2012; Wiggins, 2019) transition theories have been explored and evolved through the fields of psychiatry, psychology, anthropology and sociology (Halliday, 2012). A transition involves a temporary journey, a passage to somewhere different from where one began, a change (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2023; Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). Transitions have been identified as part of all human life, whether through growth and development or events that happen or do not happen. They are driven by changes that are within our control or outside our control, and which arise out of choice or not, for example, something physical and significant, such as setting up a new home with someone, or psychological, such as coming to terms with not conceiving. Schlossberg (2011) presents a summary of three types of transition: *Anticipated*, key events in life such as leaving home, getting a job and getting married; *Unanticipated*, such as disease, accidents or redundancy; and *Non-event* transitions, when things that could have been expected to happen do not, such as not getting a promotion. There is a suggestion that transitions do not necessarily follow every change, and that there may be an element

of choice in going through the process. A transition is conceptualised as a process that can be broken down into stages or phases, and is affected by different factors. This section will review the theories and factors affecting transitions that relate to a leader moving into a senior leadership position.

Where change is the outcome, transition is the process (Bridges, 2009). The French anthropologist van Gennep has been described as the 'father' of modern transition theory (Halliday, 2012, p. 60). He wrote about his studies of rituals associated with changing status in different cultures in the early 20th century (Van Gennep, 2019). In van Gennep's book, *The Rites of Passage*, he identified three parts to a ritual. The first involved a separation from the old ways of being, the second, a transition phase in between the old and the new, and the third, incorporation into a new way of being. Based on his work in the 1940s resolving conflict through behavioural change, the social psychologist Kurt Lewin developed what he also identified as a 3-step model to achieve change. He defined it in terms of *Unfreezing-Moving-Refreezing* (Schein, 1999; Burnes, 2004). The first step, *Unfreezing*, relates to his contention that individuals are subject to a forcefield of driving and restraining forces and that the equilibrium that maintains these forces needs to be disturbed, in order that old behaviours can be discarded in favour of new ones (Burnes, 2004). *Moving* relates to a dynamic process of identifying and evaluating options to move forward, and *Refreezing* concerns stabilising the forces to allow new behaviours to be sustained. Lewin's work is described as 'seminal' (Schein, 1999, p. 71) and it stands the test of time, in that criticisms are dismissed as 'unfounded and/or based on a narrow interpretation of his work' (Burnes, 2004, p. 997).

The three-step approach is also echoed in the work of the practitioner William Bridges, who referred to 'three natural phases of transition' (Bridges, 2004, p. 105). Based on his work with people who were going through their own life transitions, he defined the phases as *Endings*, *The Neutral Zone* and *The New Beginning*. In the same way that the first *Unfreezing* stage in Lewin's model suggests the need to disturb equilibrium and discard old behaviours, so Bridges identified *Endings* as involving a 'break in the continuity of things', and letting go outwardly and inwardly (Bridges, 2004, p. 16). *The Neutral Zone* is described as the period between the old and the new, as 'chaos' and 'when nothing feels solid anymore' (p. 139). This is comparable with Lewin's *Moving* step as described prior. *The*

New Beginning phase refers to the inner realignment necessary to provide the motivation to be different, with true beginnings evidenced by the reaction of those around you who notice the difference (Bridges, 2004). Again, this is similar to Lewin's *Refreezing* stage in terms of new behaviours being sustained.

The validity of Bridges' model may be questioned, as it is not presented with any empirical evidence. However, given their similarity in terms of both number and content of phases, and that van Gennep and Lewin's models predate Bridges' work, it can be said to have theoretical underpinnings. It is referred to within other academic texts (Sugarman, 2001; Parker, 2016) and widely cited within the business and coaching community, so it forms a part of the landscape.

Following her comprehensive review of the evolution of the theories of transition, Halliday (2012) summarised the key themes that she identified. Reducing them further to explore their relevance to senior leader transitions, they can be described as follows:

- We orient ourselves around the external environment and strive for stability to survive.
- When change disrupts that stability, it can cause emotions such as 'confusion, disorientation, depression and anxiety' (p. 106).
- We strive for continuity for ourselves and in the views of others, so our response is to restore equilibrium and look for new or different points of reference and support.

Based on this review, Halliday went on to develop The Gap Management Model. She writes that 'psychological transition is about identity, about what we believe about who we are and our relationship to the world. When we transition, regardless of the nature or source of the transition, by definition we move from one way of being to another' (Halliday, 2012, p. 138). She proposes that our identities help us to meet needs for connection, continuity, coherence, competence, control and autonomy. A gap is created when our assumptions about who we are become disrupted and there is no longer congruence between our internal sense of self and our external roles and relationships. Once the gap has been perceived, the options are to accept the change and move forward, deny the change and regain what has been lost, or make a 'creative compromise with the external

environment that we can accept' (Halliday, 2012, p. 163). The model was assessed for usefulness in desk research through application with three different populations: adolescents, people leaving college, and with a World War II era resettlement programme.

This model provides an alternative theory and approach towards personal transition which is based around identity. It is relevant and useful for this study because it recognises the challenges associated with the shift in identity that leaders face. A leader's sense of self needs to change in response to their new roles and relationships as a senior leader. It introduces six different aspects to the change in identity with which they may be struggling. However, no empirical studies testing the validity of the theory have been located. Like the other theories described previously, it also fails to explain how to support people through transitions, which this research will address.

Research conducted by Ibarra into career transitions also focused on identity. This research was empirically based and did suggest strategies to support the transition (Ibarra, 2004a; Ibarra, 2004b). A multiple case study consisting of interviews with 39 people at different stages of career transitions led to a conception of working identity, as something that is worked and reworked through an exploration of possible selves. In practice, this involves crafting experiments by trying something new, shifting connections by developing contacts and finding new role models, and making sense of the events in our lives and the stories we tell about who we have become. This adds more detail to understanding of how the search for congruity to fill the gaps caused by transition can be filled.

Further literature was identified that explores the middle phase of transition, and which can help to address how to support leaders through it. This 'interim status' (Halliday, 2012, p. 61) was specifically explored by anthropologist Victor Turner (1995), who defined it as liminality, and described it as being on the threshold of change, betwixt and between two stable states. Although the study was based on an African tribe, which raises questions of generalisability, he suggests that the middle phase was the most important in the transition. This is because it involves the confrontation of daily norms through socially subversive and ritually inersive acts. His in-depth examination described the disorientating effect that this phase has on people who feel in flux and disconnected, through the loss of one identity and the formation of another. More recently, Bridges described it as a process of

disintegration and reintegration, renewal and formlessness (Bridges, 2004). This confrontation with daily norms is particularly relevant given the shift to see leadership as practice. Also significant is the further recognition of the impact of transition on identity.

This section has shown how disorienting the process of transition can be. The next section of the review explores in more detail what this liminal phase could involve for leaders as they move into senior positions.

Inner adjustments are influenced by external factors

One model has been identified which specifically refers to transitions in the workplace. Based on a ten-year study of transitions at work, Nicholson developed a Theory of Work Role Transitions (Nicholson, 1984; Nicholson, 1990). This model of the transition process identified a cycle made up of four recursive, distinctive and interdependent phases. He found that there was an initial phase of *Preparation* where the motives, expectations and feelings for the change are established. Next comes the *Encounter*, referring to the first few days and weeks when the holder experiences the reality of the new role and their expectations will be tested. *Adjustment* relates to making the changes necessary to perform in the new role, and, finally, *Stabilisation* concerns establishing a steady state after the changes have been made.

The latter three phases are similar to the three-step structure described in the previous section. The *Encounter* creates a separation from what happened before, i.e. starting the new role involves separating from the old role. The period of *Adjustment* is a process of making changes in between the two states, and *Stabilisation* involves the integration into the new role. The additional phase at the beginning, *Preparation*, recognises that, as humans, we have an ability to think about, anticipate and imagine the future (Palmer and Panchal, 2011; Halliday, 2012). The transition to a senior leadership position can be described as anticipated, as part of career progression and development, so this stage is relevant. If the new role is in line with what has been anticipated, there may be little disturbance, and the opposite may be true if there is significant variation between expectation and reality. For example, leaders holding a traditional and trait-based view of leadership might have struggled more if they were transitioning into a senior leadership position during Covid. In this case, a

command or management approach may not have achieved as effective results as asking questions of others to address this complex and ambiguous situation.

Nicholson's theory goes on to recognise that different transitions at work require different levels of development, either personally or in terms of the role. Nicholson described these as 'modes of adjustment', and they are displayed in figure 2.4.

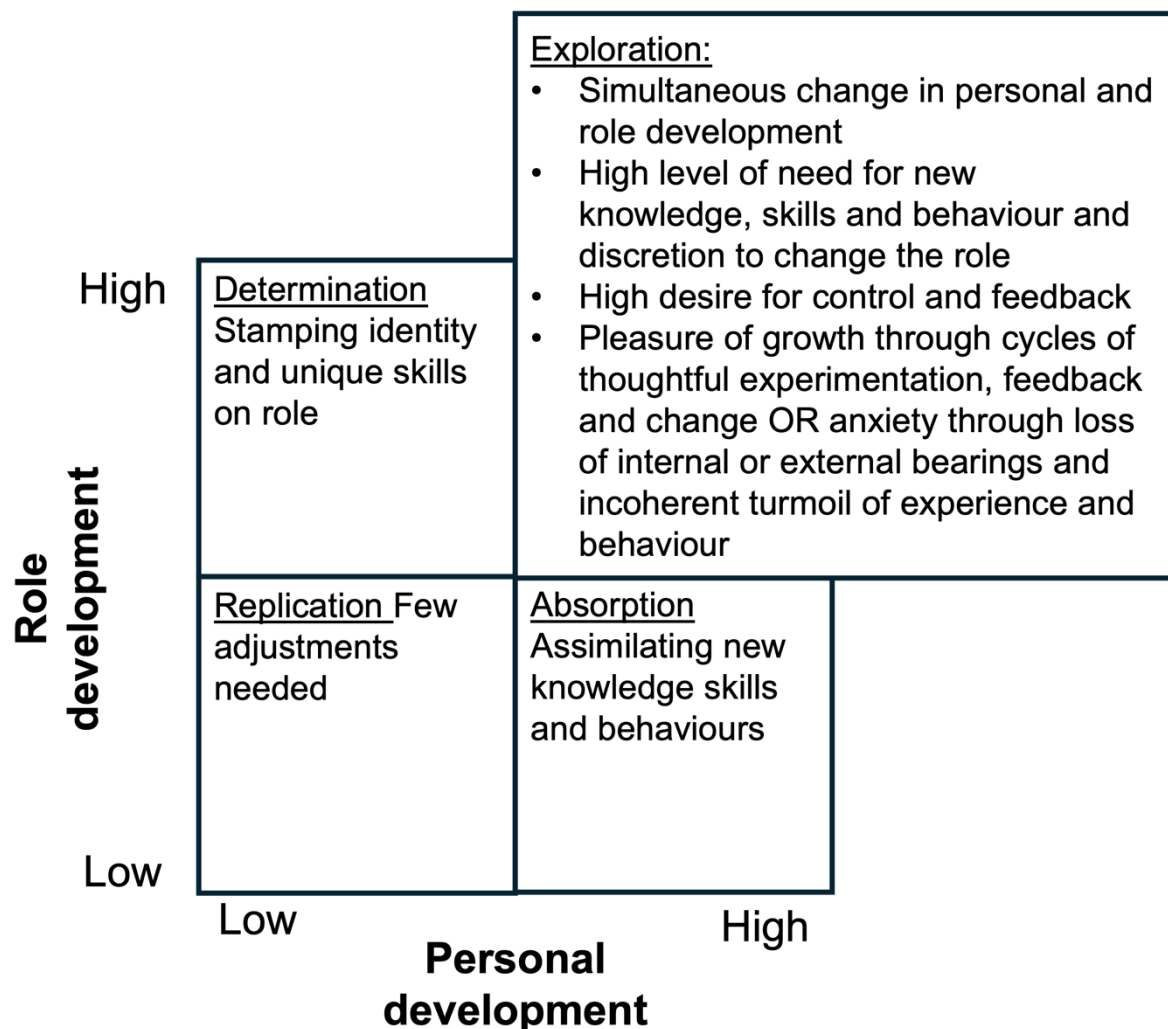


Figure 2.4: Adaptation of Nicholson's model showing the modes of adjustment in transition

The *Replication* mode calls for few adjustments either in the role itself, or the person moving into it. *Absorption* calls for considerable personal development whilst moving into a clearly defined role.

Based on the Leadership Pipeline model (Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011) shown in appendix 1, an example of this could be found in *Passage Two*, moving from *Managing Others* to *Managing Managers*. The opposite of this calls for *Determination*, where there is little need for personal development, yet there is high discretion to develop the role. This could be exemplified by a politician taking up a new brief. Based on the nature of the shifts needed to meet the requirements for a senior leadership position, as outlined in section 2.1.2, these leaders could be in *Exploration* mode. This is because their transition calls for both role and personal development, through the expansion of responsibilities, the increase in number of relationships, the change in ways of working with others, and the shift to working through higher action logics. This model adds to the understanding of what senior leaders experience, by including the desire for control and feedback. It highlights how growth occurs through experimentation, feedback and change. Meanwhile, a lack of control and feedback causes anxiety and disorientation, leading to turmoil that affects behaviour. This is significant because, in her investigation into the effect of a senior leader transition on confidence, Kilpatrick found that positive feedback was lacking, and leaders felt that it was inappropriate to ask for it (Kilpatrick, Bachkirova and Myers, 2022). This is highly relevant for this research, because it indicates that supporting leaders through transition needs to include personal development, opportunities to experiment, and the provision of feedback.

Adding further depth to the theory, Nicholson goes on to suggest that personal motivations and previous experience of transitions affect what happens, as do the socialisation processes of the organisations. Socialisation processes may or may not be relevant, depending on whether the leader is making the transition into a new or different part of an organisation. However, this does show how both the individual and organisational context are significant during a senior leader's transition, which will make every transition unique. This Theory of Work Role Transitions offers a comprehensive view of the process of transition at work. The model aligns with other theories of transition in terms of presenting a phased process, and it adds a preparation phase which could influence subsequent phases.

An explanation of the inner experience of leaders during transition comes from Louis, who researched newcomers' experience as they join organisations (Louis, 1980b). She recognised and

defined a sense making process, as people respond with surprise to the contrast between their expectations and the reality they encounter. Surprises may come from emergent anticipations and assumptions as well as from conscious expectations. She suggests that inputs to making sense of surprises include past experiences, personal characteristics, cultural assumptions and interpretation schemes and information and interpretation of others.

In connection with surprises, in his work with women returning to college in the 1970s, Mezirow described something that he defined as a 'disorienting dilemma' (Mezirow, 2000, p. xii). This was when the women became critically aware of their assumptions and expectations. He recognised a type of learning in which participants were able to change their beliefs and feelings, and their frames of reference about themselves, and he referred to it as 'perspective transformation' (Mezirow, 2000, p. xi). These beliefs and feelings are transformed through critical reflection upon the assumptions on which they are based (Mezirow, 1997), and this is supported by four processes of learning. The first involves seeking evidence to support the existing view, the second is to establish a new point of view, the third is to transform a point of view, and the fourth and final process is to transform how people make meaning (Mezirow, 1997; Terblanche and Albertyn, 2018). This is known as Transformation Learning Theory, and is described as a significant theory of adult learning (Howie and Bagnall, 2015). It has been criticised for its focus on rational discussion and critical reflection, as opposed to emotion, and the term is used loosely which diffuses its meaning (Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). Mezirow himself responds to these criticisms, recognising the role of emotion, and describing Transformation Learning Theory as a theory in progress (Mezirow, 2000).

The link between learning, thinking differently and change is described by Schein and Schein (Schein and Schein, 2017). The theme of surprises or disorientating dilemmas is picked up as they describe how change starts with the recognition of a problem, pain or dissatisfaction. New learning is described as cognitive redefinition, involving 'learning new concepts, learning new meanings for old concepts and adopting new standards of evaluation' (Schein and Schein, 2017, p. 340).

Taking a broader view of leadership transitions, a more recent study explored promoters and inhibitors (Wiggins, 2019). Based on a grounded theory method, Wiggins conducted and analysed

interviews with fifteen leaders, two senior managers and five representatives of HR. In summary, he found that organisations tend to inhibit transitions, whilst leaders have more of an influence in making them successful. For organisations to support transitions, they need to provide clarity, a structured programme, and access to the business. Other factors affecting the transition within the organisation include the people, such as the manager of the leader, the stakeholders and their team. Meanwhile, leaders influence their transitions through the skills they bring and what they do during the transition, such as having a transition plan. These factors are dependent on each other, further reinforcing the unique nature of each transition.

Additional factors which have been identified as affecting leaders when they are making the transition to senior positions relate to both the position and the personal circumstances of the leader. Moving to a more senior role inevitably increases visibility, as there are fewer positions higher up in the organisation (Kates and Downey, 2005). Kilpatrick identified this as being put on a pedestal (Kilpatrick, 2022). This increases pressure, as does a focus on hitting the ground running and having plans for the first 90 days, which adds time pressure (Watkins, 2013b). Keller and Meany describe the need to show progress within the first 100 days as a myth, suggesting that it can take over 6 months (Keller and Meaney, 2018).

The individual context, in terms of previous experience of transitions and personal motivations, has been recognised as being relevant (Nicholson, 1990; Louis 1980b). However, no empirical studies into the personal circumstances of the leader making the transition have been identified. The move into a senior leadership position may be happening alongside other transitions in the leader's personal life, which may add additional challenges. Developmental psychologists have explored changes as part of natural human growth and development. Lifespan theorists Erikson and Levinson refer to human needs between the ages of 30 and 50 as being focused on developing secure relationships, building families and careers, and reappraising and modifying the beliefs that have come from childhood and early adulthood (Palmer and Panchal, 2011; Levinson, 1986). The development of technology and new instruments show how mental development continues, and that the brain can 'keep adapting through life' (Kegan and Lahey, 2009, p. 12). Their current stage of development will therefore affect how leaders think, interact with people, make sense of the world,

and act (Bachkirova, 2011). This could have a significant impact upon the leader in terms of the time and energy they have to devote to making the transition a success. It might also serve to exacerbate the psychological confusion already present, as leaders grapple with who they want to be as a leader.

Each of these theories provide a more detailed understanding of what may be relevant and what could be happening for leaders in transition. These are summarised in figure 2.5

Considerations	References
Motives, expectations and feelings coming into the senior position influence the transition	(Louis, 1980b; Nicholson, 1984; Nicholson, 1990)
Transitions involve changes in identity in terms of how leaders see themselves	(Ibarra, 2004b; Halliday, 2012)
The transition to a senior leadership position involves personal and role development. Control and feedback are important and so is the chance to experiment.	(Nicholson, 1984; Nicholson, 1990; Kilpatrick, 2022)
Transitions involve thinking differently as leaders make sense of what is happening to them	(Louis, 1980b; Mezirow, 2000; Schein and Schein, 2017)
Every transition will be unique as it will be affected by the specific organisational and individual context for each leader, which can either help or inhibit the process	(Wiggins, 2019; Levinson, 1986; Nicholson, 1990; Kegan and Lahey, 2009; Bachkirova, 2011)
Leaders may be under pressure due to the visibility of the role and the need to show progress in the role quickly	(Watkins, 2013a; Kilpatrick, 2022)

Figure 2.5: Table to show what to consider for the transition to senior leadership

This summary shows what a transition to senior leadership can involve, and how it is affected by the context within which it takes place. Nicholson's theory may be over thirty years old, but it provides valuable insight into what may be happening for leaders as they adjust to their new positions. Wiggins' theory is helpful given its recency, and the fact that it is based on the experiences of leaders. The limitation, in terms of relevance for this research study, is that these theories are

focused on general work, leadership transitions and change, as opposed to the specific senior transition that this study is exploring. This means that they fail to consider the impact of the process alongside the challenges associated with stepping into the role and the confusing leadership landscape.

Cognitive and emotional disruption

So far, this section has explored what the process of transition could involve for leaders and the factors affecting it. The next part will explore how leaders may feel and cope during this confusing state of liminality (Halliday, 2012).

As humans, we have a need to maintain a predictable environment, and we mentally organise our thinking so that we can better understand and operate in the world (Halliday, 2012). Senge refers to mental models as 'tacit maps' of the world (Senge, 1994, p. 237), suggesting that anything that disrupts the model will lead us to question where we are in the world. Mezirow explains that we seek to order the meaning of experience to 'avoid the threat of chaos' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 3). The transition process, by its very nature, disrupts our understanding. This is described in Mandler's Interruption Theory, which recognises that 'visceral arousal follows perceptual or cognitive discrepancies' (Fisher and Cooper, 1990, p. 13).

The impact of such arousal during transitions is recognised in the work of Sugarman, an occupational psychologist who presents a seven-stage model of the response to an event (Sugarman, 2001, pp. 144 - 148). Stage 1 describes an initial reaction as immobilisation or shock. Stage 2, a response to the event, either elation or despair, depending on the type of event, quickly followed by minimisation, as the initial feelings and anticipated impacts of the event are tempered by perspective. Stage 3 is self-doubt, and is related to realisation about what the transition might lead to. This doubt could be manifested as 'anxiety, anger, or sadness' (Sugarman 2001, p. 145). At stage 4, the model picks up a similar theme to the previously described models, in terms of accepting reality and letting go. This calls on the need to relinquish attachments that will inhibit a new beginning. Stage 5 involves testing, and is seen as an experimental period when new things, such as identities and behaviours, are tried out. This aligns with the *Moving* and *Neutral Zone* phases of Lewin's and Bridges' work, and with

Ibarra's on shifting identities. Stages 6, search for meaning, and 7, integration, also pick up similar themes from the previous models, in terms of aligning thinking with different situations and integrating new ways of being into life.

Sugarman cites the origins of her work as studies of people's reactions to loss (Sugarman, 2001), which is relevant, as transitions involve a loss of how things used to be. There are similarities, in terms of the emotional responses, to the work of Kübler-Ross, who developed the extended grief cycle (Kubler-Ross, 1969). This was initially based on her work with terminally ill patients, though it was later seen as applicable to people receiving any bad news. It consists of seven stages, which are shown in the table in figure 2.6, alongside their treatment. The stages are: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, testing and acceptance.

Stage	Description	Treatment
Shock	From stability to immobilisation	Sympathy and acceptance of emotion
Denial	Close eyes to evidence	Provoke to anger by showing reality of it
Anger	Explosion of emotion	Space then reframe, don't push back to denial
Bargaining	Hope that the bad news is reversible, finding new ways to change it	Look for a win-win or realise the inevitable
Depression	Reluctant acceptance	Accept it and keep moving
Testing	Start to try things	Realistic things to do to gain sense of control
Acceptance	Ready and actively moving on to the next stage	Help establish the change and celebrate

Figure 2.6: Table describing the Kübler-Ross extended grief cycle

These models align around the initial sense of immobilisation and an immediate reaction, then a need to accept the change or loss, before testing helps to find new meaning and integrate changes. The value in Sugarman's model, for senior leadership transitions, is the identification of self-doubt

and the potentially negative impact that could have, when leaders are trying to prove how effective they can be in their new roles. This is especially likely if there is a lack of feedback available.

The process of transition makes a demand on the resources of the leader to cope with both the emotional and the cognitive challenges they face. This could be positive, eustress, in response to the challenge, or negative, distress, also known as stress (Halliday, 2012). Cooper and Palmer describe stress as occurring when pressure exceeds your perceived ability to cope (Cooper and Palmer, 2000). However, how leaders perceive their ability to cope could be affected by the transition itself. Lazarus and Folkman suggest that there are two stages to appraisal. They suggest that a primary appraisal involves people questioning what something means to them, and a secondary appraisal involves them questioning what can be done (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). At a time when a leader's models of the world are being disrupted through transition and they are experiencing self-doubt, their appraisal could be affected. For example, rather than viewing some feedback or poor results objectively, they could overpersonalise (Louis, 1980b) and add to a self-doubting narrative that they are not good enough.

A person's ability to cope was one of four resources that Schlossberg, professor of counselling psychology, identified when she researched how to help people to cope through transitions (Schlossberg, 2011). In her 4S model, she described the *Self* as concerning the person's inner strength for coping, such as their attitude and outlook, and how they frame the challenges that they are facing. The other elements of the model are the *Situation* in which the transition takes place, which addresses whether anything else is going on at the same time that could reduce the resources available for the transition; *Supports*, which, as the term suggests, refers to what support is available for the person going through transition, as this can influence their sense of well-being at this challenging time; and finally, *Strategies*, which refers to the coping skills and abilities that the person has developed to get through difficult times. Rather than define specific strategies that could be helpful, Schlossberg suggests the need to be able to flexibly call upon a number of strategies.

Pearlin and Schooler describe coping as behaviour that protects people from being psychologically harmed by a problem (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978). They suggest that there are three ways to cope

in a problematic situation: either remove or modify the conditions creating the problem; perceptually control the meaning of the experience such as reframing it; or manage the emotional consequences of the problem. Their research into the effectiveness of the interventions to cope identified that they are not as effective when dealing with impersonal occupational problems compared to interpersonal domestic issues. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described similar ways to cope. They suggest a problem-focused approach, which attempts to change the circumstances, and an emotion-focused approach, which involves developing strategies to lessen the emotional response (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 150). These approaches suggest that a leader going through a transition could cope by making changes to the conditions they experience, though upon arrival into a new position, such options may be restricted. Reducing the emotional response could be challenging in an already emotional situation and reframing the situation may be difficult for the leader on their own.

Summary of how leaders are affected by the process of transition

Transitions cause disruption and disorientation, and, as human beings, we strive for stability. This section has described what the process of personal transition involves for leaders stepping into senior positions. It has shown how influential the personal motivations and expectations of leaders coming into the transition are, as they make sense of what is happening to them. It has also described the visceral impact of any discrepancies. The middle, liminal phase is important in terms of identifying and evaluating options to address the challenges of transition. However, this takes place whilst deep internal feelings are aroused, giving way to a mix of different emotions. These involve a sense of loss associated with leaving the previous role and what it meant. Sugarman also identified the potential for self-doubt caused by the transition. This could affect how well leaders feel they can cope, as it relies on their appraisal of the situation, to question what is happening and identify what can be done about it. Feeling unable to cope will lead to stress. The literature also shows that, as well as their own inner strength and coping skills, the situation and the support around them affects how leaders will cope and transition. This reinforces how important the context around the transitioning leader is. Ultimately, one of the options facing leaders includes removing themselves from the situation, in other words, failing to transition and contributing to the number of leaders failing. Or they could reframe or manage the emotional impact of the transition.

A summary of the stages of the process of transition and the emotional impact are presented in the table in figure 2.7.

Pre-transition	Taking up the position	Letting go	Being betwixt and between – liminal phase	Integration
Anticipation for what the new position involves. Preparation for taking up the new position	Experiencing the reality of the taking up the position. Recognising what is as you expected and what isn't Primary appraisal of the situation – what does this mean? Potential for elation or despair	Secondary appraisal of the situation – what can be done? Stopping doing things that you used to do Letting go of what you used to think Denial and anger in response to loss	A period of cognitive and emotional disorientation to cope with. Identifying and evaluating options to make adjustments to fit the new role Bargaining, depression, testing and experimentation	Integrating new ways of doing and approaching things Identifying yourself as a senior leader and others identifying you as a senior leader
Key references (Louis, 1980b; Nicholson, 1984)	Key references (Louis, 1980b; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Nicholson, 1984; Sugarman, 2001)	Key references: (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Sugarman, 2001)	Key references: (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Nicholson, 1984; Nicholson, 1990; Sugarman, 2001; Burnes, 2004; Ibarra, 2004b)	Key references: (Louis, 1980b; Nicholson, 1984; Sugarman, 2001)

Figure 2.7: Summary of stages in process of personal transition and potential impact on senior leaders

2.1.4 Summary of what leaders in transition may need support for

This section of the review has identified three things for which leaders in transition to senior leadership positions may need support. Firstly, to reduce the risk of leadership failure, secondly, to assist them in taking the difficult step into senior leadership positions, and thirdly, to navigate the turbulent process of a personal transition.

Measures showing how leaders progress through their transition to senior leadership positions have not been identified. In their absence, there are reports which allude to the outcomes of the process of transition, suggesting that one in three leaders might be failing in their roles. This impacts the organisation, those around the leader and the leaders themselves.

The step into a senior leadership position is difficult because leaders need to change what they do in multiple ways. It differs from the move into other more junior positions, as it brings with it an expansion of responsibilities and a greater number of people to work with. This means letting go of what leaders were previously good at, and having to develop new knowledge, skills and ways of working with others. This is made more difficult as leaders must work out what being a senior leader means. As opposed to relying on personal traits, authority, and widely shared and understood models, leadership is now more relational, situated and evolving. Leaders need to respond to who they are working with and the situations they are facing, as well as who they are in themselves.

Finally, the process of transition itself can be turbulent and disorientating. Specific issues concern how leaders respond to the cognitive and emotional challenges of the process. At a time when they are required to step into a position that calls for them to guide followers through a complex and uncertain environment with speed, they are having to cope with the disorientation caused by their own maps of the world being disturbed. We identify ourselves through the roles, responsibilities and relationships we have, and all these change in the move to a senior leadership position, which will give rise to fundamental questions about identity. The emotional turmoil brought on by a transition will also impact upon the resources available to deal with the transition, and might render some of the previously used coping strategies around problem solving and managing emotions less effective.

It is due to the combination of the many and varied challenges facing leaders in transition to senior leadership positions that they may need support. The confusion and disorientation are affected by and affect the leaders' new responsibilities and relationships. Meanwhile, the organisational and individual context makes each transition as unique as the individual going through it. At this potentially emotional time, leaders could face a lack of clarity as well as experiencing anxiety and self-doubt.

The next section of the review will explore how senior leaders may be supported through this challenging time.

2.2 How could senior leaders be supported through transition?

The second part of this literature review considers how senior leaders could be supported during this potentially tumultuous time. A review of the field of leader and leadership development literature is followed by a critical examination of the existing support mechanisms.

2.2.1 Leader and leadership development

If leaders have worked through transitions successfully in the past on their own, they may not see the need to access any support, and may feel that they can work through the challenges themselves. This would be reasonable, as there is an often quoted, but not validated, claim that 70% of development comes through experience on the job, 20% through relationships and 10% through training (McCauley and McCall, 2014). At some point before, during or when they have been in the position for some time, leaders may choose to access or be offered support that could help them through their transition. The focus may be on the transition or, more likely, around their general development. Leadership development has been described as a multifaceted phenomenon with a multitude of meanings (Kjellström, Stålné and Törnblom, 2020). It is also said to be a contested and uninformed discipline (Day and Thornton, 2018; Carroll, Ford and Taylor, 2019) with an under-developed and under-appreciated knowledge base (Day and Dragoni, 2015). However, it is emerging

as a field of academic interest (Day *et al.*, 2014), following an explosion of practice, which has seen interest in leadership converge with the desire to be a leader, to create what could be described as a money-making industry (Kellerman, 2012; Carroll, 2019). Three key and interrelated issues arise throughout the leader and leadership development literature. These are how the terms are defined, how development is best carried out, and how it can be evaluated.

Day *et al.* made the distinction between leader development, focused on the individual leader, and leadership development (Day *et al.*, 2014). Leader development is defined as 'the expansion of the capacity of individuals to be effective in Leadership roles and processes' (Day and Dragoni, 2015, p. 134). Leadership development is broader, as it encompasses 'growth of a collective's capacity to produce direction, alignment and commitment' (Day and Dragoni, 2015), and can be targeted at the individual or collective level. As an interpersonal process, the focus is on 'forming networks and relationships that contribute to development of social capital' (Jain and Kondayya, 2023).

How leader and leadership development is best carried out and evaluated depends on the aims of development, which depend upon how leadership is viewed. McCauley and Palus summarise three developmental stages of leadership culture (McCauley and Palus, 2021). The first stage, **dependent**, sees the people in authority as responsible for leadership, whilst the second, **independent**, sees leadership based in individual expertise and action, and the third, **interdependent**, views leadership as a collective activity. Where leadership resides in the individual, at the first and second stages, the individual is the target of development. The focus is on developing the knowledge, skills and abilities of the leaders, so that they can lead others (Cullen-Lester, Maupin and Carter, 2017). This aligns with the definition of an established paradigm, wherein the skills and achievements of the leaders are assessed and developed (McCauley and Palus, 2021). To help to address questions about the effectiveness of leader centric training programmes, Lacerenza *et al.* (2017) reviewed over 300 studies in a meta-analysis, which covered a range of leader development activities including managerial training and executive coaching, and found them to be effective in terms of reactions, learning, transfer and results. One emerging question around the evaluation of leader development activities is whether development is the immediate result of the activity, or whether it happens over time, and how is it assessed (Day and Dragoni, 2015).

More contemporary views of leadership, which align with the interdependent stage of a leadership culture, see leadership as relational and practice based, thus suggesting that leadership development needs to focus on the individual and collective levels (Day and Dragoni, 2015). This raises questions, as there is a lack of clarity about what collective means. Does collective development mean developing social processes, or does it mean outcomes that are produced collectively (McCauley and Palus, 2021)? Recognising the practice-based element of leadership means that context is important, so collective development also needs to be embedded where, and with whom, the work happens (Raelin, 2015; McCauley and Palus, 2021). Another call on leadership development from critical scholars, is that it should be a place to voice and reflect upon what being a leader means, and to bring power and privilege to the fore (Ryan, Myers and Mooney, 2021). The literature shows that, not only is leadership development hard to define and evaluate, but the needs it serves are many, varied and constantly evolving.

Literature is emerging which expands the focus of leadership development. Cullen-Lester et al. propose three approaches to enhance social networks and improve collective leadership capacity (Cullen-Lester, Maupin and Carter, 2017). These are: to support individuals to develop their social competence, through intrapersonal and interpersonal skill development; to support individuals to shape and leverage their networks; and to support collectives to co-create their own networks. Despite the difficulties associated with researching leadership development (Leroy *et al.*, 2022), McCauley and Palus (2021) examined use of the Direction Alignment Commitment Framework, adding to theory and practice. This constructionist-relational view sees leadership occurring based on three socially produced leadership outcomes: **direction** means agreement as a collective on the goals to be achieved; **alignment** means the coordination of work as a collective; **commitment** means the mutual responsibility for the success and wellbeing of the collective. Both of these studies contribute to the field in terms of provoking thought about how leadership development can be framed and practiced in response to how leadership is evolving.

In an attempt to bring more clarity to the field, Kjellstrom et al. conducted a review of the different ways of understanding leadership development, based on interviews with professionals and

managers (Kjellström, Stålné and Törnblom, 2020). They identified six increasingly complex ways in which individuals become better leaders. The first category, W1, is when a leader conducts their own development, though it may not have anything to do with being a leader. The second, W2, is development that comes through the role they take on, which, again, may or may not help them to be a better leader. The third category, W3, relates to personal development, which may or may not relate to the role. When combined, W2 and W3 express the exploration mode of adjustment to which Nicholson referred (see fig 2.4). The fourth category, W4, aligns the leader's development with the aims and values of the organisation, in that the leader is developed in service of achieving the organisation's objectives. The fifth category, W5, focuses on the development of collective leadership alongside others, as opposed to focusing on the individual. The sixth and final category, W6, focuses on human development, focusing on the individual leader beyond the organisation. This categorisation highlights the many different and varied ways in which leaders become better at what they do, and what could influence the development of a transitioning leader. It also provides a structure with which to see what is covered by a mechanism design to support leaders.

In an attempt to address the challenge of evaluation, Wallace et al. present a typology of leader and leadership development outcomes. This recognises the multidimensional and temporal nature of learning (Wallace, Torres and Zaccaro, 2021). They express that there has been a focus on individual behavioural outcomes, and skill acquisition, as opposed to focusing on how leaders think, feel and mature, or on collective outcomes. The typology distinguishes between individual and collective outcomes, and shows how they are interlinked across four levels of outcomes: 1, the direct performance outcomes that are assessed in the organisation; 2, first-order learning outcomes including cognitive, behavioural and affective/motivational outcomes; 3, second-order learning, defined as 'maturing', which comes as a result of the first-order learning outcomes over time; 4, zero-order learning outcomes, which they define as the inputs to the ability to develop as a leader, such as self-awareness and learning orientation. Within each order of outcomes, Wallace et al. offer further levels of competencies and concepts as examples for individuals and collectives. This comprehensive typology shows the complexity of the topic and offers opportunities to evaluate leader and leadership development.

Classed as nascent in 2009 (Kjellström, 2009), the literature on leader and leadership development is on the increase. The key debates about what it is, and how it is carried out and evaluated, link to the evolving understanding of leadership. Leadership development is shifting, so it is not entirely focused on the individual leader, who leads through authority and their own actions, but transcends leader development and focuses on the relationships and practices of leaders, and is embedded within the context in which they lead. The move away from the established paradigm underpinning leadership development, to a developing one that embraces the complexity and disruption, calls for changes in practice and how leader development practitioners see their role (McCauley, Morgan and McCall, 2014; McCauley and Palus, 2021). Therefore, support for leaders in transition needs to be able to prepare them to lead collectively, as well as addressing the challenges that they are individually facing in their transition.

2.2.2 Support mechanisms for leaders in transition to senior leadership positions

A range of terms are in use to describe work undertaken to support and develop leaders. These include 'mechanisms', 'methods' and 'interventions'. The term mechanism will be used in this thesis, which is described as something observable which can be replicated, is supported by evidence from research, and is responsible for the phenomenon (Illari and Williamson, 2012; Kime, 2022). An examination will follow of four support mechanisms which have been identified as available to leaders as they transition into senior positions. These are onboarding, leadership development programmes, action learning and dyadic coaching.

Onboarding

For leaders joining an organisation as part of their transition, a formal or informal onboarding process helps them to adjust to the organisation (Bowers, Thal and Elshaw, 2023). The purpose of onboarding is to introduce new leaders to their team and organisation. Bowers et al. discuss Bauer's Four Cs model, which describes Compliance, Clarification, Culture and Connection (Bowers, Thal and Elshaw, 2023). Their research showed that onboarding supported retention in terms of job satisfaction, organisational commitment and job embeddedness. Clarity on roles and responsibilities and the chance to develop interpersonal relationships were key aspects that supported leaders, both

of which are highly relevant for senior leaders in transition. Following their review of practice and literature, Jeske and Olson found that, while onboarding promotes mutual learning, the generic nature of such programmes lacks the flexibility, personalisation and customisation that new hires are looking for (Jeske and Olson, 2022). Further, another report into onboarding suggests that, in reality, support varies, existing along a continuum: from sink or swim (no support) at one end, to more effective accelerated integration at the other (Byford, Triantogiannis and Watkins, 2017).

Leadership development programmes

Transitions provide the ideal opportunity for both leader and leadership development, based on the challenges that leaders face (Kates and Downey, 2005). Whilst leader and leadership development programmes take no common form, the content can include the development of identity (Carroll and Levy, 2010), cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, leadership skills, mindset, and leadership styles (Day *et al.*, 2014; Carroll, 2019). All of this content is highly relevant in transition. However, programmes can be run with a fixed curriculum, assume one size fits all, and overlook context, which fails to address the uniqueness of the transition challenges and the need for personalised development. There has been a lack of evidence that leadership development programmes were effective (McCauley and Palus, 2021), but recently this evidence has begun to emerge. One meta-analysis demonstrated that these programmes can support leaders to develop (Lacerenza *et al.*, 2017), and Bonneywell and Gannon explored a programme that addressed identity work (Bonneywell and Gannon, 2022). Leadership development programmes can also recognise the move to seeing leadership as a practice, when they allow for development to happen 'in the white space between events' (Day *et al.*, 2014, p. 80) and by creating the time for sensemaking alongside others (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005).

One type of a leadership development programme that could be relevant for leaders in transition is executive education. This was initially defined as 'management education for people who are in executive roles or who hope to be' (Ballou *et al.*, 1999, p. 340). It was designed in an attempt to bridge the divide between leadership development programmes, which lacked rigour, and academic programmes, which were not practical (Lockhart, McKee and Donnelly, 2017). MBA programmes are

a highly relevant example of executive education, having been described as a rite of passage, facilitating the transition from junior to senior roles (Kelan and Jones, 2009).

One example of a programme that would support leaders in transition was explored in a study of the 'Consulting and Coaching for Change' programme, by Florent-Treacy (2009). The programme could be categorised as executive education, as it was provided by INSEAD. Leaders were coached over a series of seven modules, by different course leaders, who were trained and experienced psychotherapists, and by each other, in small groups. The study was described as a 'psychodynamically informed and highly personal development process' (Florent-Treacy, 2009, p. 74). The study explored the narratives of the participants throughout the programme, and it showed how identity experimentation and exploration was taking place. Florent-Treacy's study establishes that the use of narratives and small groups could support the identity development work of leaders in transition to a senior leadership position. However, access to such a programme may be limited, due to the costs and the content of the whole programme. Whilst inevitably valuable, the content may not be directly relevant to what the senior leader is experiencing in their transition at that time, and is limited to narrative development.

A range of theories of leadership development underpin different leadership development programmes. Liu et al (2021) conducted a review of the literature, and identified that these include: the process of development for specific outcomes, such as self-efficacy and giving feedback; developing transformational leadership; adult development; leader self-structure; and specific developmental outcomes, such as deliberate practice. In each case, the theory drives the content and the focus on the outcomes. However, the challenges of transition will be unique to every leader, depending on their previous experience, psychological makeup, and context, which raises questions about how a structured programme could address what is most effective at the time of greatest need. More significantly, the leader and their unique experience of transition will not generally be the main focus of the programme.

Action learning

Recognising how important learning from experience is, Willocks describes how the online action learning part of a leadership development programme helped leaders to learn collectively (Willocks and Rouse, 2024). A safe and supportive environment was created, which helped leaders to discuss and reflect upon their issues, and mitigated feelings of loneliness. This is relevant in terms of how it helped to address overwhelm, which is an issue for some leaders in transition, and also in that it worked even though it was online. This contrasts with Lacerenza's review, which suggested that face-to-face was best practice (Lacerenza *et al.*, 2017). The limitation of this approach is that the focus is on exploring the issues that are brought up by each leader, and there is no flexibility to explore what else may come up in the group. The focus is also on learning to address challenges, as opposed to the transition itself.

Dyadic Coaching

Where leadership development programmes can be relevant to leaders in transition to senior leadership positions, empirical studies show specifically how dyadic coaching can benefit them. Given the many, varied and significant challenges that leaders could be facing as they transition into a senior leadership position, coaching is well placed to support them, as it establishes a relationship that combines a focus on performance and development with psychological discovery. The difference between coaching and instructional training is that coaching can be adapted and tailored to the individual (Bozer and Jones, 2018). It also places the leader who is in the midst of the transition at the heart of the experience, giving them the opportunity to explore their concerns and deficiencies (Terblanche, 2022). Transition coaching is a subcategory of business and executive coaching, and has been defined 'as personalised one-on-one intervention that aims to support transitioning leaders' (Terblanche, 2022).

A small yet increasing number of empirical studies, which explore the use of dyadic coaching during transition, are emerging to demonstrate its efficacy. Reported benefits of this type of coaching include: creating a supportive, nourishing and reflective space for leaders in transition (Terblanche, Albertyn and van Coller-Peter, 2017); developing new capacities such as managing relationships and resilience; dealing with self-doubt, self-belief and confidence building; and the chance to think

through problems and develop new meaning and identity (Reynolds, 2011; Gill, 2017; McGill, 2019). More recently, Kilpatrick explored the challenges to confidence in transition to a senior position, and how coaching can support leaders through this. Based on an interpretive phenomenological analysis of the experience of eight leaders, Kilpatrick identified the elements that underpin confidence. These were: feeling at ease, feeling in control of emotions, having clarity and feeling able to be vulnerable. Coaching created a safe space in which to alleviate vulnerability and normalise challenges, making this confidence achievable. Feedback and support from the coach helped the leaders to find clarity and resourced them to move forward (Kilpatrick, Bachkirova and Myers, 2022).

In addition to studies showing the benefits of dyadic coaching for transition, researchers are also exploring *how* dyadic coaching supports leaders. This is relevant as it identifies what could be included in the design of the group coaching programme. Terblanche, Albertyn and van Coller-Peter (2017) took a grounded theory approach to design a coaching intervention for leaders who had been promoted to a senior position. This touched on the *how* in terms of managing the coaching process, which included setting goals, allowing for reflection and allowing them to experiment with different ways of thinking and behaving. It also included using theory to help the leaders to understand themselves and their roles. A subsequent paper shared the findings from an action research study into the development of a coaching framework which ‘operationalised transformative learning in the coaching process’ (Terblanche, 2019, p. 23). The most recent paper by the same author adds a ‘coaching state transition tracker’. This creates transparency for the coach, the leader in transition, and the organisation, about how the leader is progressing through the transition (Terblanche, 2022).

Given the impact of transition on a leader’s identity, it is also relevant to consider coaching interventions that are focused on identity work, whether they are designed for senior leaders in transition or not. Skinner empirically tested her ‘Leader Identity Formation Theory’ with leaders who had participated in an integrated coaching and leadership development programme (Skinner, 2020a). The results supported the lifespan approach to identity formation, and the author provided questions for executive coaches and development practitioners to use with their clients. More recently, Snape published a framework for coaching women’s identity in transition (Snape, 2024). The ‘Me as a Process’ model is based on Snape’s doctoral research, which identified four stages of questioning

that leaders go through: 'Who am I now?', 'Who could I become?', 'Who do I really want to be?', and 'How can I make this work and still be me?' Coaches are encouraged to be led by the client, in terms of how they use the framework, questions and exercises. Focused on new leaders, Yip et al. developed a coaching and leader development framework based around the narratives that people tell themselves (Yip et al., 2020). The coaching principles and narrative practices combine to support leaders through the stages of transition, addressing the anxiety, threat and conflict related to changes in identity. These examples provide coaches with somewhere to start, which is both theoretical and practical, when coaching transitions.

Bennett explored the use of executive coaching for leaders experiencing personal uncertainty (Bennett, 2021). This recognises the link between sensemaking and identity work (Vough, Caza and Maitlis, 2020). The author offers a guiding framework based on the assumption that a coaching partnership can create the psychological safety needed to explore personal uncertainty. It suggests that the components that coaches can work with to facilitate sensemaking include emotional regulation, seeking understanding and articulating a plausible narrative. Coaching has been recommended for sensemaking, as it occurs through dialogue, either real or imagined (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005) and it is iterative, as sense is made and remade.

One other study that supports the use of coaching during transition was conducted by Grant et al. (Grant, Curtayne and Burton, 2009). This randomised controlled study showed that coaching could enhance goal attainment, increase resilience, and improve workplace wellbeing, through the reduction of depression and stress, all of which is relevant, given the challenges associated with transition as described in the previous section.

Parker summarises her chapter on coaching for role transitions, stating that coaching can provide valuable support, which can help people to respond to the challenges associated with transitions (Parker, 2016). The findings from Kilpatrick and Terblanche confirm how coaching is able to provide the support needed to address the emotional turmoil, and the space for the cognitive reframing necessary in a personal transition (Louis, 1980b; Nicholson, 1984; Sugarman, 2001). Studies are also emerging about how effective coaching can be in supporting identity work and sensemaking,

both critical parts of senior leader transitions (Skinner, 2020a; Yip *et al.*, 2020; Snape, 2024). Following their review of coaching for leadership transitions, Bond and Naughton suggest that there may be hidden costs if coaching isn't being used (2011), and Gray, DeHaan and Bonneywell (2019) suggest that coaching could play a part in preventing derailment. However, the models and frameworks relate to dyadic coaching, which separates leader development from both the people and context within which it takes place. These limitations means that leaders only benefit from the feedback and perspective of the coach, as opposed to hearing the voices of others. They also do not have the opportunity to develop the interpersonal skills and networks that are needed to meet the requirements for collective leadership.

2.2.3 How current mechanisms support leaders

In spite of the mechanisms that are available, one report suggested that three quarters of leaders feel that they are unprepared for transitions (Keller and Meaney, 2018). What support does exist for senior leaders may be ineffective, with another report suggesting that 90% of organisations could improve transitions by improving the quality of development (Sinar and Paese, 2014). Some leaders may not have access to support or may choose not to take up the offer of support, deciding instead to learn on the job. However, learning from experience is limited without a sufficiently developed ability to do so (DeRue and Ashford, 2010).

This review of the literature has identified some of the mechanisms that could support leaders as they transition into senior positions. The mechanisms reviewed included onboarding, leadership development programmes, action learning and dyadic coaching. What unites these mechanisms is that they are observable and repeatable, and the evidence shows that they can support the development of leaders. Dyadic coaching is the only mechanism that places the leader and their personal transition at the heart of the activity. The others are focused on learning and development, which may be part of the need, but which does not consider the breadth of intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges that each leader may face. Such challenges might include working out what being a senior leader means and how to engage with others in a way that aligns with the culture and context of the organisation. Onboarding, leadership development programmes and action learning

also do not have the flexibility to respond to what is most important for the leader in the moment. The key benefits of attending leadership development programmes, executive education and action learning include the potential for development alongside others. However, the timing may not align with when this is relevant for the leader, and the programmes will not necessarily explore the specific challenges related to the leader's individual transition. Leadership development programmes and executive education are well placed to address challenges associated with taking on the role, through the development of knowledge, competencies, skills and identity work. However, the need to define a structured curriculum to commercialise the product inevitably focuses, and therefore limits, the content that is explored. Furthermore, each personal process of transition takes place within a unique individual and organisational context, which cannot be the primary focus of these programmes. Meanwhile, the benefit of dyadic coaching is the unique and tailored approach, yet this does not happen alongside others. In a transition to senior leadership, the relational component is significant due to the evolving nature of leadership, and the identity work and sensemaking that can take place alongside others.

In summary, current avenues of support are lacking, in the sense that they fail to support leaders in a way that addresses their unique situation, with others and in the context that they experience in transition. This should happen at the time that they need it, alongside others from whom they can learn, by whom they can be supported and with whom they can develop collective leadership capacity.

2.3 How group coaching could support leaders in transition

The third part of this review explores the literature relating to group coaching and how it may be able to support leaders in transition. It begins with an introduction to group coaching. This is followed by a review of empirical study, and the section ends with a description of the challenges that need to be overcome for group coaching to work for senior leaders. It also considers how the need to work online could affect group coaching.

2.3.1 Group coaching offers transition support and development alongside others

This section of the chapter serves as an introduction to group coaching. It explains the background to group coaching and how it could support leaders in the transition to a senior leadership position. The section begins by positioning group coaching alongside the related activity of team coaching.

Empirical research into group coaching has been described as nearly 20 years behind that of individual coaching (O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017), and there is a lack of coverage in general coaching literature. It does not feature in *The Complete Handbook of Coaching* (Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck, 2024). So, whilst team coaching was described as a 'relatively new kid on the block' (Hawkins, 2011, p. xi), group coaching practice and subsequent research appears to be nascent. What is written about group coaching describes its clear and underused potential (Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie, 2009; Brown and Grant, 2010; O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017). This is because development takes place alongside others within the system. The group becomes a 'microcosm of the organisational environment' (Brown and Grant, 2010, p. 31) raising awareness, understanding and expanding perspectives for the good of the whole organisation. This is significant, given the influence of the organisational context upon leadership transitions (Wiggins, 2019).

Taking the view that teams are a type of group (Thornton, 2010; Brown and Grant, 2010), the distinction is important. The term 'group' is broad, and could be defined as whenever more than two people come together (Thornton, 2010). As far as coaching is concerned, one element that separates a team as a specific form of group, is that team members share a set of performance goals for which they hold themselves mutually accountable (Katzenbach and Smith, 2005; Hawkins, 2011). In the drive to improve performance throughout organisations, the team provides a clearly defined unit to focus on. Groups are not as simple to identify and define as units. One significant difference between team and group coaching is the focus of the work. Where the performance of the team provides a focus for team coaching, the growth of the individual only happens where it is relevant to the performance of the team (Hackman and Wageman, 2005; Thornton, 2010). This contrasts with definitions of group coaching, which hold the achievement of individual goals for personal or professional development at their heart (Britton, 2010; Brown and Grant, 2010).

At a practice level, in organisations, the focus on individual growth aligns group coaching with learning and development practices. As a practitioner, Britton describes a 'continuum', with training at one end and group coaching at the other (Britton, 2010, p. 21), and she describes training as the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities. The difference between the role of the trainer and that of group coach separates these two activities. In group coaching, it is the group who set the agenda, and the group coach applies their coaching skills in service of what the group needs, as opposed to the trainer, who provides their knowledge as input in line with the curriculum. In the middle of Britton's continuum sits facilitation. Britton describes this as focusing on the group process to enable and encourage the experience and activity of the learner (Britton, 2010). The International Facilitators Association summarises facilitation as helping groups to become more effective (IAF, 2019). Brown and Grant (2010) attempt to bring clarity and, following a detailed exploration of the background to facilitation, summarise and align with Britton, that group coaching is more goal focused, whereas facilitation is focused on the process. A focus on process to enable groups to work better together is also evident in organisation development interventions, such as process consulting. Group coaching has been described as a type of process consultation, where the client is guided through a process to achieve their own goals (Mühlberger and Traut-Mattausch, 2015). The extensive use of group work in human resource development (HRD) and organisation development (OD) interventions could be causing confusion within organisations about where and how group coaching fits in, and what it can add to the work that already takes place. Indeed, a review conducted by Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie (Herdman-Barker, Rooke and 2009) compared HRD and OD with business coaching, and identified that there is very little substantive difference between them all. Through the development of a theoretical and practical framework for group coaching, this research study will contribute to understanding about how they differ.

In summary, based on existing literature, the key feature of group coaching is a focus on development through the achievement of goals alongside others. The coach focuses on the goals and the process in order to help group members to achieve these goals. Based on this summary, group coaching can combine the benefits of development alongside others on leadership development programmes with the unique tailoring of coaching based on the achievement of

individual goals. An added benefit is that it takes place within the organisational context of the transition.

2.3.2 Empirical research demonstrates potential

In the early stages of this research study, in 2019, there were very few published empirical studies into group coaching to review, but by the end, in 2024, more were emerging. The limited empirical research into group coaching could mean that it isn't being used, that it hasn't been worthy of empirical study, or that it is too difficult and complex to research. There is also the possibility that group coaching is taking place but is not named as such. The absence of clearly defined and well researched group coaching practice could underpin the confusion around what it means, and how it works alongside other group interventions in organisations. This section reviews the studies that have emerged, as well as related online interventions. The review begins with an examination of three key studies exploring group coaching within the leadership population. It then goes on to review other group coaching studies which are relevant, and concludes with a focus on studies investigating personal development that have been conducted online.

Studies conducted with leaders in the workplace

The aim of this research is to explore group coaching for leaders who are in transition to a senior leadership position. The most relevant studies are those that have been conducted in organisations, with leaders, and this is where the review begins. A summary of three studies that explore the use of group coaching in an organisational setting is shown in figure 2.8.

Organisational setting and purpose of study	Approach to group coaching	Methodology of study
Senior leaders within public and private organisations: To develop authentic leadership (Fusco, O’Riordan and Palmer, 2015)	Three one day sessions a month for three months, covering the past, the present and the future Four authentic leadership coaching groups	Grounded theory approach to analyse monthly diary and final interview data
Australian healthcare leaders: How to better conduct group coaching interventions and deliver results in terms of learning, development and goal attainment. (O’Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017)	Three two-hour sessions Four groups of 6 or 7 members Facilitated, goal-focused discussions Solution-focused CBT	Semi structured interviews Analysis followed Nueman’s three phase coding: identify, connect and illustrate themes
Large multinational finance company: To evaluate group coaching programme by assessing impact on self-awareness development and work engagement Programme to improve self-awareness and engagement (Sutton and Crobach, 2022)	Two day-long sessions with one week in between Combination of theory, practical examples, individual and group exercises	Pre- and post-test measurement of self-awareness outcomes questionnaire and Utrecht Work Engagement Scale Simple thematic content analysis of open-ended questions about any changes noticed

Figure 2.8: Studies using group coaching for leaders in the workplace

The study exploring the development of *authentic leadership* (Fusco, O’Riordan and Palmer, 2015) was shown to have supported both a process of change, in terms of development of how leaders

saw themselves, and outcomes. These included: developing a strategic orientation; leadership confidence, clarity, capacity and proactivity; understanding others, flexible and effective interactions; self-understanding and self-management; and management mindfulness. The authors go on to note the possibility of the parallel process that enabled leaders to work at both inter- and intra-personal levels 'exploring and developing their self-concept in the social context that is unique to this form of coaching' (Fusco, O'Riordan and Palmer, 2015, p. 146). This is helpful given the shift in identity through transition.

The study also explored the group coaching conditions and processes. An explanation was provided about how they screened and then interviewed participants, to ensure that they were willing and understood what it meant to participate. They attributed this as key to the creation of *group cohesion*, evidenced as 'each group gelled very quickly which was imperative in this time limited intervention' (Fusco, O Riordan and Palmer, 2015, p. 137). This was accompanied by *psychological safety*, which, along with *group cohesion*, created the group conditions, which, in turn, enabled the group processes of self-reappraisal and alignment, self-learning and re-learning, and self-reflection and exploration. The focus of the study does, however, provide its limitation. It assumes that the outcomes lead to *authentic leadership*, and that this is the most effective way to lead. There is also very little detail about what happened during the three day-long coaching sessions, which leaves coaches without a framework to follow.

The second study was designed to better conduct group coaching interventions and took place in the Australian healthcare system (O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017). The programme was designed to improve performance and to develop management and leadership capability. Findings regarding the outcomes are limited to leaders reporting a positive experience, appreciating the chance to connect and understand how others experienced the same challenges. It was perceived to be less effective than dyadic coaching, though this is not explored. The key findings regarding the intervention were that the complex process means that preparation and planning are essential, in order to establish a safe container that is effective and relevant. There was a recognition that group coaching is a time-consuming process, and taking two hours from work can add further pressure to already busy participants (O'Connor, Studhome and Grant, 2017). Other specific findings included

the need for a clear focus on goals, the importance of a group coaching process structure, programme sponsorship and follow up, and participants who were genuinely engaged. Two hours was also felt not to be enough. The findings recommended that the coach have 'a degree of mastery in group facilitation' (O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017, p. 12). Mastery was described as having context specific knowledge, as well as the skills and experience to integrate multiple perspectives and work with the processes involved in group work. As the evaluation of a pilot programme, this study adds much in terms of considerations for a group coaching programme. However, as this took place in one Australian healthcare organisation, the findings may be a reflection of that particular context, as much as of group coaching.

The third study presents an evaluation of group coaching, the results demonstrating improvements in positive outcomes, of increased self-awareness at reduced emotional cost through peer support, and enhanced employee engagement (Sutton and Crobach, 2022). The reduced emotional cost through peer support is particularly relevant, given the emotionally challenging process of transition. The study is also notable as it provides the details about how the group coaching programme was structured, and the content that was explored. Small groups of between six and eight participants worked together over two days with a week between them, and the content included what made participants happy and learning from acting. This structured design, with pre- and post- homework provided, does raise a question about whether it was training taking a group coaching approach, and, if not, what makes it group coaching?

Studies outside the workplace, or when group coaching was not the main focus

Other studies were identified which have explored the use of group coaching as part of leadership development or executive education programmes. Two studies identified focus on the use of both group coaching and dyadic coaching for women. Most recently, Bonneywell and Gannon (2022) explored the use of group coaching alongside dyadic coaching as part of a programme of development focused on female leaders. The collective benefits identified from group coaching included reducing the sense of isolation, having a greater sense of belonging, and understanding the complexities and challenges that participants were facing. Meanwhile, Jackson and Bourne (2020) explored how different modes of group and dyadic online coaching could facilitate behavioural

change for women working in the STEM field. This was shown to have helped participants to develop self-confidence and to have encouraged risk taking, resulting in new learning. The study is particularly relevant given that the group coaching was delivered online. The outcomes relating to confidence and risk taking are also relevant to leaders in transition. An additional finding included how both synchronous and asynchronous methods proved to be powerful.

Related to leaders learning, Ostrowski (2018) explored group coaching to support entrepreneurs by promoting meaningful reflection and learning. Eight entrepreneurs who had attended group coaching programmes were interviewed, and narrative/performance and thematic analysis was conducted. The focus was on how the social process unfolded, and the findings from the analysis of the entrepreneurs' stories referred to cohesiveness, commonality, social support, exchange and accountability. The coach applied cognitive frameworks, asked questions and managed accountability. The key processes were described as learning vicariously through empathy, challenge and observation, as well as through feedback. This is the only study that has been identified so far to explore what happens in group coaching. However, the entrepreneurs interviewed had not all attended the same group coaching programme, they were interviewed after the event and they did not share a common experience with the researcher. A more detailed and in-depth view of what happens during group coaching could be garnered through members sharing views on the same group coaching programme as the researcher.

Within a business school setting, Kets des Vries presents a case study and outlines the benefit of adopting a psychodynamic approach with groups, as it leads to 'durable changes in leadership behaviour' (Kets des Vries, 2005, p. 61), permitting work on both cognition and affect. The psychodynamic element relates to exploring unconscious patterns and behaviour that could be affecting how leaders work. Ward (2008), from the same institution, goes on to explain how the work in groups of five gives leaders the opportunity to examine earlier life experiences and consider the challenges they face with peer support. Follow-up conversations at three- and six-month intervals confirmed that the changes were still in place, and measures of leadership effectiveness and feedback from others remained positive.

Expanding the search further and based on the need for personal development in taking up the new role (see Nicholson's model in figure 2.4), two studies were identified that specifically related to group coaching for personal and skills development. Mulberger and Traut-Mattausch (2015) compared dyadic and group coaching alongside a control group. Amongst the population of 108 students, procrastination was shown to have reduced under all conditions. However, participants who received coaching also showed higher goal attainment, commitment and self-efficacy. Aligned with the findings in O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, (2017), there was a sense that dyadic coaching was better, because they had more time. Fumoto (2016) conducted an action research study with 38 participants who were recruited through social media, which demonstrated how group coaching could cultivate creative confidence.

Picking up on the stressful nature of the transition process, two further studies reported improvements in wellbeing through group coaching. Stelter, Nielsen and Wikman (2011) worked with elite students to see what effect group coaching had on career development, self-reflection and general functioning. As well as finding that it helped their self-recovery and wellbeing, they also recognised that the students benefitted from feeling part of an integrated community. Meanwhile, Nacif explored group coaching to improve wellbeing, and noted that the group 'emerged as a catalyst for growth and development' (Nacif, 2020, p. 135).

Two empirical studies were identified which were directly related to group coaching for transitions. Grajfoner (Herdman-Barker, Rooke and 2009) reported on a programme of group coaching to support six people going through a male to female gender transition. Adopting a cognitive behavioural and solution focused approach, participants described results including improved self-reflection and identification of core values, self-acceptance, confidence, and a more positive outlook. In an attempt to develop a group coaching framework to support people living with a long-term condition, Whitely (2013) used action research to explore a positive psychology, goal-based approach. Over a series of five group coaching sessions, all six volunteers reported that they enjoyed the coaching experience, that it had changed and developed their lives, that it had supported them through dealing with their long-term condition, and that they had learnt useful skills. The action research approach supported a focus on practice, highlighting what worked, such as the length of

sessions (two hours as one hour was not enough), making it interactive, focusing on one topic per session, and using different approaches to meet different styles.

Summary of empirical research into group coaching

This review of empirical studies illustrates possible outcomes and outlines what happens in group coaching. It provides evidence that group coaching could support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions. A summary of how the evidence corresponds with what leaders need support for in transition is shown in the table in figure 2.9.

Potential support needs	Outcomes achieved
Leadership identity construction and development	Identity development. (Fusco, O’Riordan and Palmer, 2015) Psychodynamic exploration (Kets de Vries, 2005; Ward, 2008) Self-reflection and identification of core values (Grajfoner, 2009)
How to work with and influence others	Learning vicariously through empathy, challenge and observation, and feedback (Ostrowski, 2018) Development of social capital (Stelter, Nielsen and Wikman, 2011)
Develop new skills	Improved confidence and support experimentation (Jackson and Bourne, 2020) Durable changes in behaviour (Kets de Vries, 2005) Support for meaningful change (Ostrowski, 2018) Reduced procrastination (Mühlberger and Traut-Mattausch, 2015) Cultivation of creative confidence (Fumoto, 2016) <i>Not all of these skills will be relevant in all transitions, studies shown as examples of the breadth of skills developed through group coaching</i>
Reframe thinking and manage emotions	Self-reflection and exploration (Fusco, O’Riordan and Palmer, 2015) Self-awareness (Sutton and Crobach, 2022)
Support through emotional turmoil	Appreciation of the chance to connect (O’Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017) Reduced isolation and sharing of challenges (Bonneywell and Gannon, 2022) Peer support (Sutton and Crobach, 2022) Support for wellbeing (Stelter, Nielsen and Wikman, 2011; Nacif, 2020) Support through changing lifestyle (Whitely, 2013, Grajfonner, 2009)

Figure 2.9: Requirements for group coaching leaders in transition and empirical studies

No negative outcomes studies have been identified for review, though this may not be a surprise, given the small pool of studies available.

Studies of development conducted online

As group coaching was to be delivered online in this research study, it was important to explore what is known about conducting learning and development online. One of the challenges in searching for such studies is the use of terminology. The terms online and virtual are used interchangeably. Two studies were identified specifically relating to leadership development online. The first explored a pilot programme to build leadership capacity (Radcliff, 2017). This found that the technology did not get in the way and that it helped leaders to develop their online skills. The second evaluated virtual action learning and found that, even online, a safe supportive group was created (Aspinwall, Pedler and Radcliff, 2018).

Commentaries and reflections on virtual action learning recognise concerns about lack of verbal and contextual cues, which can be mitigated through strong facilitation (Embury, 2015; Byrd, 2019). Benefits included convenience and accessibility (Pedler, Hauser and Caulat, 2014; Byrd, 2019), and that it corresponds with society (Dickenson, Burgoyne and Pedler, 2010). Further, a meta-analysis of the role that leaders play in influencing team performance demonstrates how important it is for them to be able to work virtually (Brown, Hill and Lorinkova, 2021).

Based on the review of studies into online learning, and on what was identified in the empirical studies into group coaching, a summary of considerations for delivery is presented in the table in figure 2.10.

Element to consider	Reference
Set up helps cohesion	(Fusco, O Riordan and Palmer, 2015; O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017)
Goals are important	(O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017)
Coach needs mastery to work with dynamics	(O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017)
Coach to provide frameworks, ask questions and manage accountability	(Ostrowski, 2018)
There are benefits to working online	Helping leaders to develop their own IT skills, which are important (Radcliff, 2017; Brown, Hill and Lorinkova, 2021) Convenience and accessibility (Pedler, Hauser and Caulat, 2014; Byrd, 2019) It corresponds with society (Dickenson, Burgoyne and Pedler, 2010)
Safe supportive groups can be created online	(Aspinwall, Pedler and Radcliff, 2018)
Concerns about a lack of verbal and contextual cues can be mitigated by strong facilitation	(Embury, 2015; Byrd, 2019)

Figure 2.10: Considerations for group coaching delivery

Summary of empirical studies

This review of empirical studies into group coaching has demonstrated how it has the potential to support leaders through transition. It could assist needs for personal and skill development, including at identity levels, and could offer improved wellbeing which is relevant in transition. Whilst not all studies were conducted within a leadership population, the few that were demonstrated that group coaching has the potential to work for leaders in the workplace. It has been used to support a transition in a health setting, and provide support through difficult times. Furthermore, studies show that development is possible online. Based on these studies, common elements of group coaching can be described:

- More than two (often 4 – 8) individuals working with one or two coaches, and meeting for multiple sessions of varying lengths, to achieve individual goals associated with growth and development.

- Analogous to group counselling; the group members share their understanding and experiences in support of the growth and development of each other. It can involve rich, deep dialogue, sharing discovery and peer accountability.
- The role of the coach is to enable group members to organise themselves to achieve their individual goals; use of dyadic and group coaching approaches simultaneously to integrate the multiple perspectives, and use of group dynamics to raise awareness of self and others, bringing attention to ways of thinking and being, and to behaviour and accountability.

Separate empirical studies show how some of the key challenges associated with the transition to senior leadership positions can be supported through group coaching. However, studies have not yet demonstrated how the many challenges can be supported against the backdrop of a turbulent process of transition and when there is a risk of failure. The studies also do not show how the unique individual and organisational context, which is significant for leaders in this transition, can be explored. Finally, there is a dearth of study into what actually happens during group coaching (for the participants and the coach) whilst it is happening and not as a narrative after the event.

2.3.3 Challenges associated with leaders working in groups need to be addressed

Of relevance to a study exploring group coaching for leaders in transition to senior positions is a review of literature exploring the use of groups at work. This offers insight into how leaders could approach group coaching, and what might need to be considered to promote their engagement.

Where group coaching may be uncharted territory, using groups to influence how people think and feel is nothing new (Estabrooks, 2014, p. 164). Much of the literature is positive about using groups for organisational learning, decision making and problem solving (Kramer *et al.*, 2012). Yet, a paradox lies at the heart of working in groups. The potential to amplify achievement to greater than any individual can attain, is matched by an awareness that groups 'are responsible for some of our greatest devastation' (Turner, 2012, p. xi). Turner describes how the intragroup processes are interweaved with the context, and suggests that groups need to be used thoughtfully, to fit the requirements of the situation and to limit the disadvantages.

Obstacles to working in groups for senior leaders could lie in how they are perceived, due to their extensive use in therapy and their image. Group therapy is based on providing the opportunity for members to interact, understand and identify what they do and to change 'maladaptive patterns' (Yalom, 2005, p. xv). Well known examples include alcohol and drug addiction groups. This originated in the work of J.H. Pratt, who worked with patients suffering from tuberculosis. Pratt recognised the benefits of treating the person, rather than the disease, established weekly meetings of sufferers and encouraged diary keeping (Yalom, 2005). Away from the clinical field, in the 1960s and 1970s, encounter groups, described as 'therapy for normals' flourished as a way of promoting personal growth (Yalom, 2005, p. 525). Also known as T-Groups, these encounter groups were seen as the instrument of education that would lead to self-discovery and development of potential. There are conflicting views on how effective T-groups were (Ward, van de Loo and ten Have, 2014), however, they contribute to the strong base of research into the effectiveness of small groups (Yalom, 2005). Over time, the search for bigger and better experiences in groups brought them into conflict with the mental health profession, and they lost popularity, as well as credibility. The therapeutic and self-help connotations of groups, along with the potential for devastation, could combine to hinder group coaching from being used, preventing it from being sponsored within the organisation, and levels of commitment and engagement from cohorts of leaders could be reduced.

In addition to this, as outlined in the previous sections, leaders joining group coaching during the transition to senior leadership positions are likely to be experiencing considerable turmoil, on many levels. Even if they can see the potential in group coaching to support their transition, leaders will have to decide whether they can trust in the group. The benefits from being in a group depend on the willingness of group members to share information, and to use their sense of fairness and their energy (Kramer *et al.*, 2012). Failure to engage will limit what is possible, through missing the richness of hearing every voice. Trust in a dyadic relationship involves a calculation about the perceived benefits of reciprocation against the potential costs, and will be based on the history or knowledge of an individual. Within a group, the uncertainty about others compounds the difficulties that individuals face in deciding whether to trust. This adds yet further complications for leaders who may already be in a vulnerable situation. The degree of vigilance increases as the costs of misplaced trust increase, so people 'proactively seek information to reduce perceived vulnerability and

uncertainty' (Kramer *et al.*, 2012, p. 191). If leaders are to fully engage in group coaching, they will need to obtain the reassurance they need, before they decide to trust in the group. If leaders are not able to find the reassurance, group coaching is not likely to be taken up, which presents a key obstacle to group coaching providing support for senior leaders in transition.

2.3.4 The potential and limitations of group coaching in comparison to existing mechanisms

This part of the review has shown that group coaching has the potential to support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions, and has examined some of the risks that need to be mitigated. Based on the key requirements for support through a senior leadership transition, the table in figure 2.11 presents a comparison between the support mechanisms that have been examined and the potential of group coaching.

Key requirements	Onboarding	Leadership Development Programmes	Action Learning	Dyadic Coaching	Group Coaching
Timely personalised and tailored				X	X
Feedback, support and learning from the perspectives of others		X	X		X
Immersed in context	X	Sometimes	X		X
Leading collectively		X			X

Figure 2.11: Comparison of support mechanisms for leaders in transition to senior leadership positions

The literature that was reviewed in the first section, 2.1, highlighted the scale of the challenges facing leaders in transition to senior positions, associated with both the new role and the personal process of transition. This calls for personalised and tailored support that can help leaders to navigate their unique set of challenges. The empirical research reviewed suggests that group coaching can meet such needs. Figure 2.9 presented the studies that show how group coaching supports leadership identity construction and development, how to work with and influence others, and how to develop

new skills, reframe thinking and manage emotions, and support people through emotional turmoil. With a focus on meeting individual needs, group coaching can facilitate tailored and personalised development that puts the transitioning leader at the centre of the experience (Terblanche, 2022). Unlike dyadic coaching, group coaching can also open up more avenues for feedback, and opportunities to conduct active experimentation alongside others, both of which are important to leader development (DeRue and Wellman, 2009; Day and Dragoni, 2015; Kragt and Day, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2021). The group can also play an important role in reducing personal uncertainty (van den Bos, 2009).

When group coaching is conducted within an organisation, it will immerse development in the context within which the leaders are working. As such, network-enhancing leadership development may be possible through individuals developing social competence and shaping their networks (McCauley and Palus, 2021). This could contribute to developing leadership capacity (Cullen-Lester, Maupin and Carter, 2017), as it sites development with the people and in the context in which the leader exists.

Whilst group coaching puts the transitioning leader at the centre of the experience, it may limit the scope of learning and development, as content that may be useful might not be covered. In contrast, leadership development programmes are content rich, with a published curriculum. However, group coaching has the flexibility to address what is relevant for the leaders at the appropriate point in time. Others risks are that leaders may not feel safe enough, and that there may not be the time or opportunity to work at the depth required to achieve sustainable shifts in learning and identity (Terblanche, 2022; Snape, 2024). It is only through empirical study that this can be explored. Finally, whilst empirical study into group coaching in the workplace is emerging, there have been no studies exploring group coaching for leaders during such a vulnerable time as when they are in transition. As a result of the lack of studies, the potential benefits to be gained through tailored development alongside others, within the leaders' context, need to be further explored. Such research would contribute to evidence, the lack of which may prevent leaders from participating in group coaching, especially as they may be feeling vulnerable, and working in a group could compound their anxiety and distress. They may also be concerned about whether they can trust the process and the other members of the group enough to fully engage.

2.4 Summary of the Literature Review

This review began by exploring what leaders in transition to senior leadership may need support for, moved on to explore how they could be supported, and ended by exploring how group coaching could provide some of this support. The literature exposed the scale of the problem facing organisations and individuals when leaders fail to perform in role. The indicative rates of failure and the impact on organisations and individuals are significant. This research study has been designed to address this problem by contributing to knowledge about an avenue of support that could reduce the risk of failure.

With the problem articulated, the literature review went on to explore what could be making the transition to senior leadership difficult. It began by recognising that no standard definition of a senior leader exists. However, the path into senior leadership is well documented. The leadership journey models recognise a point that presents challenges associated with having greater responsibility in an unfamiliar area, with shifting relationships and a need to think and engage with others differently. These challenges may be exacerbated by the potential for confusion, associated with evolving definitions of leadership, in response to the complex and ambiguous context in which leaders are operating. This research study will contribute to knowledge about the step into senior leadership positions through an empirical exploration of how leaders are experiencing these challenges at this point in time.

Inherent in taking up a senior leadership position is a process of personal transition to adjust to the new role and responsibilities. Like the paths to senior leadership, so too theories of transition and what they mean for a change in work roles are well documented, yet they are under-researched. This is surprising given the tumultuous and intensely personal process at the heart of transition, when the costs of failure, particularly at senior leadership levels, are so high. This research study will add to understanding about the experience of the process of personal transition, how it affects leaders, and how dyadic coaching supports them.

An exploration of how to support leaders in transition to senior positions, to reduce the risk of failure, sits within the field of leader and leadership development. This emerging field of academic interest has three key and interrelated debates at the heart of it. The first concerns how leader and leadership development is defined, and, therefore, what it encompasses. The second relates to how it should be carried out, and the third, how it is evaluated. The answers are all linked to the evolving state of leadership. Definitions of leader and leadership development are becoming clearer. Leader development concerns the capacity and capability of the individual to lead, where leadership development is focused on collective development and includes leader development. The established paradigm of leadership development saw the individual as the focus for development. Leaders were assessed for gaps in knowledge skills and behaviour, relevant development was undertaken, and the results, in the form of performance outcomes, were anticipated. The evolution of leadership sees it as relational and practice based, and leadership development is about developing the collective. Studies are emerging about how to conduct and evaluate mechanisms to support leaders, though the field is complex. Against this backdrop, existing mechanisms to support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions were reviewed. These include onboarding, leadership development, action learning and dyadic coaching, with some of them taking place alongside each other. It is only dyadic coaching that places the transitioning leader, with their unique transition challenges, at the centre of development. Yet this form of coaching happens in isolation, away from others which limits the potential benefits.

Group coaching is under-researched but could offer leaders with another avenue of support which is more cost efficient for organisations, and meets the need for unique, tailored development alongside others. The emerging empirical studies of group coaching show how it is used as part of leadership development programmes, as well as in business schools. Group coaching has also been used as a stand-alone mechanism, and the evidence shows how it can assist the development of leaders and provide support during difficult times.

Whilst there is a lack of clarity about what group coaching is and how it works, some aspects of group coaching are becoming clearer. These include the size of the group, the length of the work

together, and the provision of gaps between sessions for learning to be applied. In designing a group coaching programme, it will be important to provide leaders with the reassurance that they need to be able to trust the group and engage, when they could be experiencing some of the most vulnerable times in their career. Working alongside the leaders as coach and researcher will provide an in-depth view of what happens during group coaching to support leaders. The resulting theoretical and practical framework will add to knowledge for future researchers and practitioners.

3 Methodology

This chapter explains the methodology underpinning the study, how that guided the research design, and the methods employed. It also outlines how issues concerning ethics and quality were addressed.

3.1 Philosophical approach: pragmatism

This section outlines and explains my philosophical approach. A business studies degree and corporate life prepared me to focus on numbers. Whether this was in terms of managing a budget, the delivery performance of fuel tanker drivers, or the holy grail of determining the return on investment. Aligning with a positivist ontology which focuses on an observable social reality (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009), I believe that organisations are real, they physically exist in offices and fuel tankers, and profit can be measured through the reality of a bank balance. I was introduced to the opposing ontological position, commonly called interpretivist ontology (Robson, 2002), during my master's research. I was exploring the attributes that enable people to adapt in response to change in the workplace, and I recognised the inadequacies of a positivist approach. To address the aims of the study, I needed to understand the subjective reality of people adapting: to make sense of and understand their motives, actions and intentions from their point of view (Bryman and Bell, 2003; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009).

This study is exploring group coaching for the transition to senior leadership positions and developing and informing practice. I recognise the external and independent reality of a leader having a different role and responsibilities in a senior leadership position. However, I also realise that it is not directly observable, which initially drew me to a critical realist position. This recognises that reality is out there, and that knowledge is a constantly changing construction, to be understood through exploring human understanding (Willig, 2013; Vincent and O'Mahoney, 2018). Critical realists focus on the structures and the exercise of power which give rise to the phenomena being investigated. Attention is placed on the social, political, and cultural factors that affect individuals (Kelemen and Rumens, 2008). This involves an exploration of the causes, structures and mechanisms that have endured and have caused what is observed (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). In relation to this, I recognise

that organisations are not solid or static but a collective of processes and practices, which also aligns with a postmodernist approach. This explores how the power relations sustain dominant realities, through an in-depth deconstruction of data, to challenge concepts and theories and to understand what is being excluded (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). It is focused on the role of language and power relations to question accepted ways of thinking and to give voice to the marginalised (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). However, both critical realist and postmodernist approaches are focused on making historical causal contributions or exposing power relations as contributions, and this study is focused on problem solving and informing practice.

Ultimately, I recognised that a pragmatic approach would be most appropriate for my study based on how the study originated and how it aligns with my view of reality. Pragmatists start with a problem and aim to contribute practical solutions to inform future practice (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015). The problem at the heart of my study is exposed through the difficulties that many individuals face when they are transitioning into senior leadership positions, and the negative impact that this has on the people and organisations in which they work and on the individuals themselves. My study is driven by a desire to examine and develop coaching practice so that leaders can be supported through these problematic transitions, reducing the negative impact on individuals and organisations. Also, like pragmatists, I recognise the ambiguous and interconnected nature of an objective reality and subjective experience. I am studying the objective shift in responsibilities associated with a senior leadership position and how the leader subjectively experiences the transition process into the position.

Pragmatism came about through a search for a third alternative to the objective/subjective debate towards the end of the 19th century (Martela, 2015). It recognises that fixed ontologies and epistemologies fail to capture reality and set limits to the processes by which knowledge is generated (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019). In response, pragmatism accepts that there are many different ways of interpreting the world and undertaking research and, consequently, that it is possible to work with different types of knowledge and methods (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). It has been described as an attitude or way of thinking that sees knowledge emerging from inquiring into the problems of living (Martela, 2015; Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019). With its focus on action, 'the

driving principle is that truth and meaning are only relevant insofar as they are enacted in the real world' (Jackson and Cox, 2020, p. 28). Pragmatism starts with a problem, and the research question drives the choice of methods – the value of the knowledge generated is defined by how it enables action to be carried out successfully.

In the absence of a fixed approach, pragmatism has been trivialised and seen as a way for researchers to do whatever could be expedient in the spirit of what works (Hall, 2013). In practice, it asks even more of researchers in terms of being explicit about their aims, values and choices, to enable the research community to understand and evaluate the assertions being made (Martela, 2015). Another criticism is its lack of philosophical coherence (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019). However, one could argue that the diverse backgrounds of the originators, Pierce (the philosopher), James (the psychologist) and Dewey (the educator and social reformer), bring strength, depth and relevance and make it well suited to address the many complex challenges that people face in the world today. One final and fundamental criticism is that 'pragmatists do not believe in truth' (Rorty, 1999, p. 18). If truth is defined as absolute and final knowledge, that would be the case. However, like other pragmatists, I assert that you can never be sure of absolutely anything (Martela, 2015). In the complex and dynamic world in which we live, people, contexts and interpretations will differ. Pragmatism asserts that knowledge is generated and tested against experience through action, and if better strategies are identified, the previous strategies must be abandoned (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019).

Addressing the question about my philosophical position with clarity and confidence proved to be one of the hardest parts of this PhD journey. The challenge was initially in understanding what a position meant, and the implications that it would have on my study. I encountered pragmatism with a sense of relief, it was a fitting answer, and the more I uncovered, the more appropriate I found it. It aligns with my personal beliefs about grounding knowledge in action, holding it lightly and addressing practical ends. Above all it aligns with the research question that is focused on addressing a problem and developing practice.

3.2 Research design, methodological approaches and data collection

This section of the chapter describes how the research was designed and conducted. It begins with an overview of the research design, and goes on to explain how the methodological choices were made. It also describes what data was collected and how in each phase.

3.2.1 Overview of research design

The aims of this study are to explore how group coaching could support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions and develop a theoretical and practical framework to inform group coaching practice. The research questions posed to address these aims are:

1. What makes the transition to senior leadership positions problematic?
2. How does dyadic coaching support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions?
3. How can group coaching support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions?
4. How do the findings develop and inform group coaching practice?

A pragmatic epistemology defines acceptable knowledge as that which enables things to be done successfully and recognises the possibility of working with diverse types of knowledge (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). It also sees ontology and epistemology as iterative (Fumoto, 2016) and, with a focus on action, it allows for knowledge to be created through community and dialogue (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019). Recognising this, multiple approaches were selected to address the questions being asked of the data at the time. The research design comprised two phases, which are presented in figure 3.1. The preparatory phase was designed to guide the development of the group coaching programme, which was applied and explored during the action phase of research. The preparatory phase addressed the first two research questions, and the action phase addressed the last two research questions.

Research Design

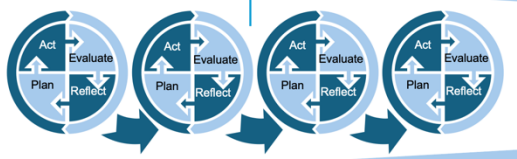
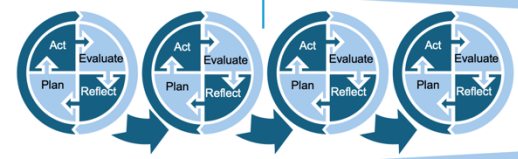
	Preparatory Phase Jan 2020 – April 2021	Action Phase July 2021 – September 2023
Research Questions	1. What makes the transition to senior leadership positions problematic? 2. How does dyadic coaching support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions?	3. How can group coaching support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions? 4. How do the findings develop and inform group coaching practice?
Activity	Ten 1:1 semi-structured interviews with leaders and coaches	Two sequential group coaching programmes consisting of four group workshops with five leaders in each <i>Cycle 1</i> First Group Coaching Programme  <i>Cycle 2</i> Second Group Coaching Programme 
Methodological Approach	Reflexive Thematic Analysis	Action Research followed by Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Figure 3.1: Research design

The preparatory phase addressed the research questions asking what makes the transition to senior leadership positions problematic, and how dyadic coaching supports leaders. Literature relating to senior leadership transitions does exist and it approaches them from different perspectives. However, as will be explained in section 3.2.2, each source has its drawbacks, in terms of answering these questions, so primary research was conducted to triangulate the secondary data. Ten, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with leaders and coaches. The examination of dyadic coaching was necessary, given the absence of group coaching experience for this transition, and dyadic coaching was what the leaders and coaches had experienced. A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of the data collected during the interviews allowed for the recognition and organisation of patterns within the content and meaning (Willig, 2013). It also recognised the subjectivity that I brought, as a researcher experienced in working with leaders in this transition (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). The findings from this phase of the study were used to contribute to the development of a group coaching programme, which could be applied and explored in the second phase of the study. A description of how this phase informed the development of the programme is provided in Chapter 4.

The action phase addressed the research questions asking how group coaching can support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions, and how the findings develop and inform group coaching practice. Two different methodological approaches were taken to address each question. The first approach involved applying and exploring the group coaching programme through action research. Action research was selected because one of the aims of this study is to improve and understand practice (Robson, 2002). I worked as the coach, with participants, as representatives of group coaching, through two group coaching programmes, and I used the action to create knowledge about the action (Coughlan and Coughlan, 2002). I developed an approach to analyse the data between the workshops and programmes that took into the account the type of data being collected and the question being asked of it at that time. The second approach involved analysing the data collected during the group coaching programmes using RTA. This was to investigate how group coaching had supported leaders through their transition. As in the preparatory phase, RTA recognised the subjectivity that I brought, as both coach and researcher, and the need for reflexive engagement with theory, data, and interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2022b).

The research was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the initial plans to conduct the preparatory and action phases in person had to be abandoned, and both phases had to move online. Professional and personal lives both also moved online, which facilitated the switch, through greater familiarity and confidence with the use of technology. However, my experience of coaching online was limited, and I was unclear about how that would affect my practice. I was also concerned about the use of technology in every aspect of the research study. From organising the meetings online, building the rapport necessary to gather useful data, to capturing and managing the data. There were challenges associated with the platforms being used and with internet connections, all of which added an additional layer of disquiet throughout the research. This will be explored in the section on reflexivity later in this chapter, and in the personal reflections in Chapter 8.

Each phase of the research will now be described in detail. In each case, an explanation is given of how the methodological choice was made, and this is followed by a description of what data was collected from whom, and how.

3.2.2 Preparatory phase: reflexive thematic analysis

The preparatory phase of the research was designed to lay the foundations for the action phase. To develop a group coaching programme that could support leaders through transition, it was necessary to understand what they would be experiencing and, consequently, what they needed from group coaching. The literature encompassing transitions into senior leadership positions approaches them from different perspectives. Descriptions of the responsibilities and shifts required in increasingly senior positions are not recent (Barrett, 1998; Collins, 2001; Rooke and Torbert, 2005; Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011; Freedman, 2011). The leadership literature explores the evolving nature of leadership (Carroll, Levy and Richmond, 2008; Day and Antonakis, 2018; Crevani, 2019), but not specifically what the step into a senior position involves. The process of transition is widely understood (Lewin, 1946; Louis, 1980a; Louis, 1980b; Nicholson, 1984; Bridges, 2004; Elsner and Farrands, 2006), it is, however, under-researched in terms of the empirical study of those going through it (Halliday, 2012; Wiggins, 2019). Empirical studies describing the benefits of dyadic

coaching for senior leaders in transition are emerging, and these make reference to the challenges involved (Reynolds, 2011; Gill, 2017; McGill, 2019; Kilpatrick, 2022). A small number of studies also show how coaching can support leaders through transition, though they explore specific aspects of the transition, for example, transformational learning (Terblanche, 2022) and identity formation and development (Skinner, 2020a; Snape, 2024). There is a gap in empirical study explaining what makes this specific transition difficult, in the current context, and how coaching supports it, without looking through a distinct lens. Insight from leaders and coaches about their experience of working through this transition contributed to addressing this gap. This formed a type of fact-finding process, common in action research (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2014). This knowledge could also support my own delivery of group coaching, having listened to first-hand accounts. In summary, there was a lack of research that addressed the specific questions I was exploring. A limited number of interviews served to update and triangulate the secondary data that had come from a variety of different sources and perspectives.

How the approach was selected

I initially considered interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and grounded theory (GT). An IPA approach would have allowed me to 'capture the quality and texture' of the leaders' experience of coaching for the transition to a senior leadership position (Willig, 2013, p. 87). However, my focus was on practice, which also involves the coach, so it was important for me to hear the voice of the coach as well as the leaders. Grounded theory was appealing, as it was designed to 'identify and explicate contextualised social processes' (Willig, 2013, p. 70) and would be grounded in the data that are systematically gathered from the participants and analysed. Furthermore, the combination of GT with action research has been presented as a solution to create coaching models through the Coaching Model Derivation Process (Terblanche, 2020). However, Willig offers two criticisms of grounded theory that made it unsuitable (Willig, 2013). Firstly, it fails to consider the role of the researcher. I am familiar with and have experience of coaching leaders through transition to a senior position. I could not act as an objective interviewer and what emerged would be influenced by how I asked the questions and probed the participants during the interviews. Secondly, GT was designed to study social processes, and it maps experiences more descriptively than explanatorily. Whilst I was looking to generate a theory, it had to be based on the meaning of the experiences of the

leaders. This would expand my understanding so that I could develop a group coaching programme which addressed how the transition process felt, as well as what it meant to them. After ruling out IPA and GT, I chose RTA, as an approach that would allow me to look for patterns of meaning within the data and bring my subjectivity as the researcher.

When Braun and Clarke were researching the diverse ways in which thematic analysis was approached, they stopped counting once they had identified more than twenty approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). They go on to suggest that thematic analysis has become a set of generic procedures, as opposed to a method, and that the approach taken needs to align with the type of research being conducted. This study sits firmly in the qualitative realm, emphasising the context and subjectivity of the research and researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Reflexive thematic analysis involves 'an organic and evolving process of noticing potentially relevant meaning in the dataset, tagging it with a code and ultimately building a set of codes, from which themes are developed' (Braun and Clarke, 2022b, p. 236). The process of theme generation is active, themes are arranged around a central organising concept and are not just about observations and descriptions of experience (Braun, Clarke and Hayfield, 2022). This contrasts with a more positivist-based approach, such as coding reliability, which identifies themes from predetermined codes (Boyatzis, 1998) or a codebook approach, such as template analysis, wherein the coding is a process for identifying evidence for themes that are organised hierarchically (Braun and Clarke, 2022b; Brooks *et al.*, 2015).

Data Sources

The focus in this phase of the study was an exploration of senior leader transition coaching practice. Data was gathered from leaders and coaches to explore both perspectives of what happens between them. I interviewed leaders who had been coached through their transition, to explore how they had experienced coaching during their personal transition, as well as coaches who had experienced coaching multiple leaders through this transition. I also interviewed pairs of leaders and the coaches who had worked with each other, through their transitions. This allowed me to explore any similarities or differences between how leaders and coaches had experienced the same coaching intervention.

Participants were sourced from my network of business contacts. Leaders who had worked with a coach through their transition to senior leadership were asked to consider taking part and if they were interested were sent a participant information sheet (Leroy *et al.*) (see appendix 3), a consent form (see appendix 4) and a privacy notice (see appendix 5). They were also asked if they would consider approaching their coach, if they were no longer in a continuing relationship, to avoid issues of dependency. Where the coach was willing to take part, they were invited to contact me directly and received a PIS, a consent form and a privacy notice. Additional leaders and coaches were approached who had not worked together. Where they expressed an interest, the same process that has been outlined above was followed.

How data was collected

I had planned to conduct the interviews face-to-face. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown meant that this would no longer be possible, so ethics approval was granted to conduct them online. The internet is increasingly being used as a medium for research, and consideration needed to be made of the context and how knowledge would be constructed (James and Busher, 2012). Unlike a face-to-face interview, the conversation would be mediated through technology. However, the use of a video platform allowed for a synchronous conversation with real-time responses which mirrored traditional interviewing (James and Busher, 2012). The enforced adoption of technology during lockdown also meant that all participants were familiar and comfortable with its use.

Data was gathered from ten, semi-structured online interviews conducted between May and August 2020. The interview guide is presented in appendix 6, and was modified to suit the type of participant being interviewed, for example, leader or coach. Descriptions of the participants are presented in tables in figures 3.2 and 3.3. In figure 3.2, differences in role refers to what leaders recognised was different in the senior role, compared to their previous more junior role.

Leaders	Role	Differences in role	Taking up the position	Began work with coach	Duration of coaching engagement
Leo Coached by Louis	Financial Services: From product owner in banking group to Transition Lead for Commercial Business Banking Team	Limited direct resource, responsible for building, leading and influencing team of 350 people. Venture capitalist type approaches to board for money. £50m a year investment spends. Clear sight of impact through profit and loss. Began talking to coach as stepped into role	Mar-18	Jan-18	18 months 1:1 and team
Lucas	Charity: From Head of Partnership Development to Head of Trusts and Foundation Partnerships	Took over from line manager. Increase from line managing 3, to line managing 8. Working with external organisations. Accountability for income goals. Member of management team. Engaged with coach before appointment	Nov-18	Sep-18	16 months alongside separate leadership programme
Hannah	Arts organisation: From Exec Director to Exec Director & Joint Chief Exec	Moved from small touring company in Aug 2018. First Chief Exec role. Rolling programme of activities, operational team, development, planning and strategic role going through major redevelopment. Responsible for financial and business management and working with Trustees. Initially involved in preparation for redevelopment then began looking forward	Aug-18	Nov-19	6 months

		and worked with coach to explore what leadership needed to look like			
Harry coached by Laura	FMCG: From Grocery Trading Director to UK Sales Director on UK Exec team	Appointed to Trading Director role with a view to succession, though appointment was competitive. Had sourced coach externally but had to work with one approved by the organisation. Part of the management team, impact of decisions bigger, stakeholder scale shifts from £100k-£200k to £1m	Sep-16	Mar-17	2 years

Figure 3.2: Preparatory phase - description of participants - leaders

Coaches	Type of Coach	Coaching experience	Years Coaching	No. of clients through transition	Qualifications or Accreditation
Catherine	Internal	Worked in professional services firm with clients moving into Partnership and or leadership roles - leading teams or part of a business. Began working with senior leaders in 2008	18	400	EMCC Senior Practitioner
Laura coached Harry	External	25 years' experience, 5 in organisations as a leader and 20 as an external coach. Mix of organisations	20	70	EMCC Master Practitioner
Louis coached Leo	External	30 years' experience using coaching, 18 years as an external coach. Mainly financial services, utilities and tech companies. US based though works in the UK	18	40 - 50	
Clive	External	15 years coaching, 11 years as an external coach. Across industries, UK & international. 150 senior leaders, 50 into that position for the first time.	11	50	EMCC Senior Practitioner
Connie	External	Consultant and coach, trained as Gestalt psychotherapist. Worked with transitioning leaders 1:1 and in workshops	15	100s	Co-authored book on transitions based on interviews with leaders
Cleo	External	25 years' experience, 5 in organisations as a leader and 20 as an external coach. Mix of organisations	20	70	EMCC Master Practitioner

Figure 3.3: Preparatory phase description of participants – coaches

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The services of a single transcriber, who had experience of academic work, were used. A transcript from the audio file was presented in literary (not verbatim) style, this meant there were no fillers. This highlights the nuances of the statement and facilitates the communication of the meaning of the subject's stories (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

False starts were left out, unless without them, the sentences did not make sense. Once received, the transcripts were checked against the recordings and shown to be accurate. A summary of how the data was analysed is provided in section 3.3 of this chapter and a detailed description is provided in Chapter 4. The outputs from this phase of the study included an understanding of how coaching supported leaders through the transition to senior leadership positions. This formed the basis of a group coaching programme that was applied and explored in the second phase of the study.

3.2.3 Action phase: action research and reflexive thematic analysis

The action phase of the study was designed to investigate how group coaching could support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions, and to develop a theoretical and practical framework for group coaching. This was achieved through the application and exploration of a group coaching programme. Supporting leaders through transition was the core project, as it could proceed without being studied. The parallel project was the research project, as part of the doctoral study (Coughlan and Coughlan, 2002). In recognition of the two projects, the data was analysed twice, using two consecutive approaches, and to address the different questions being asked of the data at the time. This part of the chapter explains how the methodological approaches were selected and then justifies the selection of two different approaches. It goes on to describe how the data was collected, and the implications that this had for me as both researcher and coach.

How the approaches were selected

Action research

The research project involved exploring practice to generate theory, and my choice lay between a case study or action research. Case studies 'address specific types of questions, examine processes and promote an understanding of a phenomenon in its real-life context' (Ellinger and McWhorter, 2020, p. 128). Flexibility exists, as different types of case study mean that they can be designed to meet the specific purpose of the study. The purpose of this study is to explore group coaching, as limited information exists, so it would be an exploratory type of case study (Yin, Campbell and Sage, 2018). Additionally, case studies are often used in business and management to develop new

theories (Ellinger and McWhorter, 2020). Case studies, like action research, can involve the respondents in the process of the investigation in terms of using multiple sources of data. However, the goal of action research is to make action more effective through the intended and unintended outcomes, to contribute to knowledge (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). This allowed me to work directly with the leaders as participants and representatives of those for whom the group coaching is being applied and explored. Together we could collaborate in 'combining action and reflection in ongoing cycles of co-generative knowledge' (Shani and Coghlan, 2019, p. 3). The development of group coaching would be based on their input and experience. In line with my pragmatic approach, this presented an opportunity to address the problem practically and to contribute to practice.

Action research is defined by Marshall as 'an umbrella term applied to a range of richly diverse approaches with their different heritages and informing ideas' (Marshall, 2016, p. 4). It was founded on the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, who sought to understand social problems by changing them and studying their effect (Kagan, Buron and Sidduquee, 2017). It promotes a high level of engagement and collaborative work, and has been used in multiple approaches across diverse industries and business disciplines for over 70 years (Shani and Coghlan, 2019). Described as research 'in', rather than 'about', action, it involves a collaborative partnership where the leaders experiencing the group coaching will participate actively in the cyclical process of planning, acting, evaluating and reflecting (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). Cox, Shoukry and Cook (2020, p. 148) describe how action research is particularly relevant for developing evidence-based coaching practice because it takes account of the 'intimate and experiential nature' of the coaching interaction; conducts research in real time and presents an 'opportunity to generate experiential and empirical knowledge while improving and developing the practice'. It could also drive change in the researcher and participants, whilst combining the roles of researcher, practitioner and co-learner. This last point is particularly relevant, as the leaders will be learning about their transition to a senior leadership position, as well as participating in the research. Likewise, I will be learning how to coach leaders through their transition, in a group.

There are many different types of action research, 'an alphabet soup of practices' according to Bradbury (2015, p. 4), as it has evolved, and practices have been mixed to match different situations.

In her history of action research, Masters provides multiple references in support of three types of action research and their alignment with different ontological perspectives (Masters, 1995). Technical types of action research align with a positivist ontological perspective, as the researcher tests an intervention with participants, playing a facilitatory role. Practical types of action research see participants more involved, as they work with the researcher to identify problems and seek ways to improve practice. This sits within an interpretivist perspective. The third and final type is described as 'emancipatory', aligning with a critical perspective which involves participants through raising their collective consciousness.

None of the above types of action research directly fit the approach to this study, or align with its pragmatic, ontological perspective. However, as doctoral action research studies into coaching have grown, Jackson and Cox (2020) have identified four more relevant modes of action research. These depend on the purpose of the research and have implications for how researcher and participant work together. Though this presents another challenge, as this study seems to touch each of the different modes. The table in figure 3.4 presents the four modes and how they could be seen to apply to this study (Cox, Shoukry and Cook, 2020, p. 152).

Mode of action research	Description of mode	Application in this research study
Inquiry Action Research	Focused on creating improvements in researchers' own understanding. Lowest level of engagement with participants	In developing and informing group coaching practice, as the coach of the group I will be developing skills and behaviours to coach the group.
Evolutionary Action Research	Focused on creating change or improvements to develop a model or theory	One of the main aims of this study is to develop and inform group coaching practice, out of which will come theory about how group coaching supports leaders through transition
Collective Action Research	Focused on creating change or improvements in group understanding. Practical knowledge that is generated from collective wisdom	The leaders who are participating in the group coaching programme will benefit from the collective wisdom within the group, both to make their transition to senior leadership positions and work collaboratively with others
Transformative Action Research	Focused on embedding empowerment and criticality within the group	This study is not helping the leaders understand and transform the system within which they work. However, there are elements of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2000), in terms of what it means to be a senior leader and the introduction of criticality to question what they see

Figure 3.4: Mapping modes of action research onto the study

Whilst the table has shown how each mode could apply to some part of this study, as one of the main aims is to develop and explore group coaching practice, it sits most comfortably with the evolutionary mode. My coaching practice inevitably developed as I coached the group, however, my main focus was developing practice alongside the leaders with whom I worked. The data from the leaders was the principal source of analysis, so there is more to this study than an inquiry mode of action research offers. The greatest overlap was between the evolutionary and collective modes; however, I initiated the inquiry, whilst applicable to the leaders, we did not evolve the inquiry together. I was evolving practice, with their cooperation as representative of the target audience. The alignment with a critical ontology makes the link to the transformative action research mode the most tenuous. We were not looking at the systems and structures, and criticality was more of a mindset. This

clarification that I was adopting an evolutionary mode of action research was important, as it had implications for how I worked as both coach and researcher, and this is explored later. A summary of how the data was analysed is provided in section 3.3, and a detailed description is presented before the findings in Chapter 5.

Reflexive thematic analysis

The purpose of the core project was to explore how group coaching could support leaders through the transition to senior positions. After having explored practice through action research, my focus shifted to explore the inner world of the leaders who had experienced group coaching. The inner world can be described as our meanings, intentions, ideas and feelings (Alvesson, 2003). To explore how group coaching had supported leaders, I was interested in understanding what they were thinking and feeling about their experience, and the data allowed me to open a window, as evidence of inner workings (Reissner and Whittle, 2022). A return to RTA was selected, as it facilitated the identification of repeated patterns of meaning across a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Alternative approaches such as IPA and GT were ruled out for the same reasons that they had been ruled out in the preliminary phase of the study. IPA would have rejected exploring my voice in the analysis, which was necessary for an exploration of practice, which would inform other coaches. Meanwhile GT would also not have considered my voice as the coach, nor my subjectivity, being both familiar with the experience of coaching through this transition and embedded within the practice. A summary of how the data was analysed is provided later in this chapter, and a detailed description is presented before the findings in Chapter 6.

Justification for two approaches to analysis

This section of the chapter justifies the selection of two sequential approaches that were taken to analyse the data collected in the action phase of the study. Two approaches were taken to analyse the data, to address the dual aims of developing and informing group coaching practice in the research project and exploring how group coaching could support leaders in transition in the core project. The approaches were guided by the questions being asked of the data at the time. The data collected during the action research phase of the study was analysed to make the action more

effective. Once both coaching programmes had been completed, the data was analysed to explore how group coaching had supported the leaders through their transition. A conventional approach to analysing data in an action research study would have been to conduct a thematic analysis of the data between the two group coaching programmes. This would allow themes generated out of an exploration of the participants experience to inform the development of the programme. However, the dual approach, involving action research, followed by RTA, was a better way forward in this study for two key reasons.

Firstly, the identification of patterns and themes to inform the overall development was not necessary during the group coaching programme. The programme was based on strong empirical, theoretical and practical foundations, and its effectiveness was evidenced through the feedback after the workshop and in the interviews. Instead, the categorisation of data allowed for a forensic examination of group coaching practice. The process was methodical, meticulous, rigorous and consistent. It led to the identification of what needed to be changed, to make it more effective in terms of design, content and delivery. Upon completion of the group coaching programmes, attention could be devoted to the generation of themes through RTA.

Secondly, this approach allowed for a devoted focus on each of the aims of the study, one at a time, initially to develop and inform group coaching practice and, subsequently, to explore how group coaching supported leaders. One of the strategies suggested for ensuring quality in RTA is to allow plenty of time for the analysis to engage with data reflexively, and this was not possible given the logistical constraints of the research study, between the two group coaching programmes.

This approach to analysis aligns with my pragmatic philosophical approach, in which the research question drives the choice of methods (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Furthermore, action research is described as an orientation to inquiry rather than a method (Willig and Stainton Rogers, 2017). There are no commonly defined procedures and there is an absence of discussion in literature about approaches to analysis in action research (Jackson and Cox, 2020).

How the data was collected

Action research process

The action phase of research was designed to apply and explore a group coaching programme. This section of the chapter outlines the action research process and the development of the group coaching programme. It then explains the context and how the data was collected.

The development of the group coaching programme was guided by the findings generated through an analysis of the data collected in the preparatory phase, by transition theory and by experience of working with leaders in transition. The programme consisted of a series of four group coaching workshops. Each group coaching programme formed one macro cycle of action research, and each single workshop formed one micro cycle. A visual representation of the cycles of action research is shown in figure 3.5.

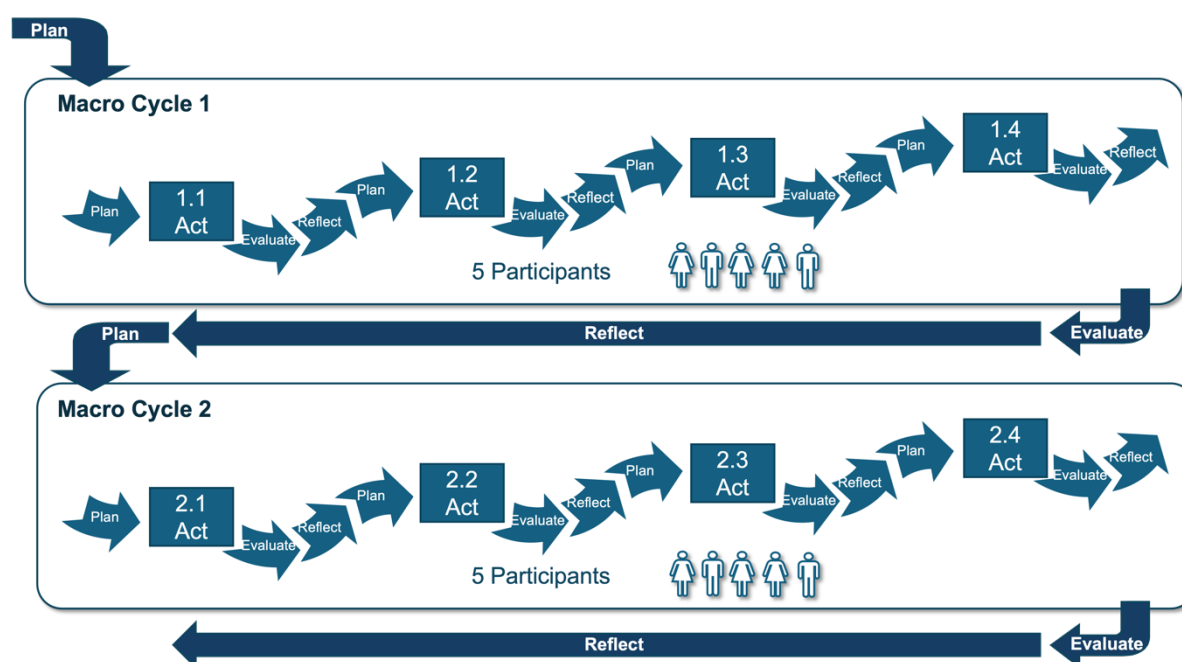


Figure 3.5: Action research cycles

Each micro cycle of action research involved planning the workshop, running the workshop, collecting data then reflecting upon and analysing the data, before planning for the next workshop. The same process was applied for each macro cycle. The purpose of the analysis between each

workshop and programme was to identify any necessary adaptations, to make the action more effective (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014).

Context of data collection

Following a struggle to find an organisation to work with, a research application was made to the British Transport Police Research Panel, and this was approved in November 2021. British Transport Police protect and police railway tracks and stations across England, Wales and Scotland, as well as other forms of public transport, such as the London Underground (Police, 2024). At the time the research was conducted, the force was transforming how they operated through a programme named 'A Force on the Move'. This involved changing their structure, processes and culture to align with a new operating model and to achieve the objectives set within their five-year strategic plan. It encompassed a shift away from the traditional command and control approach, and towards developing compassionate, inclusive leaders. Part of this shift involved the adoption of coaching as an approach to development and this underpinned their interest in participation.

Participants

Potential participants for the first group coaching programme were identified by the Lead for Coaching and Mentoring across both staff and officer groups within British Transport Police. An invitation was made by the coaching lead to attend an online conference call in December 2021. As part of the participant recruitment process, the purpose of the call was to introduce myself and the study, to answer any questions regarding participation and to outline the next steps. Following the call, interested participants were invited to contact me directly via email to confirm their interest.

Six leaders who worked within the staff population, from Finance and HR, expressed an interest. They were sent a potential research participant information pack, which included a PIS for the action phase (see appendix 7), the schedule of dates for the programme, the process for gaining consent and associated consent forms (see appendix 8), and a privacy notice (see appendix 5). The staged process of gaining consent was to recognise the multiple sources of data that were being collected. One leader who had been interviewed chose not to participate, as they felt unable to commit to the schedule of workshops. The second programme was only made available to officers. This presented

an opportunity to run the programme with a group of senior leaders who had different operational responsibilities. Comparisons could then be drawn between the two different cohorts, to explore whether a difference in responsibilities affected group coaching. A description of the participants is outlined in the table in figure 3.6.

	Pseudonym	Role	Time in Senior Role	Experience of Coaching
First Group Coaching Programme	Odette	Finance Business Partner	1 year	Previous dyadic coaching had been successful. Is mentoring other colleagues
	Ollie	HR Business Partner	7 years	Has been coaching since 2019. Completed coaching supervision course in 2020
	Oksana	HR Business Partner	18 months	Has been coached and is a level 7 coach
	Olena	Coaching Lead	1 year – Joined during Covid	Senior Practitioner and supervisor. Studying team coaching
	Oscar	Finance Business Partner	Senior before joining BTP In more junior role for 18 months as a result of Covid enforced job change	No formal training. Had responsibility to coach team
Second Group Coaching Programme	Tilly	Detective Chief Inspector	4 months	Previous dyadic coaching proved to be unsuccessful – too hands off and then too directional
	Tracey	Duty Inspector	Preparing for transition to DCI	Trained coach. Trialling group coaching
	Taariq	Detective Inspector	Promoted 1 year ago	In the army. Previously attended group coaching for groups up to 40, usually 10/15 turned up – topic based each week
	Terry	Temporary Chief Inspector	Achieved Temporary rank 6 months ago	Trained coach. Attended group coaching delivered by Ollie
	Tom	Detective Chief Inspector	Passed Board to DCI 6 months ago	No experience of coaching. Has worked with a mentor

Figure 3.6: Phase two description of participants

Data Sources

Data was collected through an iterative cycle of planning, acting, evaluating and reflecting upon each online group coaching workshop, and at the end of each programme. Multiple sources were used to collect rich, abundant data, a representation of the sources is shown in figure 3.7.

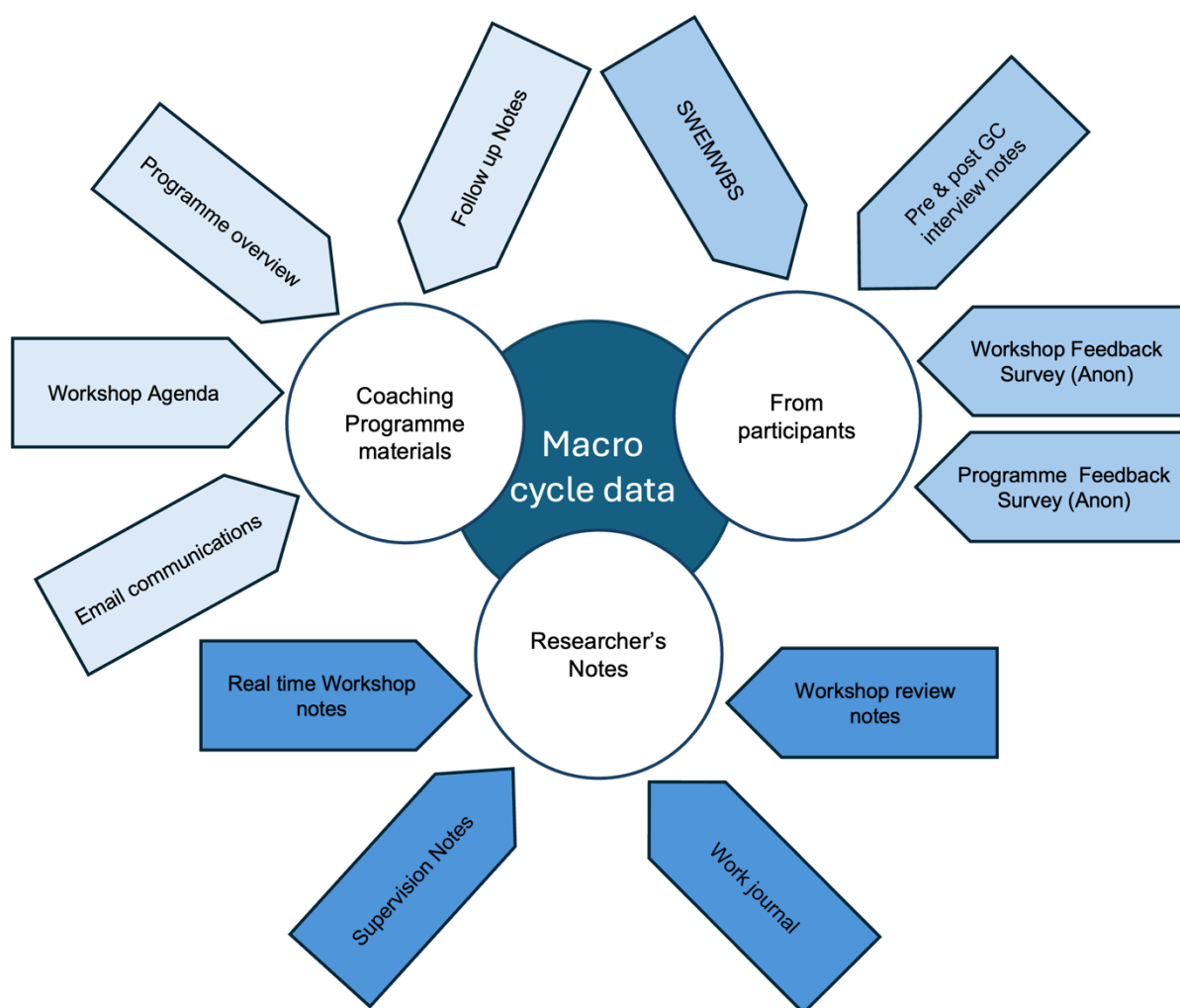


Figure 3.7: Multiple sources of data collected through each macro cycle

The three main sources of data were the participants, the materials used during the programme and my notes as both coach and researcher. Data collected from the participants included:

- Transcripts of interviews conducted with participants before and after participation in the group coaching programme (see questions from the interview guides in appendix 9).

- Responses to online surveys that were conducted immediately after each workshop and at the end of the programme (see appendix 10).
- Responses to The Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) questionnaire (see appendix 11). This survey was introduced as both a potential measure of the programme and to raise awareness of wellbeing amongst the leaders. It was relevant as the findings from the literature review and the preparatory phase identified how leaders could struggle with their wellbeing during a transition. An explanation of the survey and how it was used is provided in Chapter 5.

This approach to data collection from participants recognised the need to evaluate the coaching outcomes, so that an exploration could be made of how leaders were supported through transition. It built on Greif's evaluation model (Greif, 2013) and McDowall & Lai's update (McDowall and Lai, 2018) taking the form of data collection at three points:

1. Before group coaching began, to collect baseline data on the leaders who were participating in group coaching
2. Immediately after each group coaching workshop, to collect leader reactions to the coaching process
3. At the end of the group coaching programme, to assess reactions to the programme

The coaching programme materials included:

- Word documents used to plan and prepare for the group coaching programme and each individual workshop. These took the form of a high-level programme overview and detailed agendas for each workshop
- Word documents created to follow up the workshop, offering content that had been referred to and additional questions to consider

Maintaining detailed records of what was planned, and then provided to participants, created a library to review as coaching practice was explored.

Researchers notes included:

- Handwritten notes taken during the workshops to review and reflect upon
- Word documents that consolidated the notes taken during the workshop and used for review and reflection
- Word documents that summarised notes captured during group coaching supervision. I had five meetings with one supervisor before and during the first group coaching programme and four meetings with a different supervisor during the second programme. Coaching supervision is defined as the process by which the coach works with a supervisor to develop their understanding of their client, the client system, and themselves as part of the coach-client system, to develop themselves and their coaching craft (Hawkins, 2020).
- A work journal that took the form of a word document, to capture thoughts, feelings and questions as coach and researcher, to contribute to a 'self-aware meta-analysis of the research process' (Finlay, 2002, p. 531).

These multiple sources of data enhanced rigour and are in line with an action research study (Robson, 2002; Chen, Huang and Zeng, 2018).

Role as practitioner and researcher

The role of a researcher in positivist research is to be objective. Rigour demands a stance of distance and 'subjectivity a contaminant' (Etherington, 2004, p. 25). In contrast, in qualitative research, the researcher influences the collection, selection and interpretation of the data (Finlay, 2002). Finlay goes on to suggest that the integrity and trustworthiness of the research can be increased through an evaluation of the intersubjective elements of data collection. This is evidenced by the journal *Action Research*, which uses reflexivity as one of their quality assessment criteria for submissions (Gonnerman *et al.*, 2015). This section of the chapter will define reflexivity and will explore why and how subjectivity has been embraced in this study.

Reflexivity is described as a central yet confusing topic (Lynch, 2000) and as something which doctoral researchers find difficult (Fox, 2023). The confusion could lie in the many different fields in which reflexivity is defined. For example, Stacey describes it in relation to leadership and management as standing outside experience and observing it (Stacey, 2012). A definition from grounded theory describes it as developing insight about your work to guide future actions (Mills and Birks, 2014). Of relevance to this study, Braun and Clarke define reflexivity as a key concept that 'involves a disciplined practice of critically interrogating what we do, how and why we do it and the impacts and influences of this on our research' (Braun and Clarke, 2022b, p. 5). Further complexity lies in different types of reflexivity. Willig offers personal and epistemological reflexivity (Willig, 2013). Finlay goes further offering five different types: strategic, contextual-discursive, embodied, relational and ethical (Finlay, 2012). Whilst well-established, the confusion around reflexivity has drawn criticism, it is described as important, yet the lack of coherence around definition means that it is defined in contrast to being unreflexive (Lynch, 2000).

Putting debates about definitions aside, the ability to question what I was doing, and why, in this study was imperative. The purpose of the study was to develop and inform group coaching practice, and I needed to describe my involvement throughout the study, so that my interpretations could be understood (Etherington, 2004). As an action researcher I was immersed in the setting, creating knowledge through action, as a coaching practitioner, I was delivering group coaching (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). This called for personal reflexivity, described by Willig (2013) as reflecting upon how I have shaped the research through my values and beliefs, as well as how the research affects me as a researcher, coach and person. To meet this need, I kept a record of what happened, and of my reflections and learning throughout the study. During the interviews in the preparatory phase, I captured handwritten notes of how I felt before, during, and after the interviews, and what I noticed about how I responded. I also kept a log in an excel spreadsheet. Once the analysis of the data collected from the interviews in the preparatory phase began, recording my notes evolved into a more comprehensive work journal, which captured more detail about what I was doing, and what I thought and felt about it. During the action research, the journal evolved further to capture my reflections as a coach and researcher. This recognised the dual role that I was playing during the group coaching, and allowed me to separate out issues to do with the research and the coaching.

For example, as the coach, I captured a record of interactions I had with leaders during the workshops, and what I thought, felt or was curious about. As the researcher, I recorded how I responded to the survey responses. For example, I noticed that I was particularly attuned to noticing things that resonated with me, and I needed to be disciplined to notice everything that was shared. My work with a supervisor throughout the group coaching programme further extended questioning of how I was impacting what was happening. I also introduced more structure into the notes that I took during the workshops, I captured my hopes and fears going into them, as well as critical moments to discuss and explore afterwards. Throughout the data analysis and writing up the findings, I have also critically engaged with the data and my interpretations. There has been an almost constant dialogue as I have questioned how else I could have looked at this, what evidence I have to support my interpretations, what influences these interpretations, and how they align or not with other literature in the field.

At times, the level of reflexivity involved felt like this was more of an autoethnographic study, due to the layers of consciousness that I have been exploring. However, unlike autoethnography, it was always related to action. In this sense, it fitted Marshall's definition of a first-person inquiry into a collaborative relationship, in that I was cultivating an approach of inquiry into all that I thought, felt, and did, and was curious about my perspectives, assumptions and behaviours (Marshall, 2016). This was purposeful, as it helped me to understand how I, as the researcher, was collecting, analysing and interpreting the data, so that I and others could recognise the impact that I had on the theory I was evolving (Finlay, 2002).

3.3 Overview of how data was analysed

Multiple approaches to analysis were selected to address the questions being asked of the data at the time. This section provides an overview of how the data was analysed within each phase. Detailed descriptions of the different approaches to analysis have been provided before the findings in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. This is so that the findings can be understood in relation to how the data was analysed.

Preparatory phase: reflexive thematic analysis

The purpose of the preparatory phase of the study was to explore what makes the transition to senior leadership positions problematic for leaders, and how dyadic coaching supported them, to guide the development of the group coaching programme. The aim was to describe what was important about coaching for this transition, so generating themes through reflexive thematic analysis was a suitable method. I took a bricolage approach to analysis, defined as one that uses the tools that are available, as opposed to being restricted to following a template (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). This allowed me to immerse myself in the data in different ways, and involved generating meaning through ad hoc methods and approaches.

After familiarising myself with the data in the transcripts, I undertook an initial cycle of coding into Nvivo, which was primarily descriptive. The initial categories evolved through the second cycle of coding, from which themes were generated. Theme generation involved reviewing and grouping the content within the categories and codes. For each category, a review of the content was followed by the development of visual representations and a concept map, as well as a summary. The summaries were reviewed and what I noticed was organised into themes. A detailed description is provided at the start of Chapter 4.

Action phase: action research

The aim of the action phase of the study was to explore how group coaching could support leaders in transition to senior positions, and to develop and inform group coaching practice. The action research stage focused on making the action effective, in order to meet the aim of developing and informing practice. At the end of each workshop, data was collected from the anonymous survey responses from the leaders and loaded into Nvivo and an excel worksheet. The data was categorised by whether it was something to keep in the workshop, something to stop doing, or something to develop. It was further subdivided according to whether it related to delivery or design, and what aspect of the programme or workshop it related to. At the end of the first group coaching programme, the complete data set was analysed in a methodical and detailed way to prepare for delivery of the second programme. This same meticulous process was repeated for each workshop

and for the second group coaching programme. A detailed description of the process is provided at the start of Chapter 5.

Action phase: reflexive thematic analysis

At this stage in the research, I was exploring how group coaching had supported leaders through their transition to senior leadership positions. The multiple sources of data from the leaders allowed me to explore their inner world, as defined by meanings, intentions, ideas and feelings (Alvesson, 2003). My own field notes were also included, to gain a picture of how we all worked together during group coaching. In a repeat of the process to analyse the data in the preparatory phase, I familiarised myself with the data and conducted two cycles of coding in Nvivo. Themes were generated and developed by creating visual representations of what I took from reviews of the codes and categories. During an iterative process, the data was reorganised under themes that were generated and developed through conversations with others and through reading around the field. A detailed description of the process is provided at the start of Chapter 6.

3.4 Quality and ethical considerations

This section of the chapter outlines how issues associated with quality and ethics were addressed throughout the study.

Quality Considerations

Qualitative research involves finding meaning in data, collected through engagement with participants, in their context. This begs questions from researchers, who are more familiar with a positivist view of the world, about whether their accounts are right, or wrong, and whether such assessment is even possible (Cresswell and Poth, 2018). And if assessment isn't possible, how can it be evaluated?

Some of the same terms used in quantitative research and a positivist paradigm have been redefined. For example, qualitative validity has been described as the researcher checking for

accuracy through a set of procedures (Cresswell and Poth, 2018). The same authors go on to describe qualitative reliability as having a consistent approach across different researchers and projects. And, whilst not the intention of qualitative research, generalisability comes through the possibility of being able to repeat the steps that the researcher has taken. Amending the descriptions of the same terms can be confusing and many terms, for example, reliability across different researchers, are not relevant in this study, nor appropriate for reflexive methods. The use of different terms such as trustworthiness, credibility and dependability came about in literature in the 1980s (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These new terms have been adopted and applied to different qualitative methods, rendering quality something that needs to be defined on a study-by-study basis, according to the purpose of the study, the research paradigm and the methods selected.

As described earlier in this chapter, in response to the criticism of pragmatism taking a 'whatever works' approach, authors are asked to be explicit about their aims, values and methods, so that the research community can understand and evaluate what is being asserted (Martela, 2015). This aligns with calls for leadership research to go beyond ontology, epistemology and methodology, with researchers explaining how their values and their role affect the research (Klenke, Martin and Wallace, 2016). In summary, quality in this study has been taken to mean being clear on what happened and why, so that it is transparent and replicable (Morgan, 2014; Feilzer, 2010). This study is credible because a decision trail has been provided, through a description of the steps taken and how the interpretations were made (Koch, 2006).

During the interviews in the preparatory and action phases of the study, steps taken included recognising that interviews are not an unproblematic and direct source of knowledge, but are influenced by the interviewer, the interviewee, and the technology used to conduct them online (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). The switch to online interviews was driven by the COVID-19 pandemic (Organisation, 2020). Online interviewing was regarded as a legitimate means of data collection, though relatively novel in 2012 (O'Connor and Madge, 2017). One of the challenges had been a lack of skills to deal with technology, though this was addressed through its enforced use through lockdown, and its use is now regarded as central to work in organisations (Baptista *et al.*, 2020). A linear process was followed, as demonstrated in the interview guides (see appendices 6 and 9)

(Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). This shows how the interviews were grounded in the purpose of the study, and the design was focused on capturing the data that was needed to answer the research question. For example, leaders were made aware beforehand that the focus of the conversation would be on their transition, so they had time to bring it to mind and alive during the interview. Coaches were asked to recall specific client experiences, in order to provide examples of practice. During the interviews themselves, I used my skills and experience as a coach to ask questions which allowed the participants to express themselves openly and fully, I reflected upon what I heard, and I used my grasp of the subject to put what I heard into context (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Throughout this phase, I explored and challenged my biases through writing reflexively in my journal.

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data following the interviews in both phases. Thematic analysis has a reputation as something that is 'easy to use' (Willig, 2013, p. 65), and the assessment of quality is messy and confusing (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). Yet questions of whether the account is valid and how it can be evaluated are important for qualitative researchers, and the answers repeat the need for a trustworthy process (Cresswell and Poth, 2018). Braun and Clarke go further to define theoretical knowingness, which 'captures the practice of engaging with and deploying theory deliberately and reflexively' (Braun and Clarke, 2022b, p. 268). This called for reflexive engagement with the data and involved reflexive journalling, allowing time for analysis, discussing with others and challenging what I was finding, in terms of how I was responding and what it could mean. The step-by-step process for analysis of the data is provided before the findings in Chapters 4 and 6, to promote transparency.

Like all qualitative research, the absence of absolute criteria by which to assess action research makes it difficult to define quality, so choices and consequences have been made transparent (Chen, Huang and Zeng, 2018). As in the rest of the study, transparency is provided through communicating what happened at each stage, so that a third party could follow the process and see how the conclusions were drawn (Stowell and Cooray, 2017). This includes describing the steps and documents that were used during the planning, delivery and evaluation of the group coaching workshops, and during the analysis of the data collected. Three sources of data from the participants about their experience of group coaching included group discussions at the end of each workshop,

responses to the anonymous survey, and a one-to-one interview. This made it possible to see how much alignment there was, or was not, between the sources. Greater alignment could be seen as evidence of the views reported. The additional interviews, conducted over four months after the last workshops, provided a longitudinal perspective. Throughout the action research phase, reflexive journaling continued, alongside work with a coaching supervisor, which supported an exploration of my role as both coach and researcher and offered a challenge to my thinking and assumptions. A description of the steps taken during the analysis of the data are explained in Chapter 5. The wellbeing survey provided an additional source of data. This is a widely used, short, psychometrically robust instrument, meeting the scaling properties of the Rasch model and used across different settings (Taggart, Stewart-Brown and Parkinson, 2016).

This section has described the steps that were taken to address quality throughout the study. The intention has been to be transparent about what happened, when and why. This is to enable the community of researchers to understand the basis of the claims that are being made, so that they can be evaluated (Cavanagh and Grant, 2015). Given the focus on practice, this transparency is also required so that the practice can be replicated.

Ethical considerations

This section of the chapter describes the key ethical considerations in this study, and explains how they were addressed. The identification and mitigation of risks associated with projects involving human participants is a cornerstone of doctoral research. Before fieldwork began, approval was granted by the Brookes University Ethics committee in January 2020, and minor amendments were sought and approved in July 2021 and September 2022. Consideration of the moral consequences of the actions taken continued throughout the study (James and Busher, 2012). This was to ensure that no harm was done to the participants, and that they were shown a duty of care (Brennan and Wildflower, 2018). This was familiar to me, as an EMCC accredited coach to Master Practitioner level, I am bound by the Global Code of Ethics (EMCC, 2021). In this research, ethics considerations included how participants were recruited, how they were regarded during the study and how their data was treated.

In the preparatory phase, potential participants were identified through my network of business contacts and coaches. It was important that the coaches whom I interviewed did not invite their own clients to take part, as this could have skewed the research, and the pool of leaders would have been a reflection of the coaches I interviewed. Instead, leaders who had been coached through transitions by other coaches were approached and invited to participate. Two of the leaders were happy to recommend that I invite and interview their coaches, with whom they were no longer working. The focus of the interviews was on the coaching process, and was not about revealing personal details of the leaders. All participants were provided with a PIS and privacy notice, and were required to provide informed consent before each interview. The limited studies into online interviewing recognised that consideration needed to be given about confidentiality and the use and storage of data, which had already been addressed in the PIS (Eynon, Fry and Schroeder, 2017). Further consideration was needed around it being harder to judge online whether participants were becoming distressed by the questions or by what was happening. In mitigation, steps were taken to build rapport and to remind participants that they had an effortless way to leave the call, at any time (Mann and Stewart, 2000).

During the action research phase of the study, conducting group coaching within British Transport Police (BTPA) was subject to the approval of their research board. The organisation identified potential participants to invite to group coaching, and a conference call was set up as part of the recruitment process. The leaders were invited to contact the researcher should they choose to take up the invitation, to explore participation. During the one-to-one interview, before the recording started and the data collection began, leaders had the opportunity to ask questions and explore any concerns, and they were also reminded that they could withdraw at any time. Access to dyadic coaching to address any issues that arose during group coaching was available for all participants, through their organisation, as was any further mental health support required. All participants were provided with a participant information pack that included a PIS, a privacy notice and the forms for the staged process of consent. Recognising the highly personal and sensitive nature of coaching through this challenging transition, all efforts were made to ensure the safety of participants.

The identity of participants, both leaders and coaches, in both phases of the study, have been hidden using pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality, and data handling procedures were observed throughout the study.

This section of the chapter has explained how considerations about the quality and ethics of the study were addressed. The next section describes how the findings are presented.

3.5 How the findings are presented

The findings chapters follow the chronology of the study, as represented in the research design (figure 3.1), and are listed below.

Chapter 4. Findings from the Preparatory Phase: This chapter presents the findings from the preparatory phase of the study. This phase of the study triangulated the secondary data to develop understanding about what can make the transition to a senior leadership position problematic, and how dyadic coaching supported leaders. Dyadic coaching was explored as this is what the leaders had experienced, and no examples of group coaching for this transition had been identified. The findings from the analysis of the data were used to guide the development of a group coaching programme, in terms of its structure, content and approach.

Chapter 5. Findings from the Action Phase 1: Development of the Group Coaching

Framework: The group coaching programme was applied and explored with two groups of leaders who were in transition to senior leadership positions. Each group coaching programme made up one macro cycle of action research, denoted as MC1 and MC2. Within each programme, four workshops made up sequential micro cycles of action research denoted by MC1GC1 – MC1GC4 and MC2GC1 – MC2GC4.

Chapter 6. Findings from the Action Phase 2: How Group Coaching Supported Leaders: The third and final chapter of findings presents the outcomes from the reflexive thematic analysis of the data captured during the cycles of action research. This explored how the group coaching

programme supported leaders, both in terms of the coaching outcomes and what happened during group coaching to support them.

Each chapter describes the steps taken to analyse the data, followed by the findings.

4 Findings from the Preparatory Phase

The aim of the preparatory phase of the study was to explore how dyadic coaching supports leaders in transition to senior leadership positions, to guide the development of a group coaching programme. Primary research was conducted to triangulate the secondary data and my own experience of coaching senior leaders. This chapter is in three parts. The first part presents a detailed description of how the data from the interviews with leaders and coaches was analysed. The second part presents the findings from that analysis. The third part of the chapter introduces the group coaching programme, which was based on these findings, and which was applied and explored in the action phase of the study.

4.1 How the data was analysed in the preparatory phase

To develop a group coaching programme to support leaders, which could be applied and explored to develop theory and practice, I needed to understand the context within which the group coaching would take place. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with leaders who had experience of being coached, and with coaches who had experience of coaching leaders through the transition to senior leadership positions. Section 3.2.2 describes the participants and how the data was collected. The analysis of the interviews was focused on answering two research questions: firstly, what makes the transition to senior leadership positions problematic, and secondly, how does dyadic coaching support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions? Dyadic coaching was explored because this is what the leaders had experienced.

The bricolage approach that I took to reflexive thematic analysis involved beginning by reflecting upon my relationship to the topic before analysis began. I recorded what I was expecting to see, so that I could use it to compare and challenge my findings as they evolved. The next step was to listen to the recordings of the interviews, capturing what I noticed to be of interest. I then worked through each transcript chronologically and organised the content through Nvivo. This was primarily descriptive, and focused on answering questions such as what tools and techniques the coaches used and how the leaders were feeling. A screenshot of the codes identified at the end of the first coding process is shown in figure 4.1.

▼ Coaching through the tra...	10	70	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
What coach does	10	115	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
The self	9	67	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
▼ People and relationships	10	50	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
The Boss	7	13	17 Sep 2020 at 11:31
Inputs from outside	8	35	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
Coaching need	7	30	26 Sep 2020 at 10:...
Skills	9	30	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
Coach qualities	3	4	18 Sep 2020 at 09:...
Coachee Traits	3	4	26 Sep 2020 at 12:...
▼ Experience of Transition	10	60	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
▼ Stages	10	47	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
Gaining Clarity	3	9	16 Sep 2020 at 15:...
Feelings	9	33	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
▼ Group coaching	9	42	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
Benefits	9	40	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
Disadvantages	8	16	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
▼ Senior Leadership Position	9	39	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
Role requirements	8	43	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
Organisation and Culture	5	15	16 Sep 2020 at 14:...
Group and one to one	5	7	16 Sep 2020 at 18:...

Figure 4.1: Preparatory phase: 1st cycle of Nvivo coding

This was a dynamic process which shifted between seeking what I was looking for and capturing what I was finding. I reviewed and questioned the content within each node, then captured it on post-it notes and grouped them together. Based on this review, I created a mind map of what I noticed in the data, (see appendix 12), and I created a summary based on the questions that I noticed leaders exploring at a high level.

I undertook a second cycle of coding into Nvivo, to reconnect with the data and to explore what else came into view. High-level categories of codes were initially aligned to the mind map created after the first coding. Throughout the coding process, these evolved, and by the end there were five categories: *coaching relationship*, *coaching topics*, *context*, *group coaching* and *transition*. These are shown in Nvivo screen shot in appendix 13.

Themes were generated from these categories, through the process represented in figures 4.2 and 4.3. Step one involved reviewing the content within the high-level categories and the codes, the data was summarised on post-it notes and grouped together on a white board. In step two, beginning with the leaders' experiences, I created a mind map from the grouped post-it notes, then a visual

representation on a white board. Step three led to the creation of a concept map. Reviews were conducted in the same way for each of the other high-level categories in step four, and summaries were created in step five to identify the central themes.

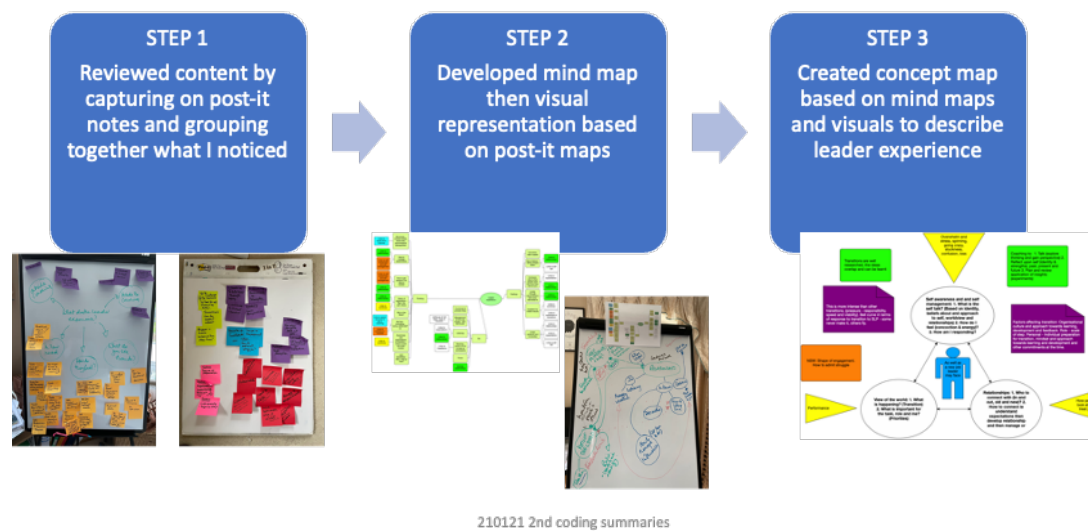


Figure 4.2: Representation of how data was explored and themes generated – Steps 1 - 3

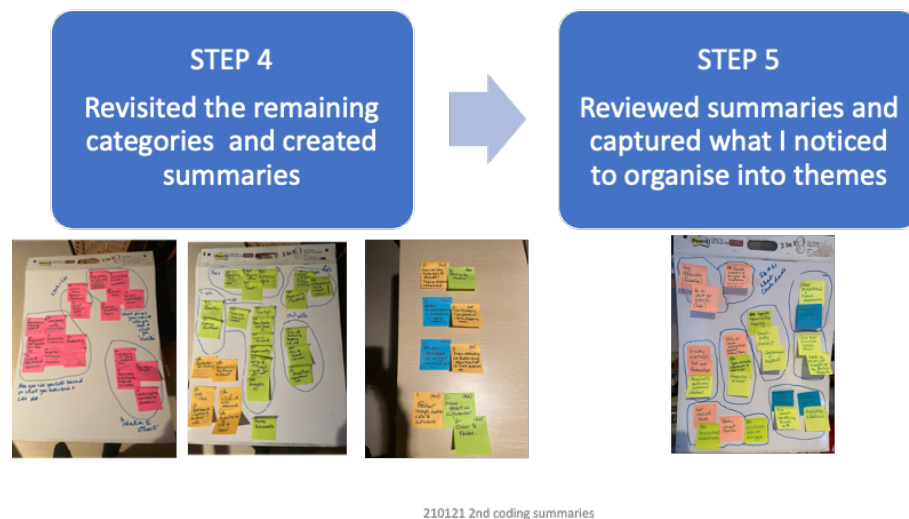


Figure 4.3: Representation of how data was explored and themes generated – Steps 4 - 5

4.2 Findings from the interviews with coaches and leaders

This section presents the findings from the analysis of the data described in the previous section. It is structured in three parts, the first explores the experience of transitions to senior leadership positions, the second how dyadic coaching supports leaders, and the third speculates upon whether and how group coaching could support leaders.

4.2.1 The experience of transition to senior leadership positions

I saw in the data three features of the step into a senior position that make it challenging, and how these challenges are exacerbated by the context and by a psychologically draining process of transition. Figure 4.4 presents and explains the themes relating to how leaders experience the transition. A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the question, and, where necessary, is broken down into sub-themes, to provide structure within the theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Research question 1: What makes the transition to a senior leadership position problematic?

Theme	Explanation	Sub-themes
Demanding step into novel territory	Three key interrelated challenges face leaders as they step into a senior leadership position	• Expansion of responsibilities • An increase in the number, and a shift in the nature, of relationships • Lack of clarity and fear of failure
Context plays a significant part	The aspects of the organisational and individual context that influence transition, and how they influence it	• Organisational • Individual
Psychologically challenging process of transition	The process of transition is challenging on a psychological level	• Experience of staged process • Additional focus on strengths and what to develop

Figure 4.4: Themes relating to experience of transition to senior leadership

Theme: Demanding step into novel territory

Leaders experience transitions through natural growth and development, both in and out of work, before they make the transition into a senior position. However, this specific transition presents a unique set of interrelated challenges which takes them into new territory in terms of what they have to do, how they engage with others, and how that makes them feel. The sub-themes are:

- Expansion of responsibilities
- Increase in the number, and shift in the nature, of relationships
- Lack of clarity and fear of failure

Sub-theme: The expansion of responsibilities

In line with career pathway models in literature, leaders described how their responsibilities expanded in senior leadership positions.

“I had to create a strategy, ...that was the big thing..[and] doing through others ... In going further up, you spend less time down. I found that really quite tricky. Because I have always prided myself in feeling connected to the work and the people” (Leo).

This exemplified the impact of the expanded responsibilities. It shows how significant being strategic was for the leader and how having to work through others meant he had to reframe what work meant to him.

Coaches noted how leaders have to shift their involvement in what they do:

“... they will need to be across a wider range of projects. .. from a ten percent involvement in five projects to a five percent involvement in twenty projects” (Catherine).

“They have too much to do, they are trying to learn a whole load of new things and they don’t know how to prioritise their time.” (Cleo).

This expansion in responsibilities and struggle with prioritisation meant leaders would also struggle to manage their time. And in addition to the expansion of the role, leaders acknowledged the increase in accountability:

"I remember feeling more responsible for that function ... this is how much you have said at the start of the year that you will bring in ... and you've got to now deliver that" (Lucas).

"... the impact of decisions is a lot bigger. So as you're making enterprise calls or structural calls, you're dealing with different issues that you've not really had to deal with before" (Harry).

These quotes illustrate the additional pressures leaders face, through these expanded and unfamiliar responsibilities. Two of the leaders were also accountable for leading change in their organisations. These findings confirm that the expansion of responsibilities in senior leadership positions can include having to work more strategically, as well as operationally, across a wider range of projects and activities, holding greater accountability, and leading change. They also described the impact this expansion has, necessitating a different way of engaging with others through influence, managing their time and how they feel in terms of their connection to the people and the work.

Sub-theme: The increase in the number, and shift in the nature, of relationships

Changing what they had to do, predictably, affected how leaders engaged with others at every level, in and out of the organisation:

"They then have to become much better delegators, empowering their team, trusting their teams. And having that recognition that other people might do it a bit differently to them. To be more outcome focused, rather than how people actually get to that outcome" (Catherine).

In addition to changing the way leaders work with those below them, they may also experience a different response from them:

"... you can physically see people approach you in a different way. They might be timid to come up and speak to you or ... you might find that there's

a lot more positioning going on in the conversations rather than people just speaking to you as they normally would. . . . And that was my wobble ... because people around me behaved differently towards me.” (Harry).

This has implications, if senior leaders need to trust those below them more, to delegate and empower them, but they are showing more timidity. Though one leader was prepared for a shift in relationship that didn't materialise:

“Initially I felt that I needed to be a bit more kind of aloof ... not necessarily be involved as much in the kind of social side ..And I remember ... realising quite quickly that I didn't need to worry about that. And actually, it was probably better that I was involving myself and just being me, ...” (Lucas).

The need to lead and influence others to change in organisations meant that relationships above the senior leader were also challenging. This led one leader to question whether he was good enough for the role:

“I wasn't their boss from day to day, but I had to influence them to do what I needed them to ... And a couple of the team were .. heroes of mine, having grown up in the organisation And what could they see in me in terms of actually have I earned my stripes here?” (Leo).

Another leader was very conscious of who he was now dealing with at a senior level:

“... suddenly the people you are interacting with might not be [earning] £100,000 or £200,000, they may be paid £1 million. Therefore, it's quite a different level of pressure on the conversation. I think a lot of that is pressure that one puts on themselves rather than pressure from the other side of the fence. But you are conscious of that” (Harry).

Knowing who to influence can also be a challenge:

“Pay attention to the power map. And where do things actually get done? Whom do you need to build relationships with? And how do you build those relationships? And that's going to be in some ways consistent and in some ways different?” (Louis).

The challenge of shifting relationships is exacerbated by the complexity within the organisation:

“They also very often talk about a lack of clarity or confusing or competing agendas. So they find themselves with stakeholders who want different things from them and they may be mutually exclusive things and so they feel like they’re in an impossible situation and they don’t know how to deal with that” (Cleo).

Leaders may also struggle with relationships within their new peer group:

“ I was just listening and maybe quite hadn’t found my feet in the group yet. And it was just interesting to see everyone sparring, you know, a bit of good chat, good conversation. And I remember thinking Ok, yeah, I’m sure I’ll get there, kind of thing. But I definitely was a little bit nervous going into that” (Lucas).

The relationship challenge is not limited to within the organisation, as there can also be a need to engage others outside the organisation:

“I think that’s something that you’re not really prepared for when you step into a CEO role, that people want to publicly hear your view” (Hannah).

This series of quotes reflect how, in the midst of the challenges associated with taking on the new role, leaders were finding themselves in a web of new and shifting relationships on every level. These comments illustrate the variety of ways in which changes in relationships affect leaders in transition. They were having to engage differently with existing relationships, above and below them, as well as within their peer group. Knowing who to engage might not be obvious, and there may be added complexity associated with trying to meet different stakeholder needs. There was also a need to engage outside the organisation. Whilst any transition into a new role calls for a change in what you have to do and with whom, the scale of this change in terms of the role and the shifts in relationships amplifies the difficulty, and how it makes leaders newly into senior leadership positions feel.

Sub-theme: Lack of clarity and fear of failure

The changes to responsibilities and relationships are exacerbated by complexity and ambiguity:

*“there is much greater ambiguity.. more shades of grey.. that it makes for difficult ethical choices that perhaps have always been there. But in a more black and white world, you could say that is wrong and that is right”
(Connie)*

This ambiguity results in a lack of clarity — all the coaches referenced this and the disorientation they had observed. This could be related to expectations both of the leader themselves, and of those around them:

“Often there is a lack of understanding of what others really do expect of people. So there is a lack of clarity around what success really might look like” (Catherine).

One coach worked with a senior leader who was clarifying their own job specification, and who described that the encounter with the position was very different to what had been expected:

“.. he’s sort of clarifying his own job spec.., the role feels more ambiguous than has probably been done before ... there is a lot of miscommunication in terms of what the senior role is, versus what they were sold” (Clive).

In addition to ambiguity, new senior leaders are also dealing with pressures associated with being more visible and with a need for speed:

“... it was also that bit around the ladder, you know, the higher up you climb, the more of your backside people see” (Leo).

The need for speed, to demonstrate performance quickly can have a negative effect.

“... he said one of the reasons why he was recruited was because they believed he could hit the ground running! And the reality was that whilst he is very strong, in fact that wasn't the case” (Clive).

Set against this ambiguity, lack of clarity, and pressure, leaders can begin to fear failure and to worry about whether they are good enough:

“The fear of failing in a big step-up role is the cause of the tension. And it's a concoction of different emotions, fear, excitement, challenge, pride one of the ones that is not helpful is too much of the fear of failure, because whilst it's natural, the impact that it had on me was that I probably spent a bit too much time worrying about whether or not I was going to be successful in the role” (Harry).

This is significant, because as one coach noted, it could be the first time they have been going through a 'wobble'. Which means they may not have the skills or mindset to work their way through it.

The quotes illustrate how, in addition to the challenges inherent in the step up to a senior position, leaders face challenges associated with the ambiguous and complex environment in which they are working. There are additional pressures linked to being senior within the organisation and needing to perform in the role quickly. The effect of this can raise questions for leaders about whether they are good enough and can introduce a fear of failure, possibly for the first time in their career.

Summary of theme: Demanding step into novel territory

The analysis of the data confirms that moving into senior positions involves an expansion of the role. This may be true in many role transitions, however, leaders described that the nature of this expansion calls for them to be more strategic, alongside additional operational responsibilities, with greater accountability. Leaders were having to learn how to be strategic, as well as managing an increased workload. This affected interactions with others, who were either involved in the delivery of outcomes, or needed to be understood and influenced, if the role included leading change. The shifts in what leaders had to do, with whom, and how they did it took place when they were more visible and under time pressure. The findings also describe the additional challenges associated with an

increase in ambiguity contributing to a lack of clarity and a fear of failure. These findings show that group coaching needs to be able to respond to a multitude of challenges that leaders may be facing. They may be struggling with how to execute their new responsibilities, for example, with setting strategy. Time management could be relevant, as could how they see themselves in relation to others. Leaders may also be under high levels of pressure, and may be experiencing self-doubt.

Theme: Context plays a significant part

Unsurprisingly, the leaders and coaches described context as influential during a senior leadership transition. This has been broken down into two sub-themes: organisational and individual. The organisational context includes what else is going on in the wider organisation, the culture, and the role the line manager plays. The individual context refers to the scale of the step into senior leadership and the leader's personal circumstances.

Sub-theme: Organisational context

What else is happening within the organisation at the same time is relevant, partly because it determines how others may be coping around the leader. In a stable context, any disorientation during an individual transition could be more evident. In contrast, a state of flux within the whole organisation could contribute to a general sense of disorientation:

".. it was such an organisation of major flux for the first year of me being there that actually everyone was disorientated and everyone was trying to find their way through it. So you didn't kind of feel unusual at that point; it was just the norm" (Hannah)

Coaches recognised the impact of the culture around learning and development for transition. The importance and subsequent investment of resources devoted to learning and development is influential, and impacts the role of the coach:

"... most organisations are very good at educating their leaders .. for example, the legal responsibilities that they might have as a director. Or they have an understanding about what it means to think strategically, and

they have frameworks to do that. But there are some organisations that don't do that, that just hope that people will pick it up somehow ... then some part of what I would be doing would be pointing people at resources to help them fill in some of the blanks" (Cleo).

Another factor is whether the individual and organisation regard this transition as an opportunity to learn:

"... whether there's an expectation set that you should be learning at this point ... the responsibility given to the organisation for their learning. And if the organisation has not noticed that they need to learn that, then the individual doesn't value it or notices it" (Catherine).

One key point that two leaders made in relation to taking up their new position concerned the impact of the relationship with their line managers. Linked to the lack of clarity described earlier, one leader spoke of his struggle to understand his line manager and what the role called for as they took up the position:

"... initially I couldn't read him at all and I really was not sure. So that was the first part of transition, getting to know my new leader. And to get closer clarity to what the big mission was from his perspective. And equally for me to express what I thought that I could do with the role" (Leo).

This was contrasted with another leader being more supportive:

"I really felt that he believed that I was ready for the job ... He's not one for great praise, but when he does say things, you really listen because it comes from a really good place." (Lucas).

These two extracts show how influential the relationships around the senior leaders are in the early part of the transition. They reinforce how unique each transition will be, as these will be influenced by the support around the leader.

Sub-theme: Individual context

This sub-theme captures aspects of the leader's professional and personal life. Professionally, the type and scale of the step into a senior leadership position determines how much the leader has to learn, and how many new relationships they have to develop. Three specific types of transition were discussed: moving into a new organisation, moving within it, or a hybrid — defined as a move to a different part of a large organisation. Increasing complexity within organisations, and fewer senior positions, intensifies the challenges associated with stepping into these roles:

“... some of these are very big steps in an organisation, just because of the organisational design. And some of them are less big now the design of organisations, very often these are big steps...” (Cleo).

On a personal level, the transition to any new position at work takes place alongside whatever is happening outside work, which could affect the leader making the transition. One coach referred to the influence that life stage plays. Many of the leaders transitioning into their first senior leadership position may also have increasing responsibilities at home, such as new relationships or a young family:

“very often this transition is happening at the same time as a whole bunch of other things. .. because of the age group, these are people who also have.., young children..... big financial responsibilities. So these are people who have a lot on, regardless of the job! So helping them to achieve balance and resilience is always going to be a part of the conversation!” (Cleo).

Context is important because it has implications for the energy that leaders have available to work on the other challenging aspects of the role. Two of the leaders interviewed also mentioned how the conversations that they had with their coaches had led to further conversations at home. This is because they were related to how they aligned what was happening at work with their personal sense of identity and what was important to them.

Summary of theme: Context plays a significant part

This is a smaller theme, yet significant because of how it might help or hinder the transition. At an organisational level, what else is happening within the organisation, the culture, and the line manager could contribute, collectively or separately, either negatively or positively. The individual context, at both professional and personal level, impacts the effort and energy available through the transition. Professionally, it relates to how much needs to be learnt, depending on the scale of the step. The personal context determines what else the leader could be grappling with at home, which may take energy away from, or support, the transition. If group coaching takes place within one organisation, the leaders will have a common experience of the culture and anything else that is happening across the organisation.

Theme: Psychologically challenging process of personal transition

This section explores the findings relating to the awareness, understanding and implications of the process of personal transition. It presents what coaches and leaders recall of the transition process, and how it relates to the challenges that leaders face. It is split into two sub-themes:

- Awareness and experience of the staged process of transition
- Additional focus on strengths

Sub-theme: Awareness and experience of the staged process

As an aid to developing the group coaching programme to support leaders in transition, it was important to understand how leaders experienced the psychological aspects of the process. One coach said that it is often the case that leaders are not aware of the transition process:

“... most people come to this not always realising that there is something called a transition into a new role which is well understood, it's well researched ” (Connie)

Before the interviews, each of the leaders and coaches were provided with a description of five stages in a personal transition, as outlined in the table in figure 4.5. This was provided to fill any gaps

in knowledge about the process of transition, and so that we had a focus for the discussion. It was based on the models reviewed in the extant literature (Louis, 1980a; Nicholson, 1984; Bridges, 2004).

Stages in the process of a personal transition (provided during the preparatory interviews)				
Pre-transition	Taking up the position	Letting go	Being betwixt and between	Integration
○ Anticipation for what the new position involves ○ Preparation for taking up the new position	○ Experiencing the reality of the taking up the position ○ Recognising what is as you expected and what isn't	○ Stopping doing things that you used to do ○ Letting go of what you used to think	○ A period of disorientation as you work out what works for you now, in terms of what you think and do and how you see yourself	○ Integrating new ways of doing and approaching things ○ Identifying yourself as a senior leader

Figure 4.5: Description of stages in transition provided during interviews

Three of the four leaders interviewed recognised the stages in the process:

“... it really rang true for me, these phases, definitely” (Lucas).

The fourth didn't recognise them:

“... there wasn't really a framework that was in my movement, it was fairly unstructured. And it was basically get on with it” (Harry).

The influence of the pre-transition stage, in terms of setting expectations, was described by two of the leaders:

“Yes, certainly pre-transition, absolutely. And the kind of mental preparation you make for stepping into a role that's different and has a higher level of responsibility. I think that there is a mental journey to go on there” (Hannah)

One coach explained how expectations based on personal history can be unhelpful, though the development of these may be driven by a need for leaders to show that they are competent:

“So they come with the idea that I need to show that I am completely competent in terms of everything that I am being asked to do, otherwise why would I be here? ... the only reference points that they have are their history.. ...relying on that history runs a risk, and it is a great risk, of importing systems and practices that worked elsewhere but don't fit where they've currently arrived at. But it's driven by the desire ... to prove that I'm a good hire.” (Connie)

This is also where any miscommunication about the role could be exposed, when the reality of taking up the position is not as leaders expected. Given the frequency of this, Connie shares a list of predictable surprises and tensions that leaders may encounter as they take up their positions. These include having to navigate that which has not been explained or is not expected.

As described earlier, the expansion of the senior leader role requires a shift away from some tasks to complete new additional ones. In line with the process, leaders and coaches aligned around the need to let go of old ways of thinking, being and acting:

“. one of the things I have always struggled with is that I am a very operational person. And actually when you step into a CEO role, you have to let go of some of that operation. You have to trust your team to do that” (Hannah).

Another leader spoke of how they needed to unlearn what had served them in the past:

"I had to unlearn the sales part of me ... this need for constant positivity, constant reframing of things that I had drilled into myself from an early age"
(Lucas).

A coach made the point that leaders often have to let go of doing things that they loved, which compounds the difficulty, whilst a leader explained how letting go made him feel betwixt and between:

"I was still in a product area that I understood. So I had to let go of [it] ... in a way that made it harder, because I was still around the subject. I could help but I could be a [hindrance]." (Leo).

The tumultuous nature of the liminal betwixt and between stage was also described in terms of the effect it had on leaders. This picks up loneliness and the fear of failure raised in relation to taking on the new responsibilities:

"I put myself under a lot of scrutiny, and that made me feel .. lonely"
(Harry).

"I've heard it described by people as feeling like you're in freefall. Where you kind of step off of a cliff and suddenly like you've got no clue, you're just in freefall" (Cleo).

Finally, there was recognition of an end point in the transition, these came from a coach who observed it and a leader who described how they felt they were a senior leader:

"You saw this moment where it and them became the same thing ... it's the way that they talk about their role ... they will talk about the partnership with more authority. They will be talking about how they contributed in meetings as an equal. You'll see them standing up as a peer with other peers. You'll see them doing probably some of the difficult things within the organisation, like ... cost cutting exercise ... it's almost like that sense of responsibility for having to take corporate or cabinet responsibility for some of the more difficult decisions. And being Ok with that..." (Catherine).

"I think that if you asked me, if you said to me ... or if a friend asked me if I see myself as leader in the organisation, I would say yes, absolutely. I definitely see myself as in charge..." (Hannah).

Both of these extracts capture how the end point manifests in the way that leaders act and how they see themselves.

Sub-theme: Additional focus on strengths and what to develop

Where the literature focuses on a period of separation and letting go of what has gone before, the analysis of the data showed that there was also an exploration of what leaders need to hold onto, in terms of their strengths and what they need to develop. One leader spoke about work helping to define his 'superpower':

"... part of my job as a senior leader was one of my superpowers that I started to realise that I had through coaching, through the work with [coach], was most people don't connect the dots as much as I do" (Leo).

Another leader spoke about their need to develop their communication skills at a more senior level

"... going into meetings either with the board or ... a council meeting. Things like that, where you really had to hold your own and be confident. And so we talked a little bit about physical techniques for helping mental confidence in those situations" (Hannah)

Summary of theme: How leaders experience the psychological process of transition

In line with the literature, some participants recognised a series of stages in transition, and it was possible to align their experiences with them. One difference between what is written about the transition process was the recognition of strengths that leaders were bringing to the role and what needed to be developed. This was in addition to what leaders were having to let go of. There was

consensus about the emotional turmoil leaders experience as their expectations are challenged and they try doing things differently.

Summary of what makes the transition to a senior leadership position problematic

The analysis of the data generated three themes which describe what makes transitions into senior leadership positions so problematic.

The first theme describes the challenges associated with stepping into a senior leadership position. These include the expansion of responsibilities; the new and different relationships that leaders encounter; and the ambiguity and pressure with which they must deal. The combination of these challenges can lead to a fear of failure and self-doubt.

The second theme describes the context within which the transition takes place. The organisational and individual context are significant, in terms of how they can help or hinder the leader's transition. At an organisational level, this relates to how the context can reduce or increase the lack of clarity and the pressure that leaders experience, for example, through the level of support available. At the individual level, the context could determine how much energy is needed, based on the type and scale of the step being taken to move into senior leadership. Also at the individual level, personal circumstances can affect the energy available to work through the disruption caused by the process of transition.

The third and final theme describes the psychologically challenging process of a personal transition. The findings described how expectations pre-transition can affect how the role is encountered. They also identified that the betwixt and between phase includes letting go of old ways of working, as well as a recognition of strengths and of what needs to be developed in the new role. This is described as a disorienting and emotional process, which can exacerbate the fear of failure already present, due to the ambiguity and pressure that leaders can feel in the new leadership position.

The findings also highlight how unique every experience is. Every senior leadership position will be different in terms of the responsibilities and relationships involved, as will the organisational and individual context. And whilst the stages of transition were familiar for most of the leaders, how they experienced them was different. The next section will explore how coaching supports leaders through this demanding period.

4.2.2 How dyadic coaching supports leaders through transition

This section of the chapter presents the findings from the analysis of the interview data, which explored how dyadic coaching supported leaders in transition. Amidst the tumultuous and disorienting transition, the data revealed that coaching provides leaders with the time and space to explore what is happening to them and to apply what they have learnt to resource them through the transition. This calls for the coach to play several different roles during the engagement, as required, to enable the leader to frame their thinking and experience, and to develop their understanding. Two themes were generated and are explained in figure 4.6.

Research question 2: How does dyadic coaching support the transition?

Theme	Explanation	Sub-themes
Enables an exploration of thinking and action	Coaching prompts leaders to think and reflect upon where they are and what they are doing, to enable them to work through the psychological process of transition	• Raising levels of self-awareness • Developing understanding and framing thinking • Fostering experimentation and reflection • Resourcing leaders
Provides a relationship with a flexible structure	The relationship between coach and leader is unique and dynamic to meet the needs of the leader within a boundary	• The role of the coach • The structure of the relationship

Figure 4.6: Themes relating to how dyadic coaching supports leaders

Theme: Enables an exploration of thinking and action

Based on this small sample of leaders and coaches, I found that coaching supports leaders by resourcing them to address the key challenges that they are facing. It facilitates and enables the psychological process of transition, through an exploration of what leaders are thinking and how they are acting. The theme has been broken down into the following sub-themes for explanation:

- Raising levels of self-awareness
- Developing understanding and framing thinking
- Fostering experimentation and reflection
- Resourcing leaders

Sub-theme: Raising levels of self-awareness

One key aspect of coaching for this transition involved helping leaders to raise awareness of their current situation. This was achieved by creating the space for leaders to think and be listened to, which helps them understand what is on their minds. One leader described this as contrasting with most of his other working interactions:

“.. they listen to you unconditionally ... most interactions I have as a senior exec, people want something from you. Having a coach means all they want from you is for you to improve or get better or whatever the problem is., you just feel better for having expressed something you’ve thought about” (Leo).

Another leader explained the benefit of having been provoked to think about how he was feeling and expressing what was on his mind:

“... there are so many learnings just in hearing yourself say what’s on your mind ... I think some of it starts with what is going on for you at the moment. And then someone gives an answer around the business and the results. It’s like well I didn’t actually ask around the business results; I asked about you. What’s going on for you, in your world? And how are you feeling about

stuff? They're the things that do open up a much richer perspective on what is going on" (Harry).

This expanded understanding of what one leader was worried about:

"... getting things off my chest. Things that I hadn't realised were pressures that I was worried about. That was really helpful. And helping me think through problem solving, some specific things. I remember that being enormously beneficial" (Lucas).

One coach described this as reflective space that was also structured to allow the leader to move on with their thinking, as opposed to ruminating:

"So allowing him ... some reflective space to help him to unpack what was going on in his head. Because he would ruminate quite a lot. .. And moved him onto sort of 'so what/now what'. Rather than just 'what'? ... helping him to go from a kind of unformed sense that it wasn't quite right to this is how I want it to be different, this is what I'm going to try" (Laura).

The conversations also allowed them to learn about themselves, with one leader referring to his 'buttons':

"... a concept of buttons, things that pushed my buttons in terms of things I don't like at value level, or that I do like but really annoy me" (Leo).

Another worked with their coach to explore their values to help them work with their board:

"We started off particularly around the kind of leadership style that I wanted to be, because I had never been in that CEO role before. It was quite an interesting situation for me to do some reflection on what were my values as a leader, how did I want to be seen by different stakeholder groups ... the relationship between the CEO and the Board ... how to work well with a Board ... working with different personalities on that Board, and the best way to present myself as a CEO that they would have faith in and ... want to work with positively" (Hannah)

Coaches shared the tools and techniques that they use to provoke thought:

"I try to use a lot of words that aren't conventional business speech..And have them think more freshly about what is going on" (Connie)

"... there was a bit of a theme about the self-visual tool. So realising that you as a leader can actually take control over how you're turning out, how you're impacting on people" (Laura).

Greater self-awareness also extended to recognising the need for self-care. Two leaders made specific mention of how they had realised the importance of prioritising themselves:

".. just thinking it starts all with the self, .. I've got to make sure that I'm looking after myself and making sure that I turn up to work in a good state of mind and actually just giving myself permission to look after myself" (Lucas).

"... it also helped me to ... realise .. I need to look after myself before I am capable of looking after others around me as well. ..to prioritise yourself and your wellbeing. ... doing things that were more about me rather than just seeing yourself as a knight in shining armour saving everyone else. ... I hadn't realised it before" (Harry).

Self-care also came up in relation to helping leaders to develop resilience in order to support them through the transition. One coach referred to sharing the 'four pillars of resilience' with leaders, These being nutrition and hydration; sleep; physical and mental exercise; and personal relationships (Clive). This exemplifies the way in which the creation of space by coaches, for leaders to be listened to, allows whatever is relevant and important for that individual leader to be explored in depth.

Sub-theme: Developing understanding and framing thinking

As the leaders express themselves and work through their thinking, coaches respond with input in terms of models, experience, or stories of others. These allow the leaders to understand what is happening for them and why:

“... examining those thought processes and unpicking some of that stuff that maybe wasn’t helpful, in order to make you arrive at a place that is more helpful” (Lucas).

Part of this serves to normalise what leaders are going through, and to help them understand what they have to do:

“.. there is a small part of the role of the coach that can be an educator ... And a normaliser. So actually helping people notice and have frameworks to use around leadership” (Catherine).

One coach explained how this helps leaders to navigate the transition. It addresses the disruption, by allowing leaders to build up new mental models that help them to make sense of their situation. The list of predictable surprises mentioned earlier allows the leader to position him or herself on a path that others have passed along and that can be worked through. Other input offered by coaches for support included a video about personal growth and development.

Every one of the leaders and coaches interviewed referred to exploring how the senior leaders saw themselves. In some cases, this involved psychodynamic work to shift a leader’s narrative from where they have come from, to where they are now:

“... one of the transitions that I made probably from thinking about myself as a rogue from a council estate to actually thinking about myself as a disruptive, challenging leader” (Harry).

As mentioned previously, these new senior leaders may also be struggling with the fear of failure. Leaders and coaches both referred to the challenge that leaders face when they work in these positions without receiving feedback. This further exacerbates their concerns about whether they are good enough, negatively affecting how they see themselves:

“... he was struggling with was the fact that people weren’t telling him or giving him feedback about the impact he was having in his role. And once we started to explore his need for external validation, we then started to

connect to I suppose a theme that ran through his career of not feeling good enough” (Clive).

In these circumstances, coaches work with leaders to enable them to step back and reflect upon what they do bring to the role, for example, their ‘superpowers’.

During their transition, leaders also face challenges to their beliefs about the world and, particularly, leadership. Following an introduction to feminist leadership, one leader was able to embrace a style which was more aligned to what he felt was important as a person, not just as a leader:

“... always thought that I was going to go at some point into one of the big firms ... and it just didn’t feel like me. So ... for the first time I was given a conceptual model of leadership that made me think ... there are people ... that I do look up to. .. You know, different types of leaders from those leaders we’ve got today. And it made me think well actually, there is a space for people who maybe are a little bit more humble. Who don’t have all the answers and aren’t just going to go into it for their own gains” (Lucas).

Lucas was able to let go of old expectations that didn’t feel like him, and realised that he could lead in a way that aligned with him and his values. Coaches also refer to some leaders facing into the fact that they had taken on the role almost without thought, and wondering if they should have taken it at all:

“Maybe fifteen percent who should have never taken the job because they were actually happier ... their personal development is not where they are or who they are, what they value ... And so the best that we can do ... is to try and help them to find a way to a situation in which they can be of value, and still do things that are valuable ..without it being a massive blow to their ego, like a backward step” (Cleo).

By working through their thinking with a coach, leaders were able to challenge what they had started to think about themselves and their situation. Challenges were normalised as the leaders developed more helpful mental models about what they were experiencing and about how they saw themselves,

now and in the future. In some cases, this helped them to cope with a lack of feedback, or to deal with tensions around where they were and may have wanted to be.

Sub-theme: Fostering experimentation and reflection

As awareness expands, coaches work with leaders to apply the insights that the leaders have gained. For example, one leader worked with her coach to explore the way in which she wanted to present herself to the board. In addition to working through her values, so that she had clarity around what was important to her, the coach offered a centring exercise, which the leader used before the meetings. This helped to build her confidence and allowed her to present herself as she wished.

Aligned to fostering experimentation, coaches also work with leaders to develop reflective practice:

“... making sure that they go beyond mulling things over to genuine reflection. Where they’re thinking about not just what has happened but what they are taking from that, what they’re learning from that” (Cleo).

Sub-theme: Resourcing leaders

An evaluation of coaching for these transitions was not within the scope of this study. Where outcomes were mentioned or discussed, they described helping leaders to feel better, to step back and to be more effective, in decision making and at influencing others. In other words, coaching resourced leaders to feel better and to be more effective:

“So there’s a bit there around you feeling better, because you’ve discussed something. There’s a bit around structuring your thinking. And there’s a bit therefore around your own mental health when you’re going onwards and upwards” (Leo).

Two leaders shared how coaching helped them to step back. One leader integrated time into his diary to help him to reflect upon what was happening, and ultimately felt that it improved decision making:

“... there was a leadership journey of how coaching can help you transition out of .. working hard in the wings versus standing on a hill surveying the

fields. To just think about how you're more disciplined with your reflection time....I did certainly build in more down time and more reflection time..."
(Harry).

As well as getting closer to his team, another leader felt that stepping back to think helped him to influence others and, ultimately, achieve his goals:

"... it enabled me to get closer to my direct team, but then also ponder the broader problems, ... So what it meant for me was that I could influence the situation. And it helped me because, through the coaching, I could really understand how I could hit the right buttons in order for me to achieve what I needed to for the team" (Leo).

Summary of theme: How coaching enables transition

Leaders described coaching conversations as unlike their usual interactions. They allow them to be listened to, and, through expressing themselves, leaders expand their awareness and understanding. Inputs and provocations from the coach lead to insights about their situation, and about who they are and what this means for them moving forward. These translate into actions as leaders try doing things differently. The outcomes that were expressed described leaders feeling better after a coaching conversation, that they were learning to step back and think about what they were doing, and that they were more effective at making decisions and influencing people.

Theme: Provides a relationship with a flexible structure

The aim of this phase of the study was to prepare for group coaching senior leaders, so it was important to understand the features of the coaching relationship. This theme is explored through the sub-themes relating to the role of the coach and the structure of the relationship.

Sub-theme: The role of the coach

The coach takes on a number of different roles within the coaching relationship, depending on the needs of the leader and their unique situation. There was consensus that a key part of the role of the coach is to normalise the challenges associated with transition. This provides leaders with a sense of relief that they are not alone in their experiences:

“... what works is to help people to have some way of understanding and framing their experience ... The other thing is to normalise their experience. So if you feel disoriented and lost, it's normal ... you are not a problem because you feel that, it's normal. ... I do quite a lot of teaching in my coaching ... Teaching tells people stuff that they didn't know. I think that I'm telling them stuff that they never knew...” (Connie)

There was a recognition that, whether it is called being a teacher, a mentor or an educator, coaches do provide material that could be useful for the leader. This encompasses models or requirements for leadership, or how to work with the politics in an organisation. The key point is that they fill gaps in the leader's knowledge. There were different views amongst the coaches as to whether they do or do not play a role as mentor. One coach felt that it was not appropriate, as a mentor is more focused on career and the organisation. Another regarded it as key to working with leaders in this position. This difference of opinion may be attributed to there being no single definition of the term.

Another role is the supporter role, in which the coach draws attention to the strengths that the leader brings to a situation. In yet another role, they may also hold leaders to account, for example, when the leader has said that they will commit to doing something.

One coach noticed that she was taking on a different role, which she viewed, more unusually, as that of 'wise elder'. This involved sharing stories and experiences to aid the leader's understanding or to expand his perspective:

"there was more of an element of life coaching ..this was somebody who was sorting their life out as well as sorting out their role ..., he didn't have as much access to that kind of wise elder. And it led me to get him to think where he was going and to make mentoring relationships inside ..and outside of the organisation." (Laura).

Exploring this in supervision, the coach recognised that she was filling a gap that was not being met through the leader's personal situation. This exemplifies how the coach takes on the role that would be most valuable for the individual leader, in each moment, within their context.

Sub-theme: Structure of the coaching relationship

Aspects of the structure of the relationship that were covered included setting parameters and availability. One leader described finding it useful when the coach laid out how they would work together and allowed her to take it slowly:

"... she was very good at setting out the parameters at the beginning very clearly, ... in terms of how the sessions would run, how many sessions, what the expectations were from my side and from her. So it was all very clear. And then just giving me the space to really work through things slowly, because it took a while!" (Hannah).

Another coach makes themselves available to the leaders with whom they work, so that they feel more like a partner as the leaders go through the transition:

"...I will be available between sessions if there is anything urgent that they need to talk through ...gives a sense of really partnering them" (Clive).

All leaders referred to the value of being able to set the agenda for their meetings:

“... what worked for me was that it was down to my agenda. So .. it would be led by me, whether it could be a work topic or it could always go into something, you know that I am grappling with outside of school” (Leo).

There was comment on what leaders could do to make the most of the coaching relationships. This included demonstrating qualities such as openness and honesty, patience, and the attitude of a learner. Two of the leaders interviewed specifically mentioned that they would be more prepared for meetings and more organised with their notes if they were to work with a coach again:

“So sometimes I wouldn’t have done the right prep before going to a meeting. .. So I was chasing my tail a bit.” (Harry).

The findings relating to the structure of the relationships show that leaders appreciate clarity about how the relationship will work, and the flexibility to work around their needs. They also show how the leaders themselves have a responsibility to ensure that they get the most out of coaching.

Linked leader and coach interviews

A review of the data collected during the interviews with linked coaches and leaders showed how similar their recollection of coaching through the transition had been. This was in terms of creating the safe space to explore thinking on the leader’s agenda. There was also alignment around the key areas that they had worked on. In both cases, the focus had been on exploring and developing personal narratives, and how to help leaders to engage more effectively with those with whom they were working.

Summary of theme: The coaching relationship

Coaches and leaders work together to create a relationship which allows for personal exploration and experimentation. The coach sets the parameters for the relationship, and then responds to what the leader brings.

Summary of how dyadic coaching supports leaders through transition

The findings show that, during the disorientation caused by the transition into a senior position, coaching supports leaders by psychologically resourcing them to address the challenges that they are facing. They are able to reflect upon how they are, and how they see themselves, in this situation. They can explore what they are bringing from their past that may be hindering them, and reframe it for the future. They can also explore how they see themselves in relation to others, which helps them to engage more productively, and reflection and experimentation is fostered. Space is created, literally, as leaders make time in their diaries to meet with the coach either physically or virtually. It is also provided figuratively, in terms of allowing the leader to fill the time with what will be most useful for them, specifically on their agenda. Working in this space, with input from the coach as necessary, allows the leader to plan and review their actions. The nature of the coaching relationship offers leaders the time and space to explore what is happening to them, how they are, what this means for them, and what they want to do with new insights and learning.

4.2.3 Triangulation of primary and secondary data

One aspect of the preparatory phase of research was to triangulate the secondary data and my own experience of coaching senior leaders in transition, with primary research. It addresses the specific transition into a senior leadership position, in the early part of the 21st century, capturing the evolving nature of leadership, and exploring all aspects of a transition. The table in figure 4.7 presents the themes and how they triangulate with the secondary data.

Table to show triangulation of primary data with secondary data			
Theme	Explanation	Sub-themes	Links to key references in secondary data
Demanding step into novel territory	Three key interrelated challenges face leaders as they step into a senior leadership position	• Expansion of responsibilities • An increase in the number, and a shift in the nature, of relationships • Lack of clarity and fear of failure	Career and Pathway models (Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011; Freedman, 2011) Impact of transition on confidence (Kilpatrick, 2022)

Context plays a significant part	The aspects of the organisational and individual context that influence transition, and how they influence it	• Organisational • Individual	Organisational culture impacts transition (Wiggins, 2019) Role of adult development and life stage in leader development (Liu <i>et al.</i> , 2021)
Psychologically challenging process of transition	The process of transition is challenging on a psychological level	• Experience of staged process • Additional focus on strengths and what to develop	Multiple challenges associated with transition process (Sugarman, 2001; Halliday, 2012; Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016; Skinner, 2020b)
Enables an exploration of thinking and action	Coaching prompts leaders to think and reflect upon where they are and what they are doing, to enable them to work through the psychological process of transition	• Raising levels of self-awareness • Developing understanding and framing thinking • Fostering experimentation and reflection • Resourcing leaders	Creation of transitional space (Dubouloy, 2004; Reynolds, 2011; Terblanche, Albertyn and van Coller-Peter, 2017; Kilpatrick, 2022)
Provides a relationship with a flexible structure	The relationship between coach and leader is unique and dynamic to meet the needs of the leader within a boundary	• The role of the coach • The structure of the relationship	(Skinner, 2020a; Terblanche, 2022)

Figure 4.7 Table to show triangulation of primary and secondary data

The findings aligned with the secondary data and clarified the specific challenges of senior leadership in the current complex and ambiguous environment. They illuminated the impact of the challenges, for example, the difficulties of time management, how to relate to others and the toll the transition took on them personally, exemplified by the need for self-care. They also highlighted the role that working on strengths plays in the transition process. As I would be the group coach, this gave me the confidence to both design and deliver the group coaching programme.

4.2.4 Speculation about what group coaching could offer leaders in transition

Based on their experience of dyadic coaching through the transition to a senior leadership position, leaders and coaches were asked to speculate upon whether group coaching could provide support for leaders. This section provides an indication of the potential opportunity according to those who have been through it, as well as the challenges and any additional considerations for the development of the group coaching programme.

Opportunity for support, to learn and connect with others

Leaders and coaches recognised the potential for group coaching, in terms of support and learning:

“ You might think that you’re the only person going through a transition like this, .. Of course it’s not true, there are lots of people doing that ... So the community there is really, really rich ... tick the networking box, tick personal development, supporting others, possibly innovation as well as you spar ideas off each other” (Harry).

This comment illustrates how clear the potential benefits may be for some people, though this is from someone who has been through the transition. Someone who has not yet been through the transition may not recognise such potential. One coach referred to the ‘foxhole’ effect of group coaching, as leaders go through the same experience together:

“A place to go and share when people are going through the same thing you are. What the challenges are. A safe space to talk about what’s working and what’s not working, fears and doubts, obsessions and rewards. And there’s all kinds of that sort of foxhole things together” (Louis).

One of the linked pairs of leader and coach worked both one to one and in a team setting. The leader recalled how effective it had been to learn from how other members of the team showed up. It gave him a choice to make about how wanted to be and act. Meanwhile the use of storytelling within the group context promoted connections within the group on a human level.

"I'd describe it as lovely to actually get to know a few people, it's promoted a conversation about us as human beings rather than kind of cashpoint machines where people keep taking money out of and don't put anything back into ... And it brought us all closer together and made us understand why people were reacting maybe in certain situations the way they do..."
(Leo).

Potential risks that affect how valuable it could be

Coaches and leaders could also see that there may be risks associated with working in a group. These related to it not being valuable, either because it wasn't productive, or through the lack of commitment and engagement of others. One leader and one coach saw risks in terms of it prompting negative conversations:

"You might imagine it breaking down if it was just a kind of 'cup of tea' session or informal chat.. a mutual moaning set" (Lucas).

"one drawback is that it becomes a .. gossip session. .. a complaining session... a kind of 'my manager is better than your manager'.. not to learn from, but as a way to do a bit of 'ain't it awful'" (Connie)

There was also recognition that it could take time for people to feel comfortable enough to share their stories:

"... it takes you a while to have comfort to open up about what has really made you who you are. .. I don't think that in day one people will probably be comfortable enough to share like that. So I think that the timing of it is important" (Harry).

"I think .. it would probably ... take longer to go deeper in group coaching than it would in one-to-one coaching. ..you can definitely go below the surface in group coaching. But I think that there may be a point where people might hold back their vulnerability" (Catherine).

One leader shared her scepticism about the impact that other leaders could have on her, which could also impact the value of the coaching:

"I am a little sceptical. ...they can often veer in the direction of one person, ..., as someone who is generally an introvert, sometimes it's hard to speak up in a group setting..., being in a one-to-one session forces me to speak and to reflect properly. Whereas in a group session I think that I could probably sit back and ... allow other people to do more of the leg work." (Hannah).

One coach also raised concerns around the necessity of commitment to the group from all the members:

"I think the challenges of group coaching is the commitment to the group. ... they would typically fail because some would say 'oh I've got this meeting and I can't possibly not do it'. And the minute that something is broken, it will start to trickle away... more scope for dying a very gentle death for lack of participation" (Catherine).

Additionally, there were concerns about group members being highly defended and not wanting to open up:

"I was wondering about those very defended people ... they've finally got their dream job and it turns out to be a nightmare. I just don't know whether being in a group would help them to deal with that, because they would see other people going through similar things and so they would de-personalise it. Or whether they just wouldn't want to open up in a group. They would find lots of reasons not to be there or" (Cleo).

After having worked alongside others during some team coaching, one leader offered his perspective on those he saw that were not able to engage:

"... if anything I had frustration sometimes with some of my peers not adopting the intent behind coaching. And my frustration was for them because I could see them. And I'd be like looking, going 'you've clearly got some issues here that you're not feeling comfortable talking about and it's really getting in the way of yourself' but ultimately, it's like anything, you have to want to pick it up for yourself. To pick up that mirror" (Leo).

In summary, the potential risks included the coaching not being productive, the fact that it could take time for leaders to open up in front of each other, and the fact that other members could have a negative impact, either through selfish behaviour or lack of commitment.

Additional considerations for the development of the programme

Some important considerations for the programme were also identified, such as the terms used, how big the groups were, and how the group was made up. Given the plethora of names for group activity within organisations, such as action learning, peer group learning and team coaching, one coach suggested that the term workshop is used:

*“When you use that word, ‘workshops’, it means something to most people”
(Connie)*

There was agreement that the group should have between 6 and 10 members, though there were differing views about whether it could work online or face-to-face. Another point of difference was whether the group would be more effective within one organisation, or as an open programme, with leaders from different organisations. The development of relationships within an organisation was regarded as one of the key arguments for the coaching to take place internally. However, there were concerns that in such a case, competition between participants could limit openness and vulnerability. In contrast, an open group could reduce such concerns, though it could also take longer for people from different organisations to open up to each other.

4.2.5 Summary of how group coaching could support leaders through transition

The findings from the preparatory phase of the research align with the secondary data by describing how leaders facing multiple challenges when they move into senior leadership positions. These are associated with: stepping into the role and the impact that it can have on leaders; the context within which the transition takes place; and the disorienting process of a personal transition. During this tumultuous period, dyadic coaching psychologically resources leaders to address these challenges. This is achieved by creating the space and time for leaders to explore how they are thinking and

feeling about their situation, and what they can do about it. Specifically, this involves an exploration of interrelated questions such as how leaders feel, how they see themselves, how they relate to and engage with others, and how to lead as a senior leader. This exploration provokes thought upon which leaders act in order to change how they lead.

When asked to speculate, leaders and coaches indicated that group coaching could present opportunities to support leaders through transition. They could benefit through learning from each other, and this would create an opportunity for leaders to see themselves in relation to others and to develop relationships. The latter point was identified as one of the key challenges of taking on a senior leadership position. However, potential risks were identified which could limit how valuable the coaching might be. The value would depend on how the time was used, and on the levels of commitment and engagement of the other group members. How the programme was set up and run would be important, to ensure that it was valuable and that the members did not have a negative impact upon each other.

In combination, these findings suggest that group coaching could support leaders through transition, by creating the space for leaders to explore their thinking about their transitions together. They could benefit from the support of others, and from learning from them, as well as from seeing themselves in relation to others. All of which could help the leaders to address the key challenges associated with the transition into senior leadership positions. Consideration would need to be given to how to ensure that the coaching would be useful and that leaders would work positively together.

4.3 Introduction to the Group Coaching Programme

The findings from this preparatory phase served to triangulate the secondary data with my experience, and were used to guide the development of a group coaching programme for leaders making the transition to senior leadership positions. It was designed to be applied and explored, to support leaders in transition and to develop and inform group coaching practice, through action research. The programme was based on three inputs: firstly, the findings from the analysis of the data collected in the preparatory phase of the study; secondly, literature in the fields of leadership, transitions, psychology, coaching and group coaching; and, finally, my own experience of coaching

leaders through the transition to a senior leadership position. An overview is presented, followed by an outline of each element, together with the details of what informed the design. A section on the coaching approach that was adopted is followed by the initial schedule of activity.

4.3.1 Overview of the programme

The programme was designed with a dual purpose, to support leaders who are in transition to a senior leadership position, and to develop a theoretical and practical framework for group coaching practice. The group coaching programme can be divided into three parts: (1) the set up; (Herdman-Barker, Rooke and 2009) a series of workshops; and (3) the follow up. The initial intention underlying each part of the programme, both for the leaders and the research purposes, is shown in the table in figure 4.7.

Three parts to the programme	For leaders	For research purposes
Programme setup	To provide information to enable leaders to decide whether to join the programme, or not	To recruit leaders, confirm consent and capture data for analysis
Five online three-hour workshops	To provide opportunities for support, learning and connection, through the transition to senior leadership positions	To apply and explore group coaching practice using action research
Programme follow up		To capture data for analysis to explore leader experience of the group coaching programme and how it supported their transition

Figure 4.8: Overview of the initial group coaching programme

The setup for the group coaching programme was designed to give leaders enough information to provide informed consent to participate, and to capture baseline data for future analysis. In line with findings from the preparatory phase, the workshops were designed to provide an opportunity for leaders to find support, and to connect with and learn from each other. Workshop content was based on exploring the challenges identified in the findings from the first phase of the study. These

challenges were summarised as questions to be explored within the group. The exploration of questions recognises the nature of organisational coaching as a joint inquiry (Bachkirova and Kemp, 2024). The questions provided a focus for each of the workshops. They were:

- What is happening?
- How and who am I?
- How to engage with others?
- How to lead?

The follow up was designed to capture data for analysis, to explore how leaders experienced the group coaching programme and how it supported their transition.

Each part of the programme will now be described. A summary will be provided, followed by a table showing the event, the purpose of the event and the content or activity.

The setup

The initial setup of the programme solely involved the one-to-one interview, as preparation for participation.

Event	Purpose/Focus	Content/Activity	References
1:1 interview with potential participants	To prepare participants and ensure informed consent	○ Outline the study and the programme (to check understanding) ○ Answer any questions ○ Collect baseline data	Assessing suitability and setting expectations (Whitely, 2013; Fusco, O’Riordan and Palmer, 2015) Exploring motivation to attend voluntarily through exploration of challenges and coaching goals (Brown and Grant, 2010; Lacerenza <i>et al.</i> , 2017)

The interview served the dual purpose of assessing suitability to take part and setting expectations and understanding (Whitely, 2013). In line with criteria set by Fusco et al. (2015) in their leadership and group coaching study, the criteria included:

1. Motivation to explore the experience of transition and how to develop as a leader in a senior position
2. Ability to access inner thoughts and emotions
3. The ability to offer sensitive and constructive feedback to others
4. The ability to accept feedback from others constructively

Workshop 1

The focus in the first workshop was threefold: to help leaders to feel included, to set coaching goals, and to help leaders to reflect upon what was happening for them in their transition.

Event	Purpose/Focus	Content/Activity	References
Workshop 1	Title: Goal setting and exploration of what is happening	Focus: meeting need for inclusion and moving on to considering need for control/assertion. (Do I want to be part of this group, if yes, what does being part of this group mean?) ○ Kick off to establish structure, set the boundaries for the programme and this workshop, i.e. why we are here and what we were going to do ○ Develop group contract – use hopes and fears from the interviews to guide discussion if necessary ○ Getting to know each other and what is happening for everyone in their transition. ○ Goal setting at individual and group level ○ Review and close	Meeting psychological needs towards collaboration (Schutz, 1989) Goal setting (Locke, 1996)

The interviews with the leaders and coaches indicated that there may be some concern from potential participants about how valuable group coaching could be. This related to the content of the conversations and a potential lack of commitment and engagement from others. The focus on meeting psychological needs for inclusion and goal setting was designed to address this. According to Schutz's theory of interpersonal relations (1989), there are a series of psychological needs that must be met, sequentially, before group members fully engage. Primarily, the need is to feel included. Without this, group members could be focused on working out whether they want to be part of the group. Once these needs have been met, the next set of needs relate to how much control the members have within the group. At this stage, the focus shifts to working out what it means to be in the group, specifically, where the power and influence sits and whether the group members can assert themselves. Only after these needs have been satisfied would intimacy and high cohesion be achieved, demonstrated by a mature use of energy and resources.

One of the potential risks of group coaching, identified in the data from the preparatory phase, was that it could become an informal chat or a complaining session. This implied that it could be of little value to the leaders. In order to address this, goal setting would allow leaders to have something to aim for during the workshops and throughout the programme (Locke, 1996).

The findings from the preparatory phase described the many and significant challenges associated with the transition to a senior leadership position. Furthermore, coaching gave leaders an opportunity to explore what was happening for them individually. This underpinned the need to devote time in the workshop to explore everyone's experience of their own transition. It was also anticipated that this exploration could begin to normalise their situation, helping leaders to recognise that they were not alone in experiencing these challenges.

Workshop 2

It was assumed that psychological needs for inclusion in the group would have been met if leaders chose to attend the second workshop. The focus was therefore on meeting any remaining needs leaders had to feel comfortable asserting themselves, and to cooperate and collaborate.

Event	Purpose/Focus	Content/Activity	References
Workshop 2	Title: How am I? (Self-care and wellbeing)	Focus: Meeting need for control/assertion, moving on to need for affection (cooperation/collaboration) ○ Reconnect and reflect upon last 2/3 weeks, review goals and prepare for workshop ○ Explore how everyone is feeling in response to the challenges discussed in the first workshop ○ Discuss the wellbeing survey results ○ Review and close	Need to address self-care and wellbeing in transition (Graifoner, 2009; Whitely, 2013) Stress and coping through transition (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Sugarman, 2001) Starting to reduce personal uncertainty (van den Bos, 2009) Asking questions to foster learning (Beddor Nowak, 2014)

The intention in this workshop was to build on the goal setting work from workshop one, to reinforce the motivation to engage in the workshop. Where Workshop 1 had focused on what was happening for leaders during their transition, Workshop 2 was designed to explore how the leaders felt in themselves. The findings from phase one highlighted the toll that transition could take on leaders. Coaching could help them to become aware of how they were and to recognise the need to look after themselves in order to lead, and provided tools to help them moving forward – such as how to be more resilient.

Further support for the focus on wellbeing would be provided through the use of the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale questionnaire. This self-report survey would be offered to Leaders to assess the state of their mental wellbeing. This was building on the use of the instrument to track wellbeing in Nacif's study into group coaching for wellbeing (2020). It would also provide a measure of the programme if results could be shown to have improved.

Workshop 3

Reviewing and framing the previous experiences leaders had, that brought them to this point in their career, was found to be insightful, based on the findings from the preparatory phase.

Event	Purpose/Focus	Content/Activity	References
Workshop 3	Title: Who am I? (Identity and role)	Focus: Meeting need for control/assertion moving on to need for affection (cooperation/collaboration) ○ Reconnect and reflect upon last 2/3 weeks, review goals and prepare for workshop ○ Learn about how everyone arrived at this point, what they bring where they would like to go ○ Challenges of leadership today and what that means ○ Review and close	Impact of transition on identity (Halliday, 2012; Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016; Ibarra and Obodaru, 2020; Skinner, 2020b; Skinner, 2020a; Bennett, 2021; Snape, 2024)

As well as sharing their personal stories, Leaders interviewed in the preparatory phase also expressed that coaching had helped them to develop their own understanding of what it meant to be a leader. Recognising that leadership has been described as a ‘contested concept’ (Grint, 2005a, p. 5), this workshop was designed to create the opportunity for leaders to discuss what it meant for them, personally, to be a leader in their organisation today. It would also give them the opportunity for sense making and identity development (Skinner, 2020b; Bennett, 2021; Snape, 2024)

Workshop 4

Workshop 4 was designed to shift the focus away from the inner world and experience of the leader, and out towards others.

Event	Purpose/Focus of event	Content/Activity	References

Workshop 4	Title: How to lead and relate to others? (Relationships)	Focus: Meeting need for affection/collaboration (recognising need for assertion may return). Legitimise feelings, foster choice and creativity ○ Reconnect, reflect and prepare ○ Challenges of relating and strategies to overcome ○ Coherence between how you are, how you see yourself and how you relate ○ Plans to act before the final workshop ○ Review and close	Promotes social networks and collective leadership (Cullen-Lester, Maupin and Carter, 2017; McCauley and Palus, 2021)

The findings from the preparatory phase identified the need to both build new relationships and shift existing relationships. This was particularly challenging due to the number of new relationships and the impact this had on how leaders got things done. It encompassed relationships with those above and below, and with peers working alongside leaders, both within and outside their organisations. Coaching through the transition had enabled leaders to raise awareness about how they saw themselves in relation to others and to consider their interactions with them. This was particularly important, given the evolving nature of leadership in terms of it being more collective, relational and practice-based. As this was the penultimate workshop, there would also be the opportunity to plan to interact differently with others and to bring those experiences back to the final workshop to reflect upon and learn from them.

Workshop 5

In the fifth and final workshop, the focus was for leaders to separate well and to give them the opportunity to reflect upon how participation had supported their transition to a senior leadership position. There would be an opportunity for leaders to reflect upon their experience of the previous

few weeks, specifically in relation to how they interacted with others, based on the learning from the previous workshop.

Event	Purpose/Focus of event	Content/Activity	References
Workshop 5	Title: Where now, what next and evaluation	Focus to include separation (ending well) ○ Reconnect, reflect and prepare ○ Evaluate and next steps ○ Review and close	Starting to consider proximal development indicators such as self-awareness, leaders identity and self-efficacy (Day and Dragoni, 2015)

The need to 'separate well' meant helping leaders to move away from the group and towards the future. This involved celebrating what the group experience meant for leaders, and addressing any anxieties about the programme coming to an end (Benson, 2019). To address the risks, identified in the preparatory phase, of working in a group not being of value, it was also important to help leaders conceptualise what the experience meant to them and what they had learnt. The collaborative evaluation would also serve the needs of research study.

Follow up

The final part of the group coaching programme was designed to evaluate how group coaching had supported leaders in transition. Data would be captured so that it could be analysed to explore the leaders' experience.

Event	Purpose/Focus of event	Content/Activity	References
1:1 interview	To learn about the experience and impact of group coaching	Questions to explore outcomes and experience of group coaching	Consolidating outcomes and exploring first- and second-order outcomes (Day and Dragoni, 2015; Wallace, Torres and Zaccaro, 2021)

The intention was to schedule the interviews within a month of the final workshop.

4.3.2 The approach to group coaching

In addition to the design of the programme, it was also important to consider how to approach coaching the group. Different forms of coaching and approaches are applied in group coaching, career transition coaching and leadership coaching, and may reflect the complex and highly individualised work necessary (Korotov, 2016; Parker, 2016). Borrowing from work in the social sciences arena, a bricolage approach to leadership coaching describes employing a variety of methods as called for by the situation (Kincheloe, 2005; Korotov, 2016). Building on this need for flexibility, a hybrid coaching approach was planned, which was based around three key approaches. The first was the Gestalt approach, which emphasises the role that awareness plays in achieving effective behaviour. Introducing the *Cycle of Experience* will enable leaders to learn to experiment and focus on the here and now, and to become curious, interested and aware of their own processes (Bluckert, 2018). The second approach was cognitive behavioural coaching. This is an integrative approach which recognises that how people think affects how people act and feel. It will involve asking questions to raise awareness and to develop methods to modify stress-inducing thinking (Williams, Palmer and Edgerton, 2018). Finally, the psychodynamic coaching approach involves creating a holding environment in which the unconscious is brought into consciousness (Kets de Vries, 2005; Ward, 2008; Ward, van de Loo and ten Have, 2014; Lee, 2018). This will allow for an exploration of the influences and assumptions that could be driving ways of thinking, feeling, acting and being for leaders, by eliciting personal stories and creating the time and space for introspection and making links.

Both the design and approach were also influenced by the work of Benson (2019). His approach is based around involving the whole person in the interaction and enquiry of how the group works together. This is as opposed to through prescription, or an exploration of personal experience in groups. The key principles that were adopted in the design and approach were as follows:

- The group is organic, natural and intentional, roles, values and norms emerge
- The group is an energetic experience and interaction changes over time

- What is important is what is happening here and now in the continuous unfolding of experience
- Making the hidden visible facilitates interaction and activity
- Experience of the group is multi-dimensional in terms of the physical, emotional and intellectual
- The organising principle is belief and hope in the group to meet the need

4.3.3 Plan to apply and explore the programme through action research

One of the aims of this study was to develop and inform group coaching practice. An action research approach was selected, as it allowed me to work directly with leaders as participants and representatives in a programme of group coaching. It was based on the cyclical approach of planning, acting, evaluating, and reflecting (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). One group coaching programme made up one macro cycle of action research, within which each group coaching workshop made up a micro cycle. The initial schedule of the group coaching programme can be seen in figure 4.8. It shows the five group coaching workshops spread over 12 – 15 weeks, and the multiple methods of data collection.

Weeks	Pre GC -1-3	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Event	30 min Interview	1st workshop		2nd workshop		3rd workshop		4th workshop				5th & final	30 min Interview - (Record & transcribe)
Content	Assess criteria (see below) and set expectations	Goal setting & what is happening?		How am I?		Who am I?		How I will lead and relate to others?				Evaluation of development & programme	
Data collection		WEMWBS - Baseline										WEMWBS - End point	
	Participant Questionnaire & discussion	X		X		X		X				X	
	Participant Focus group (record & transcribe)											X	
	Participant interview												X
	Observer discussion	X		X		X		X				X	
	Observer interview											X	
	Field notes												
	Researcher's journal												

Figure 4.9: Initial group coaching programme schedule

The duration of the workshops was based on findings from previous empirical studies in the workplace, which showed that two hours was not long enough (O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017). The gap of two weeks between the workshops addressed opposing needs. Firstly the need to meet regularly from previous group coaching studies for transition, leadership and behaviour change (Stelter, Nielsen and Wikman, 2011; Whitely, 2013). Secondly the need to recognise the demands of the senior position, which meant time to devote to group coaching would be limited. It also provides time to apply learning between workshops. The longer gap between Workshops 4 and 5 was to provide longer to experiment and embed learning.

4.4 Summary of findings from preparatory phase

In the preparatory phase of research, leaders and coaches were interviewed about their experience of dyadic coaching during the transition to a senior leadership position. A reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to identify the challenges that leaders face in transition, and how dyadic coaching supported them. Based on their experience, they were also invited to speculate upon whether and how group coaching could support leaders in transition. The data was used to guide the development of the group coaching programme to be applied in the next phase of the study.

The analysis revealed the multifaceted challenges and demands facing leaders as they step into senior leadership positions. These are inherent within the senior role, for example, the expansion of responsibilities, influenced by the organisational and individual context and exacerbated by a psychologically challenging process of transition. This can have a disorienting effect on leaders and can cause them to question whether they are good enough.

Dyadic coaching was shown to create the space for leaders to explore how they are and what is happening to them. This allows them to think about and normalise their situation. Leaders can reflect upon how they see themselves in relation to their past, where they are now and what is important to them moving forward. They are also able to consider their relationships with others, and how they relate to and engage with them. Ultimately, coaches can foster reflection and experimentation, resourcing them to act as senior leaders.

Based on their experience of dyadic coaching, the coaches and leaders interviewed recognised potential benefits associated with group coaching through this transition. These included the group providing support, opportunities for learning and making connections. Concerns surrounded it having a lack of value and the negative impact that other members could have in terms of their behaviour, or through lack of commitment. Considerations around the size of the group, session duration and naming were offered.

Based on these findings, a group coaching programme was developed to be applied and explored in the action phase of the research. An initial group coaching programme schedule concluded the chapter. The next chapter, Chapter 5, describes how the programme was applied and explored with two different groups of leaders.

5 Findings from Action Phase 1: Development of the Group Coaching Framework

The purpose of the action phase of research was to explore how group coaching can support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions, and to develop and inform group coaching practice. This first chapter of findings from the action phase presents the findings from the application and exploration of the group coaching programme through action research. This phase was designed to develop and inform group coaching practice, and it led to the development of a group coaching framework. The chapter begins by explaining how the data was analysed during the application of the group coaching programmes. It goes on to present an overview of the first group coaching programme. This is followed by the findings from the first programme, a summary of adaptations for the second programme, the findings from the second programme and a comparison between the programmes. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings and the presentation of a framework for group coaching.

5.1 How data was analysed during action research

An approach was developed to address the type of data collected during the workshops and to answer the questions being asked of it at the time. The question was how each workshop could be adapted to make the action more effective (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). At the end of each workshop, anonymous survey responses were loaded into NVivo and the data was organised in response to questions that would support planning for the next workshop (see figure 5.1).

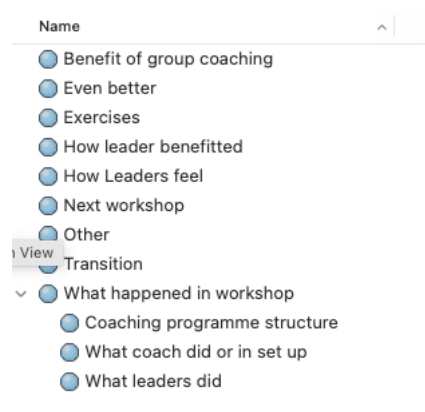


Figure 5.1: Nvivo categories for anonymous workshop survey responses

The survey responses from the leaders served as the basis for the adaptations between the workshops, and they were supplemented by feedback offered and my fieldnotes taken during the workshops. The data was limited and, as well as organising the survey responses in Nvivo, the responses were logged in an excel worksheet. Building on the concept of successful adaptation to thrive in evolutionary biology (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009), the data was categorised according to whether it was something to keep in the programme, drop or develop. The choice to keep something was based upon answers to the survey questions, asking what had been helpful and what leaders would like to see more of (see surveys in appendix 10). Examples of responses included the structure, pace and the reading materials, that were provided after the workshops. Things to develop were suggestions or ideas from leaders, based on answers to the question of what would they like to see or do more of. One example included being explicit about how we were building on the foundations of the work we had done in previous workshops. Things to drop came from answers to the question what they would like to see or do less of, for example, breaking out into pairs. These categories were further subdivided depending on whether they related to the design or delivery of the workshop or programme. The design related to the content and exercises in the agenda. Delivery related to how I approached coaching or what I could ask the group. I also had a category that captured data that I was curious about for reflection at the end of the study. The content was supplemented by what I had noticed myself that had worked well and what to improve, based on my fieldnotes and reflections. The worksheets were used as the basis for adaptations to the workshops to make them more effective. A section of the worksheet created between workshops is in appendix 14.

The end of the first group coaching programme was the end of the first macro cycle of action research. At this point, I could have followed a conventional approach and conducted a thematic analysis of the data collected throughout the group coaching programme. However, as explained in Chapter 3, I chose to continue analysing the data using the method I had developed, as this was the most effective approach for this study. The complete data set, made up of 48 documents from the sources presented in figure 3.7, was analysed in a methodical and detailed way, to prepare for the delivery of the second programme. This included additional observations and reflections on

summaries of the interviews and reviews of the programme. Whilst this was not a thematic analysis, I took a reflexive approach to familiarise myself with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2020; Braun and Clarke, 2022a). This recognises that researcher subjectivity is a resource for the research, as knowledge generation is inherently subjective and situational. As I read each document, I questioned how analytical and critical I was being. I looked for what was of interest and could be worth exploring, what was familiar or unfamiliar, and how I was responding to the data. I also made a distinction between my reflections as a practitioner and a researcher. For example, as a practitioner, I noticed when some information before the workshops could help leaders in their preparation. As a researcher, I noticed the need to amend ethics approval to make some changes to the wording on the wellbeing scale consent form, and enhancements to wording on the group coaching model.

A summary of this analysis was created, and aspects of the programme to keep, drop, develop, and that I was curious about, were added to the worksheet. Things I was curious about referred to observations I had made that I wanted to follow up in the second programme. For example, whether the second group developed effective ways of working together as quickly as the first group had. In total, I recorded 123 items relating to aspects of the group coaching programme that needed adapting or exploring. Common items were grouped together, and actions identified, or notes made for further investigation. This was summarised in a document outlining adaptations relating to each aspect of the programme, or for exploration in the final analysis. A section of the document outlining adaptations is shown in appendix 15.

5.2 Overview of the first group coaching programme

The original design of the group coaching programme, described in section 4.3, was amended to meet the operational requirements within British Transport Police. The key changes were as follows:

- Reducing the number of workshops from five to four. Workshops 1 and 2 in the initial design were integrated to explore 'What is happening?' and 'How am I?' together
- The one-week gap between the workshops was increased to between 3 and 5 weeks
- The short wellbeing survey was used in place of the long one to reduce the time commitment of the leaders

Figure 5.2 presents the group coaching programme schedule and data collection methods. Events in the first group coaching programme commenced on 8th December 2021 and ended on 3rd May 2022. Longer-term follow-up interviews were conducted with two leaders in January and February 2023.

	Conference Call	Pre 1:1	Workshops				Post 1:1	Follow up
Workshops			1	2	3	4		
Title			What is happening and how am I?	Who am I?	How to lead and relate to others	Where now and what next?		
1st Programme	08/12/21	14/12/22 to 04/01/22	11/01/22	01/02/22	01/03/22	05/04/22	19/04/22 to 03/05/22	17/01/23 to 01/02/23
Elapsed Time between events		1 – 3 weeks	1 week	3 weeks	4 weeks	5 weeks	2 – 4 weeks	8 months
Cumulative weeks from conference call		1 – 3 weeks	5 weeks	8 weeks	12 weeks	17 weeks	19 weeks	1 year
Data Collection								
SWEMWBS		X					X	
Feedback in Workshop			X	X	X	X		
Interview Transcript		X					X	X
Fieldnotes	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Supervision Notes		X	X	X	X	X	X	
Reflections	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Figure 5.2: Overview of activity in the first group coaching programme

5.3 Findings from the first group coaching programme

The multiple, rich data sources and meticulous process of data analysis produced numerous adaptations, especially in the early workshops. However, many of these related to very small adaptations, such as changes to a slide, or for personal learning to manage anxiety. This section presents the key findings, where key is defined as those that are relevant to developing and informing group coaching practice. The findings are evidenced by data that relates to the structure, design and delivery of the workshops and the overall programme. As a reminder, the data was collected through the anonymous surveys and interviews with the leaders, as well as comments made during the workshops, and my fieldnotes and reflections. The quotations in double quotation marks are taken directly from data transcripts, or, where no name is provided, the anonymous

survey, which is unattributable. The shaded quotations are comments leaders made that are taken directly from my field notes. A description of what happened is followed by an explanation of what the feedback from the leaders meant for group coaching practice, and a table summarising the adaptations moving forward. The author's reflections are presented in Appendix 16

Programme set up: conference call and one-to-one interview

An online conference call was arranged as part of the participant recruitment process, the coaching lead at BTP invited to attend those they thought eligible and who may have been interested. The purpose of the call was to introduce myself, as coach and researcher, and the study, to answer any questions regarding participation, and to outline the next steps. As described in Chapter 3, following the call, interested participants were invited to contact me directly, via email, to confirm their interest. Six potential participants were interviewed, and one subsequently chose not to participate. See appendix 9 for the questions within the interview guide. The interview was in two parts. The first part was designed to confirm consent and to answer any questions about participation, and the second was recorded to provide data for analysis.

Feedback from leaders

The conference call and interviews served to kickstart thinking for the leaders about what engaging in group coaching would mean, in terms of their motivation to attend and what engaging in group coaching would be like. Motivation was addressed by providing leaders with input on senior leader transitions to provoke thinking, then with the time and space to think about their own transition. By raising awareness of their current situation and challenges, leaders began to see how working on their transition could be relevant for them. This was important, as lack of relevance had been expressed as a concern that could hinder group coaching. It was important that leaders saw a reason to attend and volunteered, as opposed to being instructed to attend, as voluntary attendance increases the transfer of learning (Lacerenza *et al.*, 2017).

"[The conference call] gave me the space to ask questions and to think of things like intentional leadership ... [and in the interview I was] reflecting on those questions that you sent out beforehand" (Oksana).

The primary source of information about what engaging in group coaching would be like came from me, as the coach. I was the embodiment of the group before it started (Benson, 2019). Recognising the potential that groups have for achievement and devastation (Turner, 2012), and the vulnerability that leaders could be feeling in transition, it was important that they would feel safe. Thus, they would need to feel that they were working with someone who was credible and who would look after them. One leader shared that they felt I sold myself short, that sharing that I was a Master Coach would have helped them to establish who I was. Comments also referenced how being organised with all the briefing packs before the interviews had helped them know what would happen and what they would be asked. They had been ‘pre-warned’ and it helped with their ‘mental preparation’.

The interviews were also important to start building a trusting coaching partnership which could create the psychological safety necessary to work with the personal uncertainty in transition (Bennett, 2021; Jain and Kondayya, 2023). Additionally, they provided me, as the coach, with considerable knowledge about with whom I would be working, which helped me to develop my approach to working with them.

Adaptations

The below table summarises how the programme developed as it was applied and explored. It summarises what was originally planned, how this changed to meet organisational needs, and the adaptations for the second programme, based on feedback and learning from the first programme.

Initial Programme Set Up	Revisions for first programme in response to organisational requirements	Adaptations for the second programme in response to feedback
1:1 interview with potential participants Purpose: to prepare participants and ensure informed consent	Added introductory conference call for potential participants	Purpose of the set up expanded to include to prepare coach and inform approach An attendee from the first programme joined the conference call to address any queries about how group coaching worked

		The potential risk of triggering emotional reactions was shared The role of the coach was clarified in terms of supporting with the achievement of goals, both during and in between the workshops.

Workshop 1 - first programme

The first workshop was designed to raise awareness in leaders about how they were and what was happening for them in their transition. This led on to what would be useful for them to work on in group coaching and setting coaching goals. A detailed plan for the workshop included the activity and output, as well as the intention behind each session, and this was repeated for each workshop. Addressing the psychological needs for inclusion involved encouraging leaders to get to know each other and to elucidate their purpose for being there, specifically, clarifying their goals. Material distributed after the workshop included a link to complete the anonymous online survey; *Thinking Templates*, which were word documents with questions to provide leaders with a tool to explore their thinking and experience about a particular topic outside the workshop; notes and references relating to things we had discussed; the slides presented during the workshop; and the group contract, defining how everyone wanted to work together (see appendix 16). Information was also provided about the next workshop and the preparation that could be helpful.

Feedback from Leaders

The framework was based on empirical knowledge and practical experience, so it was expected to be a productive experience for leaders. Leaders expressed how it had provided time for focused reflection and that it was integral to the job, as they were meeting and learning from each other. This was significant, as it meant that they could see that it was valuable use of their time from the start. The speed with which the group gelled was referenced, as evidenced by how leaders felt comfortable to share from the start, which indicated that they felt safe with each other. Some attributed this to everyone being on the same wavelength and the same path, despite coming from different teams

and backgrounds. This could be attributed to the preparation, which meant that everyone was clear about why they were there and what would happen.

“The ground rules we all worked together [to create] provided a sense of individual and group ownership and I had a great sense of collaboration”

This comment means it could also be attributed to the creation of the group contract. This was co-created in response to asking what would help everyone to work well together.

There were also key aspects of the coaching approach and structure that were noticed. Leaders wanted to stay together as one group, as opposed to breaking into smaller groups or pairs, which indicates that the group was a good size, allowing the opportunity to hear from everyone. The leaders picked up on the use of ‘gentle but perceptive questions’, with a guide to direct the conversation and the pace.

“The Goldilocks pace of the session was critical - perfectly balanced to enable reflection without over-dwelling ”

Elements of the structure included checking-in and checking out, which leaders noticed helped them get rid of the ‘baggage’ they were bringing with them into the workshop and see the progress they were making during the session. Comments also referred to the focus on goals and signposting to other materials. These are significant because they show what the coach does and what group coaching offers that leaders valued and separates group coaching from other open collective spaces.

The after-event survey created the opportunity for leaders to reflect upon their personal experience of the workshop. One referenced their desk height, and another, how they noticed they felt a pull to answer emails. This shows how the survey enabled leaders to reflect upon and learn from their experience.

Adaptations

The feedback supported the key elements of the workshop, in terms of its length, an agenda based on questions to explore, the pace of delivery and the coaching approach. The table below shows how the workshop was revised and adapted from the initial programme.

Initial Programme	Revisions for first programme in response to organisational requirements	Adaptations for the next workshop	Adaptations for the second programme
Title & focus: Goal setting and exploration of what is happening	Title and focus expanded to include 'How am I?' based on need to reduce to 4 workshops	Offer the group the choice about how they would like to work together; as one group or in breakouts Include a recap of what we covered last time Provide slides in advance	

Workshop 2 – first programme

The focus in the second workshop was to explore how leaders saw themselves, as part of identity development work (Skinner, 2020a). It was designed to help leaders to raise their awareness about what had shaped their career to date, and to consider what that means for them now, as senior leaders. Preparatory work before the workshop involved thinking about the three most influential moments in their career, to provide a structure to share their stories. An open group discussion followed, to explore what it means to be a senior leader. Attempts to promote interaction using the online whiteboard failed, as not everyone could see it.

Feedback from leaders

Leaders made comments about how they felt that the workshops were evolving. They described them as “developing” and “building up the atmosphere of trust”. This recognises that the psychological needs of the leaders continued to be met, as they all felt safe to share and be heard:

“... you really get to listen to all of the people in the group and learn a lot from each person”

This could also be seen as an example of how leadership capacity was developing, as leaders felt comfortable voicing their views and could see value in each other's contributions (Day and Dragoni, 2015). A request to build on the stories, and to explore how to address challenges with BTP, shows the significance of the context to leaders in transition. Addressing challenges helps them with their job role, and aligns this type of leadership development with the work leaders have to do.

Adaptations

Feedback from the leaders continued to endorse the way that the workshops were designed and delivered. Specific adaptations are shown below.

Initial Programme	Revisions for first programme in response to organisational requirements	Adaptations for the next workshop	Adaptations for Workshop 2 in the second programme in response to feedback
Workshop 2 Title: Who am I? (Identity & role)	Title and focus expanded to include 'What it means to be a leader'	Focus on how decisions are made within the group and ensure all voices are heard Ground discussions in the context of BTP and increase challenge around goals	Promote goal development following the initial interview and share goals to provide focus in the workshops Create structure around leadership discussion, include what my perspective is based upon and that there are many other ways of looking at it Create time to focus on development of leader to be vision

Workshop 3 – first programme

The third workshop explored how to lead and relate to others. It began with a breathing exercise, designed to help leaders to disconnect from their day-to-day tasks and to focus on the workshop. The original plan was to focus on group dynamics, developing metaphors to describe the roles that people play in groups. This morphed into describing the impression that leaders had of each other. The open discussion after this drew out actions that leaders committed to try, because of their insights and learning. The follow up included a template to apply learning from the workshop to specific relationships in BTP. As the next workshop would be the last, a template was also attached to develop and consolidate leaders' thinking about their progress against coaching goals.

Feedback from leaders

The breathing exercise was well received. One leader described it as *'therapeutic' and another* described how they felt afterwards, *'... head was like a bouncing ball and now curious and focused'*. This took the group coaching work into experiential territory. It was an example of taking risks, as it might not have been well received. However, a safe space had been established, and it was grounded in leader development. Likewise, the metaphor provided a different way for leaders to think about and describe each other, with good effect. Leaders described it as *'Offering a freer way to think'* and as a gift. One leader committed to trying the exercise with their team, demonstrating the ripple effect of group coaching (Brown and Grant, 2010). The metaphor was also important to their transition, as feedback is key for senior leaders' confidence (Kilpatrick, 2022), as is validation from others for leader identity formation (Skinner, 2020a). Leaders recognised the breadth of issues relating to the transition that we were covering:

"The ultimate fact is the group session is a safe space to explore all of the variables; emotions, psychology et al of being and transitioning to a senior leader."

As an example of how safe the space was, one leader described that they were *'not in a great place'* when they checked in, which was a demonstration of their vulnerability. In this case, the needs of the individual took precedence over the needs of the group, and this was explored before moving on, recognising that everything that happens for one member of the group becomes part of the group. It

was also an example of how supportive the group were. This was well received by the leader in question, who shared in the survey response that they were grateful for this “*opportunity for growth*”. This could be seen as a demonstration of ‘consciously cooperating with the organic process of growth and development in the group in order to liberate and utilise its creative energy and resource’ (Benson, 2019, p. 83).

Adaptations

Initial Programme	Revisions for first programme in response to organisational requirements	Adaptations for the next workshop	Adaptations for the second programme in response to feedback
Workshop 3 Title: Who am I? (Identity & role)	Title: How to lead and relate to others? (Relationships) Title and focus from Workshop 4 moved to Workshop 3	Show progress through workshops and focus on goals	Include the exercise to develop a metaphor for the members of the group that would like to hear it

Workshop 4 – first programme

The fourth and final workshop was designed to explore what leaders had learnt, how they could sustain their development, and what was next for their development. The agenda retained the same structure as the previous workshops, in terms of a check-in and catch up to begin with. The recap on the last few weeks revealed that leaders were making changes to the way they led: Odette was taking control of her diary, Oksana described how she was offering challenge into the organisation and ‘hadn’t been sacked’, and Olena was letting go of things that others could do, such as running workshops. In response to the feedback, a slide was shared to capture the breadth of topics we had explored.

The main exercise involved leaders describing an artefact that encapsulated their experience on the coaching programme. The open discussion was based around questions such as what leaders would hold on to, to help them through the transition, what they were celebrating, and how group coaching

had helped them. A slide was created showing all the artefacts, to act as an aide memoir to their experience and learning. This is shown in figure 5.3.



Figure 5.3: Image of the artefacts from Workshop 4 (first programme)

The quotation represented feeling stronger to push back and stand up for self; the lighthouse was about feeling battered but having self-respect and holding steady; the Egyptian artefact reflected self-respect and not doubting knowledge and skills; the AirPods case felt good to the leader, and represented blocking out the noise and having an anchor. Finally, the broken soup tureen reflected the Japanese term Kintsugi — an idea that struggle and damage can make things more beautiful. The email follow up to the workshop included links to complete a survey about the workshop, and a second survey about the whole programme. Follow-up notes were included with a copy of the wellbeing scale.

Feedback from leaders

The artefact exercise was described as “*creative and also inspiring*”. It also had a temporal dimension:

“It consolidated the learning of the past 3/4 months and positioned me to work through the coming months”

There was also a recognition that the transfer of learning into action could be sustained:

“... the gaps between the workshops was about right to allow reflection; embed action and for me to let what I need to do be firmly embedded”

This shows how the learning coming out of group coaching for this transition could offer an enduring effect (Terblanche, 2022).

Adaptations

Initial Programme	Revisions for first programme in response to organisational requirements	Adaptations for the next workshop	Adaptations for the second programme in response to feedback
Workshop 4 Title: How to lead and relate to others? (Relationships)	Title and focus: Where now, what next and evaluation	N/A	Check level of challenge is as required

Follow up - first programme

Once the workshops had finished, a one-to-one interview was conducted with every leader. These were designed as part of the study, to collect data to be analysed. They were focused on exploring what was different for leaders as a result of participating in the group coaching programme, and how the leaders had experienced group coaching. At the time, they were not regarded as part of the programme, so no exploration was made of what leaders thought about the interview, nor whether, or how, it contributed to the transition. There was considerable overlap between the comments made

about the structure, design and delivery of the programme in the interviews and the survey. The data is presented in the following section on feedback from leaders.

In order to explore the distal reflections of group members, after 6 months, participants were invited to take part in a second follow-up interview. The purpose of the interview was to share and discuss any further reflections on the group coaching programme and the difference it made to their transition. Two leaders contacted me and were interviewed after the final workshop.

5.4 Summary of feedback and adaptations for the second programme

This section of the chapter summarises additional feedback from leaders and the implications of the learning from the whole of the first programme. It concludes with a summary of key adaptations for the second programme.

Feedback from Leaders

Of the four responses received to the programme survey, all four said they would recommend group coaching to support the transition to senior positions. Suggestions for improvements included the use of psychometrics, more diverse groups to include Officers within BTP, and how devoting time to prepare for the workshops beforehand helps participants to get more value out of them. When asked about how the programme could be improved, two questions were raised out of curiosity. These were whether to hold it in person and whether to include people from different organisations. Neither were possible in the context of this study but will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Key comments relating to the structure, design and delivery of the programme covered contracting and the nature of a flexible structure. One leader recognised the dynamic nature of contracting

“ ... you've done your contracting really well, and re contracting throughout as well because there are times where ... they don't want to go there. And then you'd re contract with the person.” (Olena, +6 months).

This is significant because it characterises contracting in group coaching as a dynamic process. It is not something that can be agreed at the start and set in stone, it is fluid, depending on the person

and the situation at the time. In a group, this means holding an awareness of where everyone is, as opposed to just one person in dyadic coaching. Oscar also picked up on the contradictory nature of structured flexibility:

"I think group coaching ... can be quite flexible because it's structured, because it's important to have a structure in the format in order to direct the conversation and achieve the goal" (Oscar, +6 months).

A structure provided focus for the discussions, yet there was flexibility to go where the discussion took the group. This contrasts with some more structured mechanisms, such as action learning and some leadership development programmes, which may be restricted in the content they cover.

Two significant insights concerned the development of the group and how the group coaching programme operated on three different levels. The development of the group was observed through the transfer of levels of energy and engagement from the coach to the group members. From the conception of the programme and during the setup, the energy and engagement is driven by the coach. Over time this was transferred. In final workshop, the leaders managed the discussions themselves with very limited input from me. The group became self-sustaining, when it met once the workshops were completed without the coach. This is represented in figure 5.4.

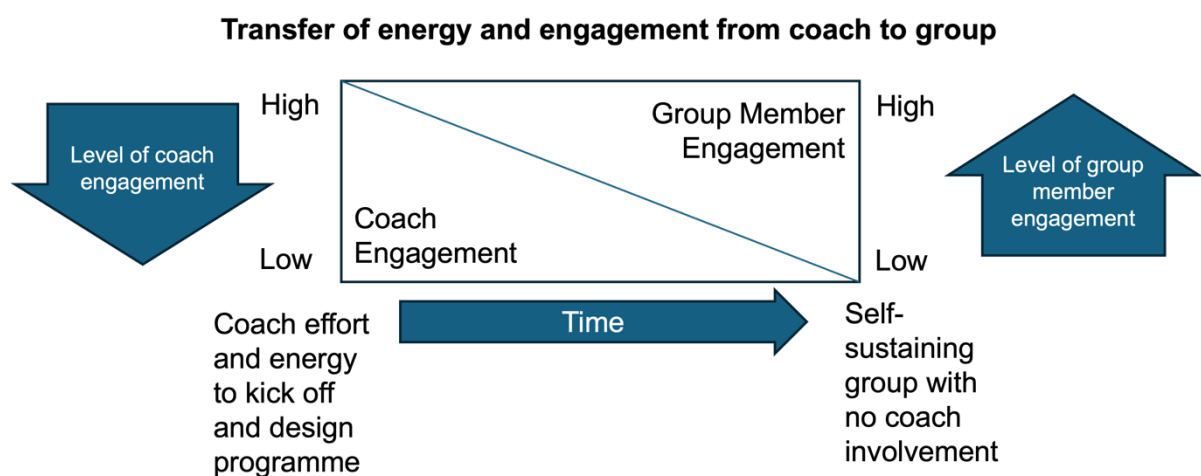


Figure 5.4: Transfer of energy and engagement from coach to group members

Meanwhile, stepping back from the detail of delivery, there were three distinct and different ways in which I had worked on the group coaching programme. The initial task involved creating the structure of the group coaching programme, based around the common need that the group shared. In this case, a series of workshops would support an exploration of the key questions that leaders grapple with during the transition to a senior leadership position. The next level involved the design of each workshop, deciding what content and exercises would facilitate an exploration of these questions. The third and final level was what happened in the workshops themselves, between the leaders and the coach. This is where group coaching practice involved consciously cooperating with what happened between the coach and the leaders, in service of meeting the common need. This could constitute the difference between group coaching and other interventions. The top two levels were about putting in place the scaffolding to enable the group coaching to happen at the third level.

Adaptations for the second programme

It was clear from the analysis of the data during and after the workshops that the overall structure of the group coaching programme did not need changing. The feedback from the leaders had been positive, and the coaching had supported them through their transition. The one structural change made was more about changing how things were viewed. The setup of the programme had initially been focused on preparing leaders for participation in a research study. However, leaders had attributed the conference call and interviews to the group gelling and beginning to work together so quickly. Therefore I decided to include the conference call and interviews as part of the programme.

Figure 5.5 summarises the adaptations to the programme.

From Initial Programme Overview in Chapter 4			Update following delivery of the first programme
Three parts to the programme	For leaders	As a research tool	
Programme setup	To provide information to enable leaders to decide whether to join the programme	To recruit leaders, confirm consent and capture data for analysis	Include conference call to allow for personal introduction to the coach before the interview Expand purpose of the interview to include information

			gathering for coach, to support delivery, as well as build rapport
Five online three-hour workshops	To provide opportunities for support, learning and connection, through the transition to a senior leadership position	To apply and explore group coaching practice using action research	Four online three-hour workshops Include follow up notes and materials to extend thinking beyond the workshops
Programme close		To capture data for analysis to explore leader experience of the group coaching programme and how it supported their transition	

Figure 5.5: Updated overview following first programme

In terms of the detail around the design and delivery of the workshops, the meticulous nature of the analysis led to several adaptations:

Key Elements to keep

- Structure and design of the programme, and integrate conference call and interviews
- Approach based on addressing psychological needs
- Responding to survey feedback and meticulous and methodical approach to adapting the programme
- Follow-up notes and thinking templates

Key elements to develop

- Introduce goal setting earlier, pre-Workshop 1
- Identify and prepare for decision points
- Create an image of the overall programme to navigate

- Amend leadership content in Workshop 2 to be more coherent
- Plan the metaphor exercise in Workshop 3 and secure consent

Key elements to drop

- Breaking up the group, instead, everything can be discussed together

The next section presents the findings from the analysis from the data collected during the second group coaching programme.

5.5 Findings from the second group coaching programme

The second group coaching programme ran from 15th September 2022 to 22nd January 2023, with a follow-up group interview on 25th of May 2023. Figure 5.6 provides an overview of activity in the second programme.

	Conference Call	Pre 1:1	Workshops				Post 1:1	Follow up
Workshops			1	2	3	4		
Title			What is happening and how am I?	Who am I?	How to lead and relate to others	Where now and what next?		
2nd Programme	15/09/22	27/09/22 – 07/10/22	11/10/22	08/11/22	06/12/22	16/01/23	31/01/23 – 22/02/23	25/05/23
Elapsed Time between events		2 – 3 weeks	1 week	4 weeks	4 weeks	6 weeks	2 – 5 weeks	3 months
Cumulative weeks from conference call		2 – 3 weeks	3 weeks	8 weeks	12 weeks	18 weeks	20 – 25 weeks	8 months
Data Collection								
SWEMWBS		X					X	
Feedback in Workshop			X	X	X	X		
Interview Transcript		X					X	X
Fieldnotes	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Supervision Notes		X	X	X	X	X	X	
Reflections	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Figure 5.6: Overview of activity in the second group coaching programme

The data was collected and analysed in the same way as the for the first group coaching programme. The adaptations outlined in the previous section were made, and this section reports on the supplementary feedback.

Programme setup - conference call and interviews

Following the conference call, five officers expressed an interest, were interviewed, and participated in the second programme. The interview retained the same format as in the first programme.

Workshop 1 - second programme

The preparatory email included the mental wellbeing scale and a goal development template, to prompt thinking around goals. This was introduced earlier than in the first programme. Two leaders shared their goals with me, so that I could hold these and check that we were working on them. Checking took the form of raising questions in group discussions which I knew related to their area of focus, without naming them. I prepared for the delivery of the workshops by creating a detailed agenda, as before.

Having offered the leaders the choice to stay as one group or break into pairs, they chose to stay together. The group contract was more succinct, yet it covered the same topics (see appendix 17), and the goal discussion was more focused than in the first programme.

Feedback from Leaders

The feedback from the leaders in the second programme was reduced compared to that of those in the first programme. Just 14 out of a potential 20 responses were received about the workshops, compared to 19 out of 20 from the first programme. The responses were also briefer, with more references to how group coaching was supporting them, which is explored in Chapter 6. There were fewer responses about the elements of the programme and practice.

As before, one leader fed back their reflection about their physical environment.

“... next time I need to be in a safer location so that nothing affects my ability to fully commit/concentrate/contribute!”

This is significant because the setup of group coaching programmes that are exploring personal issues, such as transition, needs to raise participants' awareness that their physical environment for the online interaction can be a help, or hindrance.

As opposed to an adaptation, the only thing to consider for the next workshop was to focus on practical steps for the leaders in response to their feedback.

A summary of the impact of the adaptations from the first programme and further adaptations for the future is shown below.

Adaptations to Workshop 1 following the first programme	Impact of adaptations	Adaptations for the next workshop	Adaptations for the future programmes
From Workshop 1: Offer the group the choice about how they would like to work together; as one group or in breakouts From Workshop 2: Promote goal development following the initial interview and share goals to provide focus in the workshops From Workshop 4 Check level of challenge is as required	Groups chose to stay together Goal discussion was more focused from the start and two goal templates were shared before the workshop which raised my awareness of where to focus During the set up I reminded leaders to ask what they wanted from me as the coach for example levels of challenge and support	N/A	N/A

Workshop 2 – second programme

As before, preparation for the second workshop involved the leaders thinking about how they had arrived at this point in their career, so that they could share it with everyone else in the group.

Differences concerned sharing additional content for leaders at this earlier stage. For example, a programme navigator was shared, in response to leader feedback on the first programme, to recap what had happened and to share what was ahead. There was also an image that consolidated the goals that the leaders had revealed within the group and in the one-to-one interview. These were shared to confirm that everything the leaders wanted to focus on was covered and to provide a focus for our discussions. Recognising that leadership is a contested concept, I also disclosed my perspective on leadership, as that influenced the content input I was sharing. This served to prepare leaders to choose what it means for them, personally, to lead, and for development of their vision of the leader to be.

In the spirit of consciously cooperating with what came up, when one leader raised a specific challenge that they were facing, during the check-in, we chose to explore this later as a group. The issue related to a struggle managing upwards. In response to feedback requesting practical steps to aid transition, my approach was to ask the group what more would be useful, whenever the opportunity arose.

Feedback from leaders

One respondent reflected upon the contradiction of not wanting to spend time hearing stories from others, yet finding it useful:

"I would say less background on each other however I have learnt things I probably would not have considered so perhaps that's the point!"

This highlights one of the paradoxes in group coaching, and could extend to working with others generally. There may be an impatience to move on to a task, however, that can cause participants to miss the richness of hearing something new.

There were no adaptations to be made for the next workshop, and the impact of previous adaptations is shown below.

Adaptations to Workshop 2 following the first programme	Impact of adaptations	Adaptations for the next workshop	Adaptations for future programmes
From Workshop 1 on first programme: Include a recap of what we covered last time From Workshop 2 on the first programme: Create structure around leadership discussion, include what my perspective is based upon and that there are many other ways of looking at it Create time to focus on development of leader to be vision	Recap from last time included summary of goals and programme navigator. No specific feedback was received but it did provide a focus for the discussions There was more clarity in the discussion around leadership. Leaders subsequently referred to the typology of problems model that had been shared.	N/A	N/A

Workshop 3 – second programme

A chaotic start, based on an incorrect start time in an email, was reflected during the check-in, through how the leaders were experiencing the organisation. Structural changes had been announced, which caused leaders to feel unsettled and uncertain of their place. Once everyone had arrived and checked in, I ran the breathing exercise, and it was received positively.

Two slight changes were made to the running of the third workshop. The first was the use of the *Leader To Be* and *Shifting Relations* thinking templates as inputs to the workshop. This was based on feedback that leaders liked the structure and organisation, and knowing what was going to

happen. One leader had shared these with me beforehand, and we had exchanged comments which they found useful. There was little energy to explore the templates further in the workshops, reinforcing that they are provided for discretionary use of the leaders, only if useful.

The second change involved securing an opt in to the metaphor exercise. The exercise had evolved during the workshop last time, and every leader had seemed very supportive of it. However, I was aware that asking people to share their impressions of each other had the potential to cause harm. I judged this to be unlikely, given the way the group had already worked together, and that the benefits would outweigh the potential risk. By way of mitigation, leaders were invited to opt in to hearing what others thought of them, and this was secured through the chat function.

In preparation for the metaphor exercise, leaders worked individually to write down words that described themselves and recognised how they focused on the negative points. This is particularly relevant for leaders in transition when there can be a loss of confidence and self doubt (Kilpatrick, 2022). We began the metaphor exercise, and I intervened when one leader began describing one person after another, as I judged it more effective to hear about one person at a time. This was an example of cooperating with what was happening, yet staying focused on what we were trying to achieve. An open discussion followed about what the impressions meant for themselves as leaders and for leadership at BTP. This included some of the relational challenges that leaders were facing, and led on to a conversation about the difficulties of leading change. In response to the need for practicality, leaders were asked to share what goals they would set for themselves before the final workshop.

There were no adaptations to be made for the next workshop.

Adaptations to Workshop 3 following the first programme and in response to feedback	Impact of adaptations	Adaptations for the next workshop	Adaptations for future programmes
Include the exercise to develop a metaphor for the members of the group that would like to hear it From Workshop 2 on first programme: - Focus on how decisions are made within the group and ensure all voices are heard From feedback: - Templates to explore leaders to be and shifting relations provided before the workshops	Whilst not shared in the surveys, the metaphor exercise was well received and leaders spoke of it later in the programme and their interviews. Securing an opt in to the metaphor exercise aligned with an ethical coaching approach Providing the templates beforehand enabled one leader to put in thinking before the workshop	N/A	Introduce different types and contract with group about how to make decisions: planned, process, in the moment, and personal decisions

Workshop 4 - second programme

The final workshop's date and time were changed to accommodate one of the leaders, and it was the first to be delivered in the afternoon. The only change between this workshop and the one in the first programme was a focus on progress towards goals that the leaders had committed to at the end of the third workshop. Not all the leaders had remembered to bring along an artefact, so they drew upon the images described in the metaphors in Workshop 3. A visual representation of what the leaders brought along or described can be seen in figure 5.7.



Figure 5.7: Image of the artefacts from Workshop 4 (2nd programme)

Three of the leaders collated images of the metaphors that had been used to describe them. One leader used the image of a float, to reflect not worrying about letting things go. Another was resourced by thinking about a cooking implement that their relative used, which gave them strength. The wheel recognises that you cannot stay stagnant, and that life is about moving, changing, adapting and reframing thinking.

Feedback from Leaders

There was an expression of gratitude at the end of the workshop, but there was no specific feedback about what had worked well or could have been better. Themes picked up in the surveys reinforced the sense of gratitude and value. However, one leader felt that their need for practicality had not been met.

*"I would like more detail/time on practical elements against experience.
Both are useful but perhaps weighted too heavily on the latter."*

This recognises the different views that leaders will have on the same activity, and that the aim must be to provide many different activities to meet the needs of a range of preferences.

Follow up - second programme

After the workshop, leaders were invited to complete a survey for the whole programme, as well as the workshop. One-to-one interviews were also conducted with each of the leaders. As before, these interviews were used for research purposes, to explore what was different for leaders as a result of the workshops, and how they had experienced group coaching. In place of a longer-term follow-up one-to-one interview, this group chose to meet together four months after the workshops had finished.

Feedback from Leaders

All three leaders that replied to the programme survey said they would recommend group coaching for leaders to support their transition. There was a specific reference to the benefit of the 'cross coaching' that they gave each other, which is at the heart of group coaching. One leader also explained why they felt that workshops in the morning were better:

"Format of the session worked best in the morning, as it captured us at our best - with energy and less 'baggage' from the day's work"

This insight is valuable for scheduling purposes.

Comments relating to the programme in the follow-up group interview aligned with the feedback following the first programme in terms of the size and makeup of the group, and the length of the workshops. The group was small enough that they could hear from each other and there was a sense that they were like-minded and slightly different, yet with the same kinds of *"fears or experiences"*. This reinforces the way in which being together had normalised the challenges associated with transition. As in the first programme, the one-to-one interview and the pack of information were found to be useful, and the group felt trusted when they created their group contract and could choose how they wanted to work together. Staying as one group, as opposed to breaking into smaller groups helped them to get to know each other more quickly. One leader commented that

they knew each other well enough, but not too well to feel uncomfortable sharing vulnerabilities. There was also agreement that having an external coach helped, as I was impartial and unaware of any politics. Both of these comments have implications for how group coaching is run in organisations. Who runs the group coaching and how the groups are made up both need careful consideration.

Use of the wellbeing survey

The wellbeing survey was introduced as a potential measure for the programme, and to raise awareness for leaders in response to the transition question, 'How am I?' Completion and sharing of the survey were optional. Eight of a possible ten leaders shared their survey responses before and after the group coaching. However, the recommendation from the survey provider is to have before and after data for at least 30 clients in order to measure an intervention. This very small number of responses meant that the scores could only provide an indication of wellbeing. In the event, the changes in scores were negligible. The results and narrative of this are presented in appendix 18.

5.6 Comparison between the two programmes

Once the data from the second group coaching programme had been analysed in the same way as the first, a comparison was made between the two programmes. The data from both programmes was summarised, and I looked for similarities and differences between each programme. The summaries were based on questions, for example, why leaders joined, how they experienced group coaching, and what they got out of the group coaching programme.

A comparison of the findings relating to the structure, design and delivery of the programmes is presented for each workshop.

Workshop 1. How am I and what is happening?

Both groups of leaders referenced the willingness within the group to share openly and honestly in the first workshops, and how valuable it was to hear from each other. There was also a recognition that leaders within each group shared similar challenges. They reported having the chance to reflect upon and clarify goals, as well as to find clarity and focus on what matters. Looking ahead to the next workshop, both groups of leaders were looking for the groups to stay as one, without smaller breakout groups, as they valued hearing everything from everyone. There were also references to reducing introductions to move to discussions and work on goals. This evidences the paradox associated with much group work, an impatience to focus on progress as opposed to gathering richness from stories that could be valuable.

Workshop 2. Who am I and what does it mean to be a senior leader?

Leaders in both the first and second programmes described how empowering it was to share their own journey as leaders and to hear from others. They referred to it being reassuring, reinvigorating and motivating. They enjoyed sharing their stories, gained deeper understanding of each other, and changed their perspectives on others. One officer reported feeling relaxed and comfortable enough to share their vulnerabilities without fear of judgement, and a staff leader found that the questions allowed them to dig deep for better understanding. Tips picked up during the conversations could be applied immediately, for example to help leaders prioritise tasks and manage upwards.

Workshop 3. How to lead and relate to others?

The third workshop was designed to build on the relationships that had been evolving within the group, and to use them to support development. This served to normalise the challenges that they were experiencing in transition, specifically the emotional and psychological difficulties associated with leading through brand and behaviours. A staff leader in the first programme reported recognising the need for self-compassion, and another, the impact of the past on how they lead. Both groups reported finding it powerful to hear how they came across to others, and that they took strength and

confidence from it. They also acknowledged the kind, compassionate and complementary ways that this feedback was delivered.

With an awareness that the next workshop would be the last, the focus in the survey responses from staff was on keeping what was working in terms of pace, interaction, covering a lot of ground, making links to what has gone before, and revisiting goals. Officers had valued discussions around managing change, finding the practical advice useful.

Workshop 4. Where am I now and what next?

The fourth and final workshop was designed to handle the separation of the group and what leaders needed to focus on moving forward. Leaders in both cycles shared how the final workshop helped them to consolidate and cement their learning. Leaders were leaving with an understanding of themselves as leaders and the challenges that lay ahead, and with tools to help them. One staff leader remarked on the value of hearing their own thoughts played back to them, and another, on how it had helped their own coaching practice. Officers referenced the benefit of peer coaching and being able to develop their own models to take forward.

Summary of comparison

From a practice point of view, the first and second programmes were very similar. The structure, design and delivery were well received. In addition to the planned content of the workshops, a review of the material sent out after the workshops, based on what had come up in conversation during the workshops, shows that seven topics were covered in both programmes. Common topics are highlighted in bold in figure 5.8. These findings demonstrate that the structure, design and delivery of the programme worked well for leaders in both populations. In terms of the populations themselves, there was more of a focus on procedures and process amongst the officers in the second programme.

	First programme	Second programme
Workshop 1	Self-care Resilience	Thinking environment Motivation STOP tool Imposter syndrome Confidence in transition Habits
Workshop 2	Transactional analysis Typology of problems Time management	Managing upwards interactions Being with the way things are Pain to power vocabulary Situational leadership Typology of problems
Workshop 3	Authenticity Imposter syndrome Motivation STOP tool	Change management Resilience
Workshop 4	Thinking environment Supervision model	Time management

Figure 5.8: List of topics covered in follow-up notes

5.7 Summary of findings and group coaching framework

The findings in this chapter partially address the aim of developing a theoretical and practical framework to inform group coaching practice. In this final section of the chapter, a summary of the key findings will be presented, concluding with the presentation of a framework for group coaching. The findings were based on multiple sources of data, collected through two sequential group coaching programmes. Participants were senior leaders within British Transport Police. The first cohort were staff members with functional responsibilities in HR and finance. The second cohort were officers with operational responsibilities. The data was analysed in a comprehensive and meticulous way. Every comment relating to the structure, design and delivery of the programme was itemised and categorised, to identify adaptations that would make it more effective.

The programme had strong empirical, theoretical and practical foundations, which explains why the only structural change involved repurposing events in the setup. Rather than being primarily part of the research study, the conference call, originally for recruitment, and the interview, originally for data collection, were recognised as integral and vital preparation for leaders and coach. The length and cadence of the workshops were found to have provided leaders with space to work with ease, and to use the time between them to develop and apply their thinking. The focus and exercises within the workshops prompted the leaders to interact and explore issues that were relevant to their transition. The approach to and pace of the coaching matched the leaders' needs. The analysis of the data clarified that the structure of the programme created the scaffolding within which the design and content of the workshops could be organised. The flexible approach within the workshops meant that group coaching was relevant and responsive to the organic process of growth and development within the group.

There were aspects of the design and delivery at a detailed level that could be, and were, improved after the first programme. These aspects included bringing goal setting forward, and creating more structure to the leadership session in Workshop 2 and the metaphor exercise in Workshop 3. Follow-up notes after the workshops were continued. The one thing that didn't work was breaking the group into smaller groups for discussions.

Based on the findings in this chapter, a group coaching framework has been created to show what happens, when, and who is involved in setting up a group coaching programme (see figure 5.9). Reading down from the left, the framework recognises the people involved in group coaching, and across the top, the chronological order of events. The setup, workshops and follow up align with the key elements of the initial group coaching programme. The framework breaks down the events and involvement. Further detail behind how the workshops evolved has been summarised in appendix 19 and a consolidation of the learning in appendix 20.

Group Coaching Framework

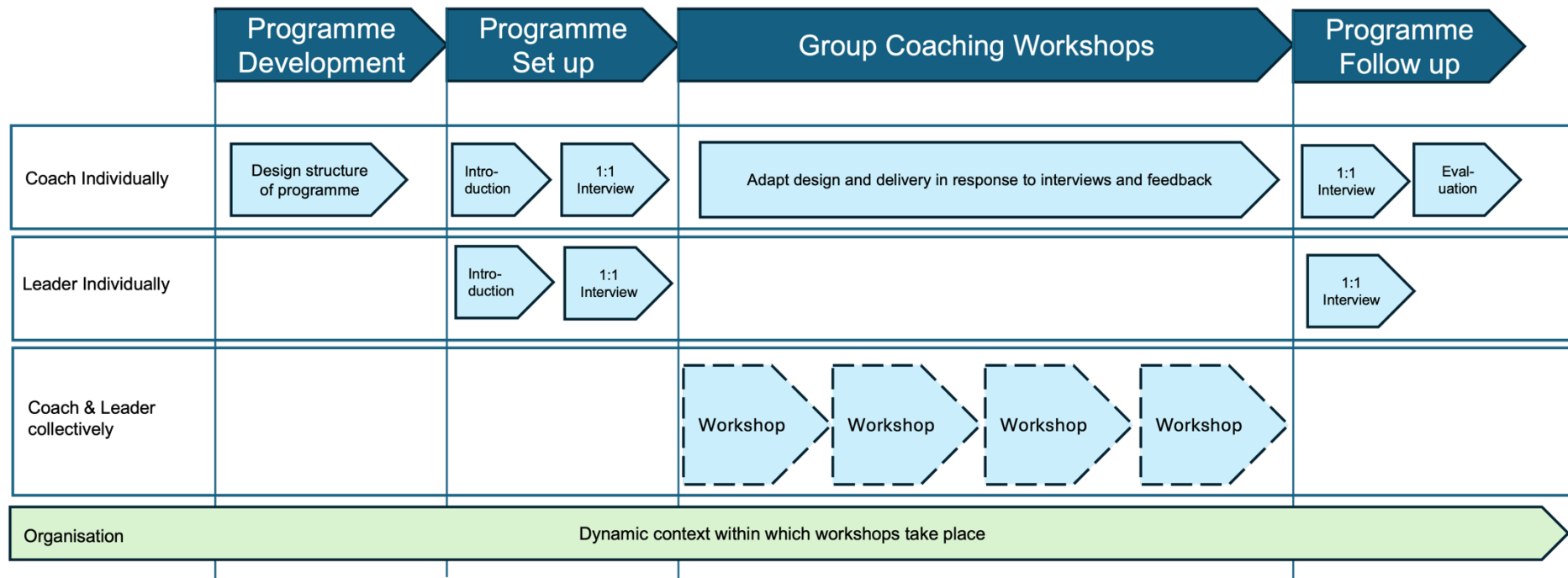


Figure 5.9: Initial group coaching framework

In an attempt to understand what happened for me as the coach during the workshops, I reviewed all the notes that I took during the workshops. These included what I recorded that I felt had gone well, what could have been better, any critical moments, what I was curious about, and any other reflections. These revealed the breadth of what I was working on, as a coach, during the workshops. For example, whether and how the technology worked, how I closed an exercise or discussion, whether and how I followed up comments, and how I felt. These provide examples of how I was consciously cooperating with what happened in the group. To investigate this further, I reviewed the moments that I deemed to be critical, and identified three areas of focus: effectiveness, observing dynamics, and responses.

A categorised list of critical moments is shown in the table in figure 5.10. Each critical moment is recorded, with which workshop it related to and where I felt my focus lay.

Critical moments	When	Focus
Looking to check going okay – needing feedback early on	MC2GC2	Effectiveness
Wellbeing hub – contrast with coaching – what does this mean for your development?	MC1GC3	Effectiveness
Felt lost leadership discussion – need for specific questions at key moments	MC1GC2	Effectiveness
Noticing the team were late to join the call	MC1GC4	Effectiveness
My frustration with the group not committing to meet sooner	MC2GC4	Effectiveness
No work on LTB visions	MC2GC3	Effectiveness
Tech challenge	MC2GC3	Effectiveness
No time to hear from each other about each other – as in reflect upon what they have heard	MC2GC2	Effectiveness
Incorrect start time	MC2GC3	Effectiveness
Not exploring difference between how they describe themselves and how others describe them	MC2GC3	Effectiveness
Meeting M1's need to travel	MC2GC4	Observing Dynamics
When F2 shared what they had noticed about F1 smiling and the shift in energy	MC1GC4	Observing Dynamics
When F2 asked 'If he trusts you, why don't you?'	MC2GC1	Observing Dynamics
Offering choice to use the 10 mins	MC1GC4	Response

Heartfelt presentation from M2 – Didn't want anything from the group, I asked could we appreciate what heard, I was in tears, as were others.	MC1GC4	Response
Offered my vulnerability in not knowing how to end – went with what seemed appropriate	MC1GC4	Response
Not being able to follow conversation or explore in 1:1 eg M1 what he realised when he left last role, following up F2's questions about self and leader	MC1GC2	Response
Listening to discussion about transition and leadership without adding	MC2GC1	Response
Felt like I was coaching during goal discussion, though may have been more offering ideas and suggestions	MC2GC1	Response
Impact of not being in a great place. Picking up on the very real challenges of making change outside session (F2) and offered context to normalise	MC1GC3	Response
Whilst people share stories I am looking for connections/link and patterns instead of being curious. EG F1 sharing need to be well rounded	MC2GC2	Response
Thinking & planning whilst leaders are speaking	MC2GC3	Response
Not asking how people experience me – it's all about them	MC1GC3	Response
Going with discussion about APC – felt it was relevant but not chasing down engagement	MC1GC2	Response
M2 raised question about authenticity that the group responded to. I summarised what I had heard in their words – honestly, meeting own needs and what others need	MC1GC4	Response

Figure 5.10: Table showing critical moments

Some of the moments show how I was focused on how effective the workshops were or might not be. These included moments when we started slightly later, we encountered technical challenges, or I was looking for feedback. Another focus was the interactions and dynamics within the group. These included when leaders asked questions of each other or did something that affected the energy of the group. The final focus was on my response to what was happening. I was aware of when I had to make a choice to follow up a comment that had been made, or to offer an input, or to sit back and let the group conversations continue. I was also aware of where my thoughts were when leaders were speaking, and how I felt. In summary, my focus as the coach was on how effectively we were meeting the need to be together, how the group were interacting, and how I was feeling, acting and thinking.

This chapter has addressed how the group coaching programme has developed and informed group coaching practice. The next chapter, Chapter 6, explores how group coaching supported leaders through their transition.

6 Findings from Action Phase 2: How Group Coaching Supported Leaders

This second chapter of findings from the action phase answers how group coaching supported leaders in transition to senior positions. It presents the findings from the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of the data collected throughout both group coaching programmes. The chapter is made up of three parts. The first part explains how the RTA was conducted once the action research was complete. The second part describes how group coaching supported leaders, through a presentation of coaching goals and outcomes. The third and final part presents the findings from the RTA. The three themes that will be explained are:

- Co-creating a safe and productive space to work in
- Many relevant inputs to work with
- Processing the inputs to resource the transition

6.1 How the data was analysed after the action research

Multiple qualitative sources of data included interview transcripts, anonymous survey responses and my own field notes and journals. These sources allowed me to explore the inner world of those of us involved in group coaching, so that I could answer the research questions. The inner world can be described as our meanings, intentions, ideas and feelings (Alvesson, 2003). The data allowed me to open a window to show evidence of inner workings (Reissner and Whittle, 2022). Thematic analysis was selected as a method, as it facilitates the identification of repeated patterns of meaning across a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Further, reflexive thematic analysis recognises the subjectivity of the researcher as an analytical resource, and the need for reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2022a). The aim of this method is to produce themes by working through a series of steps recursively, as shown in figure 6.1.

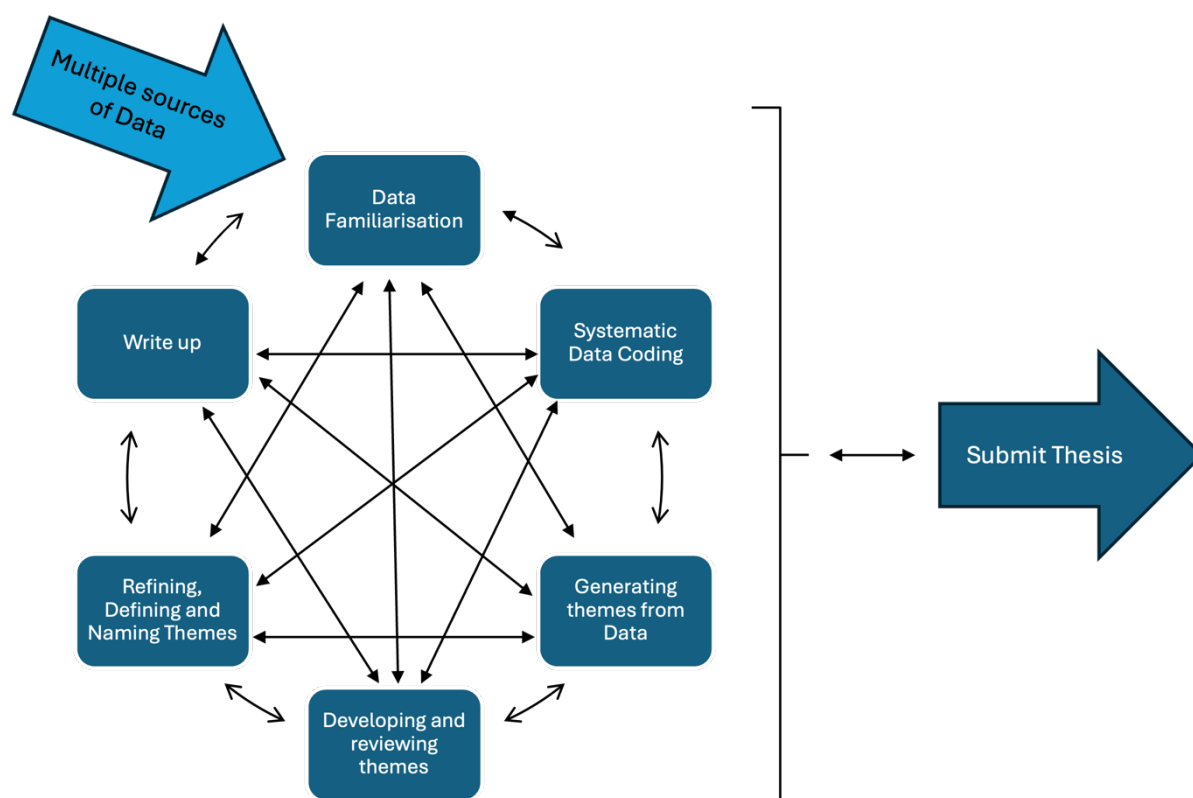


Figure 6.1: Diagram to represent the recursive nature of the steps in reflexive thematic analysis

I began the analysis by capturing my reflections upon the topic and my relationship to it. This provided a source to refer to, to explore and challenge any presuppositions that were impacting my analysis as it developed (Finlay, 2002). The next step involved the systematic coding of the data. Research methodologists disagree about what to code. Some suggest the total body, others the salient parts, and a post-modern perspective suggests that texts are partial and incomplete (Saldana, 2009). I chose to load 34 files into Nvivo, consisting of:

- 24 interview transcripts from 11 hours of interview recordings
- 4 surveys (2 surveys relating to the workshops and 2 to the whole programme)
- 2 sets of notes from 9 group coaching supervision sessions in total
- 2 sets of reflections upon pre-group coaching interviews
- 2 sets of fieldnotes captured during and immediately after the workshops

This reflected all input received from the leaders and my notes which directly related to the delivery of the group coaching programme. I chose not to include my work journal, as that included content that did not relate to the programme. This is discussed in the passage covering my role as researcher and coach in section 3.2.3.

I began coding in answer to questions such as '*what worked well?*' and '*what were the coaching goals and outcomes?*' I also coded for attributes, emotions and gerunds, to show what was going on and to holistically to grasp themes and issues (Saldana, 2009). This was an iterative process, as I identified new codes then recoded as I went along. I recorded the process in memos. These capture the coding process and choices, as well as the intuitive and spontaneous nature of the process. See appendix 20 for a screenshot of codes after the first cycle of coding.

I also recorded what I was doing and why, and my impressions of the text. For example, the survey responses seemed more personal, some were written up immediately after the workshops, and I noted deeply reflective comments that were open, honest and flowing. Generally, the responses from the officers in the second programme were shorter and not as reflective as those of the staff on the first programme.

Once the first round of coding was complete, I worked through each code to see what it contained. This helped me to familiarise myself with what was in each one, and it kicked off my thinking about codes for the second cycle of coding and about potential themes. I moved data into different or new categories and picked up anything I missed in the transcripts. I also created expansion notes, which broke down the codes into more detail so that I could make sense of them. For example, coaching outcomes were categorised by transition challenge, knowledge or skills.

Where the first coding cycle had been mainly descriptive, the purpose of the second cycle was to explore the intersectionality within the codes. I created a second project in Nvivo with same 34 documents. As an example of intersectionality, where I recorded coaching goals and outcomes separately in the first cycle, I coded goals and outcomes that shared a common theme, such as engaging with others, under the same code. See appendix 21 for a screenshot of the Nvivo codes after the 2nd cycle of coding. I reviewed the second cycle in the same way as the first. Working

through each code, I reviewed the content, recoded as necessary, and summarised or wrote up further notes expanding what was in the code.

Once this was complete, I started to generate and develop themes by creating a visual representation of what I took from a review of the codes generated during the second cycle. The first one centred around the concept of space (see figure 6.2). I recognised space during the coding, and it was at the core of how coaching supports leaders in transition, based on the findings from the preparatory phase of the study.

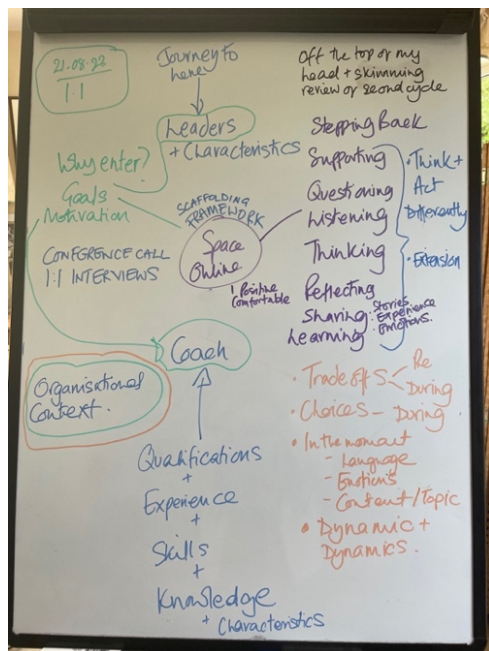


Figure 6.2: Visual representation of space theme

The representation seemed more descriptive, so I attempted to generate three themes (Saldana, 2009). This was the basis for the development of the key themes. Theme development involved gathering data under the themes, conversations with others, and reading around the field, e.g. leadership. This enabled me to move from the detail to the bigger picture. I used tables in Microsoft Word, post-it notes and whiteboards to summarise the data and develop each theme.

Once these had been developed, I created a concept map to summarise the initial themes and the relationship between them.

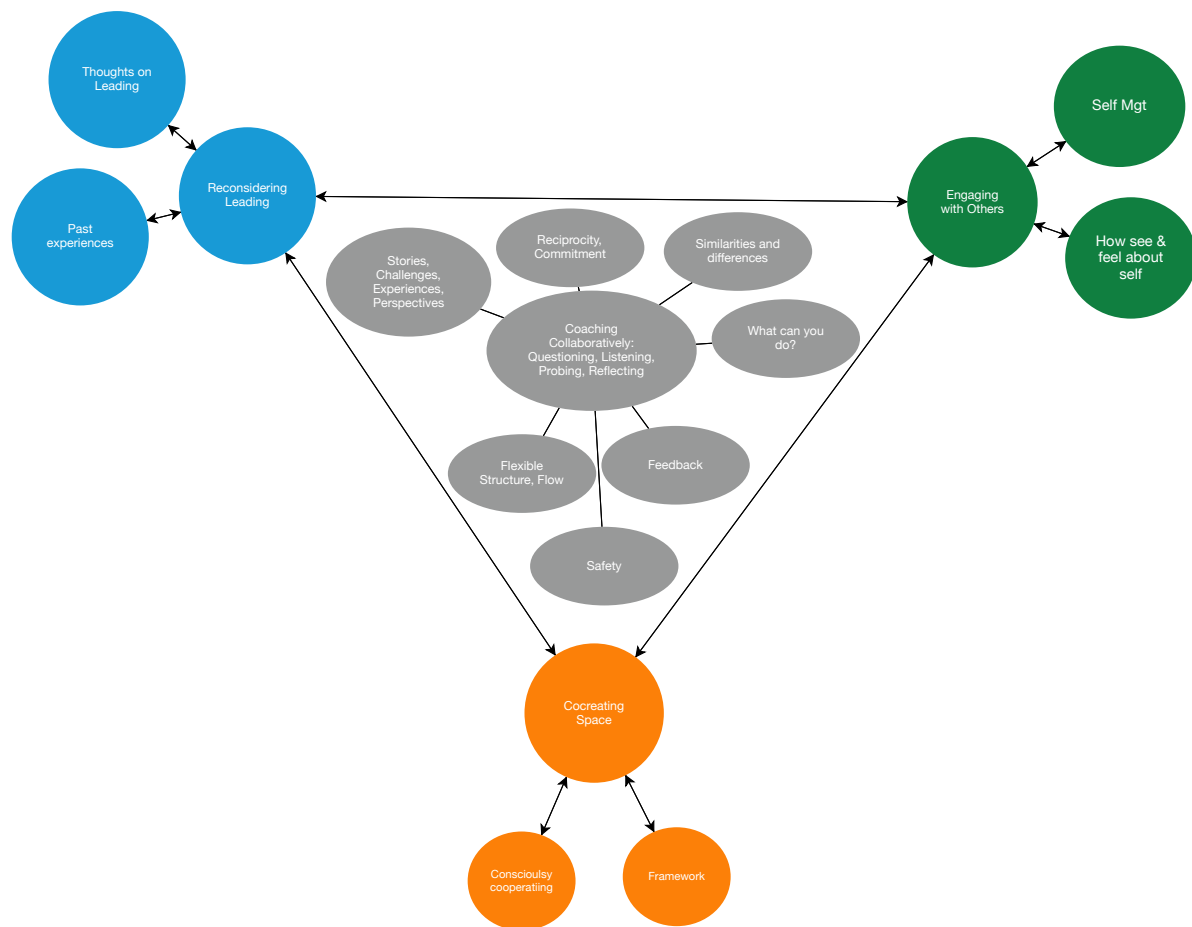


Figure 6.3: Concept map of initial themes and relationships between them

The iterative process continued, as themes continued to be refined, defined and named throughout the writeup. There was a shift along the spectrum, away from descriptive themes and towards more interpretive ones (Braun and Clarke, 2022b). This uncovered a deeper understanding of what was happening during group coaching.

6.2 How group coaching supported leaders: coaching goals and outcomes

Exploring how group coaching supported leaders involved an examination of both what was different for leaders following group coaching, and what happened during group coaching to make the difference possible. This section of the chapter presents what leaders described as different, that they were attributing to group coaching, and which supported their transition to senior leadership positions. For the purpose of this research, support through transition is defined as anything that helped leaders to address the challenges they were facing. The assessment of support is explored through an examination of why leaders joined the group coaching programme, followed by what they took away from it. It will describe the following:

- What leaders wanted to get out of group coaching (coaching goals)
- What difference group coaching made for leaders in transition (coaching outcomes)

6.2.1 What leaders wanted to get out of group coaching (coaching goals)

The term coaching goals has been used to capture what leaders hoped to get out of participating in the group coaching programme. Data relating to why leaders joined the group coaching programme was collected during the pre-group coaching interviews and in the first workshop of each programme. Leaders shared what they enjoyed and found challenging about senior leadership, and what they hoped would be different after group coaching. We explored coaching goals during the workshops, and three leaders shared their thoughts in a template designed to explore their thinking around their personal coaching goals.

The data has been summarised and presented as coaching goals in a table in figure 6.4. The goals have been categorised in response to the key questions that leaders explored through coaching for this transition. These are how leaders see themselves, how they engage with others, and how to lead in a senior position. One additional category includes goals that relate to the transition process and the leader's context.

Categorisation of goal	First programme	Second programme
How leader sees themselves: Am I good enough? What do I bring and need to develop? How am I?	• Confidence • Develop self-belief and ownership within self • Trust self • Manage anxiety, not overpreparing	• Learn about self • Reassurance • Improve confidence & self-belief • Address self-doubts and impostor syndrome • How to feel more confident
How to lead in a senior position? What do I need to do?	• How to set boundaries/look after wellbeing, take control of calendar • What unknown skills could help • Learn about intentional leadership • Understand role as senior leader • How to be happier to step up • Resilience	• How to be a visionary leader • Looking for procedure/structure/steps to go through, how to deal with things • Desire to copy what has been learnt • How to be less reactive • Have an approach to being more effective • Be better at time management • Practical tools to stay strategic • How to be a team/group coach • To enjoy now • How to lead without being an expert • How to contribute when joining meeting at last minute • How to stop interfering • Learn about senior leadership
How to relate to and engage with others?	• Trust and understand others	• How to lead dispersed teams • How to manage upwards • How to influence others • How to influence decision making • How to raise profile • How to manage and motivate others • How to manage how seen by others
Transition and context	• Step away from the day job • Future thinking • Reinvigorate/embolden to face challenges • Find group support • Learn about transitions for the future	• How to get to next level • Find motivation to progress • Build evidence for promotion • Understand nitty gritty of role • Decide about next level • Set short & long-term goals

Figure 6.4: Table to show coaching goals across first and second programmes

Examples of goals around how leaders saw themselves included getting a general confidence boost and feeling more confident in the way they conducted themselves:

"give me a boost of confidence." (Tracey).

"I still get a bit anxious ... over preparing ... I want to get to point where I'm just comfortable just saying it" (Olena).

In response to the many and often competing demands, there was an interest in working on time management:

"... time management .. how I could do it better.. looking at priorities.. having a process or a structure ..you can manage without having to think have I done everything in the right timeframe?" (Terry).

Leaders on the second programme were generally more focused on practicalities, and showed a desire to learn processes and how to structure what they were doing in role. They were also more focused on how to engage, specifically how to influence and manage up and down:

"... what I can do to .. focus on that strategic side of it, not drop down and, .. revert to the positions I've done in the past" (Tom).

"... a tangible measure for me is around that ability to communicate to [a] higher audience" (Tilly).

Goals outside the scope of the model related to the individual context for the leader. For example, one staff leader in the first programme was preparing to lead change:

"...to ... steel myself up again, and work with colleagues to be able to ... reinvigorate for ... the next batch of change"

An officer in the second cycle was focused on moving up to the next rank:

"... hoping that .. these sessions will help me to .. pan out my goals..long term and short term .. because at the moment I am struggling to .. get myself motivated." (Tracey).

6.2.2 What difference group coaching made for leaders (coaching outcomes)

Coaching outcomes are defined as what was different for leaders after participation in the group coaching programme. This included what they had learnt and how they were applying their learning within the workplace. Data was collected during the workshops, through the anonymous online surveys after each workshop and the programme itself, as well as in the post-group coaching interview and follow-up workshop. The group coaching outcomes have been summarised and are presented in figure 6.5 in table form. As with the coaching goals, they have been categorised by the questions upon which the group coaching programme was based. Based on adapting to thrive, further categorisation shows what has been kept, dropped and developed. Similar outcomes have been grouped to help sense making.

Categorisation of goal	Coaching outcome and source
How leader sees themselves: Am I good enough? What do I bring and need to develop? How am I?	Keep: - Recognition of self as senior leader (Survey) - Know worth, broader view of what bringing to organisation (OKSANA) - See role enablers play in the organisation (OKSANA) - Recognise what I have achieved (TAARIQ) - Awareness of strengths (workshop survey MC1GC4) build on strengths (TAARIQ) Drop: - Don't mimic anymore – okay to be me (OLENA) - Not doubting self, e.g. decision making under pressure (TRACEY) Develop: - Developing Emotional Resilience (Survey) More resilient and cope in self to be there for others (OLLIE) - Bringing whole self (OKSANA) How I show up (Survey) - More confident in decision making (OLENA) A lot more confident (OSCAR) Have confidence I am good enough (OSCAR) more confidence in self after hearing about others vulnerability (TAARIQ) Gave me more confidence (TERRY) Made progress in confidence (TILLY) Took confidence from others descriptions (TRACEY) - Less stressed (OLENA) more calm, keep in proportion, (OLLIE) More relaxed about what I do instead of focused on getting it wrong (TAARIQ) Descriptions brought calm and validation (TRACEY) - More positive and open (OSCAR) - More aware of thoughts and emotions (OLLIE) - Feel good about what I do (TAARIQ) Building reputation I want to create (ODETTE) - More comfortable about insecurities (TOM) all feel same with doubts and insecurities (TRACEY) Aim for healthy level of self-criticism (OSCAR) Healthy not to dwell on doubts as other have them and are achieving (TAARIQ) Everyone has imposter syndrome, push through (TAARIQF) - More comfortable about not knowing (TOM) - Less afraid of getting it wrong (TOM) I can learn and ask (TAARIQ) - Ready and know what it takes – have shoes on, not moulded yet (OKSANA) - Being more strategic, influencing and persuading (TILLY)
How to lead in a senior position?	Drop: - Not panicking (TAARIQ-F) Develop:

	- Being more focused (Survey) Organise self better (OLLIE) Planning more (TAARIQ) Challenge what is really necessary (TAARIQ) More focused (OLLIE) (TAARIQ) better time management (workshop survey MC1GC4) Approaches to address time management challenge (workshop survey MC2GC4) Need to manage time to address pace of change (OLENA) - Challenge and notice how leading – self-care, stepping back (OLENA) Self-care (Survey) Importance of looking after yourself to help others (OSCAR-F) need for self-compassion (workshop survey MC1GC4) Asking myself how I am (survey) - More reflection (OLLIE) More thoughtful and taking time to think (OSCAR) STOP tool (Survey) Less reactive, more directed and focused (Survey) More mature in role - how to respond & interact (ODETTE) Step back and organise thoughts (OSCAR) Step back and think before acting (OSCAR-F) Breathing helps think about what doing (TAARIQF) Self-reflection so don't default to getting too involved (TOM-F) - Applying breathing & mindfulness techniques (OSCAR-F) Doing breathing exercises (TAARIQ-F) - Claiming space and being intentional, experimenting (OKSANA) - Different ways to address issues and take flexible focused approach (survey)
How to relate to others?	Drop: - Less interfering (TOM) Accepting you might not get what you want but probably a good thing in long term (TOM-F) Develop - Have more empathy (OSCAR-F) (TERRY) Can relate to others all have same wants and needs (ODETTE) Understanding of others (TERRY) Listening (OLENA) and hearing perspectives of others wide-eyed empathy (OLLIE) empathy for others (workshop survey MC1GC4) slow down talking and not afraid of pauses to improve impact on others (TRACEY-F) - Have confidence to showcase what I am doing eg with SLT (ODETTE) More confidence to speak my mind eg on training course (TOM) - Helps with mentoring more junior staff (ODETTE) - Networking with broader purpose (OKSANA) - Leader as opposed to practitioner through empowerment (OLENA) Delegating & coordinating eg annual leave (TERRY) Planning and delegating more (TOM) Trusting (OLENA) - Bringing experience and perspective as sounding board (OLLIE) Storytelling (OLLIE) - Think about what I am doing eg how sending email will impact others (OSCAR-F) Communicating expectations (TERRY) Speaking informally to

	people (TOM) Importance of words used/language (OSCAR-F) Conscious effort to consider others in decisions and actions (TERRY) - Can speak to higher authorities without questioning whether good enough (OSCAR) Reduced fear of managing upwards as challenge has been normalised (TILLY) Managing upwards, pushing back & rationalising when receive tasks (TERRY) Managing upwards through phrasing (TOM) Use of Transactional analysis (Survey) Upwards management, feel more confident with line manager (TILLY) Better at managing upwards (TERRY) - More likely to have peer to peer discussions as sounding board (TILLY) - How to use teams to set objectives (workshop survey MC2GC4) Using ideas for own coaching practice eg developing contract (OLLIE) incorporating what we did into team coaching practice (OLENA) Brought in checking-in and checking out as part of conversation, sets agenda and see what need to delve in to (TERRY)
Transition and context	Learnt about: - The process of transition (Survey) Psychological and emotional aspects of transition (Workshop survey MC1GC3) what the process of transition is about (Workshop survey MC1GC3) Normalise challenges & obstacles of transition (Survey) others going through the same thing (OSCAR) Not alone, all deserve to be here (TERRY) Normalise experience of transition to senior position (workshop survey) Shared challenges [normalise] (TOM-F) Need to drop things (OSCAR) - Being a senior leader (survey) More informed about what leadership looks like (OLENA) learnt a lot about leadership (OSCAR) - Circle of control (OLLIE) - Accept dips at senior level and be who you want to be (TERRY) - Impact of environment on behaviours and interactions with people (workshop survey MC1GC3) - More about what coaching can do to manage wellbeing and anxiety (TILLY-F) Personal Development: - Goal setting (Survey) - Reinvigorated ambition (survey) - Found focus for development (survey) - Recognise on development journey (survey) Iterative nature of development (workshop survey MC2GC3) - Gathering evidence to move to next step (TRACEY) Practically thinking about next steps (TRACEY) - Moved into new role (OSCAR-F) have taken on new roles eg national (TAARIQ) - Helped improve motivation to progress (TRACEY-F)

	- Heard about other challenges you wouldn't have thought of to consider as well (TOM-F) How they feel: - Content and restored (survey) - Reassured (survey) - Feel reinvigorated, motivated and more aware of how showing up (workshop survey MC1GC4) - Positive mindset (survey) - Helpful to have supportive group (TILLY-F) How they think: - Open minded to think differently (Survey) Expands think when meet new people across the business (survey) Gaining different perspectives compared to 1:1 coaching (survey) Brought perspective (TILLY) - Mindset shift to can (OLLIE) - Unseen stuff improves capability (OKSANA) - Making mistakes is human and you need to learn from them (OSCAR) - Kintsugi – cracks make you beautiful (OSCAR) - Difference an asset not a liability (OSCAR) - Forced to think about challenges instead of react to them (TOM) For the organisation: - Promotes modern and transformation approach to leadership in BTP - Reassurance to see inspiring and motivated leaders - Politics of policing (TAARIQ)
<i>'F' after the name denotes data collected during the follow up interviews</i>	

Figure 6.5: Table to show coaching outcomes

Taken together, the tables in figures 6.4 and 6.5 show the how group coaching supported leaders in terms of what was different for them before, during and after participation in the programme. The next section will show how this was achieved through group coaching, and direct quotations are provided to evidence of these changes.

6.3 What happened during group coaching to support leaders

The rest of this chapter explores what happened during group coaching to support leaders through their transition. Three main themes from the RTA were identified, and are shown in the table in figure 6.6, along with their definitions and sub-themes. These themes are interrelated and build upon each other.

Theme	Definition	Sub-themes
Co-creating a safe and productive space to work in	How the elements of the framework, the coach and the leaders worked together, to provide a safe and productive space to work in. <i>Where</i> the work took place, i.e. the environment that was created.	○ Surfacing Issues ○ Evolution of space ○ False attribution to coach
Many relevant inputs to work with	How the design of the framework and the space created opportunities for the coach and leaders to share relevant inputs to work on. What happened <i>between</i> everyone.	○ Gradual, organic and generative nature of inputs ○ Breadth of inputs generated ○ Generation through reciprocity ○ Potential limits on inputs
Processing the inputs to resource the transition	How the space led to the inputs that were processed by the leaders to resource their transition to become senior leaders. What happened <i>within</i> the leaders.	○ Generating thinking through questioning and listening ○ Thinking resources leaders

Figure 6.6: Theme summary table

6.3.1 Co-creating a safe and productive space to work in

The findings from the preparatory phase of research suggested that coaching leaders through transition involved creating space for leaders to explore their thoughts and feelings. The initial cycle of coding was open and descriptive. I was not specifically looking for space, though I recognised the pattern and explored it in the second cycle of coding. For the purpose of this analysis, space relates to the transitional space described by Dubouloy as a reassuring environment (2004) which facilitates openness and experimentation with others (Ibarra, 2002). The existence of such a safe space was described by leaders on both programmes and they explained how it impacted them:

“...I feel like I'm in a safe environment...I could share my own experience without fear of being judged” (Oscar).

“I felt at ease... I was bit wary about revealing stuff to people. But I didn't feel that at all. I felt quite comfortable and I was quite happy to talk about anything and everything. And I'm quite ...a closed person, I'm not a very sharey person” (Terry).

Once the high-level theme of space had been generated, the data was further explored, and, through an iterative cycle of writing up, revisiting, then reviewing the data, I generated three sub-themes. I saw in the data that the space could be shown to have been co-created during the early part of the group coaching programme as issues were surfaced, that it evolved over time, and that it was falsely attributed to the coach. The following sub-themes will now be explained:

- Surfacing issues
- Evolution of space
- False attribution to coach

Sub-theme: Surfacing Issues

As the programme was applied and explored, data from the leaders and coach showed how the conference call and pre-group coaching interview contributed to the group working together. This section will explore how this was achieved by enabling leaders to think about what it would mean to join the group coaching programme. Specifically, why they would join and what joining could mean for them. This served the dual purpose of meeting their psychological needs for inclusion, and laying the foundations for how the leaders did and did not want to work together. Originally designed as part of the research study, these initial events served to build commitment by giving the leaders the opportunity to consider what participation could involve.

“I think this preparation is critical as it allows any issues to surface on [a] 1 to 1 basis and be discussed before the group sessions” (first programme survey).

Conference call kickstarted surfacing issues

The online conference call kickstarted thinking for leaders about their personal transition into senior leadership, and to consider whether joining the group coaching programme could be useful for them. The evidence that this did kickstart thinking about the transition into senior leadership came from one leader, who explained that she had been thinking about intentional leadership since the call, and agreed that it had been a key influence on her decision to participate:

“I’ll go back to the words used in the original session. I will be more intentional as a leader, and [a] more intentional leader .. in using group coaching” (Oksana).

Another went further, although he didn’t know what to expect in group coaching, he had confidence based on what he had seen in the conference call:

“... what makes me trust that it will be [a positive process] I think it’s when you explain that in our first session, and ... why ... we are doing this?” (Oscar).

My preparation notes for the conference call reminded me that I was the initial embodiment of the group, and represented its efficacy from the start (Benson, 2019). Recognising the significance of this interaction had been important, and the data shows how it contributed to motivating leaders to attend.

In recognising the value of the conference call, it is also necessary to explain that it was not vital. One member of the second cohort had not been able to join it. They were provided with the slides and the pack of information, and their interview and subsequent participation was no different to the others. Though valuable for some leaders, the data suggests that attendance on a conference call before group coaching may not be described as fundamental for participation, as long as potential participants have enough information to make an informed decision to have an interview.

Interviews surface and explore issues

Unlike the conference call, the interviews can be described as fundamental, as my interpretation shows that they served to lay the foundations for the group coaching. This was about meeting needs for inclusion and raising awareness about how the leaders wanted to work together. The psychological needs for inclusion were addressed by exploring answers to the questions ‘*why do I want to join the group?*’ and ‘*what does joining the group mean for me?*’ The first question was answered during the exploration of their experience as a senior leader, and the second, through the exploration of their thoughts on group coaching.

During the exploration of their role, leaders considered what they were enjoying and what challenges they were facing. Throughout these conversations, leaders expanded their awareness about how group coaching could be useful for them. Leaders were able to see how group coaching could support them in their unique context. Ollie recognised that the timing worked well, given the challenges he was facing, and Oksana realised that there could be additional benefits for her own coaching practice:

“... it's really probably a great opportunity in the next couple of months, because there's going to be more emerging and strands kicking off of work ... it's absolutely perfect timing..., just thinking about it” (Ollie).

“And I actually haven't thought about group coaching, and how about I might use it in my own team ‘til this conversation” (Oksana).

This was effectively beginning the coaching, as it was raising awareness for leaders about how it could help them, and it developed their motivation to attend. It also provided leaders with experience of working with me as the coach and furnished me with invaluable information about who would be in the group, in terms of their progress through transition and where their focus would be.

The second part of the interview explored the leaders’ thoughts and expectations for group coaching. Experience of coaching within both groups was mixed. Some had very limited experience of coaching and no training, whilst others were qualified practitioners and supervisors, and not everyone had found coaching successful. Only one leader on the second programme had experience

of group coaching, and that had been as part of a much larger group. This meant that group coaching was new to most people, and the interviews gave them the chance to think about what they were expecting, as well as any hopes and concerns. The hopes across both cohorts were that this would be an open and interactive space, with focused discussion, to allow learning from each other:

“An open discussion about different topics and there will be one coach that can consolidate that and bring direction to the discussion an interactive .. activity ... to learn from other people within the group ... then .. provide my own experience and my own thoughts” (Oscar).

This shows that some expectations from the start were that this would be an interactive space, guided by the coach, where discussion would be based around listening and sharing. It also suggests that people new to group coaching have a broad understanding of what it could involve.

Concerns related to how safe the space would be for the leaders, and whether it would be useful. Feeling safe related to the confidential nature of the space and being vulnerable. Confidentiality was covered, in the sense of it being part of a study, in the participant information sheet and one leader felt that that had been enough to address their concerns. However, Terry was concerned that what was said within the group, about people outside the group, would not get back to them.

“What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, and sometimes within these forums, if the group is known to each other, we might talk about people that may be familiar to other people. ” (Terry).

Based on his previous experience of group coaching, Taariq's concern related to the risks of sharing things without knowing how others would treat the information, especially when he was used to keeping his work and personal life separate:

“... from the other sessions ... it's almost like therapy. I see where you might talk about things, private things, which [have not previously been] revealed and [once they are] out there, you don't know what people will do with it ... it's a concern ... showing my vulnerability at times ... in a policing context, I kind of keep those two lives separate” (Taariq).

At its simplest level, irrespective of what people would do with whatever they heard, Oksana was concerned about the impression they could make on others:

"I don't want to cry or look a fool in front of people" (Oksana).

This comment shows how feeling safe in the group means different things to different people. In voicing their concerns during the interviews, I was aware of what would be important to people, thus could ensure that it was covered, if it wasn't brought up when we were contracting.

There were also concerns about how others could have a negative impact on how useful group coaching could be. This was either through a lack of commitment, or through their personality. Ollie described the impact if others didn't commit to the group and how that would affect cohesion:

"... what would irritate me, what ... might irritate others is people not committing to the group, you know, dropping in and out missing one session and coming into session three, because, you know, I think that will make it dysfunctional, and also breaks that sort of trust and harmony" (Ollie).

Odette shared her experience of how being in a group with a dominant personality limited her contribution.

"... there is all always that worry about the personalities ... that you get somebody in the group who is very much opposite to your particular style or your character that may try and dominate the sessions ... I've had group situations where ... it has been dominated by more vocal, more confident people. And so that that's been where ... I got a free pass ... I can just sit back while somebody else sort of talks" (Odette).

One further concern pertained to whether the goals of others could mean the coaching wasn't useful.

"... whether there are such differences in people's needs that we can't cater to them in a group coaching session. [If] other people's challenges are not like mine. And then you can get kind of down a route of actually I'm not sure if this is assisting" (Tom).

These concerns aligned with the thoughts that leaders and coaches expressed in the findings from the preparatory phase, about whether group coaching would be valuable.

Expressing concerns during the interviews served a number of different purposes. At a surface level, they expressed what could negatively affect working in the group, therefore what the coach needed to be aware of. At a deeper level, expressing these concerns would have helped the leaders to become aware of how not to behave in the group. It also served as preparation for the group contracting exercise in the first workshop, in which leaders were asked to consider what would help them work together.

That the interviews served to begin the co-creation of the space could be supported by one potential participant choosing not to join the programme following the interview. Data was not captured about why they didn't continue, so this is speculation. However, if, after receiving all the information and exploring their thinking about joining, leaders choose not to join, this becomes an informed decision. Similarly, those that do join, become part of the group, therefore involved in the co-creation of the space within it.

Surfacing issues during the conference call and interviews can be seen to co-create the space, as leaders begin to realise how they could benefit and visualise what it could be like. The leaders create motivation to attend by considering how they might benefit, which would make it productive. They also begin to set expectations for themselves and others in terms of how it could work, and how they could be safe.

Sub-theme: Evolution of the space

The previous section has shown how the early interactions with leaders began to co-create a safe and productive space to work in. My interpretation is also that this co-creation served to evolve the space during the workshops. One of the first questions that leaders were asked to consider was how they would like to work together. Based upon the interviews, as the coach, I knew that there was alignment around what the leaders were expecting, in terms of how group coaching would work, so I

wanted them all to express it together. This was variously described as contracting and setting ground rules. Tilly described how important this was, and what effect it had:

“setting out those ground rules early on is really important. .. creating that feeling of that trust and confidence in the process.. ... certainly helped for me knowing that I could be both free and open and honest. ..that was a big, quick win to creating that.. bond” (Tilly).

In the workshop survey, one respondent described how the process of exploring this together offered the double benefit of giving them a sense of ownership and promoting collaboration.

“The ground rules we all worked together provided a sense of individual and group ownership and I had a great sense of collaboration” (workshop survey).

I interpret this as further evidence of how the psychological needs for inclusion were being addressed. Building on their thinking during the interviews, this was the first act of the group coming together, and they were defining for themselves what being part of the group would be like. The resulting group contract was the manifestation of the space that they were co-creating together. As I had conducted the interviews, I could also have nudged them to consider anything that had not been covered, but that was not necessary.

The group contract was shared after the first workshop and revisited at the start of each one. This was to act as a reminder and to check that there was nothing else that needed adding. As Olena described, the option to reveal anything or not was completely up to the leaders:

“So people don't feel even if people don't want to reveal a lot about themselves they don't have to either” (Olena).

This comment alludes to the agency that leaders have in group coaching. There are no efforts to force leaders to say anything that they do not feel comfortable sharing.

Building on the experience of the first programme, the goals were shared earlier in the second programme, to provide a focus and to ensure that we were productive. When anyone in the group could see options to discuss something, we decided how to move forward, therefore the space evolved in response to what came into it.

The paradox of the flexible yet structured nature of the space was picked up by Oscar.

“Flexible because it’s structured. Structure directs conversation to achieve goal” (Oscar).

The structure provided a focus for the discussions, based on questions that were relevant for leaders in transition to senior leadership positions. Yet within that structure, there was the space to work with whatever came up for the leaders.

Based on the definition of space being a reassuring environment that facilitates openness, this can also be seen to have evolved outside the workshops. Odette described how she had spoken to other members in between the workshops.

“I have ... confidential discussions with ... other members on issues that they have had. I know that I've kept them entirely confidential” (Odette).

This is also evidenced by the fact that both groups came together once the group coaching programme had finished. The space continued outside the programme and was recreated when the group members came together.

Sub-theme: False attribution to the coach

Whilst my interpretation is that the space was co-created by the coach and leaders, the leaders, at the beginning and after the workshops, attributed its creation to the coach. Ollie expected the coach to get the group to work together:

“You will be facilitating and getting the group to work together” (Ollie).

Whilst the coach does facilitate the creation and set up of the group, they cannot control whether and how the group work together. In the workshop survey, one respondent attributed creating the safe environment to me:

“Safe environment created by Ruth” (workshop survey).

This attribution could be seen to deny responsibility for the creation of a safe space, when my interpretation is that the leaders themselves co-create it through their attitudes, actions and behaviour. The role that the coach plays in the co-creation is to draw attention to what will support the creation and maintenance of it as a safe and productive space. This is made possible through the structure of the programme.

The mistaken attribution to the coach could be linked to the role that authority plays within the group. Before the workshops, it is understandable that the leaders look to the coach for authority, especially given that they were new to group coaching. Once the group came together, authority was gradually conferred and taken up by the group. This happened through the invitations to decide how they were going to work together through the development of the group contract and as a whole group or in pairs. The failure to recognise their own role in the development and evolution of the safe and productive space denies their agency. This has implications for work they do in future groups.

Summary of theme about the co-creation of space

The data within this theme shows how the coach and the leaders worked together to co-create the safe space to work in. The setup of the group coaching programme allowed the leaders to begin thinking about why and how they could work together. This meant that when they came together, they had already considered how they could benefit and what could help or hinder their work. Upon these strong foundations, the space evolved throughout the time they worked together within and outside of the workshops. The tendency of leaders to attribute the creation of the safe space to the coach could be seen as denying the role they play, which underpins why an understanding of the co-creation is important.

6.3.2 Many relevant inputs shared

I saw this theme within the data when I began to explore what was happening between the leaders and myself as coach. The findings show how the safe and productive space that was co-created made it possible for many relevant inputs to be offered to the leaders. The term 'inputs' is used to describe anything that was shared within the group that could have generated thought for the leaders. It includes stories, experiences, perspectives, observations, questions, content knowledge, tools and techniques. An explanation is offered about how the inputs emerged slowly and how it felt for leaders. The different types of inputs are explored, as well as whether there could have been a limit to the inputs that were offered. The sub-themes break the theme down to explore different features. They are:

- Gradual, organic and generative nature of inputs
- Breadth of inputs generated
- Generation through reciprocity
- Potential limits on inputs

Sub-theme: Gradual, organic and generative nature of inputs

This sub-theme describes how the inputs were related to the safe space that had been co-created, there was a slow start and the process felt very natural. The relationship between the need for a safe space and inputs was described by Oscar:

"For an introverted person like me, I would struggle to share this stuff normally, because I felt secure during that time, I was fine. sharing my experience being vulnerable" (Oscar).

The foundations that were laid to create the safe and productive space were enough for some leaders to begin opening up immediately, and this led to others following:

"I think at first ... it was the normal kind of, sort of, maybe not reticence, but like a bit of lack of confidence in sort of talking and opening up so much. But

*then, I guess when I saw other people doing it, it was quite easy to do”
(Odette).*

This recognises the differences between leaders in the group. They needed to feel confident before they could open up, and without someone feeling confident to start with, this could have been difficult. Some of the members within the group already knew each other, and this could have contributed to them feeling more confident to start with. Once they began sharing, there was a snowball effect, as their confidence encouraged others join in. This has implications for the framework and the makeup of groups. When the group first begin to work together, opportunities to encourage sharing need to recognise the potential reticence, and the topics chosen must be those that leaders will feel safe sharing to start with.

Established relationships within the group could also influence the speed of openness within the group. Those who are more familiar with other members may feel safe enough to open up. However, this could also work the other way. One leader in the group follow-up interview shared that they would have felt uncomfortable if they had been working with people they knew too well:

“I knew a few of us already. ..., but not well enough to feel uncomfortable in speaking the ... truth ... I think if you've got ... a person who you work with or a friend, then perhaps you'd be a bit reluctant.” (Tracey)

In the event, two members of the group in the second programme were linked through a reporting line. This was discussed in the follow-up interview, though it had not affected what was shared:

“ it didn't ... I think two things. One, obviously you [line manager] were very open and as everybody was. So I think that ... was really helpful. And ... I was quite invested in this. .. if you're going to be part of something you've got be involved in. [There is] no point not putting yourself forward” (Tom)

Paradoxically, there was a sense that the conversation was natural and organic, yet it would never have happened in real life:

“Didn’t feel like formally led, more natural conversation ... enjoyed, it felt natural as opposed to right we’re doing this, organic how people approached it ... Would never have happened in real life without prompt or this kind of forum” (Odette).

This highlights the need to find a balance between focusing conversations, yet allowing them to flow. The flow may be enabling leaders to lose the sense that they are in a group coaching workshop, and to focus on whatever is being discussed. This was described by Tilly in terms of the ability not to worry about what she was saying:

“... just not having to worry .. if I raise this, how’s this gonna work for me individually or my career or my relationship with people? And it just didn’t feel like that was a worry that any of us had to even contemplate?” (Tilly).

This is an example of how the needs for inclusion had been addressed, as leaders felt that they belonged and were able to contribute.

Tilly went on to describe the experience in comparison to dyadic coaching, and how the many inputs gave rise to more inputs, both in terms of what was shared but also what they noticed about each other:

“ a lot of the answers just came naturally within the group setting,..if you’re having one to one coaching, you’re the only one talking. ... you really do learn off each other and bounce off each other as well.... yeah..that’s the same with me, and then you build upon that as well and I suppose inspire each other ... you can choose ... I really like that style. I really like what she did there or what he did ... I’m gonna use that myself and you know, using other people’s strengths and building yours that free flowing, sharing of ideas ..., sparking off against each other .. a more beneficial way of doing things. So maybe for me one-to-one coaching isn’t for me, but group coaching works?” (Tilly).

This captures that group coaching isn’t just about the dialogue, but also, how the leaders are

behaving. Working on online seemingly did not restrict what the leaders were able to pick up from each other.

Odette described these as extra dimensions:

"It's the third, fourth, fifth dimension of whoever is in there that can provide that perspective that is still relevant to what you have." (Odette).

Ollie summed up it up as

"..you got more brains to the problem." (Ollie).

These comments are at the heart of how group coaching worked. Once a safe and productive space was created, the leaders were able to share their thoughts and observations, which in turn provoked further, relevant inputs, to create a rich pool to draw from.

Sub-theme: Breadth of inputs generated

The inputs were generated in response to the questions upon which the group coaching programme was based. The agenda for each workshop posed questions in the form of discussions or exercises. For example, in workshop one, *'what got you to this point in your career?'* In workshop two, *'what does it mean to be a leader?'*, and in workshop three, *'what impression would you like to make, and do you make on others?'* In response, leaders shared their stories, experiences, perspectives and observations. The safe and productive space encouraged contributions that covered difficult, unusual and personal topics:

"I was able to be more open and talk about issues and conflicts, like the more difficult conversations" (Odette).

"No one wants to talk about race because they're worried yet in the group we were talking about [it]. Something about the safety of the group that enabled me to open up when [I] wouldn't normally" (Olena).

"... to hear other people ... that know you and in your organisation ... speak about you ... in a positive way ... you feel quite good ... my peers, the senior leaders, this is what they view me as ... it gives you that boost ... of confidence" (Tracey).

In addition to the inputs from leaders, I shared knowledge and tools and techniques that could help to address difficulties and challenges that the leaders mentioned. This was relevant input, as it directly related to what was being said at the time. For example, I introduced transactional analysis theory in response to points leaders raised about the difficulty they had managing upwards and we discussed how leaders could apply this. Ollie noted that knowledge provided this way differed from that received during leadership training:

"... when you're in ... management or leadership training, it's a lot of front loading ... they're telling you about the theory ... So it's very much been ... force-fed?" (Ollie).

This highlights that group coaching can be sensitive to the context and the people participating, as opposed to being driven by a curriculum or fixed approach to addressing problems. Further

information was provided after the workshop, including references for leaders to follow up in their own time.

Sub-theme: Generation through reciprocity

Sharing thoughts and experiences would not have generated so many relevant inputs if the leaders had not listened, to hear what was being said, and then made contributions, for mutual benefit:

“Everyone listened to each other, and what was good to see ... everyone was giving suggestions to each other as though we're kind of like, coaching within coaching ... we were helping each other ... There was no one being inappropriate or being rude to everyone ... and we were quite honest to each other as well” (Taariq).

“People would pitch in with suggestions or experiences which were helpful” (Tom).

“It's about the questions, probing and effective listening to see what may be below the surface – coaching that out” (Terry).

This demonstrates reciprocity, as leaders were there for the mutual benefit of each other. Olena went on to describe how she saw this directly arising out of how safe leaders felt.

“... psychological safety is massive. It's very difficult to get that in organisations where people are worried about their egos in the situations. But in the group, there is no status, it is working together to get the best for each other” (Olena).

My interpretation is that, in order to achieve the many rich and varied contributions, the leaders need to feel safe enough to let go of any concerns that they have about personal safety within the group, and speak when they have something to offer. This needs to be in service of the others they are working with, not serving their own interests.

Sub-theme: Potential limit on inputs

In their post-group coaching interviews, two leaders questioned whether there had been enough challenge and disagreement within the group:

“... there was nothing I felt strongly about that wasn’t said, surprised me how there was very little challenging, were people worried about harming the group ... was lack of disagreement because people were worried about upsetting others?” (Tom).

It is not possible to say whether leaders held back due to fear of upsetting each other, as this was not asked. However, the other leader who raised it shared that they, too, did not let anything go unsaid:

“Didn’t think I’m biting tongue, don’t think anything went unsaid” (Oksana).

Different views on things had been shared within the group. For example, one leader challenged another about their thinking around them attending a meeting that their line manager had asked them to. They simply asked:

“If your line manager trusts you to attend, why do you not trust yourself?” (Tracey).

Whilst there were challenges to thinking, and different perspectives were shared, there were no disagreements. This could be for a number of reasons. Fear of upsetting others cannot be ruled out. Neither can fear of harming the group, especially if the leaders were finding this a supportive and useful space. Perhaps their subconscious was filtering what was said, or perhaps they were disagreeing well, through constructive discussion, so disagreement was not apparent. That two leaders felt things did not go unsaid is the only measure that nothing was filtered out. This was a relatively short engagement, and the group seemed to work effectively to create enough relevant inputs without causing disagreement.

Summary of theme about many relevant inputs

In summary, once a safe and productive space had been co-created, leaders began to open up and share their stories and experiences. Different types of inputs were generated, with leaders sharing thoughts on perspectives that are viewed as difficult in normal conversation, and inputs were offered by the coach. Reciprocity was at the heart of the generation of inputs, as they were offered for mutual benefit. There may have been a limit on the inputs, based on a desire not to harm the group, though it is not possible to determine this.

6.3.3 Processing the inputs to resource the transition

The third and final theme I noticed within the data describes what happened within the leaders themselves, when the inputs were received. This section will explore what the space and inputs made possible, and how this served to resource leaders by normalising the challenges, recognising their strengths, and giving them actions to take to move forward as senior leaders. This is presented under the following sub-themes:

- Generating thinking through questioning and listening
- Thinking resources leaders

Sub-theme: Generating thinking through questioning and listening

The combination of the safe space and relevant inputs served to provoke thought which enabled leaders to understand themselves:

*“Questioning enabled me to dig deep to better understand myself”
(workshop survey).*

*“Space for deeper exploration enables me to notice and recognise what is
going on for me in my leadership position” (workshop survey).*

The personal uncertainty (van den Bos, 2009) that underpins many transitions is addressed through the exploration of deeply personal questions. Odette noted that she received the questions in a way that allowed her to consider them, as opposed to becoming defensive:

“Challenge felt like curiosity of a friend asking a question which allowed for asking myself instead of going defensive” (Odette).

This is an example of how the safe space meant that she didn't feel threatened, and thus, she was open to exploring her thinking. Olena described how she was listening and simultaneously thinking about what it meant for her:

“When you're in a group, as you're hearing other people speak, and you're listening to their truth, other stuff is resonating within you” (Olena).

Oksana went further, and described how the richness was achieved:

“... it wasn't as unsubtle as input output. It was using things like some of the models ... but in a subtle way, and in some ways, was not quite joining the dots. But more like finding things, exploring things and then almost coming out .. into a clearing ...” (Oksana).

These extracts show how the leaders processed what was shared within the group. Whilst something was offered into the group, leaders were working on it and this was evidenced by the effort that was involved:

“It was intensive because yeah, at the end of the sessions, you know, I was quite tired. And we've covered a lot of ground” (Ollie).

With the thinking came new realisations, which resourced the leaders as described in the next section.

Sub-theme: Thinking resources leaders

The thoughts that were provoked, as a result of the inputs offered in the safe space, served to resource leaders through their transition in a number of different ways:

- Normalising vulnerability
- Re-evaluation of how leaders saw themselves and acted as senior leaders
- Recognition of strengths
- Reconsidering how they viewed others

The results of this resourcing flowed through into managing themselves and engaging with others differently.

Normalising vulnerability

Only three out of five leaders in the second programme specifically expressed a need for reassurance, and to address self-doubt or impostor syndrome, in the interviews before group coaching. However, this topic was addressed in both group coaching programmes and was mentioned in the interviews afterwards. Hearing that other leaders shared similar challenges, especially those they work alongside, helped the leaders to realise they were not alone:

“ [it was] good to hear other people, some who I looked up to, ..to hear their own vulnerabilities and what they thought of ... how they came across. The bits they thought they weren't doing so well ... we seem to be our greatest critics and just use that to reflect on myself and okay possibly that's the kind of stuff that been holding me back as well ... it is healthy, to have those doubts, but not to dwell on it ... just came away .., a lot more confident” (Taariq).

This recognition, and the inputs that were shared during the discussion, served to resource him to deal with this:

“It's made me more relaxed in what I do, and not be so focused on what if I get something wrong ... Put hands up and say you don't understand instead of trying to stumble through, ” (Taariq).

Oscar described how he had learnt to challenge his thinking:

"[I have] a lot of self-doubts ... I'm really my worst critic ... that's what I learned from the session ... taking the time to reflect and ... challenge your thoughts" (Oscar).

Both of these quotes reflect the sense of vulnerability and distress associated with transition. In making themselves vulnerable by opening up to others, leaders recognised the vulnerability of others too, which helped them to address their own challenges. Insights were then used as the basis to plan action moving forward.

Re-evaluation of how leaders saw themselves and acted as senior leaders

The space and inputs enabled leaders to explore how they saw themselves.

"... it help me to think about who I am as leader and how I am perceived by my peers and colleagues and what are my values" (MC2WS).

This exploration involved recognising long held beliefs that were preventing seeing themselves as senior leaders:

"I had a vision of what senior leaders look like, and that was ... traditional white male middle class.. And not really accepting that senior leaders look or sound like me. Being in the group and seeing different senior leaders and hearing their story helped me to realise that senior leaders come from ... all different backgrounds. And it's okay to be different ... I don't mimic anyone anymore. I'm very much myself" (Olena).

This comment exemplifies the intrapersonal and interpersonal process of identity work (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2017). The leader explores their own individualised self-identity, based on their values and characteristics, as well as their relational self, constructed through their interpersonal bonds, and how they compare and are perceived by others. Cognition is then shown to be pragmatic, as seeing

themselves as a senior leader gave them the confidence to behave like one. Odette described that she was more confident in meetings, and Olena, in her decision making:

“... this morning I was in in a meeting ... showcasing what I've been up to, and I've ... had the confidence to do it, before I think I'd been a bit more ... reluctant about that” (Odette).

“I'm definitely more informed, more confident in my decision making. I'm also challenging myself and noticing how I'm leading. I think before, if I'm honest, before the group coaching, I was very much a practitioner” (Olena).

In relation to how they saw themselves, leaders also began to be more intentional about how they used their time and looked after themselves. Managing the many and conflicting demands on their time had been described as one of the key challenges of senior leadership. Leaders on both programmes described how group coaching had helped in terms of how they thought about managing time and what they were doing about it. This included stepping back, being more focused and aware of the trade-offs that are being made, often unintentionally. It also translated into actions to improve diary management, which led leaders to feel more resilient and in control, and improved their self-care. In a survey of the whole programme, one leader commented that their mindset had shifted and they were more focused:

“The coaching programme opened up my mind to think differently on my approach and also adjust my mindset. It helped me to be less reactive and be more directed and focused” (second programme survey).

Ollie made the link between better diary management and improved resilience.

“The other thing [that] was ... in my goals was to organise my myself much better around focused time on the calendar and managing my calendar better to give me that time to do things without feeling harassed and rushed ... which then ... builds up your resilience because I'm feeling a bit more in control” (Ollie).

Leaders were also stepping back. Oscar recognised the importance of doing so in order to lead others:

“... one of the things that [I’ve] learnt, looking after yourself because there's nothing else that you can share or do for other people if you don't look after yourself” (Oscar).

These are examples of how the top-down psychological identity work interacted with the bottom-up actions in the external environment to support leader development (Liu *et al.*, 2021).

Recognition of strengths

Sharing the story of what had brought leaders to where they were in their career proved particularly resourcing. Comments in the surveys after the second workshop, on both programmes, described the impact of sharing their story in front of the group. For many leaders this was the first time they had spoken their history out loud

“This made me feel grateful for my past and recognised that I/we don't celebrate our successes as much as we should do. It has given me new insight as to look back has enabled me to look forward and allowed me to develop new insights for the future. ...I have an extensive tool box (reflections; skills experience) to refer to and use now and in the future. This has reassured me and bolstered my resilience, confidence and I have recognised how one's own personal story can be a powerful tool to remind me of my journey and to share with it others” (first workshop survey).

“Whilst a little overwhelming and stirred up some historic angst, it was really useful to talk through my career journey. Gave me that 'lightbulb' moment of recognising what I have achieved and also made me realise that this is pretty impressive and I need to be proud of it!” (second workshop survey).

Olena commented that it was not only resourcing to share her journey, but to be heard, and how unusual that was for her:

“only the people that speak the loudest get heard. So the group coaching is really good, because it allows a person to see you in a way that they hadn't seen you before. And for the person that's telling the story. They're in a safe environment where they can tell their story. And then you realise that your story is just as valuable as everybody else's story..” (Olena).

This is often covered during a dyadic coaching engagement. However, the leaders took between seven and ten minutes to share their stories, so it is of note that such insight was drawn from a relatively short summary of their story.

Leaders were also resourced by hearing about what others noticed within them during the metaphor exercise. Oksana said that what she had heard from others about her was new and valuable to her:

“[I heard]..... you always kind of say the right things at the right time. And I suppose I didn't realise that but I can see it ... I do try and bring the calm into things. So it did give me that ... validation ... and then I started sort of noticing it my in myself in at work as well. So ... I think that exercise ... helped to boost my confidence” (Oksana).

Olena went on to describe how hearing from your peers in such a way was very different to the usual way of receiving feedback:

“... And I remember one of the comments was that ... every time they [are] with me they feel they learned something new. Never heard that before either... there's something about the group that had that psychological safety to actually be really honest and show you who you are. Even though you've got the strengths and 360 degree feedback ... it's not the same as hearing from your colleagues, hearing it from your peers” (Olena).

Oksana described how, in general, she had an increasing sense of self-worth:

"I have got a lot to offer and claiming my space is not about others validation ... It's ... whatever the opposite of learned helplessness ... [it is to] feel more self-value, than [being] dependent on external validation" (Oksana).

Sharing stories and providing feedback are common in many dyadic coaching engagements, but these extracts show that there is additional value to be gained through hearing them in a group setting.

Reconsidering how they viewed others

Another way in which leaders were resourced through group coaching was through a change in the way that they viewed others. Leaders showed an increased awareness of what could be going on for other people with whom they were working, and the impact that they could have on them. This was leading them to be more proactive and intentional in the way that they connected with others, and it changed the way that they were engaging and interacting with them.

"[I]... have a bit more empathy, what's going on for somebody ... what could be driving them" (Ollie).

"... understanding that everyone works at a different level ... and accept them for who they are" (Terry).

Empathy is key to developing collective intelligence (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2023) and this, along with acceptance, will contribute to the development of social capital. Day defines this as building networked relationships that enhance cooperation and resource exchange to create value for the organisation (Day, 2000).

Leaders went on to describe examples of how it was changing what they did:

"... it has made me think about when I am about to communicate this to the team. How is it gonna impact them as individuals ... and then I can tailor my communication to that because [of] empathy for them, I don't just think about me satisfying my own desire to communicate my message, it is also

important that that message is successfully received, as it should be received” (Oscar).

This extended to relations with more senior people. Managing upwards had been one of the key challenges that leaders were facing in their transition to a senior position. The increase in empathy, understanding and acceptance also extended to working with those more senior to them:

I definitely feel a lot more confident in it with my particular line manager in that I just don't have that fear about it anymore I have been able to have quite a few open and honest conversations .. and I think that's really helped our relationship. ... it's not shying away from those difficult upward conversations which is quite a new thing for me” (Tilly).

These comments show that working alongside others in the group had enabled leaders to work alongside others in their job role. In this regard, group coaching was supporting development, in line with the evolving views of leadership as a collective (McCauley and Palus, 2021).

Summary of theme about processing inputs

In summary, the many and varied inputs that were offered to leaders caused them to reflect and to explore their own thinking and mindsets. The leaders became critically aware of their context, beliefs and feelings about themselves, which brought about changes in assumptions and expectations. Group coaching served to facilitate sensemaking and identity work (Bennett, 2021), and this translated into how the leaders thought and acted.

6.4 Summary of how group coaching supported leaders

The findings presented in this chapter have shown that group coaching supported leaders through their transition. This is defined by making progress towards their coaching goals, as evidenced by the coaching outcomes and what happened during the workshops. This section summarises how these coaching outcomes were achieved, and concludes by presenting a visual representation of what happened in the group coaching workshops.

The coaching outcomes could be mapped against the three key areas challenging leaders in the transition to a senior position. These are how leaders see themselves, how they lead in a senior position, and how they relate to and engage with others. After group coaching, leaders were clearer about how they saw themselves, in relation to their past, where they were now, and their visions for the future as leaders. They also had more confidence, were less doubtful and felt better. They were more equipped to work at a senior level, with an ability to step back, reflect and be more focused. Significantly, given the relational nature of leadership, they were equipped psychologically and with tools and techniques, to relate to and engage with the many stakeholders with whom they had to work.

These outcomes were achieved through the interplay between the space that the leaders co-created to work in, what happened between them, and how they processed what happened between them. This is visually represented in figure 6.7.

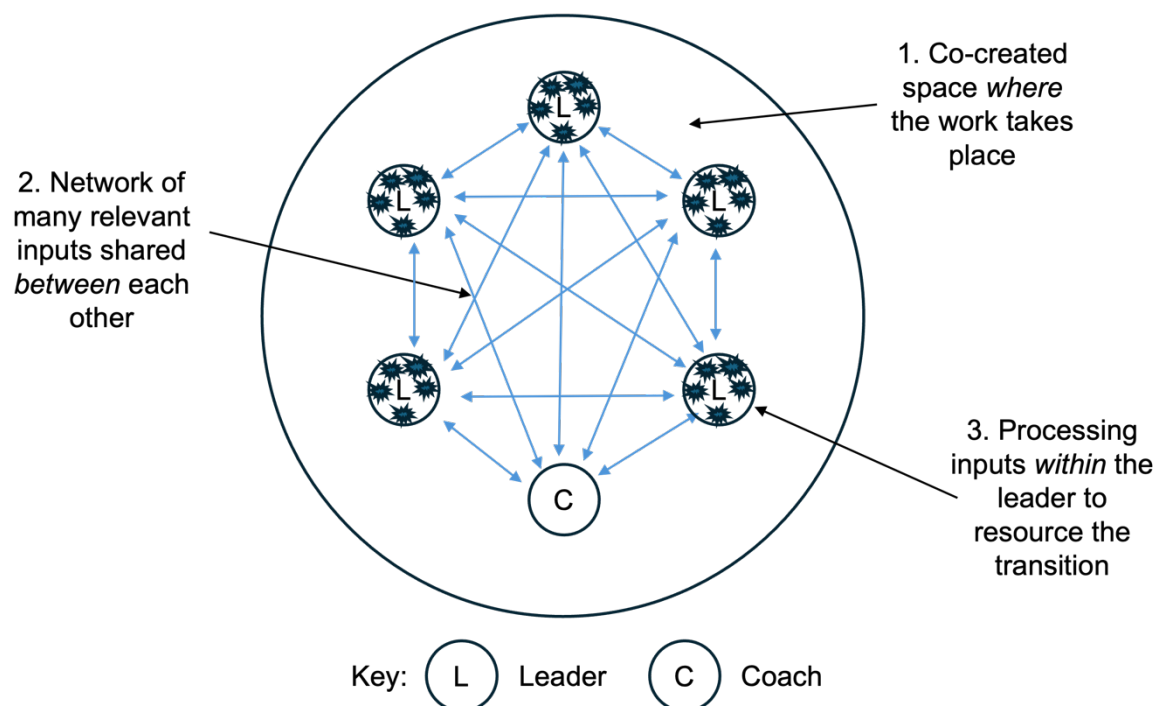


Figure 6.7: Representation of what happened during group coaching

The co-creation of a safe and productive space began as soon as the coach and group members interacted on the conference call. Leaders started thinking about whether participation could be useful for them and what it might mean. By the time the workshop began, the manifestation of their motivation to work together productively was evidenced by how quickly the groups gelled and the leaders began opening up to each other. They expressed their vulnerability through a description of the challenges they were facing and how it made them feel. There was a recognition that it evolved, deepened through the programme, and even existed outside the structure of the workshop programme. This was evidenced in conversations between group members outside the workshops, and when they came together as a group once the programme had finished. Despite an attribution to the coach, the space could not have been created without the attitudes and behaviours of the group members.

The co-creation of such a safe and productive space led to a rich and free-flowing exchange of thoughts, stories and ideas. Even potentially difficult topics, such as race and gender, were explored, as inputs were offered for mutual benefit and leaders described nothing going unsaid. This plentiful source of inputs was highly relevant, as they related directly to the challenges that the leaders were experiencing.

The space and inputs combined to provoke deep thought and probing of ideas within the leaders. They sparked off each other, reframing their thinking and opening up new ways to be and act, in themselves and with others. Such transformed thinking resourced leaders by normalising the challenges that they were facing, and equipping them with ideas and confidence to experiment with different ways of being and acting as senior leaders.

The penultimate chapter, Chapter 7, will discuss these findings in relation to the literature within the field, and explain the contribution that this study has made.

7 Summary of Findings from the Action Phase

This chapter brings together the findings from both stages of analysis in the action phase. The dual approach to analysing multiple sources of data has provided an in-depth understanding of what happened, and of how group coaching contributed to the achievement of the coaching outcomes. Overall, the findings highlight the interplay between the leaders, coach, structure and approach in group coaching. The chapter begins with a tabulated comparison of the two phases of analysis, followed by a description of each element. The chapter ends with a holistic view of the programme.

7.1 Comparison of findings from both research phases

The table in figure 7.1 maps the findings from the two research phases onto each element of the group coaching programme. It demonstrates the ways in which the structure, design and approach shaped the space in which the leaders and coach worked, what happened between them, and what this led to.

Table to show comparison of findings from both phases				
Elements of group coaching programme	Findings from Action Phase 1: Action Research	Findings from Action Phase 2: Reflexive Thematic Analysis		
		Co-creation of safe and productive space	Sharing of multiple relevant inputs	Processing inputs to resource transition
Programme development	An inquiry was shaped around the identification of overlapping needs and around maximising the potential benefits of working alongside others The programme design incorporated a series of workshops with gaps in between to prompt reflection and experimentation. The length of time in the workshops permitted leaders to work with ease whilst accommodating the constraints that they were experiencing	The inquiry had to be based on the needs of the leaders to ensure that it was relevant and would be productive	The inquiry needed to benefit from an exploration alongside others for the multiple relevant inputs to be useful	The inquiry needed to benefit from exploration so that leaders could process their thinking to resource them
Setup	An introduction and 1:1 interview proved to be integral and vital to the	Thinking about what participation would mean allowed the	During the interview, the coach could identify the	The leaders needed to be open to processing the inputs received

	programme. Leaders began thinking about what participation would mean for them, the coach learnt about who they would be working with, and the foundations were laid for the working alliance	leaders to consider what would make it safe and productive for them, and to decide whether to join. Those deciding not to join may not have felt that they could be safe, or may have felt that it would not be productive for them	overlapping needs, meaning that the multiple relevant inputs could be useful	Thinking about what participation would mean meant that leaders identified goals that they were motivated to achieve to resource them
Workshop 1	The first workshop created time and space for leaders to consider how and where they were in transition and to identify their goals Leaders found it valuable to hear from each other and recognised they shared similar challenges	The workshop was designed to address the potential anxiety associated with coming together for the first time Prior consideration of what would make it a safe and productive space guided the development of agreed ways of working together	The leaders and coach co-created the safe and productive space through their mindset and behaviours, which allowed the group to gel quickly, evidenced by the fact that they shared their stories and vulnerabilities	Comments during the workshop and in the surveys evidenced that the workshops were causing leaders to think differently
Workshop 2	The second workshop explored more personal questions about their career journeys Leaders gained a deeper understanding of each other	The safety of the space was evidenced by the depth of personal content that was revealed	As well as the stories that were shared within the space, leaders offered support to and asked questions of each other	Processing was evidenced by leaders sharing that the questions helped them to dig deeper, expand understanding and change their perspectives
Workshop 3	The third workshop built upon the relationships that had been evolving to support their development A more unusual breathing exercise was embraced, and metaphors were developed to feed back how leaders experienced each other	In exposing themselves to receiving feedback about the impressions they made on other people, leaders demonstrated how safe they were feeling	As well as feeling safe to receive feedback, leaders demonstrated how safe they felt in offering inputs such as metaphors into the space	Processing was evidenced by discussions of the differences between how leaders saw themselves and how others saw them
Workshop 4	The final workshop focused on consolidating and cementing learning through sharing artefacts or representations The agenda was more open for the group to take the discussion	Examples of how safe leaders felt included shows of emotion	Multiple relevant inputs extended to suggestions about how to use their time together	Examples were provided of how leaders had processed the inputs, and how they were experimenting with new ways of thinking and acting

	wherever it would be most useful for them			
Follow up	The three-part follow up was made up of an anonymous survey, an immediate 1:1 interview and a longer-term follow up These provided further opportunities to extend reflection and gain learning from insights	Feedback evidenced that leaders had felt safe and the achievement of coaching goals demonstrated that it had been productive	Leaders valued the inputs from others	The coaching outcomes, and changes to the ways that leaders viewed themselves and others, evidenced that processing had taken place to resource them through transition

Figure 7.1: Comparison of findings from both research phases

7.2 Summary of findings from both research phases

Programme development

The programme was developed by shaping an inquiry around the challenges that leaders were facing in transition to senior leadership positions. It focused on the overlapping needs of the leaders and on maximising the potential benefits of working alongside others. The inquiry was shaped around primary and secondary research, which aligned around the transition to senior leadership being a disorientating and tumultuous time. Specific and interrelated challenges were associated with the senior position itself, the context within which it takes place, and the process of personal transition. The key elements of the programme were: a series of workshops, with intervals in between them to provide the space for active experimentation; anonymous surveys; and pre- and post-workshop conversations. Holding the experience of the transitioning leader at the centre of the inquiry, the workshops were focused on exploring the answers to key questions, which were intended to help them to navigate the challenges of transition. The questions were generic and open, to explore issues relating to the overlapping needs.

Consideration was also made of how the leaders might fit group coaching into their already busy schedules. The twelve hours that participating leaders were investing in their development, away from their role, in workshops, equated to a similar number of hours that would be spent in a dyadic coaching engagement, therefore this was realistic. The timing and cadence of the workshops were planned with input from the sponsor within BTP. This was to ensure that they met organisational and

operational requirements. The sponsor was also responsible for identifying leaders who were in transition to senior leadership positions, who might be interested and could benefit from attending.

Programme setup

Setting up the programme involved laying the foundations for the group coaching workshops, which was the point at which the coach and leaders first came together. The initial conference call and one-to-one conversations served to kickstart leaders' thinking and to surface issues around whether to get involved. In essence, they served to address whether this would be a valuable investment of their limited time. It also gave me, as the coach, an understanding of with whom I would be working, and what to consider in my approach to group coaching. The findings show that these events contributed to answering the question of why leaders should join a group coaching programme, and what joining would mean for them. Evidence that the conference call had kickstarted thinking came through comments relating to topics we had discussed, such as being an intentional leader.

The pre-group coaching conversation served to build on this thinking. Open questions to leaders about how they were experiencing their transition, specifically what was working well and what was challenging, helped them to identify what could make group coaching useful for them (see coaching goals in figure 6.4). Their initial thinking was also extended, as evidenced by leaders recognising benefits during the conversation. One leader recognised that the timing was opportune, as it would help them to deal with something that was coming up, and another noted that they could learn about group coaching in order to use aspects of it themselves.

In addition to exploring the motivation of leaders to attend group coaching, this initial conversation also helped leaders to think through what the coaching would mean for them. Open questions about their expectations of group coaching demonstrated that it was broadly understood. They anticipated that it would be in an interactive experience, in which leaders would share and listen to each other, with a coach to guide the discussions. Concerns centred around how safe it would be for leaders to join, specifically, how information shared within the group would be treated, whether it would be

shared outside the group, and how other members would judge them. There were also concerns about how the other members of the group could impact them personally within the coaching context, and whether this could restrict the potential benefits. For example, would the other leaders be committed and engaged enough to attend every workshop, as opposed to dipping in and out? Other concerns included whether others might dominate the conversation, or come with different goals that were not aligned to their own needs. One potential participant chose not to participate after the one-to-one conversation, which suggests that it may also have served as a filter for leaders who decided that it might not be valuable or for those who could not commit.

Another important aspect of the setup was the impression that the leaders formed of me as the coach. This was linked both to motivation and to what group coaching involved. How credible was I, as the coach? Did I have enough of an understanding of their situation to support exploration, and did I have the knowledge and skills to coach the group? These are evidenced by comments suggesting that I could have made more of my qualifications, that they appreciated the organisation and information they received, and that they found my style helpful in building trust and rapport. These factors contributed to building the trust, respect and confidence needed to create the bond in an effective working alliance (de Haan *et al.*, 2016).

The programme setup was vital, as it started to address the psychological needs for inclusion, initiated the co-creation of a safe and productive space, and provided me, as the coach, with an understanding of with whom I would be working. Key questions that people ask to address inclusion needs before joining a group are, 'why should I join and what does joining mean?' (Schutz, 1989; Benson, 2019). The setup contributed to the co-creation of a safe and productive space through an exploration of what would help and hinder the group in working together. This meant that, when they came together for the first time, leaders were able to offer considered suggestions about how they wanted to work together. Furthermore, I was the embodiment of the efficacy of the group (Benson, 2019). Everything I did, the impression I made on the leaders, and the materials they received, gave them further insight into what joining group coaching would mean for them. Significantly, in gaining an understanding of with whom I would be working, I became aware of the coaching goals and of what would be important in my approach to group coaching.

Workshop 1 – What is happening and how am I?

Each workshop was based upon a question that would support the exploration of the transition for the leaders, and was designed to promote collaboration within the group. The question in the first workshop was intended to help leaders to pause and consider how they were. As this was the first time the group had come together, the question was intentionally open, so that leaders could choose how revealing they wanted to be. This also helped to expand awareness of what might be useful for them to focus on as they set their coaching goals.

The design of the workshop focused on addressing the potential anxiety associated with coming together for the first time as a group. This meant ensuring the physical, emotional and intellectual inclusion of every member (Benson, 2019). A key part of addressing emotional inclusion was the collaborative development of a contract based on the question '*What would help you work together?*' Leaders collaborated by choosing what to include, which gave them a sense of ownership, and this was described as a quick win. Intellectual inclusion was addressed by satisfying leaders' needs to find out who they were working with and what had brought everyone to group coaching. An introductory check-in helped leaders to get to know each other and to appreciate the alignment around the coaching goals. Physical inclusion was addressed by offering the leaders the choice about when to break, based on what they needed, and whether to work independently or in smaller groups.

Addressing these inclusion needs could be described as fostering group cohesion, as this contributed to creating an effective climate. This was co-created, because it was guided by the questions I asked as the coach, and was based on the responses, behaviour and attitudes of the leaders. The co-creation of the safe and productive space then led to the generation of multiple relevant inputs. These inputs took the form of the leaders' answers to the questions, comments and content that were relevant to the issues they were raising. One leader noted that this contrasted with content being force-fed on a structured programme. There was a high level of engagement and reciprocity, as evidenced by everyone contributing to the discussions. The pace of the workshop

underpinned the generation of multiple relevant inputs, as it gave leaders the time to think about the questions that were being asked, yet allowed everyone to be heard, without feeling rushed.

The responses to the anonymous survey after each workshop provided leaders with an opportunity to reflect upon their experiences of the workshop, both in terms of their learning and how they were experiencing group coaching. It also provided me with valuable data that I could use to shape my approach in the workshops, and responding to the feedback further enhanced the trust that the leaders had in me as the coach.

Workshop 2 – Who am I?

In recognition of the need for identity work in transition, the second workshop focused attention on how leaders saw themselves. A temporal perspective was explored, as leaders shared what had brought them to this point in their career and what it meant to be a senior leader now. The existence of safe and productive space meant that leaders were comfortable to share their journeys. There was a sense of the group evolving, both in terms of the workshop content building and the trust deepening. This was evidenced by the deeply personal stories of successes and failures that leaders had experienced. It was notable how much insight and learning were taken from a seven-minute summary of a career, both in terms of what the leaders themselves learnt about their own career, for example, realising that past achievements had value, and what the other group members took from hearing from others. This is a demonstration of the way in which the leaders were processing the inputs they were receiving. They were re-evaluating their views and beliefs, and beginning to change their views of themselves and others based on what they were hearing. This created a paradox for one leader, who commented on his impatience to move on in order to get some practical help for his transition, yet he found it valuable to hear the stories of others. He wanted to hear less background information, but he benefitted from more.

Workshop 3 – How to lead and relate to others?

Building on the identity work in the previous workshop, the focus in the third workshop was on how leaders were seen by others. Hearing directly from group members, as opposed to through a 360-degree feedback exercise, provided leaders with candid feedback, which helped them to understand

what impression they were making and what impact they had on others. They could also compare it to their own descriptions of what they believed others saw in them, and note where there was misalignment. In opening themselves up to hear what others thought of them, leaders were placing themselves in a vulnerable situation, which was an indication of how safe they felt in the group. This led to processing what they were hearing, which served to resource them and give them confidence. They could see the strengths that they were bringing to the organisation, and this influenced the way that they began to see themselves.

The third workshop, in both programmes, represented a turning point in the evolution of the group, in terms of the depth of learning and how coach and leaders worked together. For example, deeply personal stories were shared, giving rise to significant insights and learning. This went against a suggestion in the primary and secondary research that it may not be possible to work at depth in a group. Leaders also felt safe enough to bring their vulnerability to the check-in, which brought more opportunities to learn within the group. On both programmes, leaders shared specific challenges that they were facing, and the flexibility of group coaching permitted an exploration of these challenges. There was an expansion in the way the group worked, through the introduction of a somatic exercise, recognising that meeting online is not a barrier to physical work. Leaders also shared that they were connecting outside the workshops, revealing how the safe space and relationships were extending beyond the structure of group coaching.

Workshop 4 – Where now and what next?

The focus in the final workshop was on consolidating learning from the previous few months, both in and outside the workshops. Leaders shared artefacts or representations that encapsulated what they were taking away from the programme. The agenda was open for the leaders to take the discussion in the direction they found most useful, and they spoke confidently amongst themselves. This demonstrated the cohesion and maturity within the group.

In both cases, the groups continued meeting, which emphasised the social capital that had been developed, giving the leaders a network to call on. Their expanded awareness of everyone having their own stories encouraged leaders to be more generally curious and empathetic towards others

with whom they worked. Leaders also shared that they had plans to use some of the practices and exercises with their own teams and groups. This demonstrated a ripple effect of collective practice out into the organisation. In this sense, the coaching outcomes not only supported the development of the leaders through their transition, but also served to develop collective leadership.

Programme Follow Up

The follow up to the programme for the leaders was in three parts. The first part involved completion of an anonymous online survey exploring how the leaders had experienced the programme. It included questions exploring the ways in which the workshops had helped them through their transition, as well as what had worked for them and what could be improved (see appendix 11). This provided an additional opportunity for further personal reflection. The second part comprised a one-to-one conversation to explore the group coaching outcomes in more detail. These conversations explored the ways in which learning and insights were being applied and deepened reflection. Extending the conversations to explore what aspects of group coaching practice had been useful led to conversations about their application in the workplace. The third and final part of the follow up with the leaders after the first programme involved one-to-one conversations with two leaders. One was eight months and the other a year after the workshops had finished. These provided a distal perspective on the leaders' development and how group coaching had supported them. The leaders on the second programme chose to meet together, four months after the final workshop. They held an open discussion exploring their learning, application, and reflections upon group coaching. In each case, the follow up served to consolidate learning. The one-to-one conversations allowed for deeper personal exploration, whereas the group facilitated an exchange of views and ideas.

One final part to the follow up involved the submission of reports to the BTP sponsor after each programme. These outlined the group coaching programme and shared themes about the ways in which leaders felt that they had benefitted, and how group coaching had enabled their development.

7.3 Holistic overview of the programme

The group coaching programme was based on strong theoretical and empirical foundations. The structure and content addressed the key areas of inquiry associated with the transition to a senior leadership position. This foundation was underpinned by a process that maximised the opportunities for development alongside others. The interplay between the structure and process provided leaders with a transitional space which encompassed the inputs from others, augmenting the thoughts that the leaders were able to process. Furthermore, it provided opportunities to develop the capacity for collective leadership through relationships and practices that were transferred into the organisation.

The leaders who participated shared a common situation, in that they were all experiencing leading in a senior leadership position. Their common motivation was to address the challenges that they were facing. In transition theory terms, there was a disequilibrium of forces, as the position disrupted the stability needed to survive (Halliday, 2012). This was creating disorientating dilemmas, as leaders recognised problems or dissatisfaction (Schein and Schein, 2017), and it was manifesting in different ways, for example, old ways of thinking and behaving needed to be redefined and discarded as they were no longer working (Mezirow, 1997; Burnes, 2004; Schein and Schein, 2017). There was also misalignment between how people saw themselves and their roles and responsibilities, leading to a search for congruity (Ibarra, 2004). Whilst the situation and motivation to change were common and unifying, each leader had their own understanding of what they wanted to change, which translated into their individual goals. Though there was overlap in the leaders' goals, the individual goals underpinned their commitment and ensured that group coaching could be tailored to address the unique circumstances facing each leader. One other important aspect was that these goals needed addressing at this point in time, for each leader, irrespective of where they were in the transition. They were either on the verge of attaining a senior leadership position, had had a senior leadership position and had lost it, were new in position, or were recognising that how they used to work was not serving them in their senior position. Their participation provided them with opportunities to apply learning from the workshops and to experiment with different ways of action and being in their daily lives.

Traditional leadership training and development was based on passing knowledge from those who know, to those who do not (Raelin, 2015). The group coaching recognised the shift in leadership development, positioning the coach in service of the needs of the group of leaders, as a practitioner who works with leaders to create an environment that enables experience-driven development (McCauley, Morgan and McCall, 2014). This called for a range of knowledge, skills, abilities and ways of working that put the transitioning leader at the heart of the experience, rather than the necessity to impart knowledge or develop skills.

The neutral yet responsive role of the coach necessitated a constant focus on what was happening on multiple levels. A focus on the reasons that the group came together drove specific actions, exercises and questions. Posing clear and specific questions to the group led to discussions that were relevant and insightful. However, in the flow of the workshop, choices about when and how to add something into the space, in terms of a question or content, occurred constantly. Whilst this mirrors what happens in dyadic coaching, it was intensified by having to recognise the needs of the group, as well as the individuals. As the group evolved, the group members organised themselves, and the role of the coach was less visible and, ultimately, unnecessary. The effort and energy that the coach brought to develop and set up the programme at the start transferred to the group, in service of their needs as they matured. The belief in the potential of the group to support their own growth and development recognises the agency within the individual members and restrains the coach from taking authority away from them. The role of the group coach could therefore be summarised as dynamic, operating at multiple levels and evolving through time.

Several paradoxes and contradictions were evident, for example, leaders were impatient to move on to discuss how to do something, yet found value in hearing from others, conversations felt normal, but wouldn't have happened normally, there was structure, yet group coaching could be flexible to respond to what came into the group for exploration.

This group coaching programme was focused on supporting leaders through an exploration of their transition to a senior leadership position. It contrasts with other support mechanisms that may be focused on specific elements of the transition, such as identity or transformational learning, or the

development of skills. That the leaders developed as a result of supporting them through the exploration was predictable, through the use of goal setting, although the multifaceted, messy and experimental process that is organisational coaching (Bachkirova and Kemp, 2024) could not guarantee how that development would manifest. For example, just like in dyadic coaching, an exploration of the transition and what it means may reveal to some leaders that senior leadership is not where they need to be at this point in time. This study, due to keeping the experience of transition at the heart of group coaching, tackled all the aspects of the transition, such as the personal, physical, psychological, cognitive, social and emotional challenges. Whatever was relevant for these leaders and their unique experience of transition, group coaching provided tailored and personalised development, with additional benefits brought by the fact that they experienced this alongside others.

8 Discussion

The aim of this research study was to explore how group coaching could support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions, and to develop a theoretical and practical framework to inform practice. This chapter brings together and discusses the findings from the study and how they contribute to knowledge about senior leader transitions and group coaching.

Four research questions were formed to address the aims of the research study. The questions were addressed over two phases. The preparatory phase served to triangulate the secondary data, to answer the first two questions through interviews with leaders and coaches who had experience of dyadic coaching through these transitions. The findings guided the development of a group coaching programme for leaders in transition. This was applied and explored in the action phase of the study, using action research and reflexive thematic analysis to address the last two questions. The research questions and a summary of the answers are presented in the table in figure 8.1.

Phase	Research Questions	Answers discussed in this chapter
Preparatory phase	1. What makes the transition to senior leadership positions problematic?	The multifaceted challenges of the transition into senior leadership positions
	2. How does dyadic coaching support leaders in transition to a senior leadership position?	The creation of safe, productive space for inquiry and experimentation
Action phase	3. How can group coaching support leaders in transition to senior leadership positions?	The co-creation of safe and productive space, into which multiple relevant inputs are provided to provoke thought and lead to action
	4. How do the findings inform and develop group coaching practice?	A framework for group coaching practice

Figure 8.1: Research questions and answers

The chapter is structured in three parts. The first two parts discuss the contributions to theoretical knowledge and the practical application for senior leader transitions and group coaching. These are summarised in the table in figure 8.2

	Theoretical Knowledge	Practical Application
Senior Leader Transitions	Updated and expanded understanding of the multifaceted challenges associated with making the transition into senior leadership positions	Developed conceptual models to show the challenges and the psychological process of personal transition, for leaders in transition to senior positions Developed a conceptual model to show how coaching supports leaders in transition to senior positions
Group Coaching	Identified sequential steps in group coaching to support leaders in transition to senior positions Created a new definition of group coaching that expands knowledge to include what happens and how	Developed a group coaching framework to undertake a group coaching programme Developed a conceptual model showing different levels at which the coach works in group coaching

Figure 8.2 Table to show contributions to theoretical knowledge and practical application

The third part of the chapter discusses the implications of the contributions for

- Group coaching

- Senior leader transitions
- Leader and leadership development

8.1 Contributions to Senior Leader Transitions

Theoretical contributions to knowledge about senior leader transitions resulted from the triangulation of secondary data and personal experience, together with empirical research. Based upon interviews with a small sample of leaders and coaches, it was possible to confirm the scale and impact of the challenges associated with stepping into senior leadership positions. The research also updated understanding of the challenges associated with the transition at the start of the 21st century. These theoretical contributions to knowledge led to the development of conceptual models which have practical application. The models can be used by leaders themselves, coaches and others supporting them through transition to raise awareness of the challenges they may be facing. They can help normalise challenges and help to identify support options to navigate the transition.

8.1.1 Theoretical knowledge about senior leader transitions

The findings clarify and extend understanding of the challenges facing leaders who step into senior leadership positions and explain why this transition can be problematic. This is achieved by illustrating how three demanding challenges converge to cause psychological confusion at a particularly difficult time:

1. Stepping into novel territory as a senior leader
2. Responding to the complex and ambiguous challenges associated with being a contemporary senior leader
3. Navigating the cognitively and emotionally difficult process of transition

Stepping into novel territory as a senior leader

For the leaders that participated in both phases of the study, stepping into a senior leadership position was confirmed to be difficult, and they reported that it caused them problems. The expansion of responsibility into areas that were unfamiliar was coupled with the extension of relationship

networks and the shifting of existing relationships. This change takes place amidst ambiguity, and alongside pressure to perform, which can cause leaders to question how good they are and to fear failure.

The findings extend current knowledge around senior leader transitions by highlighting the impact of the highly ambiguous and complex environment within which the transition takes place. The change in responsibilities, shifts in relationships, and necessity to work in different ways as a senior leader align with the models reflecting how the requirements of leaders change as they move up through organisations (Barrett, 1998; Collins, 2001; Rooke and Torbert, 2005; Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011; Freedman, 2011). These models are not recent, but they can be described as standing the test of time, as the fundamental shifts associated with moving up to more senior levels in organisations endure. Specifically, these shifts call for a leader to work at an organisational and strategic level, through influence as opposed to authority; to lead change and drive transformation; and to work through higher levels of personal development.

However, the increasing responsibilities, coupled with uncertainty, mean that leaders are unclear about where to focus their time and energy. Thus, time management becomes a problem, and failure to manage time effectively affects their wellbeing. At the same time, according to social identity theory (Turner, Brown and Tajfel, 1979), we define ourselves by our roles and relationships, so the lack of clarity could extend to a leader questioning their sense of self as their roles and relationships change. The impact of these wide-ranging challenges on senior leaders is reported in studies exploring coaching through transition (Gill, 2017; Terblanche, Albertyn and van Coller-Peter, 2017; McGill, 2019; Kilpatrick, 2022). This study adds to knowledge by updating the difficulties that leaders face, and how they are impacted by this transition in the early part of the 21st century.

Responding to the complex and ambiguous challenges associated with being a senior leader

In addition to the lack of clarity associated with stepping into a senior position, there is also a lack of clarity about what it means to be a senior leader. This is not covered in earlier models of leaderships journeys and work transitions. Wiggins' research identified that lack of clarity is a common and

significant inhibitor to transition (2019). The findings from this study extend understanding in terms of what they are looking for clarity about. The leaders Wiggins interviewed referred to a lack of clarity in terms of 'role, responsibilities, authority, scope and key performance indicators' (Wiggins, 2019, p. 129). As described above, this is in line with previous literature (Watkins, 2013b; Terblanche and Albertyn, 2018; Kilpatrick, 2022). One of the key contributions of this research is that it goes beyond current models and illustrates how the lack of clarity encompasses both what it means to be a senior leader and how to fulfil the role.

Trait theories of leadership have historically dominated the discourse, we are brought up on fairy tales of heroes saving the day (Fraher, 2011). This shapes what leaders think about leading, consciously or unconsciously. The findings show how valuable it was to create space for leaders to examine their thinking about what it means to be a leader and how it was serving them. In the workshops, we discussed how the narrative of leaders as heroic individuals, who lead through command and control, permeates. This was particularly relevant in a Blue Light organisation with a rank structure. However, a change in leadership at the top of the organisation was driving a culture shift away from that way of working and towards a more collaborative and inclusive culture. This aligns with contemporary studies, which suggest that leadership emerges out of interactions (Firth, 2019). A more collective style of leadership is also described as a response to the wicked problems that leaders might be facing (Grint, 2005b). The difficulty that leaders face is that some of them have not heard about, let alone seen, a more relational and collective way of leading. This means that, despite a complex environment that demands more engagement with others, leaders are confused and constrained by outdated concepts of what it means to be a leader. Furthermore, descriptions and prescriptions of how to lead (Crevani, 2019) no longer function in the uncertain, dynamic, complex and ambiguous environments in which senior leaders operate. Leaders may be unaware of what it means to be a contemporary senior leader, and there are no templates to pick up and follow to address the unique context that they are facing. This means that senior leaders are having to work out what it means for them to be a senior leader, in their unique personal and professional context, which serves to exacerbate the lack of clarity that they are already facing as they move into a senior leadership position. This research demonstrates how important it is for leaders to have the space and time to explore their unexamined beliefs about leadership, which could be exacerbating their

struggles and limiting their potential. Thinking about what is needed for them personally to be effective, in their current context and discussing it alongside others facilitates leader and leadership development.

Navigating the cognitively and emotionally difficult process of personal transition

Concurrently with taking up a particularly challenging new role, with limited awareness of what being a senior leader means, leaders experience the effects of a process of personal transition. Described as taking its toll physically, emotionally and socially (Bridges, 2004), the process of transition underpins personal change. Leaders, like all humans, will have made transitions throughout their personal and professional lives. However, the findings show that the challenges described in the previous sections are intensified by the process of personal transition for senior leaders.

Traditional theories of workplace transitions conceptualise a staged process. A detailed description of the stages and their impact on leaders based on extant literature was presented earlier in figure 2.7. A summary of the stages is shown again below to aid the discussion.

Pre-transition	Taking up the position	Letting go	Being betwixt and between – liminal phase	Integration

Figure 8.3: Summary of the stages in a process of personal transition based on existing literature

The findings from both phases of research somewhat aligned with the models for workplace transitions (Louis, 1980a; Louis, 1980b; Nicholson, 1984). Pre-transition, previous expectations influenced what leaders were thinking and how they felt, as they took up their new role. Leaders described **anticipating** what senior leadership positions could involve, whilst assumptions about leadership influenced how they thought they would need to be as senior leaders. These factors served to underline the unique nature of personal transitions, as expectations will differ for every senior leader based on their character, assumptions and previous experience (Sugarman, 2001; Schlossberg, 2011).

There was also a recognition that taking up the position was significant in terms of whether it validated leaders' expectations. This **encounter** with reality reveals questions for leaders about how they see themselves, how they relate to and engage with others, and what they should be doing as senior leaders. Halliday describes this as when incongruity appears between the sense of self and the roles and relationships that are held, causing distress and uncertainty (Halliday, 2012). Moreover, the need to feel competent may be affected by the self-doubt that Sugarman described in reaction to the encounter (Sugarman, 2001). One other consideration is timing. The common view in literature is that the work needed to support transitions happens around the time of the change in role, with a specific focus on the first 90 days (Watkins, 2013). This research challenges this, as two leaders joining the first group coaching programme had been in senior leadership positions for over eighteen months. This suggests that the lack of congruity may not always happen as leaders take up the position, and work to address incongruity could happen at any point in a senior leadership tenure.

Another way in which this research goes beyond what is commonly understood is how letting go is not recognised as one specific stage. Instead, the findings suggest that letting go happens alongside leaders working out how they want to lead, what strengths they bring and what they need to develop. This would make it part of the middle, liminal stage, not a precursor to it. Leaders found clarity about what it meant to be a contemporary leader for them personally, in their unique situation, during coaching. They could identify and evaluate options to move forward based on this new understanding (Burnes, 2004, Nicholson, 1984). This meant that they could move to enact leadership by identifying what they needed to let go of, as well as what strengths they brought and what they needed to do to develop, in relation to how they wanted things to be (Day and Harrison, 2007). This aligns with the theory of evolutionary biology which recognises that for a species to thrive, there is a need to keep what is important, drop what is no longer serving them, and develop new characteristics (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009). The implication is that whilst the change in role demonstrates an objective letting go of old responsibilities, the psychological process of letting go needs to take place alongside an assessment of how the leader wants to be and what they need to do.

This is not to say that the need to let go is insignificant in the transition to a senior leadership position. The need to let go of old ways of thinking and acting in transition is widely reported in the literature on leader transitions (Dotlich, Noel and Walker, 2005; Kates and Downey, 2005; Goldsmith, 2008; Wiggins, 2019) and was confirmed. This study adds to understanding by highlighting that letting go is a practical, relational and cognitive challenge. Leaders had to practically let go of tasks by delegating them, because they were no longer their responsibility, or they no longer had the time to do them. Though, given the time management challenge described earlier, they struggled to find the time to work out what they could delegate. This was a relational challenge, as it meant that they had to develop ways of working with and trusting those to whom the tasks were delegated. It was also a cognitive challenge, as leaders were having to let go of how the task was carried out, and this, too, is described in the literature as difficult (Wiggins, 2019).

The challenge that some leaders faced to manage upwards shows that letting go, being aware of strengths, developing skills and seeing themselves as senior leaders are interrelated. In addition to dealing with the expansion of responsibility by empowering those below them to do more, some leaders were also having to manage upwards, to challenge what was passed down to them. This called for them to be able to see themselves as senior, to discuss this with their line managers, to let go of any fear about having the conversation, to recognise what they brought to their role, so that they felt good enough, and to develop the skills to have uncomfortable conversations.

The effect of the liminal or ***betwixt and between*** stage of transition was shown to raise deep personal questions that leaders explored in coaching about who they were as senior leaders. This aligns with the literature in terms of how transitions affect identity and how people see themselves (Ibarra, 2004a; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). The terms self and identity are described as being used synonymously across the literature (Oyserman, Elmore and Smith, 2012). A useful distinction, particularly relevant in transition, is made by Halliday, she describes the self as referring to the internal experience, as 'who I feel myself to be', which is shaped by external circumstances (Halliday, 2012, p. 109), whereas identity describes the self in relation to others, and derives from interaction with the social world. The findings confirm that both the internal and external experiences of identity are important in the transition to senior leadership positions.

The findings have shown that coaching helps leaders to explore their internal experience of how they feel themselves to be, through the consideration and development of their stories and narratives. Stories are fateful (Mead, 2014) and the stories that leaders shared in dyadic and group coaching gave them insight into what they brought with them into their roles, and how to shape the narrative for themselves as senior leaders. With regard to the external experience of identity, leaders described how they encountered different reactions from others more junior when they were promoted, as well as how they had to shift the way they worked with those who had been more senior and were now peers. This is supported in literature. Burke developed identity control theory, which recognises that discrepancies in anticipated reactions from others, or when actions don't have the desired effect, calls for a rebalance to maintain a coherent identity (Burke, 1991). The research shows how group coaching was particularly helpful in relation to the external experience of identity, as leaders benefitted from hearing how others saw them, during the metaphor exercise in workshop 3. This proved to be resourcing for leaders on both programmes, and would not have been available through dyadic coaching, unless the engagement incorporated an element of feedback. Even then, the feedback would in all probability be heard second hand, as opposed to directly from others. This extends understanding about how group coaching can create a safe enough space to explore deep and personal aspects of identity and support senior leader transitions more expansively than dyadic coaching alone.

Connected both to how they see themselves and how they relate to and engage with others, leaders also need to make changes to how they behave. Cognition is pragmatic (Oyserman, Elmore and Smith, 2012), and once a leader saw themselves as a senior leader, it translated into how they acted. One of the biggest challenges that leaders referred to was how to manage their time with the many and competing demands that they were facing. A revised mental construct of what a senior leader looks like shaped the options available to them, for example, setting priorities and being more intentional about their use of time, so that they could focus on the more unfamiliar, strategic and long-term tasks. This is particularly important for leaders in transition, as an empirical study has shown how clarity is related to a sense of control and confidence (Kilpatrick, 2022). This clarity could serve

to address the self-doubt that leaders associated with a move into a senior position, which was described earlier.

This understanding of the psychological process of personal transition for leaders moving into a senior leadership position challenges the conception of a staged process of transition, which positions letting go as separate to the liminal phase. This is important because it explains how the liminal, betwixt and between phase can be navigated, through an exploration of how leaders see and want to see themselves, and what that means they need to keep, drop and develop. This is based on developing clarity about who, and how, senior leaders need to be, to address the situations that they face and the people with whom they work. It aligns with contemporary views on leadership, which regard it as situational and relational (Firth, 2019). It also expands understanding of the exploration mode in the adjustment period, as described by Nicolson, by explaining how the role and personal development can take place (Nicolson, 1984; 1990).

The final stage, **integration**, involves recognising when leaders see themselves as senior leaders and when others see them as senior leaders. This may be a subjective measure, but it is important nonetheless, as it signifies the end of a process. In the absence of any method to measure a transition, this at least indicates what has been achieved.

In summary, new knowledge about the process of personal transition for senior leaders has been created. The research extends current literature by recognising how the challenges associated with stepping into senior leadership are exacerbated by confusion around what it means to be a senior leader, in response to the complex and ambiguous context and the evolving nature of leadership. Furthermore, during the non-linear stages in transition, my argument challenges the common view that letting go is a separate phase in the transition process and instead that it forms part of the messy liminal phase. Furthermore, merging letting go into the betwixt and between phase recognises how linked it is to keeping what is important and developing new skills, and that it needs to be driven by the new vision of what it means to lead. In a leadership transition, the objective shift in role involves letting go of old responsibilities and picking up new ones and transition support is often focused at this points. However, this research extends the literature by showing how it is only if, and

when, the incongruities between the old ways of working and the new position become clear, and cause upset and distress, that work to find congruence takes place. There may be no time limit on when this takes place.

8.1.2 Practical Application for Senior Leader Transitions

This clarification of the current challenges facing senior leaders in transition led to the development of three conceptual models, which have practical application. These models can be used by those supporting senior leaders through transition, as well as the leaders themselves, to raise awareness of what they may be facing and what may be causing them problems.

The first model, figure 8.4, summarises the three interrelated challenges that can make the transition to senior leadership problematic.

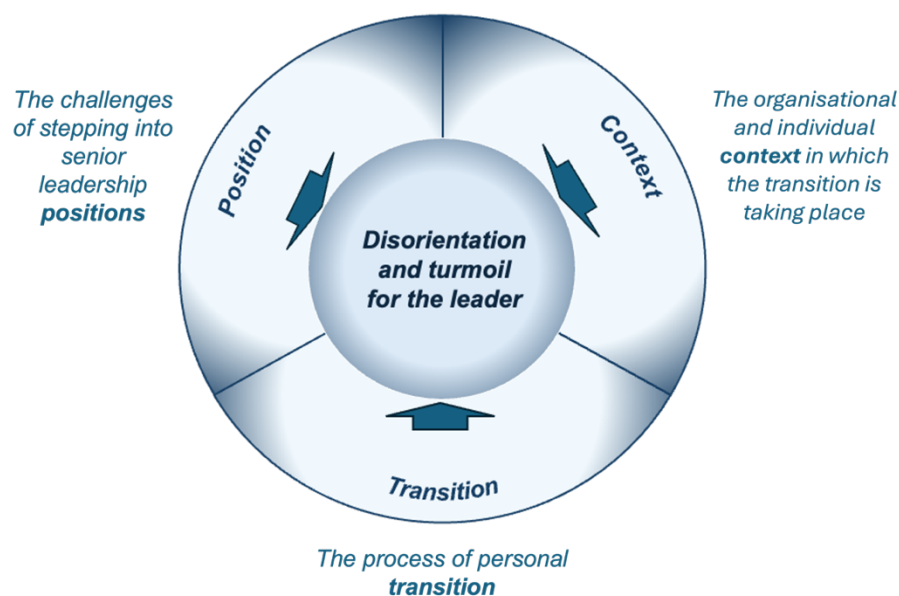


Figure 8.4: Challenges facing senior leaders in transition

The first challenge relates to the features of senior **positions** that make them the hardest to step into (Barrett, 1998; Rooke and Torbert, 2005; Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011): The second is the ambiguous and complex **context** within which the transition now takes place, including the lack of awareness and understanding about what it means to be a senior leader: The third the

psychologically demanding **process of personal transition**. A lack of clarity compounds disorientation and self-doubt, causing turmoil, which explains why it can be so problematic for some leaders. This model has practical implications, as it can help leaders themselves, and people working with them, to become aware of the different types of challenges that they may be facing in transition. This simple and accessible representation of the many and interrelated challenges provides a starting point in dyadic or group coaching conversations. At a time of overwhelm, disorientation and turmoil, it could help leaders to identify and understand what they might be struggling with and normalise the situation. This expanded awareness could then help them to focus on what they need and subsequently make a plan to act. The model could help those supporting leaders by helping them to understand the breadth of the challenges the leaders may be facing and what they could anticipate leaders might need to do to support them. Finally this model could be used by line managers to help them understand the breadth of challenges their reports may be dealing with and consider how they may best be able to support them.

The second model, figure 8.5, represents the process of personal transition for senior leaders and illustrates what they may be experiencing.

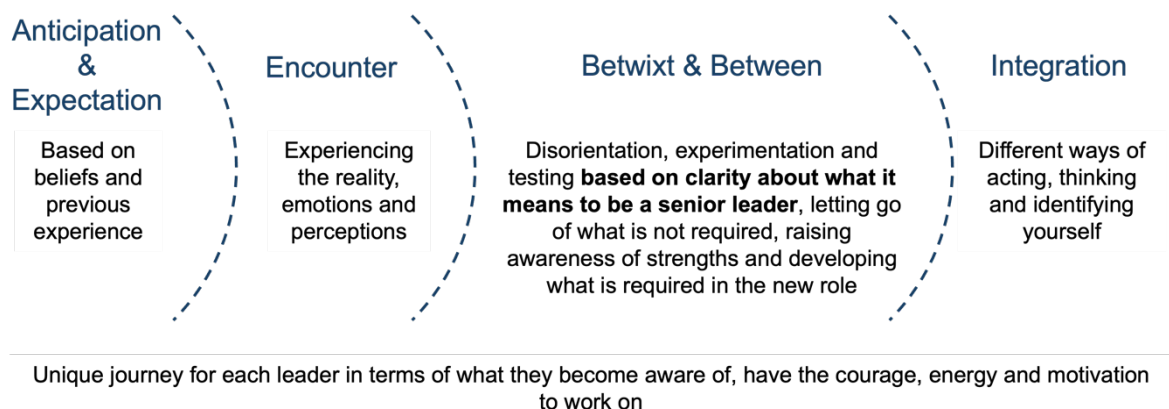


Figure 8.5: Psychological process of personal transition for senior leaders

This model summarises what could be happening for leaders in each of the nonlinear stages. As with the previous model, this could help leaders to understand and normalise what they are experiencing. Of particular relevance is the expanded understanding of the betwixt and between phase,

specifically, the need to explore what it means for each individual to be a senior leader and how that drives what to let go of, keep doing and develop. This builds on the literature in the field of senior leader transitions by positioning where, within the process of transition, work on identity and transformational learning takes place (Skinner, 2020b; Skinner, 2020a; Terblanche, 2022; Snape, 2024). As before, the practical application comes from showing this model to leaders in transition and those working with them, to develop a common understanding of what could be causing their struggles. It could help prepare those approaching transition for what may be ahead, and it could help those in the midst of a transition to identify how far through it they might be. With that awareness, comes the chance to plan how to act.

Building on the awareness of the challenges and what leaders may be experiencing, the third model, figure 8.6, summarises the nature of the coaching inquiry.

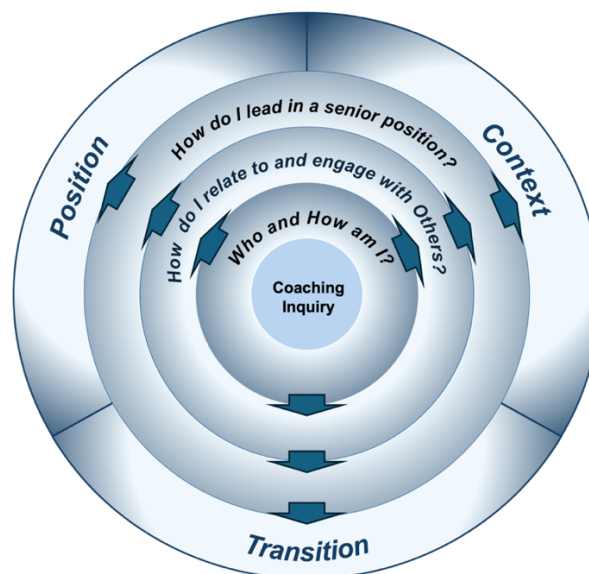


Figure 8.6: Model to show the inquiry during coaching for the transition to senior leadership positions

The findings identified that coaching creates the space for leaders to explore key questions that arise in the transition to senior leadership positions. These are ‘Who and how am I?’, ‘How do I relate to and engage with others?’ and ‘How do I lead in a senior position?’. The findings from the action phase provided evidence that exploring these questions helped leaders recognise and normalise the

challenges they were facing. As well as raising their awareness of the type of questions leaders may be asking themselves, consciously or unconsciously, both dyadic and group coaches have something to ask leaders in transition. For example, 'How do you see yourself?' 'How effectively are you relating to and engaging with others?' and 'How effectively do you feel you are leading in a senior position?' This could help leaders think for themselves and identify any work that is required. These specific questions focus attention on key areas, as opposed to asking more general questions about how leaders are in transition. Coaches will also be more aware of how the answers to these questions are all interrelated.

Taken together these models provide leaders and coaches with tools to raise understanding and awareness of their situation, and of what could be helpful to explore in order to move forward.

8.1.3 Summary of theoretical and practical contributions for senior leader transitions

Whilst research into the process of transition itself is lacking empirical study (Halliday, 2012; Wiggins, 2019) literature on senior leader transitions is growing. This includes the impact of the transition and what leaders need support for (Gill, 2017; Reynolds, McCauley and Tsacoumis, 2018; Kilpatrick, 2022) and how to support leaders through, for example, transformational learning and identity work (Terblanche, Albertyn and van Coller-Peter, 2017; Terblanche, 2019; Skinner, 2020a; Terblanche, 2022; Snape, 2024). The findings from this study contribute to the field by updating and extending understanding of the challenges associated with transition and by conceptualising knowledge into models to raise awareness and focus inquiry.

Theoretical contributions include extending the literature, by exposing how the complexity and ambiguity in the contexts within which senior leaders are working, makes the transition into a senior position difficult. And how this is compounded by the confusion surrounding the evolution of leadership itself. At a time of personal confusion and disorientation, outdated and unexamined notions of what it means to be a senior leader, coupled with a lack of role models and a dynamic environment that makes templates unworkable, means leaders have no clear path to follow. The only option is working through their thinking in their unique situation. Group coaching assists such work

as it takes place alongside others, in a microcosm of the organisation making it directly relevant to what and who they have to deal with.

Practical contributions come through a set of conceptual models which can be shared with leaders in transition and those who work with and support them, including coaches. They can provide a focus for conversations that can help to raise understanding and awareness of what leaders could be experiencing and how they can best be supported.

8.2 Contributions to group coaching

The previous section described how the findings extend and develop knowledge about the disorientation and struggles caused by the transition to senior leadership positions. This section considers how the findings contribute to theoretical knowledge about how group coaching can support leaders through this transition, and how that knowledge can be practically applied.

8.2.1 Theoretical knowledge about group coaching

The discussion centres around how it was possible for senior leaders to explore the deeply personal questions, figure 8.6, at times of unprecedented challenge for them (Gill, 2017), and when the idea of working in groups is described by Turner as ‘tantalising and yet so disturbing’ (Turner, 2012, p. xi). Turner goes on to highlight the paradox of the group’s potential to ‘amplify achievement’ as well as ‘cause devastation’. Furthermore, Brown and Grant suggest that many participants find group coaching highly challenging and personally difficult (Brown and Grant, 2010) and additionally, self-development itself can cause distress (Sutton and Crobach, 2022). It will discuss the following:

- Co-creation of a safe and productive space
- Sharing of multiple relevant inputs
- Processing of inputs to accomplish outcomes

Co-creation of a safe and productive space

The potential scale of the vulnerability of the senior leaders has been exposed through an examination of the challenges they face in transition. Two topics for discussion are how the transitional space was created given the level of vulnerability, and how the benefits of co-creating such space extended beyond group coaching. The term transitional space was defined by Winnicott in the 1950s, and is based on his work in the development of babies and young children, as they find their place in the world (Winnicott, 1991). During a study investigating training for high-potential managers, who had studied for an Executive MBA, Dubouloy described it as space to facilitate 'experiment, openness and confrontation with others, production of meaning and the self' (Dubouloy, 2004, p. 469).

Such deep exploration necessitated the creation of somewhere that leaders felt safe enough to express themselves cognitively and emotionally, as opposed to disengaging, withdrawing and defending themselves (Kahn, 1990). This meant that creating psychological safety was important. The concept of psychological safety originated in the work of Schein and Bennis in the 1960s, in relation to helping people feel safe enough to be capable of changing (Edmondson, 2012). It supports change by addressing the learning anxiety that is created when data is received that something needs to change (Schein and Schein, 2017). During the leadership transition, an example of this could be when leaders find that they can no longer fit their expanded responsibilities into the way they have worked before. If leaders don't feel psychologically safe, they may not be open to exploring new ways of thinking and doing things. Based on her research with teams, Edmonson introduced the concept of psychological safety as a group-level construct, as opposed to it sitting within the individual, and listed its benefits (Edmondson, 2012, p. 126). These are shown in the table in figure 7.6, along with a description of how they link to the many relevant inputs and processing themes that were generated through the analysis.

Benefit of psychological safety	How psychological safety helps group coaching
Encourages speaking up	Reduces fear of negative reaction from others, so more relevant inputs are shared, nothing holds the leaders back from saying what they need to

Enables clarity of thought	Reduces activation of fear within the brain, which promotes exploration and processing. Processing of inputs is not restricted. Leaders are relaxed and able to follow where their thoughts take them and challenge their thinking to find clarity
Supports productive conflict	Allows self-expression, productive discussion and thoughtful handling of conflict. More relevant inputs are shared as leaders do not fear conflict and are open to constructive challenge which promotes further processing
Mitigates failure	Easier to discuss failures. More relevant inputs shared without fear of judgement of mistakes
Removes obstacles to focus on goal achievement	Focus on goals as opposed to self- protection. More relevant inputs are shared as leaders focus on what could help the transition without limiting their thoughts
Increases accountability	Climate supports interpersonal risks to achieve goals. More relevant inputs and processing

Figure 8.7: Psychological safety benefits and links to findings

The above table shows that the creation of a safe and productive space was vital to promote the sharing and processing of multiple relevant inputs. Psychological safety also promoted a willingness to speak, and mitigated the risks to leaders of being seen as 'ignorant, incompetent, negative or disruptive' (Edmondson, 2012, p. 121). This adds to theoretical knowledge about group coaching by describing how psychological safety underpins the work that takes place. This is important because whilst previous studies have recognised the potential group coaching offers (O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017) there are very few studies describing its effective implementation, let alone what underpinned its success.

Another concept related to the safe space that was created is that of a community of practice. Wenger describes these as groups of people who share a concern or passion and meet regularly (Wenger and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The group that was created through group coaching could be described as a community of practice, as it meets the three characteristics: there was a shared sense of identity, as the leaders were all going through the transition to a senior position; the leaders participated in joint activities and discussions; and there was an exchange of stories and experiences. That both groups met once the group coaching had finished adds further support to this being a community of practice and echoes Ward, in terms of the group taking on a life of its own

(Ward, 2008). This is important as it suggests that groups formed during group coaching could also contribute towards creating learning systems that could benefit the organisations in which they operate. This extends the benefits of group coaching beyond the need that the group coaching was set up to address. This study makes a contribution by providing empirical knowledge of how group coaching can lead to the creation of a community of practice.

Psychological safety was one component of two group conditions that Fusco, O’Riordan and Palmer (2015) identified as key in their study into the development of authentic leadership through group coaching. The second was group cohesion, which they defined as the ‘bedrock’ upon which work took place, and which contributed to a sense of belonging and acceptance (Fusco, O’Riordan and Palmer 2015, p. 137). The concept of group cohesiveness as a therapeutic factor has been widely researched and explored, yet it lacks a consistent definition (Yalom, 2005). In spite of this, Yalom goes on to say that group cohesiveness is a significant factor in group therapy, and that members in a cohesive group are ‘accepting of one another, supportive and inclined to form meaningful relationships’ (Yalom, 2005, p. 75). Matching this description with the findings suggests that the group was cohesive, supporting previous group coaching studies into learning and wellbeing (Fusco, O’Riordan and Palmer, 2015; Nacif, 2020). What makes the creation of this psychologically safe and cohesive space novel and important is that it was achieved in a workplace, with senior leaders, who were experiencing a demanding transition. This was a closed group, with the same members attending every workshop, which promoted cohesion. Given the considerable diary challenges that the senior leaders expressed, this demonstrates a significant commitment to the work that they were doing together. Without the psychological safety and cohesiveness, the group coaching may not have been so valuable, and the leaders may not have been so committed. This has implications for running a group coaching programme, as one leader failing to attend a workshop could reduce cohesion and limit the outcomes.

One additional therapeutic factor that was evident within the safe space included socialising techniques, as leaders exhibited tolerance and empathy for each other. These were identified in the work of Stelter, Nielsen and Wikman (2011) who used group coaching for narrative identity work. They are particularly relevant given the relational nature of leadership. One of the outcomes

expressed by the leaders was that they were more understanding and accepting of others generally, not just those within the group. Such respect for others could also be seen as an example of social sensitivity, which Woolley *et al.* (2010) describe as contributing to the development of collective intelligence. Collective Intelligence is defined as 'groups of individuals acting collectively in ways that seem intelligent' (Malone, 2015 p.3). This means that, during group coaching, leaders experienced a more empathetic way of engaging with others, and this helped them to engage more empathetically after group coaching. Engaging with others during group coaching improved how they engaged with others beyond group coaching.

The co-created nature of the space is significant because it recognises the roles that both coach and leaders play. The leaders attributed the creation of the safe space to the coach, and, as Benson suggests, the worker is the embodiment of the group in the early stages (Benson, 2019). However, once the workshops began, the attitudes and behaviour of the leaders in the group co-created the space along with the coach. This is relevant, because the false attribution to the coach suggests that group members look elsewhere, without realising the influence they all have, individually, in co-creating the space. An awareness of the co-creation of space is important, so that leaders understand how they all share responsibility for how psychologically safe, cohesive and productive it is. This is not something that can lie solely with the coach, and the coach cannot take that responsibility upon themselves, as they cannot control the attitudes and behaviours that make up the space. An understanding of this within group coaching could also help leaders see the role that they play in creating safe and productive spaces within their teams and other groups at work.

The interviews that were conducted before group coaching began could have contributed to the co-creation of space. They gave leaders the time to think about their hopes and concerns for group coaching, as well as what they wanted to get out of it. This started the thinking process, so that when the leaders came together and created the group contract, it built on questions they had already considered. Having had the interview, one potential participant chose not to participate. Their reasoning was not explored, though it could be speculated that the interview helped the leaders to make an informed choice about whether or not to participate. It helped them to consider what participation would mean, and to explore their motivation. These findings align with those of

O'Connor, Studholme and Grant (2017) from a pilot group coaching programme, which also identified how important preparation, and a goal focus, were. This highlights the importance of work carried out beforehand to lay the foundations for the group coaching programme. The personal connection that develops between the coach and leader serves not only to help the leader to explore their motivation to attend, but to lay the groundwork for the way that the group will work together. When groups flounder or fail through lack of attendance, it could be attributed to a lack of preparation. Participants may not have fully explored their motivation to attend, or what attending would mean.

This section has outlined the features of the safe and productive space and how it was co-created. This is important because of how it contributed to group coaching, in terms of preceding the many relevant inputs and processing which are described in the next sections. It is also significant for three other reasons. Firstly, as the leaders co-create the space, they can see how they could play an active role in co-creating such space with other groups in the future. This is an example of group coaching having a ripple effect. For example, one leader asked a group he was working with to create their own group contract, as opposed to telling them what to include, and another began using check-ins with their team. Secondly, hearing from others helped leaders to be more understanding and accepting of each other within the group, and this was transferred into their interactions outside group coaching. For example, leaders showed more consideration of how their messages would be received when communicating with others, and were curious about what could be happening for others, rather than judging behaviour. Thirdly, the leaders who came together for group coaching became a community that met once group coaching had finished. This perpetuated the potential for learning within the leadership of the organisation.

Sharing of many relevant inputs

The co-creation of the safe and productive space encouraged the leaders to offer inputs, in the form of their stories and ideas. Telling stories can offer a validation of personal experience, and act as a catalyst for change (Brown and Grant, 2010). These inputs also provide a common repertoire, which is another feature of a community of practice (Wenger and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). As the leaders became more trusting, supportive and sensitive towards each other, the breadth and depth of topics expanded. It was noted that the usually unspoken topics of race and gender were covered. In the

spirit of reciprocity, and with deep listening and questioning on the part of leaders and coach, an abundance of content was provided for leaders to process, to develop their understanding and reframe their thinking.

It was the introduction of many inputs to the space that differentiated group coaching from dyadic coaching. This is demonstrated in figures 8.8 and 8.9. In dyadic coaching, the coach and leader may be said to co-create the safe space between themselves, and the leader processes the inputs that are generated through their conversation (see figure 8.7).

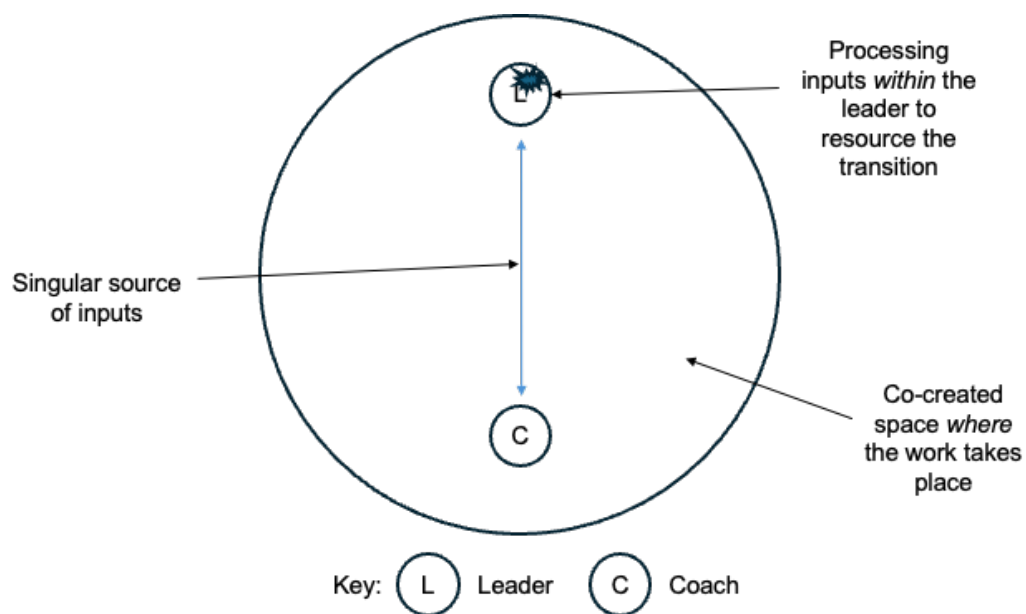


Figure 8.8: Inputs generated through dyadic coaching

In contrast, figure 8.8 shows the multiple inputs, which set off a chain reaction in leaders as they sparked off each other, to provide further inputs. This could be described as an example of the creative emergence, for which O'Connor, Studholme and Grant (2017) described group coaching as having the potential.

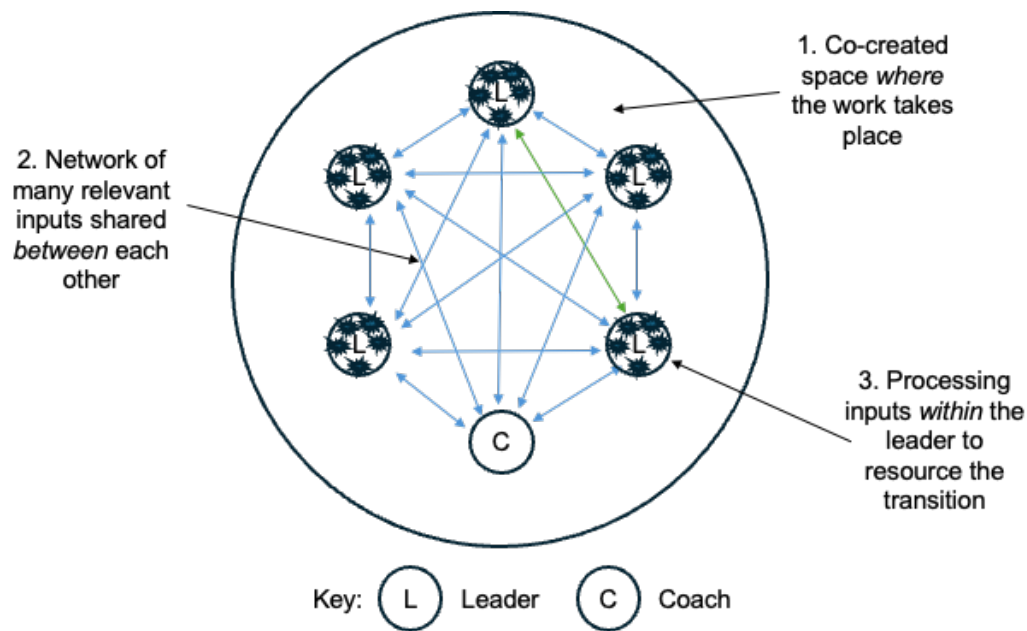


Figure 8.9: Many relevant inputs generated through group coaching

It is the relevance of the many inputs that further differentiates group coaching. Like dyadic coaching, group coaching is focused on the agenda, and what is most important for the leader at that point in time. This means that the stories and ideas that are shared within the group are immediately relevant. This is important because it limits the risk of time being wasted on things that are not relevant, which promotes further engagement. The inputs build on each other based on the energy and interest of the group.

The provision of many relevant inputs also sets group coaching apart from other forms of support for leaders. For example, training may be provided to support leaders as they step into new parts of the business. This can be termed onboarding, when leaders join new organisations. This type of development often follows a fixed agenda, and the content provided may or may not be relevant at the time it is offered. The difference is represented in figure 8.10.

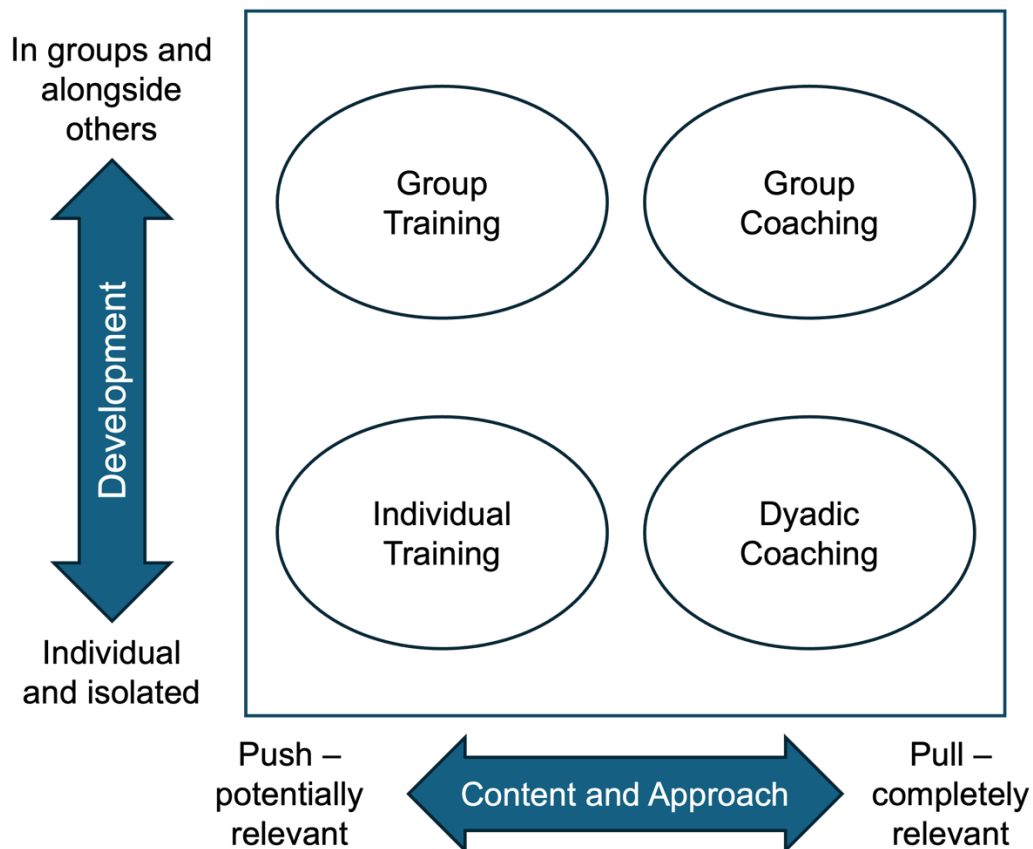


Figure 8.10: Relevance of inputs in types of development

The figure illustrates that group coaching involves development alongside others. The approach and content are relevant, as they are based around the requirements and agenda of the leaders within the group. Leadership development programmes tend to be based around a fixed curriculum, though may include elements of group and dyadic coaching to ensure its relevance.

The relevance of the many inputs is important, as group coaching allows leaders to explore their views of leadership, to test and evolve their thinking with a group of other leaders, and to develop a vision that aligns with who they are and the situation they are facing. This recognises the unique combination of issues for each leader in transition. It is also in contrast to leaders in training or leadership development programmes, who may be offered templates of how leaders should be and what they should do. Given the lack of clarity and self-doubt in transition, leaders may be susceptible to such templates, although they may not be appropriate for them or their situation.

The flexibility of the agenda assisted the development of many relevant inputs, as it provided the freedom for the group to explore topics as they arose. For example, when one group member checked in in a state of emotional difficulty, the rest of the group supported an exploration of the challenges they were facing, which served to resource them. There was enough structure within the workshop to ensure that group members felt safe, and to check on progress against goals, yet there was also flexibility to go along with the energy of the leaders in the group. This freedom in terms of process differentiates group coaching from more structured mechanisms, such as action learning sets.

Processing of inputs to accomplish outcomes

Once the inputs were offered into the space, the leaders were able to reflect upon what they heard and how it related to their own thinking and experience. Probing and questioning of their own and others' thinking led to greater understanding and reframing of assumptions and experience. In their investigation into dyadic coaching to construct identity, Hughes and Vaccaro (2024) identified five sub-types of probing: descriptive, affective, insight, challenge, and action. These were not named during group coaching, but they cover the range of probing from the coach and other leaders.

Finding new ways of looking at things is an example of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2000) and cognitive redefinition (Schein and Schein, 2017). These new ways of thinking normalised and resourced leaders, as evidenced by the group coaching outcomes, presented in Chapter 6.

Normalising these challenges aligns with previous studies into group coaching for transitions, wellbeing, and support with identity development (Grajfoner, 2009; Whitely, 2013; Nacif, 2020; Bonneywell and Gannon, 2022). At the heart of this is the realisation that group members are not the only ones facing these problems. As opposed to hearing from a coach in dyadic coaching that others experience these challenges, in group coaching, leaders heard from each other that they shared the same struggles.

Leaders were resourced in terms of finding answers to the questions explored during group coaching. The social interaction served to validate interpretations and justify new perspectives

(Mezirow, 1991). Leaders were able to make sense of their situation through the information and interpretation of other members of the group (Louis, 1980b). Through this, the leaders gained self-knowledge, which opened up choices about how to lead and engage with others (Taconis, 2018). As a result, the leaders conveyed that they were seeing themselves as senior leaders, that they were more intentional in their interactions with others, and that they had more clarity about how to lead in a senior position. This element of resourcing is evident throughout separate empirical studies of group coaching (Stelter, Nielsen and Wikman, 2011; Mühlberger and Traut-Mattausch, 2015). However, this research study has shown how group coaching can resource leaders in many ways, at the same time. This could also be described as 'soul work', as it allowed the leaders to think about and understand their sense of self and identity (Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton, 2006). This is significant because, prior to group coaching, a concern had been expressed that it might not be possible to work at the same depth in groups, compared to dyadic coaching. It also challenges the perception that dyadic coaching may be better than group coaching (O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017).

Resourcing in many ways is important for this type of transition, because the areas of disorientation are interrelated. For example, seeing themselves as senior leaders was related to being more aware of the strengths they brought to their role, which is also related to a reduction in the self-doubt that could potentially be caused by the transition (Nicholson, 1984; Sugarman, 2001). This reduction, in turn, helped to improve their levels of confidence and comfort with their insecurities. They described being more positive, more open and less stressed. At the same time, engaging with others became more productive through greater understanding and empathy for others. This is an example of how social capital can be developed through group coaching. Social capital is defined as network connections that have an economic value to organisations, through the way that leaders who know each other well can interact (Balkundi and Kilduff, 2006). As such, group coaching was supporting the shift in leadership away from attributes and towards interactions, which aligns with contemporary approaches based on relationships and interactions (Crevani, 2019). Furthermore it supports the use of soft power in response to the current context involving wicked problems (Grint, 2005b) and the need for collective intelligence (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2023)

Leaders who had participated in group coaching were giving greater consideration to what, and how, they communicated. They were speaking up and showcasing their work to more senior levels and delegating and empowering those below. This shows an evolution of how they came to see themselves as peers of the senior leaders. There was also recognition of the need for leaders to step back, notice, and challenge themselves about how they were leading and looking after themselves to lead others. This included being more focused and managing their time more effectively. Additional outcomes related to the learning about the process of transition, specifically normalising the challenges. Moreover, the responses to the survey described leaders feeling content and restored, reassured, reinvigorated and supported.

These findings provide further evidence of what may be possible through group coaching. In the workplace, this demonstrates how it can support leaders to change how they see themselves, to develop capacity and confidence (Fusco, O Riordan and Palmer, 2015; Kilpatrick, 2022), and to permit work on how they think and act (Kets de Vries, 2005). The supportive environment that leaders described aligned with findings for group coaching studies for transitions (Grajfoner, 2009; Whitely, 2013). The use of groups to support wellbeing is reinforced (Nacif, 2020), as are the positive reactions to group coaching (Stelter, Nielsen and Wikman, 2011; Bonneywell *et al.*, 2016; Nacif, 2020). There was also a ripple effect, when leaders experimented with some of the exercises and activities with their own teams (O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017). This ripple effect extended to the leaders being more empathetic and accepting of others throughout the organisation.

The processing of inputs, probing and questioning is a feature of dyadic coaching. What makes it different in group coaching is that the processing and development takes place in the context of the group, a microcosm of the organisational environment (Brown and Grant, 2010). This is particularly relevant as organisations have been shown to inhibit leadership transitions (Wiggins, 2019). Working through transition challenges within the organisation in the group suggests that group coaching could not only provide learning for the leaders, but for the organisation itself. Additionally, as Benson describes, 'The Group provides context within which socialisation and the formation and development of self occurs' (Benson, 2019, p. 4). Part of the processing and development is

associated with the other members of the group, which adds another dimension to it and further supports the development of relationships outside the group coaching.

The enforced move to group coaching online reflected the way in which leaders were having to work, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus reflected society (Dickenson, Burgoyne and Pedler, 2010). The findings reinforced other studies that have shown how effective online coaching, learning and development can be for leaders (Radcliff, 2017; Aspinwall, Pedler and Radcliff, 2018; Jackson and Bourne, 2020). Some of the leaders participating in the research expressed a preference that group coaching was conducted in person. However, working online was found to have been more helpful for others, who would have felt more uncomfortable in person. This aligns with the findings in the study conducted by Jackson and Bourne (2020). The outcomes achieved through group coaching online suggest that it can be useful, despite some leaders' preferences, whilst group coaching in person could limit the engagement of some leaders.

Summary of how group coaching supported leaders

This section has discussed how group coaching supported leaders through transition, both in terms of what happened during the group coaching itself and the outcomes that were achieved. It has shown how the apprehension that is associated with working in groups was overcome through a setup that allowed leaders to think about what the value of joining the group would be, and what joining the group would mean. The preparatory interviews before group coaching began served to build trust and rapport and probe thinking, which helped leaders to clarify their motivation to join, and allowed them to voice concerns. In doing so, their articulation helped them to define what needed to be in place for the work to be safe and productive. This was established in the first workshop, through the group contracts. These laid the foundations for agreement around effective attitudes and behaviour. The content and design of the workshops was based around meeting leaders' psychological needs when working with others, which helped them to work together (Benson, 2019). The co-creation of safe and productive space meant that leaders felt able to fully engage and contribute through reciprocal sharing of stories and ideas. Furthermore, the benefit of co-creating the safe and productive space extended beyond the group coaching, to facilitate engagement with others within the organisation. The multiple and relevant inputs created a chain reaction that served to

develop understanding and reframe thinking. Not only did this resource leaders through the transition, but it also contributed to the development of more collaborative leadership practices.

Finally, the enforced move to work online presented the opportunity to see how the use of technology did not hinder the achievement of outcomes. Furthermore, it may have encouraged participation, in a way that in-person group coaching might not.

This explanation of how group coaching supported leaders contributes to the field as an empirical study of how it can work for senior leaders within the workplace. The identification of the sequential process of co-creating the safe and productive space, into which many relevant inputs are shared for leaders to process their thinking, informs the field. It also begins to differentiate group coaching from other mechanisms of support, in that it was based upon asking open questions, as opposed to offering content, and the agenda was flexible, as opposed to fixed, so could respond to individual needs, as and when they arose and were most relevant. (Britton, 2010; Britton, 2015; Mühlberger and Traut-Mattausch, 2015; Sutton and Crobach, 2022). The study also presents evidence, through the coaching outcomes, which shows that it can be a useful means of leader and leadership development.

8.2.2 Practical Application for group coaching

As well as exploring how group coaching could support leaders through transition, the aim of this study was to develop a practical framework for group coaching. This section of the chapter discusses a two-part practical framework. The first part of the framework describes who and what is involved when undertaking group coaching. The second part expands upon what the coach does during group coaching. These add to knowledge about how to undertake a group coaching programme for leaders in transition to a senior position, and what is involved for the coach.

The group coaching framework was introduced and described in Chapter 5, it has been developed to illustrate the richness of a group coaching programme and is presented in figure 8.11. The framework has been designed for practitioners. It organises ideas, and highlights elements in the coaching

process to guide decisions and actions (Lennard, 2010). On the left, it lists the people to involve in a group coaching programme, and across the top, the key activities that take place.

The role of the sponsor has been introduced, as this is a feature of coaching within organisations (Bachkirova and Kemp, 2024). Their role can be summarised as providing the energy and resources to establish a group coaching programme in an organisation. They are involved in commissioning the programme, identifying those for whom it may be most useful, and they need to be involved in the evaluation, to assess how group coaching met the individual and organisational needs. If group coaching is run as an open programme, with leaders from different organisations, the sponsor would be whoever provides the resources to promote and then establish the technological and administrative scaffolding for the programme. In some circumstances, this may be the coach themselves. The significance to practical application is the recognition that there needs to be someone who takes responsibility for ensuring it is effective. Without this, group coaching risks being ineffective and fails to be purposeful, which negatively impacts the reputation of the mechanism.

The coach is involved throughout the programme, and the leaders are involved from the programme setup onwards. The framework recognises four key phases, firstly the *development* of the programme, then the *setup* of the programme, then a series of group coaching *workshops*, and finally the *follow up*, which includes evaluation.

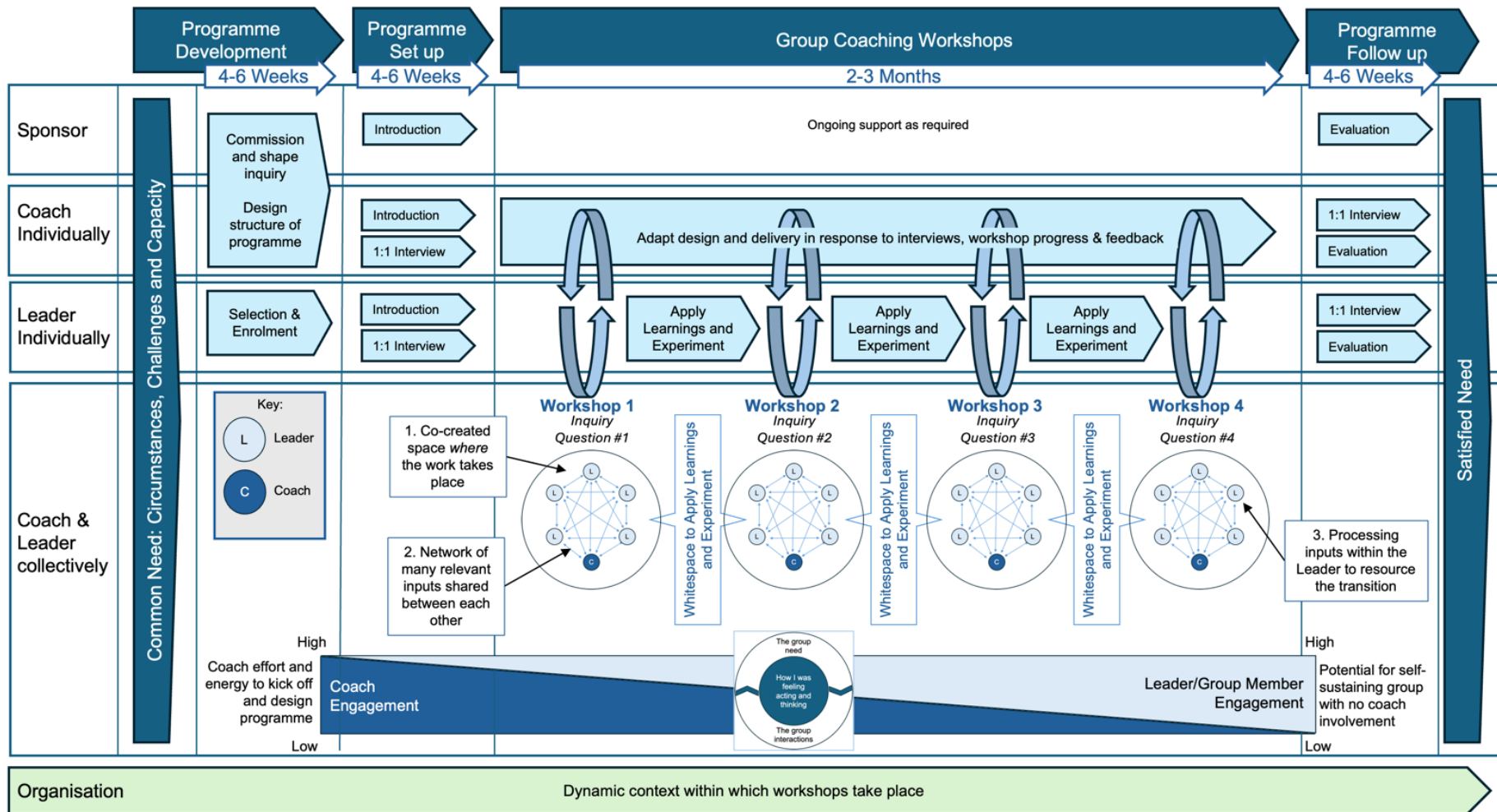


Figure 8.11: Updated group coaching framework

Programme development

The development of the programme involves commissioning and shaping the inquiry. This begins by establishing why group coaching could be an effective mechanism for support or development. What problem needs addressing that could be useful for potential members of the group to explore together? At the heart of group coaching is a common need around which individuals pursue their own goals. There are three elements that make up a common need:

- Shared circumstances that create a common situation
- Similar challenges or development needs that potential attendees may be motivated to address
- Personal capacity to address these challenges at this point in time

Shared circumstances relate to a set of facts or conditions that each potential attendee is experiencing. In this study, each leader was on the verge of being in, or was already in, a senior leadership position, and their common situation was unifying. Within this common situation, it was anticipated that leaders could be facing similar challenges or sharing common development needs. Importantly, they would also have the capacity, both in terms of the time to invest in attending the workshop, and in learning orientation, to apply learning and experiment in between workshops. This ensured that the work undertaken in the group would be immediately relevant to their daily tasks. These three elements combine, so that within the unifying situation, overlapping goals could be addressed and the potential benefits of working with others optimised, to achieve change. This is a significant extension to the understanding of group coaching, because it identifies the elements which, if not present, mean that group coaching will not be implemented effectively. If the participants are not in a common situation they are less likely to have overlapping needs, which can be effectively explored alongside others. If they are not motivated to address challenges, they may not be open to exploring what they think and feel about them, energised to act to change things, or supportive of others. Finally, if they do not have the capacity to attend all the workshops, a cohesive group may not be created, thus restricting the chances of co-creating a safe and productive space which could limit the sharing of inputs and reduce the processing that could lead to change. This provides coaches and

those looking to establish group coaching with a test to check whether it could be an effective mechanism.

Questions for future practitioners when considering group coaching include:

- What shared circumstances bring people together, to create a common and unifying situation?
- What similar challenges or development needs could potential attendees be motivated to address?
- How much capacity do potential attendees have to address these challenges and needs at this point in time?

At the programme development stage, the answers to these questions can only be anticipated. It is only during programme setup that the answers can be confirmed.

Once the common need has been identified, the structure and design of the programme can be based around what would make a useful inquiry. In this study, the structure of the programme was based upon an inquiry that would lead to the exploration of key questions associated with the transition to senior leadership positions. The findings evidenced the vital part that the introduction and interviews play, to prepare the coach and participants and to begin the co-creation of space. A series of workshops serves to build upon and evolve the inquiry, and provide time for experimentation and subsequent reflection.

Programme setup

The setup of the programme involves the coach and leaders laying the foundations for the way the group coaching will work. This involves providing information to potential participants and creating the opportunity to explore whether and how group coaching could be useful for them. Whilst not vital, some kind of introduction to group coaching kickstarts thinking for potential attendees and helps them to decide whether to participate. The one-to-one interview before group coaching is vital, as it serves to begin the co-creation of the safe and productive space. Specifically it allows:

- Potential attendees to consider how engaging in group coaching could be useful for them (motivation)
- Potential attendees to consider what might help and hinder their participation in group coaching (engagement)
- The coach to start to build a rapport with each member of the group (working alliance)
- The coach to understand what will make group coaching most useful for potential attendees (goal focus)
- The coach to consider how to deliver group coaching (approach)

Depending on the sensitivity of the topic, the interview could also be used for the coach to assess suitability for group coaching, in terms of potential participants' ability to access inner thoughts and emotions, offer sensitive and constructive feedback to others, and accept feedback from others constructively.

The focus during the setup is on enrolling those for whom group coaching will be relevant at this point in time. It also follows that it will separate out those who are not motivated to fully engage. The end point of the setup is a cohort of motivated and committed participants ready to begin group coaching together. The implication is that if such a cohort is not created, the implementation of group coaching will not be as effective, as it will impede the co-creation of a safe and productive space, so limiting the relevant inputs and reducing the processing needed to drive action.

Group coaching workshops

The structure of the group coaching programme, in terms of the number, dates and timing of the workshops is fixed from the start, to ensure potential members are able to commit to each one. Any changes to the schedule need to be agreed within the group. The high-level design around the inquiry, for example what each workshop will explore, also needs to be shared from the start to help potential attendees understand what they are committing to exploring. More detailed design within the workshops needs to respond to what happens and feedback received within and outside the workshops. Anonymous surveys provide attendees with the opportunity to feedback what is working and what could be improved, as well as extending the opportunity to reflect upon their experience.

Programme follow up

The follow up to group coaching involves an exploration of how the common need has been satisfied and, specifically, what is different as a result of the participants coming together. Different sources will allow for a triangulation of the data on what outcomes were achieved and how the group coaching was experienced:

- Feedback shared within the final workshop
- Feedback provided through anonymous surveys
- Data received during the initial follow-up 1:1 interview
- Data received during a distal follow-up 1:1 interview or group discussion
- Data received from stakeholders within the organisation.

Levels at which the coach works

The base of the framework recognises the shift of energy and effort away from the coach and towards the members of the group throughout the programme. The ways in which the coach works are further explored in figure 8.12. These levels expand what happens in the group coaching framework. Level 1 involves engaging others to structure the programme based around an identified need. Level 2 involves designing the workshops based on knowledge and experience of the common need that unites the group and what participants are looking for. Level 3 describes what the coach is doing during the workshops. At the end of the second workshop, I was able to expand my understanding of what consciously cooperating in group coaching meant, through a review of my field notes. Based on the critical moments I had recorded, I noticed that my awareness shifted between how I was thinking, feeling and acting; how we were meeting the group need, defined as exploring topics that were relevant to the transition; and how the group were interacting. These constant shifts in awareness add to understanding of the mastery that O'Connor, Studholme and Grant describe, to 'facilitate the development and integration of multiple perspectives in the attainment of multiple levels of hierarchically related goals' (O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017, p. 12).

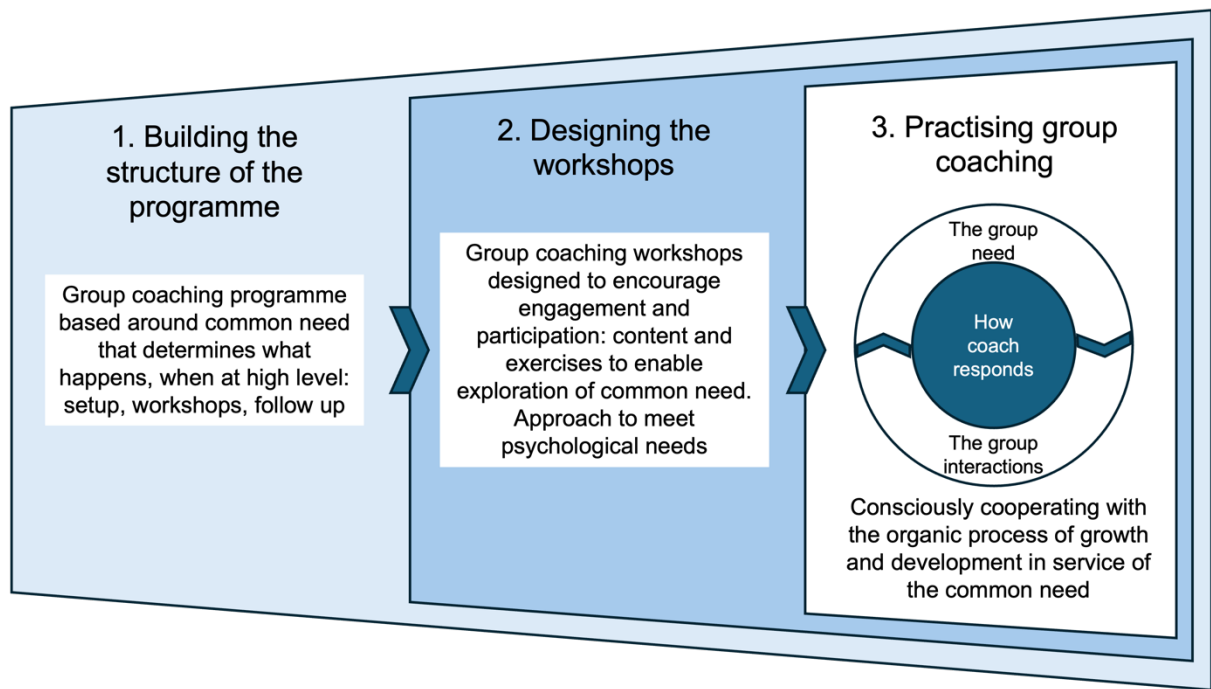


Figure 8.12: Representation of the levels at which the coach works

The two-part framework makes a significant contribution to knowledge about group coaching and group coaching practice. This is the first empirical study that has offered a framework to show who needs to be involved, and at what point, to develop a group coaching programme. Whilst this programme is focused on group coaching for the transition to a senior leadership position, it provides people in organisations and coaches somewhere to start to develop their own group coaching programmes. The levels model recognises the scope of the work involved in delivering a group coaching programme in organisations and, therefore, what skills are required. For example, developing a programme and shaping the inquiry in an organisation are more akin to consultancy and project management skills. This model also adds to knowledge about the different things that the coach needs to be aware of during the group coaching workshops. Revealing the different levels at which work takes place in group coaching enables coaches and coaching trainers to develop the skills and attitudes needed to understand and practise group coaching. Taken together, these contributions to knowledge help towards differentiating group coaching from other similar human resource development and organisation development interventions (Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie, 2009).

8.2.3 Summary of theoretical and practical contributions for group coaching

Confusion exists about what group coaching is and how it can be implemented. Moreover, research lags behind that into dyadic coaching. This study addresses the gap, as one of very few empirical studies into group coaching that is based on the experience of those taking part, as opposed to being based on retrospective accounts. When combined with the forensic and two stage approach to analysis, the study offers a significant contribution to theory about group coaching. It has identified how a safe and productive space for inquiry, alongside others, can be created and optimised. The development of the two part group coaching framework provides coaches and those considering implementing group coaching, with somewhere to begin. Further, it raises awareness for coaches and coach educators of what being a group coach involves.

8.3 Implications of the findings and contributions

This final part of the chapter addresses the implications of the contributions for group coaching and senior leader transitions. It then goes on to discuss further implications for leader and leadership development.

Implications for group coaching

The explanation of how group coaching supported leaders contributes to the field of coaching, as an empirical study of how group coaching can be an effective mechanism for the development of senior leaders, within the workplace, in terms of how it supported leaders to achieve their goals.

Furthermore, the identification of the sequential steps that established a safe and productive space for inquiry, alongside others, informs the coaching field about how group coaching works. This research also helps to differentiate group coaching from other group based mechanisms of support and development, such as action learning and training. This is because group coaching was based upon asking open questions, as opposed to offering content, and the agenda was flexible, as opposed to fixed, so that it could respond to individual needs, as and when they arose and were most relevant.

Based on the findings from this study, exploring group coaching for leaders in transition to senior leadership positions, group coaching can be defined as follows:

Group coaching addresses a common need, through the pursuit of individual goals. A small group, between three and eight people, work with a professional coach and each other, through a joint inquiry, in a series of workshops. The co-creation of a safe and productive space generates multiple relevant inputs, to provoke thought that can enable change.

This expands upon existing definitions by identifying key elements of group coaching, the common need and a joint inquiry, and by explaining what happens during group coaching. There were three key parts to the common need: shared situation, shared motivation and timeliness. Leaders were in the same situation, facing a similar set of circumstances, in that they were all in, or approaching, a senior leadership position, which was unifying. Secondly, they were all motivated to address the challenges that they faced within this situation, which underpinned engagement in the process. Thirdly, group coaching was taking place when the inquiry was relevant for them. This meant that they had the capacity to invest time in attending the workshops, and opportunities to apply insights from the workshops and experiment with different ways of being and acting in their daily tasks. If the leaders had not been in the same situation or had not been motivated to address their challenges, or had no time to commit to engaging throughout the programme, they may not have contributed to, or benefitted from, the joint inquiry. The joint inquiry recognises the open and exploratory nature of group coaching, in contrast to a fixed process. The explanation of what happens expresses *where* the work takes place, i.e. in the co-created space. It offers what happens *between* group members, in terms of sharing multiple relevant inputs, and it describes how it provokes thought *within* the group members themselves. The findings revealed how the small size of the group meant there was time for everyone to feel safe and be heard, without rushing. Yet multiple inputs could also be offered for consideration. Specifying the number of people guides practitioners: Too few people could limit the inputs shared and too many could affect how safe people feel and the time available for them to be

heard. This definition brings clarity to the field, by combining theoretical and practical elements, which will support implementation.

This definition partly aligns those in the field, as shown in figure 1.2. Alignment is around recognition of personal goals and how group coaching maximises the combined energy, experience and wisdom of the individuals and can provide support (Britton, 2010; Britton, 2015; Mühlberger and Traut-Mattausch, 2015; Sutton and Crobach, 2022). It differs through specifying the focus on inquiry, as opposed to a facilitated process (Britton, 2010). It extends understanding by explaining what happens during group coaching to achieve the outcomes.

Implications for senior leader transitions

This research contributes to the field of coaching for senior leader transitions by updating and labelling the breadth of interrelated challenges that leaders could face in transition to a senior position. The findings align with the categorisation of the five main challenges facing leaders in transition: cognitive, behavioural, interpersonal, psychological and systemic (Terblanche and Albertyn, 2018). They go on to illustrate what the challenges are and how they impact leaders. The challenge associated with leading amidst complexity and ambiguity, when the nature of leadership itself is evolving, is of particular significance, given the need for identity work that calls for an exploration of beliefs about what it means to lead. The challenges have been summarised and presented in a way that is accessible for leaders and those who work with them, to understand and explore them. Furthermore, previous studies have approached the challenges of transition from one direction, for example, Terblanche et al. focus on perspective transformation (2019), Kilpatrick on the development of confidence (2022), and Skinner and Snape on identity development (Skinner, 2020b; Skinner, 2020a; Snape, 2024). This research reflects an approach that is open to the breadth of topics that leaders encounter in transition to senior leadership positions. Expanding understanding of what leaders may experience, in terms of personal transition, means that coaches can explore what stage leaders might be in, to help them to successfully navigate that stage. The key questions also provide somewhere to start with the joint inquiry.

Implications for leader and leadership development

The study also presents evidence, through the coaching outcomes, that group coaching can be a useful tool for leader and leadership development. Leaders develop through experience, and when a leader takes on unfamiliar responsibilities, it can trigger reflection, which can improve self-awareness and prompt identity work to support that development (Jain and Kondayya, 2023). However, in transition, leaders face a range of unique challenges associated with taking on a senior leadership position and simultaneously working through the psychosocial process of transition. These challenges could be overwhelming, which could hinder their learning processes and limit development (DeRue and Wellman, 2009). In response to the significant and unique challenges facing them, senior leaders may look for a mechanism to support them. This study has shown that group coaching could be a useful mechanism, and this section of the chapter positions the study alongside the ongoing debates in the field of leader and leadership development

The three interrelated debates within leader and leadership development concern what leader and leadership development are, how they should be carried out and how they should be evaluated. This study has shown that group coaching for leaders in transition to senior leadership positions can address both leader and leadership development. Group coaching supported the development of the leaders, as it enabled them to achieve their goals and address the challenges that they were facing. This meets the definition of leader development, in terms of it being a process that increases the leader's ability to exercise influence in leadership situations that become increasingly more complex and varied (Liu *et al.*, 2021). The gaps to allow for experimentation between workshops addressed the need to allow leaders to apply skills and knowledge, which was relevant to the practical challenges they were facing (Willocks and Rouse, 2024). The mix of experience, interpretation and dialogue supported individual formation (Hibbert, Beech and Siedlok, 2017). Further, the enabling factors of leader identity formation theory, such as being prepared to engage, maintaining a focus on authenticity and strengths, purpose and personalisation, support networks and validating others were also present. This suggests that sustainable leadership growth was possible, as deeper-level changes incorporating sense of self were present, as well as behaviour and skills changes (Skinner, 2020a). Leaders received feedback from each other and identified their strengths and weaknesses, to prompt reflection and adjustment. This translated into identity development spirals (Kragt and Day, 2020).

Leaders identified as leaders, which motivated them to engage with leadership and develop leadership competencies

In addition to leader development, group coaching also contributed towards leadership development, as defined by the growth of leadership with others. As an example of enhancing leadership capacity, leaders felt comfortable to voice their views and saw value in each other's contribution (Day and Dragoni, 2015). Further, the discussions about the challenges of the change programme, and the group meeting together, once the programme had ended, show that group coaching worked at the intrapersonal, interpersonal and organisational levels (Liu *et al.*, 2021). In this sense, group coaching focused attention on the multidimensional, temporal and complex nature of 21st century leadership (Wallace, Torres and Zaccaro, 2021). In line with the call from critical scholars, group coaching created a space where leaders could share and reflect upon their aspirations to be a good leader and could touch on power and the role that plays for them when managing upwards (Ryan, Myers and Mooney, 2021).

Collective leadership development has been described as complex (Kjellström, 2009). The detailed and forensic examination of practice shows how leader and leadership development was approached. The resulting framework addresses a call for documentation and dissemination of processes and practices (McCauley, 2014). It is also one of very few experiential studies, as opposed to being a theoretically based or retrospective review of experience.

This study was exploratory, as opposed to evaluative. The limited evaluation of the experience of the leaders was restricted to after-event surveys and interviews, primarily focused on exploring practice. The self-report nature of the coaching outcomes presents a partial view of how leaders and leadership developed. Moving forward, the framework presents a common template, against which other researchers and coaches can evaluate outcomes.

In addition to extending the debates with regard to what leader and leadership development is, what it looks like, and how it can be evaluated, group coaching for transitions offers a way forward that can address the constantly evolving view of leadership. The safe and productive space that was co-

created permitted an open dialogue around how to address the current challenges facing leaders in their context, whatever they may be. It was not limited by potentially outdated paradigms and frameworks. Leaders could discuss what was relevant and meaningful for them, and grapple with their challenges together. The role of the group coach was neutral, to steer the dialogue in service of what met the leaders' needs, not to teach or to present a specific view.

8.4 Summary of discussion

This chapter has discussed the findings from the study and how they contribute to the literature in the field of group coaching and senior leader transitions, as well as leader and leadership development. It also outlined the contributions to theoretical knowledge and practical application. These included:

1. Updated and expanded understanding of the multifaceted challenges associated with making the transition into senior leadership positions (figure 8.4)
2. Developed a conceptual model of the psychological process of personal transition for leaders in transition to senior positions (figure 8.5)
3. Developed a conceptual model to show how coaching supports leaders in transition to a senior position (figure 8.6)
4. Identified sequential steps in group coaching to support leaders in transition to senior positions (figure 8.9)
5. Developed a group coaching framework to develop a group coaching programme (figure 8.11)
6. Developed a conceptual model showing different levels at which the coach works (figure 8.12)

Theoretical contributions to knowledge include updating and extending the literature on the challenges facing senior leaders in transition. They confirm how the transition to senior leadership, often portrayed as from functional leadership to business leadership, is one of the hardest. This is due to the unfamiliarity of the new tasks and responsibilities, the need to engage with a wider group of people, and the need for personal development to work through higher-action logics and to take broader perspectives (Barrett, 1998; Freedman, 1998; Collins, 2001; Rooke and Torbert, 2005;

Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011). This has been updated through the recognition of the challenges associated with the lack of clarity arising out of the complex and ambiguous environment (Grint, 2005b), and the shifts toward more relational, and emergent ethical, inclusive and effective leadership practices (Wilson, 2019). Against this backdrop, senior leaders experience a disorienting cognitive and emotional struggle to find congruity between how they see themselves and their changed roles and responsibilities (Halliday, 2012). The combination of the change in role, the ambiguity around what it means to lead in the complex environment, and the demands of the process of personal transition can create considerable confusion.

Contributions for practical application include models to show the conceptualisation of the transition challenges, the personal process of transition, and how coaching can support senior leaders through their transition. This updated and expanded understanding of both the challenges and how coaching can support them, provides leaders and coaches with tools to navigate this disorienting period. They also challenge the literature around derailment, as they recognise that leaders could be supported to adapt and understand their situation (Watkins, 2013b). Derailment may occur not because leaders are predisposed, through their traits, to fail (Furnham, 2010), but because they are lacking the space and support to navigate their transition.

The chapter then moved on to describe the theoretical and practical contributions for group coaching. These included the identification of how group coaching supported leaders in three sequential steps:

1. Co-creation of a safe and productive space – *where* we worked
2. Multiple relevant inputs shared within the space – what happened *between* group members
3. Processing of inputs – what happened *within* the leaders

This process helped the leaders to normalise the challenges that they were facing and to rethink their situation, and it resourced them to operate as senior leaders. The exploration of what happened in group coaching to support leaders indicates how group coaching differs from other avenues of support. This can be summarised as being based upon joint inquiry around open questions that have meaning for the individuals within the group, and a flexible agenda to explore it.

A practical contribution has been provided through the development of a two-part group coaching framework, which coaching practitioners can use to undertake a group coaching programme. A new definition of group coaching has been crafted to bring more clarity to the field by explaining how it works.

The contributions of this study extend beyond group coaching and senior leader transitions. They add to the field of leader and leadership development, by offering a mechanism that cites development within the context and alongside the people with whom leaders work, fostering collective leadership.

9 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore group coaching for leaders in transition to senior positions and to develop group coaching practice. The aims were to explore what happened in group coaching that supported leaders, and to create and develop a theoretical and practical framework for group coaching. Addressing these aims is important because, if our lives depend on the quality of leadership (Day and Antonakis, 2018) and one third of leaders may be failing (Neal and Rhyne, 2021), finding avenues to support leaders and reduce the risk of failure is of value to everyone. Furthermore, research into group coaching is twenty years behind dyadic coaching (O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017) yet it may be more accessible to more people than dyadic coaching. This chapter summarises how the research objectives were achieved and explains the significance of the contributions to knowledge. It addresses the limitations of the study, suggests further avenues for research, and I share my reflections upon my journey as both coach and researcher.

9.1 Review of aims and objectives

Reports into leadership failure may not be evidence based, but the lowest recently reported figure of 35% (Neal and Rhyne, 2021) suggests one third of leaders may be failing. This study contributes towards addressing the problem by exploring what makes the transition to a senior leadership position problematic, and how group coaching can support leaders in transition. This section will explain how each of the research objectives have been met.

Research Objective 1 (RO1): To critically review the literature relating to the transition to senior leadership positions, the process of personal transition, the support available to leaders through transition, and group coaching to support leaders through transition to senior leadership positions

The literature review combined a study of the challenges associated with stepping into senior leadership positions with contemporary studies into leadership and the process of personal transition. This demonstrated how demanding and disorienting transition can be in the early part of the 21st

century. Whilst the majority of leader development comes through experience, there are mechanisms available that could support leaders through transition, such as onboarding and leadership development programmes. Studies into coaching for senior leaders in transition are emerging (Terblanche, Albertyn and van Coller-Peter, 2017; McGill, 2019; Kilpatrick, 2022). These studies evidence the benefits of dyadic coaching as an adaptable and tailored process (Bozer and Jones, 2018) which puts the transitioning leader at the heart of the experience (Terblanche, 2022). They also evidence the impact that transition can have on senior leaders, and show how dyadic coaching provides leaders with support and space to explore their thinking, and to address the challenges they are facing. The support and clarity from coaching normalises the challenges and resources leaders through the transition. However, dyadic coaching takes place in isolation, away from the people with whom they will be leading. Group coaching could offer development alongside others, which could support the development of identity and the engagement with others, both of which are key for transition to senior leadership positions. It could meet calls for leadership development that addresses context and the evolving requirements of leadership to be more collective. Empirical study into group coaching is behind that of both dyadic and team coaching. Studies that do exist show how group coaching can support leaders through transitions and can support the development of leaders. Furthermore, no studies have been conducted exploring group coaching in organisations for senior leaders in transition..

RO2: To empirically explore how leaders experience the transition to senior leadership positions and how dyadic coaching supports them

The views of both leaders and coaches provided different perspectives on the common experience of dyadic coaching through the transition to a senior position. These served to triangulate the secondary data, aligning and confirming how demanding the move into senior leadership positions can be. They also revealed the physical, cognitive and emotional challenges associated with the personal transition. These challenges were confirmed by the leaders who participated in the group coaching programme. They were evidenced in the initial interviews when they spoke of the challenges that they were facing, and in the coaching goals they set themselves.

These challenges are widely reported and understood (Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011; Freedman, 1998; 2011). This study extended that understanding by reporting on the confusion facing leaders. This comes from the complex and ambiguous environment they lead in, which is compounded by the lack of clarity about what it means to be a leader. Long held assumptions and beliefs about what it meant to lead, based on traditional trait theories, were not helping leaders to navigate the environment with which they were dealing.

The process of personal transition that leaders experience adds further confusion and disorientation at this difficult time. Building on extant literature and combining it with the findings from the preparatory and action phases, a conceptual model was developed. This extends understanding of the liminal, betwixt and between stage. It shows how it involves leaders letting go of ways of thinking, being and acting that are no longer serving them, cultivating their strengths and developing new ways of thinking, being and acting, all in line with how they want to see themselves as leaders. The process resembles the concept of thriving from evolutionary biology. DNA is preserved for survival and discarded if it no longer serves the species, creating new arrangements to flourish (Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky, 2009).

The findings also demonstrated how coaching created the space for leaders to address their confusion and disorientation. This involved an exploration of interrelated questions: how did leaders see themselves, including how they felt; how they related to others; and how to lead in a senior position. Coaches played the role that met their needs (for example, educator, mentor or sounding board) in service of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2000) and cognitive redefinition (Schein and Schein, 2017) and support.

RO3: To develop a group coaching programme based on the findings from the empirical exploration

A group coaching programme was developed. This was guided by the findings relating to the process of personal transition and how coaching supports leaders in transition to senior leadership positions. The programme was also based on learning from previous studies into group coaching (Fusco, O'

Riordan and Palmer, 2015; O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017), how to work with groups (Benson, 2019) and my experience working with leaders in transition and teams.

RO4: To apply and explore the group coaching programme, taking an action research approach with a group of leaders in transition to a senior leadership position

The group coaching programme was applied and explored through two macro cycles of action research. In each cycle, two groups of five senior leaders participated in a series of four online group coaching workshops. The coaching outcomes demonstrated that they had been supported through their transition.

RO5: To contribute to theory on personal transitions, coaching for senior leadership transitions, group coaching and the practice of group coaching as a way of supporting senior leaders in transition

A reflexive thematic analysis of the data collected during the group coaching programme identified three sequential steps underpinning what happened during the group coaching workshops. The first was the **co-creation of a safe and productive space**. The preparatory work before the programme began, combined with a focus on inclusion in the first workshop, lay the foundations for group coaching. Leaders had considered what would make attending the workshops valuable for them and their hopes and concerns. This meant that they were able to express and work out how to have their needs met. This was a co-creation between everyone in the group, as everything that happens within the group becomes part of the group (Benson, 2019). The observable behaviours, as well as the motivations and attitudes contributed to the space. The preparatory work meant that these were aligned. This is important as it recognises the shared responsibility to create a safe space, as opposed to it being the responsibility of the coach.

The co-creation of safe and productive space permitted **many relevant inputs** to be shared. These came from the leaders and the coach in response to the questions and discussions that took place. The sharing of stories and experiences provided a common repertoire (Wenger and Wenger-Trayner,

2015) upon which everyone could build. Experiences were validated and feedback offered and received, and this sparked additional inputs. The final step involved the leaders **processing the inputs** for themselves. The multiple inputs provided an abundant source of data to work with to have assumptions, challenges and perspectives expanded.

Previous work into how group coaching works has offered important considerations, for example preparation and goal focus (O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017). Mühlberger and Traut-Mattausch (2015) described how it enables peer learning experiences. In contrast, this study has identified what happens to enable these experiences.

In addition to identifying what happens during group coaching to support leaders, the application of the group coaching programme led to the development of a group coaching framework. This shows who needs to be involved when, and what they need to do in establishing a group coaching programme. Such a framework has not been identified within extant literature, and it gives coaches and sponsors somewhere to start.

Finally, a conceptual model described the different levels of work for the coach during group coaching. At the highest level is the structure of the programme, beneath it sits design, in line with the needs of the programme. During the workshop this means consciously cooperating with what happens to facilitate the co-creation of space and sharing of multiple inputs to facilitate processing to accomplish goals. O'Connor, Studholme and Grant (2017) discuss the need for mastery, and Mühlberger and Traut-Mattausch (2015) discuss the type of leadership behaviours a coach could exhibit. This study is the first to identify where the coach needs to focus during the workshops.

9.2 Contributions to knowledge and practice

In achieving these objectives, this research study makes theoretical, practical and methodological contributions to knowledge. Theoretical contributions come through updating and extending understanding of the challenges facing leaders in transition to senior positions, and through expanding understanding of what group coaching is and how it works. The literature on senior leader transitions is expanded through recognition of the confusion facing leaders about what it means to be

a senior leader, in the complex and ambiguous environments in which they lead. This exacerbates the challenges they are already facing.

Further theoretical contributions come through adding to the limited empirical research into group coaching, which is described as 20 years behind that of dyadic coaching (O'Connor, Studholme and Grant, 2017). Contributions to knowledge result from the investigation of what happens in group coaching for leaders in transition to senior leadership positions. This has resulted in a new definition of group coaching, based on the identification of three sequential steps that underpin how group coaching works: the co-creation of a safe and productive space, multiple relevant inputs, and the processing of inputs. The safe and productive space that was co-created between the coach and the members of the group is significant. This is because, at a time of great vulnerability, leaders were able to have their concerns (about being negatively impacted by others in the group and that it could be a waste of time) allayed. The co-creation is significant, as it recognises the shared responsibility between coach and leaders. Safe space is not the sole responsibility of the coach, and leaders need to be aware of how they can influence it through their attitudes and behaviours. Once the safe and productive space had been created, leaders were comfortable to share multiple relevant inputs within the group. The multiplicity of inputs separates group coaching from dyadic coaching as leaders have a wider range of inputs to consider. Thirdly, it is the consideration and processing of these multiple inputs that helps leaders gain clarity in their thinking and resources them to become senior leaders.

In addition to identifying what happens during group coaching, this research also adds to knowledge about how group coaching can support leaders in transition. The coaching outcomes demonstrated how group coaching helped leaders to explore and address key interrelated questions facing them in transition. These included how they saw themselves, how they related to and engaged with others, and what they could do to lead as a senior leader. This is important because the question about how someone sees themselves is intensely deep and personal, and there is a perception that group coaching may not go as deep as dyadic coaching. Not only did every member in both groups share deeply personal stories and insights, but this depth was also achieved over a shorter time frame. This raises the question of whether dyadic coaching could be unnecessarily long. Furthermore, the group coaching process itself helped them to learn how to see and work with others differently. Through

group coaching, they learnt how to engage more productively with others. The group coaching workshops could be described as epitomising the shift in management learning to 'customised, contextualised, participative and experiential learning' (Bachkirova and Kemp, 2024). The implications of these contributions are that group coaching can be an alternative mechanism to offer to leaders in transition. It can be an avenue of support that allows them to work at depth and breadth, through an open collective inquiry, with a flexible agenda, alongside a coach and others, to address their common needs.

This study also adds to knowledge by being one of very few evidenced-based studies into transitions. It extends understanding of the psychological process of transition for contemporary senior leaders, recognising how letting go forms part of the liminal phase of transition. It describes how the liminal phase can be navigated by setting a vision and by working out what strengths leaders bring to the senior leadership position, what they need to let go of and what they need to develop.

This study contributes to practical knowledge about senior leader transitions and group coaching. It offers models which conceptualise the challenges that senior leaders face, and the personal process of transition. Leaders in transition and those supporting them can use these to raise awareness around what could be happening during a transition. A third model highlights key areas for inquiry during coaching.

A two-part framework has been provided to help practitioners to understand the process of coaching leaders through transition (Lennard, 2010), and it guides the use of tools and approaches for online group coaching. The group coaching programme framework is new knowledge and provides those commissioning group coaching and coaches with a place to begin developing and designing a group coaching programme. It offers coaches an approach to follow to coach groups of leaders in transition to a senior leadership position and provides dyadic coaches with a set of questions to explore with senior leaders in transition. The model showing the different levels at which a coach works will help coaches to understand what they need to be aware of and able to do. Meanwhile those responsible for training group coaches can see what they need to teach. Furthermore, conducting group coaching

online was shown to be useful, and may encourage the participation of those who are uncomfortable about working at depth with others in person.

Finally, the study makes a methodological contribution to the use of action research in business and management and in online research, both of which are under-researched (Shani and Coghlan, 2019). The methodical and rigorous process of analysis between the workshops and group coaching programmes, followed by a reflexive thematic analysis of the data, offers a new approach to take in action research. Where the research aims and objectives make it appropriate, the advantage of this approach is that it allows researchers to focus on practice and logistical adaptations, to make action more effective within each cycle. Researchers can thus devote their time to a full reflexive analysis of the data, once all the cycles have been completed. The detailed description of the approach addresses the need for more discussion about approaches to analysis in action research (Cox, Shoukry and Cook, 2020).

9.3 Limitations of this study:

There are a number of limitations to this study, relating to how the group coaching was implemented and the approach to analysis. The group coaching took place within one organisation and there may have been cultural or contextual factors that made it particularly suitable for British Transport Police. One cohort of staff and another of officers did provide variance, in terms of the responsibilities of the senior leaders, and the approach served to be flexible enough to meet their different needs. Nevertheless, the group coaching programme would need to be explored in other organisations, to investigate how different contexts affect implementation and outcomes. Another limitation is that group coaching took place online. This may have been more comfortable for some participants, and online sessions do expand access to group coaching. However, both groups questioned what difference in person could have made, therefore hybrid or all in-person group coaching could identify further learning and improvements.

The coaching outcomes were all self-reported, which provide an indication of how the leaders were thinking and feeling after group coaching. However, much of the focus in these transitions is on how

to engage with and relate to others, thus, gathering stories from those around the leader in transition would provide a different perspective on the outcomes.

One of the constraints on the analysis of the data between the workshops was the lack of data in the anonymous surveys. More data from the participants, such as interviews between the workshops, or participant journal entries, could have allowed for more detailed analysis. This might have identified more adaptations. Similarly, the use of my fieldnotes amplifies my voice in what happened during group coaching. Having an observer in the workshops or recording them for analysis could have provided a different lens through which to view what happened.

9.4 Avenues for further research

This was an exploratory, as opposed to an evaluative, study. This was due to the absence of a common definition or framework upon which to base group coaching practice. Now the framework exists, further avenues for research become available. One avenue is to evaluate the effectiveness of group coaching for leaders in transition to senior leadership positions. In the absence of measures of transition, a broad set of measures, both quantitative and qualitative and including self-reports, could be designed to assess the effectiveness of leaders in transition. These could be used to measure a baseline at set times, one before group coaching, then during and afterwards. Measures could include well-being, psychometric evaluations around emotional intelligence, and staff attitudes of those around the leader. Qualitative analysis could include story gathering around the leaders during the programme to evaluate the impact of how leaders engage with others. When compared to a control group, who choose not to participate in group coaching, the results would provide an indication of how this coaching supports leaders.

Another avenue for research could be to compare group coaching with dyadic coaching. The same set of measures could be used for different cohorts of leaders and could include comparisons between dyadic and group coaching, as well as a mixed approach. This could demonstrate what differences there are, and extend understanding about what approach to use when. Further avenues include comparisons between in-person and online group coaching, and exploring an open programme that includes leaders from different organisations.

The new knowledge about the process of personal transition could be explored for other significant transitions. A change in roles and relationships affects how people see themselves and are seen, and 'significant transitions' could be defined as those that have added implications for the participants' sense of identity. For example, transitions such as returning to work after maternity leave or leaving the workplace could be considered significant.

9.5 Personal reflections

My reflections upon this study have been split into those as a coach and researcher. As a coach, the levels of anxiety that I experienced before the coaching programme began were significant. This was due to it being the first time that I was delivering group coaching, and I had doubts about whether and how it would work. Whilst the evidence base for the use of group coaching for leaders in the workplace and for transitions was growing, the two had not come together. I was acutely aware of the challenges facing senior leaders in transition, and I was unsure about how group coaching would work. My concern about it being a waste of time for leaders and not of much value was real. The use of technology added another source of anxiety. At the time of delivery, I was still relatively unfamiliar with, and inexperienced in, holding meetings online. This anxiety was significant, as it underpinned how important it is to examine practice and inform others, so that anxiety can be allayed. The group coaching framework and the explanation of what coaches need to be aware of will offer other coaches, who are new to group coaching, some scaffolds to steer them. Meanwhile the coaching outcomes provide an evidence base that group coaching can support leaders in transition to senior positions.

My initial anxiety gave way to elation and then surprise when leaders did engage and began to open up during the first workshop. It quickly became apparent that the common need was uniting the group and providing a focus for the conversations. The depth at which we worked and the level of insight that was gained during the second workshop was surprising. My experience of dyadic coaching senior leaders in transition meant that I was used to giving leaders much more time to share their stories and I was able to question everything that I thought could be useful. In contrast, leaders in the group had seven minutes to share their stories and I was unable to question and probe everything that I thought

could be useful. The coaching outcomes suggest that the same levels of insight were gained through this brief storytelling. I thus questioned whether dyadic coaching may be indulging the coach's curiosity as much as benefiting the leader, given that they were able to explore their thinking without my probing them.

The experience and the reflection upon my experience of group coaching leaders in transition has had a manifest effect on all aspects of my practice. My knowledge of the process of personal transition helps me to understand what leaders are experiencing, and I am better able to move within the interrelated areas in which they are struggling. Above all, the ability to 'fly naked' that I reported towards the second half of the second group coaching programme has liberated me to consciously cooperate with what comes up in teams and groups. I no longer fear the responsibility for others and whether the outcomes will be achieved, my focus is on what is happening and how we can all respond.

As a researcher, I was comfortable exploring practice. The opportunity to immerse myself in what others were doing in this field, and then what I was doing, why, and what effect it was having, felt almost self-indulgent. The need to look more broadly at what was happening as a researcher was much more difficult. I recognised my tendency to focus on practice first, then learnt to challenge myself around what else was there and what I was missing. The discomfort was evident, and half-way through the study, my supervisor called out the parallel process of transition that I was experiencing. This normalised the challenge, and how I saw myself shifted to resource me.

In contrast to the positivist and objective view of a researcher that I used to hold, this researcher's journey has been surprisingly emotional from start to finish. Perhaps the emotion is intrinsic to transition, perhaps all PhD journeys are emotional, or perhaps the emotion is what I bring because I care a lot about this.

I conclude with two observations. Firstly, just as pragmatism recognises the dual nature of an objective change in responsibilities and a subjective experience of the transition, so too, I recognise the need for ethical, methodologically rigorous research, that also embraces reflexivity and the human

elements of this 'multifaceted, messy and experimental' thing that is coaching (Bachkistrova and Kemp, 2024, p. 4). Secondly, that these contributions are offered until better strategies are identified.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Stages in the journey through leadership positions

Pathways and crossroads to institutional leadership	Seven levels of leadership Consciousness	Level 5 Hierarchy	Seven ways of leading	The Leadership Pipeline
Freedman (1998) Based on work by Mahler and Wrightnour (1973)	Barrett (1998). Developed through work on corporate transformation tools	Collins (2001). Developed through 28 company comparisons	Rooke and Torbet (2005) Developed through completion of Leadership development Profile – Harthill Sentence completion over 25 yrs	Charan, Drotter and Noel (2011) The Leadership Pipeline: How to Build the Leadership Powered Company. Based on work by Walter Mahler
Institutional Leader	Wisdom/Visionary, focus on Society	Level 5 Executive: Greatness through a blend of personal humility and professional will	Alchemist - generates social transformations	Passage Six: From Group Manager to Enterprise Manager
Executive Manager of Several Businesses	Partner/Servant, focus on community		Strategist - generates organisational and personal transformations	
	Collaborator, focus on organisation	Level 4 Effective leader: catalyses commitment to vision stimulating higher performance standards	Individualist - interweaves competing personal and company action logics	Passage Five: From Business Manager to Group Manager
Manager of a single business	Facilitator focus on transformation	Level 3 Competent Manager: Organises people and resources around predetermined objectives	Achiever - meets strategic goals	Passage Four: From Functional Manager to Business Manager
Supervising Manager	Manager focus on self esteem	Level 2 Contributing Team member: Contributes individual capabilities to group objectives and works effectively with others in a group setting	Expert - rules by logic & expertise	Passage Three: From Managing Managers to Functional Manager
	Paternalist, focus on relationship		Diplomat - avoids conflict	Passage Two: From Managing Others to Managing Managers
Individual Contributor	Authoritarian, focus on survival	Highly capable individual: Makes productive work contributions	Opportunist - wins any way possible	Passage One: From Managing Self to Managing Others

Appendix 2 Detail supporting description of senior leadership position

Leadership refers to the human aspect of management,(Fraticiu, 2018). Senior as defined higher levels of the organisation. Models of management, (Freedman, 1998; Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011) recognise the shift from functional manager to business manager as one of the hardest based on the need to work with unfamiliar functions and a wider variety of people.

Aspects of the business manager role:

(Freedman, 1998 p.142)

- Manage specialised but interdependent units that are part of and contribute to the same chain.
- Could be single discipline functional departments eg customer service or warehouses, or multidisciplinary teams, eg new product development and marketing.
- In a small company it could be the CEO, in a bigger more complex organisation it could be the regional or group manager or plant manager.
- Key aspect are discontinuous responsibilities and requisite behaviours

(Charan, Drotter and Noel, 2011)

- Usually have significant autonomy
- See clear link between efforts and marketplace results
- Unexplored territory, responsibility for many unfamiliar functions and outcomes

Identity and beliefs	To develop	To demonstrate...
• Integrity – well established value system that has been tested in the past (Levinson, 1980) • Vision - Clear about progression of his or her life and career as well as where the organisation could go. (Levinson, 1980)	• Understanding that corporate organisations are complex social-technical, open, political systems • Psychological mindedness – recognises and applies psychological factors in viewing, understanding and acting on organisational issues • Focus on Organisation's success as opposed to personal success • Diplomacy – understanding and appreciation of legitimacy or each perspective without necessarily making a commitment • Utilising and managing legitimate yet conflicting simultaneous demands (from subordinates, bosses, peers, suppliers & users) • Balancing future goals (quarterly targets) and present needs (3 – 5 yr plan) • <i>From</i> can we do <i>to</i> is it the right thing to do? • Tolerance for ambiguity, confusion and ambiguity before it becomes clear (Levinson, 1980)	• Trust, accept advice and receive feedback from all functional managers, even if have never experienced personally. • Reliability (trustworthiness) – walking the talk, acting on what say, dependable • Communicating clearly and effectively • Articulation – Makes a good impression (Levinson, 1980) • Strategic and Business management skills eg in marketing, HR, accounting, strategic planning • Stopping doing and reserving time for reflection and analysis • Personal Organisation – good sense and use of time (Levinson, 1980) • Perseverance – able to stick to a task regardless of difficulties (Levinson, 1980) • Judgement – knowing when to act (Levinson, 1980) • Orientation to identifying and seeking ways to satisfy needs of organisation (Levinson, 1980) ○ Awareness and appreciation of other departments work functions and interdependencies ○ Integrate and manage, not just understand other functions ○ Work with wider variety of people ○ Being sensitive to functional diversity ○ Valuing and effectively using staff functions, such as HR, legal, finance to optimise contribution

		○ Eliciting the cooperation and effectiveness of their 'subordinate' departments and suppliers

Appendix 3 Preparatory Phase: Participant Information Sheet (Leroy et al.)

The purpose of this document is to invite you to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, please consider the information in this document carefully, so you understand why the research is being carried out and what it will involve.

Study title:

An action research study into group coaching for leaders making the transition into senior leadership positions.

The purpose of the study

The appointment to a senior leadership position brings with it both external public and internal personal challenges. Externally there is the need to meet the requirements of the role quickly and internally a psychological process of transition to align and adapt to the new role. From an organisational point of view there are reports that 30 – 50% of leaders taking up positions fail within the first 18 months and the financial costs of failed transitions are estimated to be between eight to twenty three times the annual salary of the transitioning leader, [1]. This study has two aims; firstly to explore coaching through the process of transition to a senior leadership position and secondly to develop a model of group coaching to facilitate leaders going through such transitions.

To clarify the terms being used, where change is the outcome, transition is defined as the process and described in more detail in *appendix 1*. For the purposes of this study, senior leadership positions are defined as those that are in the higher levels of an organisation and holding responsibility and accountability for some aspect of the performance of a business. Further detail is provided in *appendix 2*. There is a lack of clarity about how group coaching is both defined and implemented and in broad terms it can be described as people working towards their individual goals in a group setting. Further explanation is provided in *appendix 3*.

The entire study will run for up to two years and be in two phases. The first phase will address the aim of exploring coaching through the process of transition to a senior leadership position. This will be achieved through interviews with senior leaders and coaches who work with them through the transition. The second part of the study will use that understanding as the basis for an action research study into group coaching for leaders approaching, or in transition.

Why have you been invited to participate?

Leader:

You are being invited to take part as you have experience of being coached through the transition to a senior leadership position, as defined in *appendix 2*. You and your coach (*insert name of coach*) will be one of three pairs of leaders and coaches to be interviewed separately. You will be asked to share your recollections of your experience and observations of being coached through the transition, as summarised in *appendix 1*. An indication of the questions you will be asked is provided in *appendix 4*. The focus will be on the transition process and coaching, and you and your coach will not be sharing anything personal about each other.

Coach:

You are being asked to take part as you have experience of coaching (*insert name of leader*) through the transition to a senior leadership position as defined in *appendix 2*. You and (*insert name of leader*) will be one of three pairs of coaches and leaders to be interviewed and asked to share your experience and observations on coaching (*insert name of leader*) through the transition process as described in *appendix 1*. An indication of the questions you will be asked is shown in *appendix 4*. The focus will be on the transition process and coaching, and you and your coach will not be sharing anything personal about each other

Do I have to take part?

Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. *If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet along with a privacy notice that will explain how your data will be collected and used, and be asked to give your consent. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.*

Participation will have no impact on your current/future employment at (*insert name of organisation*).

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you take part in phase one of this research study it will involve the following:-

A one to one interview that, with your permission, will be audio recorded, I anticipate that the interview will take approximately 60 minutes. A transcript of the recording will be offered to you for your records as a general reflection of our conversation.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Phase One

The disadvantages of participating in this research include:-

- The time it will take out of your working life to be interviewed.
- We will be exploring a psychological process that may have been challenging and revisiting this may cause some distress or raise new questions for you that need exploring.

Any transition can be psychologically, socially and emotionally challenging. Reflecting upon and exploring your thoughts and feelings about this could prove distressing. Support will be provided both during and after the interview. If you feel you would benefit from further support following involvement in this research study, the following avenues are open to you.

1. EMCC Find a Mentor or Coach - https://www.emccouncil.org/find_mentorcoach/
2. NHS – Counselling - <https://beta.nhs.uk/find-a-psychological-therapies-service/>
3. NHS – Mental Health app library - <https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/>

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

For a leader:

Potential benefits exist on three levels as follows:-

Personally, you will have the opportunity to reflect upon your transition to a senior leadership position. This may help you develop insight and learning that you can apply through future transitions, as well as work through any challenges you have, or are facing. Your work colleagues may benefit as you may be better able to prepare and support them through the transition to senior leadership position, or any other transition. Your organisation may benefit through the learning you are able to apply to your work. The researcher will also be happy to share the consolidated themes arising out of the initial phase of data collection.

For a coach:

Potential benefits exist on three levels as follows:-

Personally you will have the opportunity to reflect upon your coaching practice and specifically relating to leaders approaching, or in transition to a senior leadership position.

This may help you develop insight and learning that you can apply in future work with clients facing such a transition.

Your fellow coaches may benefit as you may be better able to prepare and support them through working with clients through a transition to senior leadership position, or any other transition.

The researcher will also be happy to share the findings of the research study with you, which could lead to development of your practice.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations) and confidentiality, privacy and anonymity will be ensured in the collection, storage and publication of research material. Anonymity will be achieved as you will be identified by a code.

Research data will be kept securely at all times, especially when collected in the field before being transferred back to Oxford Brookes University. Laptops and other devices will be password protected whilst data files will be encrypted. Data will also be stored in Google Drive, for which the University has a security agreement.

Data generated by the study will be retained in accordance with the University's policy on Academic Integrity. The data generated in the course of the research will be kept securely in paper or electronic form for a period of ten years after the completion of a research project.

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you are still interested and available to opt in to this study, please contact me directly at ruth.simpson-2018@brookes.ac.uk or on my mobile, +44 7970 148918.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the study will be used in my PhD thesis and a copy of a summary of the study will be offered to you. Summary results may also be published as chapters in a book, articles and used as conference papers and in presentations.

Who is organising and funding the research?

I am conducting the research as a student at Oxford Brookes University Business School and self-funding.

Who has reviewed the study?

This research has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee, Oxford Brookes University.

Contact for Further Information

Should you require further information at any point please contact me by phone on 07970 148918 or email at ruth.simpson-2018@brookes.ac.uk.

Should you wish to contact them, my supervisors on this research project are

- Dr Christian Ehrlich - cehrlich@brookes.ac.uk
- Dr Ioanna Iordanou - ioanna.iordanou@brookes.ac.uk

If you have any concerns about the way in which the study is being or has been conducted, please contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on ethics@brookes.ac.uk.

Thank you

Thank you for considering participation in this research and for reading this information sheet.

References

1. McGill, P., Clarke, P. and Sheffield, D., *'From "blind elation" to "oh my goodness, what have I gotten into"... Exploring the experience of executive coaching during leadership transitions into C-suite roles'*. International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring, 2019. **17 (1)**,; p. pp.3-18.

Appendix 4 Preparatory Phase: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM – Phase 1

Full title of Project:

An action research study into group coaching for leaders making the transition into a senior leadership position.

Form to consent to participate in the semi-structure interviews forming phase one of the study.

Name, position and contact details of Researcher

Ruth Simpson, Ph.D researcher, Oxford Brookes Business School

Email: ruth.simpson-2018@brookes.ac.uk

[Mobile +44 7970 148918](tel:+447970148918)

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.
3. I agree to take part in the above study.
4. I understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded
5. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

☐☐☐☐☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix 5 Privacy notice for research participants

This privacy notice provides information on how Oxford Brookes University collects and uses your personal information when you take part in one of our research projects. Please refer to the research participant information sheet for further details about the study and what information will be collected about you and how it will be used.

Oxford Brookes University (OBU) will usually be the Data Controller of any data that you supply for this research. This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The exception to this is joint research projects where you would be informed on the participant information sheet as to the other partner institution or institutions. This means that they will make the decisions on how your data is used and for what reasons. You can contact the University's Information Management Team on 01865 485420 or email info.sec@brookes.ac.uk.

Why do we need your data?

We need your data to contribute to a study exploring how virtual group coaching can facilitate the transition to a senior leadership position. Your data will be used to explore the psychological process of transition and develop a model for group coaching to facilitate leaders through such transitions.

OBUs legal basis for collecting this data is:

- You are consenting to providing it to us
- Processing is necessary for the performance of a task in the public interest such as research

If the university asks you for sensitive data such as; racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade-union membership, data concerning health or sexual life, genetic/biometric data or criminal records OBU will use these data because:

- You have given OBU explicit consent to do so; and / or
- Processing is necessary for scientific or research in the public interest.

What type of data will Oxford Brookes University use?

Data gathered as part of this study includes:- *(as appropriate depending on phase of the study)*

- Interview notes
- Collective and individual feedback
- Survey data
- Researcher's field notes and diary

Who will OBU share your data with?

No-one outside the supervision team

Please note: Google and Apple services are used for data hosting and office productivity software such as email

Will OBU transfer my data outside of the UK?

No

What rights do I have regarding my data that OBU holds?

- You have the right to be informed about what data will be collected and how this will be used
- You have the right of access to your data
- You have the right to correct data if it is wrong
- You have the right to ask for your data to be deleted

- You have the right to restrict use of the data we hold about you
- You have the right to data portability
- You have the right to object to the university using your data
- You have rights in relation to using your data in automated decision making and profiling.

Where did OBU source my data from?

In phase one data will come from interview transcripts.

In phase two data will come from:-

- Interview transcripts
- Collective and individual feedback
- Individual completion of the short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) questionnaire, a self-report measure mental wellbeing
- Researcher's field notes and diary

Are there any consequences of not providing the requested data?

There are no consequences of not providing data for this research. It is purely voluntary.

Will there be any automated decision making using my data?

There will be no use of automated decision making in scope of UK Data Protection and Privacy legislation."

How long will OBU keep your data?

In line with Oxford Brookes policies data generated in the course of research must be kept securely in paper or electronic form for a period of time in accordance with the research funder or University policy.

Who can I contact if I have concerns?

In the event of any questions about the research study, please contact the researchers in the first instance (contact details in the study participant information sheet). If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee at ethics@brookes.ac.uk. For further details about information security contact the Data Protection Officer at: brookesdpo@brookes.ac.uk or the Information Management team on info.sec@brookes.ac.uk

Appendix 6 Preparatory Phase: Interview Guide

Thematising	- o Why? Transition to SLP difficult – Position, speed, high risk of failure, demanding process, coaching could help - o What? How can coaching support the process - o How – Ask leaders and coaches, so I'm aware of what 1:1 coaching has offered. Want to obtain empirical knowledge of leader & coach experiences of 1:1 coaching through transitions so I am well prepared to work with clients in group coaching. Know what has worked and could have been better. I want to know about the role coaching played in the transition – what need did it meet, www & what could have been better.
Design	Small, flexible, exploratory study In order to counteract: Leaders forgetting their experience – will provide them with notice beforehand so they can bring it to mind and ask them specifically what happened so it comes alive – Will check it wasn't more than 4 years ago Coaches forgetting their experience and have enough to speak about – will ask them to bring to mind specific clients – will check how many clients they have worked with

Pre interview

Interview details to go out	1. Participant Interview sheet – specific to type of interview 2. Consent form – to be returned before interview 3. Privacy Notice

Start	Thank you for taking part Purpose of my study is to explore group coaching for the transition to a senior leadership position 1. First phase - to understand how 1:1 coaching supports this transition 2. Second phase – use that understanding to deliver group coaching Housekeeping – Thank you for providing your consent, I will let you know when we begin recording – Will be referring to the appendices in the participant info sheet – may be helpful to have to hand – – Anticipate this will take up to an hour – Will debrief the process at the end,

	– Do you have any questions?

Leaders	
Research Question	Interview question
Breaking in question	Summarise the transition you made – from what to what role and when?
What do leaders recall about their transition to an SLP	Ⓢ How similar is your experience of what is required of a senior leader to that described in appendix 1? Ⓢ How similar is your experience of the process of transition described in appendix 2? Ⓢ How would you summarise your experience of the transition to an SLP? Ⓢ What were the biggest challenges you faced? Ⓢ What did you find helpful at the time? Ⓢ What got in the way/was unhelpful?
What aspects of the coaching supported the transition	– How would you summarise what you learnt from coaching through the transition? – What specifically do you remember about the coaching? – What worked well? – Do you recall using any tools/models, what & how useful?
What could have been more helpful?	How well equipped did you feel to complete the transition to an SLP after the coaching? What could have been more useful?
What thoughts on group coaching for a transition to an SLP	Where the definition of group coaching is How could it help? How could it not help?

Coaches - Linked	
Research Question	Interview question
What do coaches experience about leaders generally making the transition to an SLP	How would you summarise leaders' experiences of the transition to an SLP? What are the biggest challenges leaders face?
Relating to X - what aspects of the coaching supported the transition	– How would you summarise the coaching journey for X? – What specifically do you remember about the coaching? – What worked well? – Do you recall using any tools/models, what & how useful?
What could have been more helpful?	What could have been more useful?

What thoughts on group coaching for a transition to an SLP	GC would allow leaders to come together How could it help? How could it not help?

Coaches - separate	
Research Question	Interview question
What do coaches experience about leaders generally making the transition to an SLP	How would you summarise leaders' experiences of the transition to an SLP? What are the biggest challenges leaders face?
Relating to X - what aspects of the coaching supported the transition	– How would you summarise the coaching journeys? – What works well? – What tools/models & how useful?
What could have been more helpful?	What could make coaching more useful been more useful?
What thoughts on group coaching for a transition to an SLP	GC would allow leaders to come together How could it help? How could it not help?

Close	I have no further questions; my summary is that 1. ...the role and process are aligned/not aligned 2. ...the process was..... 3. ...coaching was helpful because..and specifically.... 4. ...could be more helpful 5. ..GC could help.. and hinder.... Do you have anything to add? Thank you, I will now turn off the recorder What has been your experience of this interview, what worked well and what could have been better?

Appendix 7 Action Phase: Participant Information Sheet

The purpose of this document is to invite you to participate in a PhD research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, please consider the information in this document carefully, so you understand why the research is being carried out and what it will involve.

Study title

An action research study exploring online group coaching for leaders making the transition in to a senior leadership position

The purpose of the study?

The appointment to a senior leadership position brings with it both external public and internal personal challenges. Externally there is a need to meet the requirements of the role quickly and internally a psychological process of transition to align and adapt to the new role. The aims of this doctoral study are to understand what role group coaching could play for leaders making the transition to a senior leadership position; then create, develop and refine a model that coaches could use to support the leaders. Where change is the outcome, transition is defined as the process and described as taking its toll physically, mentally and emotionally. Online group coaching will provide an environment to explore the social and mental/psychological aspects of the transition process then respond and adapt to the new position. Group coaching is commonly understood to involve small groups, working towards individual learning goals through exchange and interaction.

The study is being conducted in two phases. The first phase is complete and explored what role coaching plays through the process of transition in to a senior leadership position. This involved interviewing senior leaders and the coaches who worked with them, or had experience of coaching leaders through this transition. A model for group coaching was developed based on the findings from the first phase of research. The second phase of the study will use the model as the basis for an action research study into online group coaching for leaders making the transition.

Why have you been invited to participate?

You are being invited to take part as you are transitioning in to a senior leadership position and have expressed an interest in exploring participation in an action research study into group coaching to facilitate transitions. For the purpose of this study a senior leadership position is being defined as one that requires leaders to think and act differently. Senior leaders need to move away from functional, operational goals to organisational, strategic goals; from self-interest to the common good through change and transformation; and from meeting needs externally to meeting them internally through growth and development.

Action Research has been selected as its goal is to understand practice with a view to developing findings that make a difference for people and to address problems within the complex contexts in which they exist. This is a collaborative process where the researched and researcher work together to influence both the journey and outcome of the study to ground it in their experiences. Data is collected through an iterative cycle of planning, acting, evaluating and reflecting. Each group coaching workshop will make up one of four Micro cycles within two or three Macro cycles, see figure shown below.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you take part in phase two of this research study it will involve a commitment of up to fourteen hours over four months, which breaks down as follows:-

Activity	When	Purpose	Time commitment
Online, pre group coaching individual interview, that will be recorded.	Up to two weeks before the group	To confirm understanding of the research process, address any questions and create baseline data	30 – 60 mins

	coaching begins	for the group coaching programme	
Four online group coaching workshops taking place within the working day, which will include providing verbal and written feedback individual completion of wellbeing scale during the first and final workshops	Every three to four weeks	To work together to explore and address the difficulties in the process of transition and develop and refine a model of online group coaching.	12 hours over 12 weeks
Online, post group coaching individual interview, that will be recorded.	Within two weeks of the fourth and final group coaching workshop	To explore and evaluate the role group coaching played as one part of the transition to a senior leadership position	30 – 60 mins

In recognition of the multiple methods of data collection a staged process of gaining consent will be adopted, whereby you will be invited to consent to each individual part of data collection. This will include to consent to the pre and post group coaching online interviews: the completion of the self-report WEMWBS questionnaire, submission to researcher and anonymous sharing of results and to consent to participation in four, three-hour group coaching workshops. As well as providing feedback at the end of each workshop and the group coaching programme. See the Process of Gaining Consent document for consent and self-report forms.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet along with a privacy notice that will explain how your data will be collected and used. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. If you withdraw you have a right to ask for your data to be deleted, though it may be that some of the data that you have provided has already been used in the research study. Please see the Privacy Notice for more information and feel free to contact the research team at any time.

Participation will have no impact on your current/future employment at British Transport Police.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The disadvantages of participating in this research include the time it will take out of your working life which includes:-

Up to one hour each for online pre and post group coaching interviews

Three hours on four occasions to attend online group coaching workshops

Any transition can be psychologically, socially and emotionally challenging. Reflecting upon and exploring your thoughts and feelings about this could prove distressing. Support will be provided both during and after the group coaching workshops. If you feel you would benefit from support during or following involvement in this research study, the following avenues are open to you.

Within your organisation
Sandra Wilson
Wellbeing Team
Employee Assistance Programme

EMCC Find a Mentor or Coach - https://www.emccouncil.org/find_mentorcoach/

NHS – Counselling - <https://beta.nhs.uk/find-a-psychological-therapies-service/>

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Benefits will potentially exist on three levels:-

Personally, you may benefit from being involved in group coaching to facilitate your transition to a senior leadership position. You may gain insight and learning that you can apply to the way you live and work.

Your work colleagues may benefit as you may be better able to transition into the senior leadership position, reducing the risks of a failure to transition.

Your organisation may benefit through reduced risks and costs associated with a failure to transition.

More generally:

Coaching practice will benefit through sharing the results of this research study as there is limited empirical research into group coaching.

Leadership development practice will benefit as it will provide a deeper understanding, based on empirical research, into the psychological process of transition which could influence practice.

Organisations will benefit as ways to improve the process of transition to a senior leadership position could reduce the financial and other associated costs of leaders failing to fully transition.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations) and confidentiality, privacy and anonymity will be ensured in the collection, storage and publication of research material. Anonymity will be achieved as you will be identified by a code.

Research data will be kept securely at all times, especially when collected in the field before being transferred back to Oxford Brookes University. Laptops and other devices will be password protected whilst data files will be encrypted. Data may be stored in Google Drive, for which the University has a security agreement.

Data generated by the study will be retained in accordance with the University's policy on Academic Integrity. The data generated in the course of the research will be kept securely in paper or electronic form for a period of ten years after the completion of a research project.

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you are still interested and available to opt in to this study, please contact me directly at ruth.simpson-2018@brookes.ac.uk or on my mobile.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the study will be used in my PhD thesis and a copy of the study will be offered to you. Summary results may also be published as chapters in a book, articles and used as conference papers and in presentations.

Who is organising and funding the research?

I am conducting the research as a student at Oxford Brookes University Business School and self-funding.

Who has reviewed the study

This research has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee, Oxford Brookes University.

Contact for Further Information

Should you require further information at any point please contact me by phone on 07970 148918 or email at ruth.simpson-2018@brookes.ac.uk.

Should you wish to contact them, my supervisors on this research project are

Dr Christian Ehrlich - cehrlich@brookes.ac.uk

Dr Ioanna Iordanou - ioanna.iordanou@brookes.ac.uk

If you have any concerns about the way in which the study is being or has been conducted, please contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on ethics@brookes.ac.uk.

Thank you for considering participation in this research and for reading this information sheet.

Appendix 8 Action Phase: Process for gaining consent and sample consent form

In recognition of the multiple methods of data collection a staged process of gaining consent will be adopted, whereby participants will be invited to consent to each individual part of data collection. This will be as follows.

- To consent to the pre and post group coaching virtual interviews
- To consent to completion of the self-report SWEMWBS questionnaire, submission to researcher and anonymous sharing of results
- To consent to participation in four three-hour group coaching workshops
- To consent to providing feedback a) at the end of each workshop b) at the end of the group coaching programme

Consent Form – Phase Two: Pre & post Group Coaching Interviews

Full title of Project:

An action research study into virtual group coaching for leaders making the transition in to a senior leadership position.

Form to consent to participate in a virtual semi-structured interview.

Name, position and contact details of Researcher (and supervisory team if appropriate)

Ruth Simpson, Ph.D researcher, Oxford Brookes Business School

Email: ruth.simpson-2018@brookes.ac.uk

Mobile

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.



2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.

3. I agree that the interviews will be audio recorded

4. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

5. I agree to take part in the above study

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix 9 Action Phase: Questions from Interview Guides

Pre Group Coaching Interviews

Part 2 (To record)	
Research Question	Interview question
Transition journey	• How long with BTP? • When did you make the transition into a senior role? • What was it from and to?
Experience of transition	• What are you enjoying about the senior L'ship position? • What are the biggest challenges you are facing?
Coaching outcomes	• How do you hope group coaching will help you through this transition? • Do you have any specific goals and how will you measure them?
Experience of coaching	• What understanding and experience do you have of coaching? • What understanding and experience of group coaching?
Hopes and concerns for group coaching	• What hopes and expectations do you have about how group coaching will work? • What concerns do you have about how group coaching will work?

Post Group coaching interviews

Part 2 (To record)	
Research Question	Interview question
Coaching outcomes and where next?	• How would you sum up where are you at now, compared to before group coaching? – achieved/changed/learned, satisfied/frustrated, comments on you, how would you change/modify? (knowledge, attitude & doing differently?) • Where are you going? – Direction, what next, what goal, what to learn/achieve? • What could be in your way? – what prevents learning/changing, what blocks direction, what are you avoiding/overlooking/refusing? • What could help_ - what will help you learn/change, what do you need to develop, what skills/knowledge/qualities, where will you get them from?
Experience of group coaching?	What was your experience of group coaching? • What worked? • What could be better? Were hopes & concerns addressed?
Benefits & disadvantages	What were the benefits? What were the disadvantages?
Anything else to add?	

Appendix 10 Questions in anonymous online surveys

Questions asked in the survey following each workshop
1. How did today's online group coaching workshop help you through your transition to a senior leadership position?
2. If the workshop has been helpful, what happened in the group coaching workshop to help?
3. What would you like to see or do more of in the next workshop?
4. What would you like to see or do less of in the next workshop?
5. Is there anything you would like to add?

Questions asked in the survey after each group coaching programme
1. How did this group coaching programme help you through the transition to a senior leadership position?
2. What happened in the group coaching programme to help you through your transition to a senior leadership position?
3. What do you suggest could improve the group coaching programme in the future?
4. Would you recommend group coaching to support the transition to a senior leadership position? Please explain answer.
5. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 11 SWEMWBS

Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (S) WEMWBS

Full title of Project:

An action research study into group coaching for leaders making the transition into a senior leadership position.

Please initial box

I agree to complete this questionnaire, submit to the researcher and for the results to be shared anonymously within the group.

☐

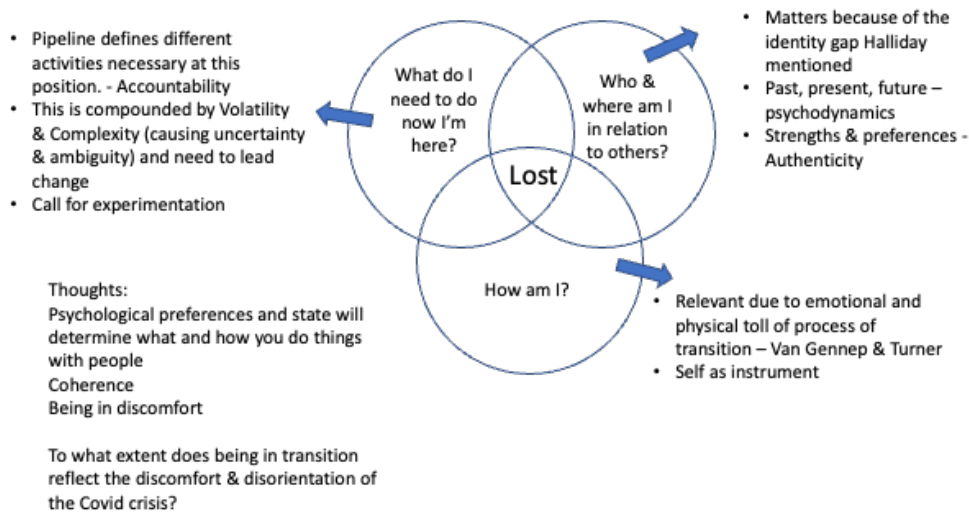
Below are some statements about feelings and thoughts.

Please select the answer that best describes your experience of each over the last 2 weeks.

Statements	None of the time	Rarely	Some of the time	Often	All of the time
I've been feeling optimistic about the future	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling useful	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling relaxed	1	2	3	4	5
I've been dealing with problems well	1	2	3	4	5
I've been thinking clearly	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling close to other people	1	2	3	4	5
I've been able to make my own mind about things	1	2	3	4	5

Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS)
© NHS Health Scotland, University of Warwick and University of Edinburgh, 2007, all rights reserved.

Appendix 12 Preparatory Phase: Mind map created from Initial Coding



Appendix 13 Preparatory Phase: Revised Codes from second cycle of coding

Name	Files	References	Created on
○ Coaching relationship	7	14	16 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ Client examples	4	16	22 Dec 2020 at 07:...
○ Contribution from each...	0	0	16 Dec 2020 at 07:...
○ What the coach brings	9	21	16 Dec 2020 at 07:...
○ What the coach does	10	59	16 Dec 2020 at 07:...
○ What the leader brin...	10	36	16 Dec 2020 at 07:...
○ What the leader does	6	12	16 Dec 2020 at 07:...
○ Linked relationships	4	23	21 Dec 2020 at 09:...
○ Logistics	6	20	16 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ Outcomes	9	26	16 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ Timing of the coaching	5	12	16 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ Coaching topics	0	0	16 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ How leader acts	10	47	16 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ How leader is (WellBein...	8	15	16 Dec 2020 at 10:13
○ How leader sees them...	10	71	16 Dec 2020 at 10:14
○ Context of transition	0	0	16 Dec 2020 at 07:...
○ Backdrop	5	7	16 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ Relationships surroundi...	10	34	16 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ Role requirements	9	44	16 Dec 2020 at 08:11
○ Group Coaching	7	22	16 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ Considerations for grou...	9	35	16 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ Evaluation of group coa...	0	0	16 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ Advantages	9	22	16 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ Disadvantages	8	15	16 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ Transition	5	12	16 Dec 2020 at 11:59
○ Leader experience	9	61	16 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ Stages	10	34	17 Dec 2020 at 08:...
○ Surprises	7	13	16 Dec 2020 at 12:12

Appendix 14 Section of worksheet created in between workshops

KDD	When	What	Why
Develop	GC2	DEL: Ability to notice decision points and share with group	To explore how they respond and where energy wants to go
Develop	GC2	DEL: Check on physical for all - stand up move around	Feedback
Develop	GC2	DEL: Checking pace	Feedback
Develop	GC2	DEL: Clarify role people want me to play/specifically how I can help in goal development	So I know what to do when someone sends me something
Develop	GC2	DEL: Go with energy in discussion and hold knowledge lightly eg heroic leadership. Holding knowledge lightly, being curious and receiving the questions and when I want to share with a - Thank You, then pause, repeat what I have heard and answer	Came from my notes about not wanting to be a trainer & discussion in supervision
Develop	GC2	DEL: Use of Teams - how to type on screen & have questions in word doc to share on screen	So its smoother
Develop	GC2	DES: A way of capturing what has gone on between workshops	Feedback
Develop	GC2	DES: Recap previous session/journey	Feedback
Develop	GC2	DESIGN & DELIVERY: Hear colleagues perspectives about leadership	Feedback
Develop	GC2	DESIGN & DELIVERY: Offer a recap and check all are standing/sitting comfortably, managing distractions	Feedback
Develop	GC2	DESIGN & DELIVERY: Positive challenge and refining goals	Feedback
Develop	GC2	DESIGN: Check in and out in one word	Great descriptors of where people are, useful from a data collection point of view.
Develop	GC2	PRE: Slide pack to send out on morning of workshop if necessary	Feedback & In case tech doesn't work
Keep	GC2	DEL: Go with their energy for breaks	Gives leaders responsibility
Keep	GC2	DEL: Rich discussion	Feedback
Keep	GC2	DEL: Signposting refs	Feedback
Keep	GC2	DES: Interactive to keep people engage and hear 'colleagues perspectives'	Feedback
Keep	GC2	DES: Others asking questions and sharing	Feedback
Keep	GC2	DESIGN: Interactive to help engage but only one breakout	Feedback
Develop	GC2	COACH: Structure for reflection: How do I feel it went? What was different to what I expected? What were the critical moments?	Supervision
Develop	GC2	PREP: What am I hoping will happen and what are my fears?	Supervision

Appendix 15 Section of document outlining adaptations for second programme

Based on sorting MC1 Master – FIXED 2/8/22 from MC1 KDD & Curiosity

- Worked through each line and captured what was said and anything to act upon or explore by way of preparation for MC2. Also grouped points together that were common
- Numbers taken from row in spreadsheet
- Worked through line by line to check all covered

Develop	What	Action	
Generally	28 & 54 & 100 & 120 (keep) ask the group to decide and learn about how to make decisions about what we do and how – eg securing agreements to break outs or not	Where possible prepare for how to make decisions as a group. Offer options and discuss how group would like to decide and notice reactions and them noticing each other eg F2 noticed F1 when smiling	MC2 - DES
	6 & 7 & 55. What does the feedback specifically mean? The big insightful growth questions to allow me to dig deep? What is a good pace? Are people getting enough challenge	Notice/observe and ask to check	RQ
	32 & 36 & 59. Holding knowledge lightly, see what there is in the group whilst we are together. Winnicott – p. 57 Patient's creativity can be stolen by a therapist who knows too much....hide it or refrain from advertising what you know.	Sharing in notes as opposed to during the workshop. Respond to questions with a thanks, pause, repeat to check understanding & offer	MC2 - DEL
	33 & 44. Get better at using Teams in more creative ways	Learn about functionality	MC2 - DEL
	34. Catching up on what has happened between workshops	Be clear about and make time for catch up between workshops	MC2 - DES
	35 & 74. Orient leaders around the programme. What has gone before and what ahead	Recap journey as part of intro to each workshop	MC2- DES
	38. Maintain focus on goals	Reminder to focus on and refine goals as we go	MC2 - DEL
	39. Use of check-ins	Single word are powerful from practitioner & researcher point of view	MC2 - DES

	40. Ensure leaders have materials they need and contacts if tech doesn't work	Pre-workshop set up to include sending out slides on morning of workshop and check I have contact numbers.	MC2 - DEL
	41 & 56 & 57 & 73 & 95.(and keep) Structured coach/researcher reflection	Reflect upon feelings, expectations & critical moments and openness to surprises & energy. What are my hopes & fears. Hopes & Fears then 1. Think & Feel & why (WWW & EBI) 2. Expected & not 3. Critical moments	MC2 - DEL
	43 & 61 & 63. Workshop focus & check people got what they wanted	How are you arriving, what question do you bring & what would you like to walk away with? How close to getting what you wanted? Include ref to progress on goals	MC2 - DEL
	46. Gathering feedback	Be more assertive	MC2 - DEL
	53. The SLT coaching journey	Create an image to use as a map for the leaders	MC2 - DES
	11 & 62. Expand programme	Conference call, 1:1's & follow up notes	MC2 - DES
	65 & 69 Amend interview questions	KDD MC2. Amend questions to 1. Instead of outcomes – What do you hope will be different as a result of the group coaching? 2. Instead of hopes – what do you expect will happen in group coaching? 3. In place of hopes and concerns what will help & hinder group coaching	MC2 – 1:1
	67. Develop conf call	Fix typo, risk of triggering	MC2 - CC
	68. New pack for leaders	GC Intro pack	MC2 - Rec
	76. Involve leaders in coaching	Ask them to ask questions of/ challenge each other (self-sustaining)	MC2 - DEL

Appendix 16 Authors Reflections

	Event	Reflections
Programme One	Set up	The interviews were conducted to ensure that the leaders had all the information they needed to consent, and that the criteria for participation had been met. In the event, they were fundamental to me as the coach, in terms of providing information about who was part of the programme. An understanding of the leaders' journeys assisted preparation and informed how to approach delivery. As well as providing information, the interviews were the first opportunity to work with technology and establish what would be effective for the workshops. After the first interview, I also reflected upon how I was the embodiment of the group before the workshops began (Benson, 2019). This led me to be more intentional moving forward to meet the leaders' psychological needs for inclusion in the group.
	Workshop 1	Aligned to the feedback from the leaders, my reflections were that the basic elements of the workshop were fit for purpose. The focus of my reflection was the recurring need to make choices in response to what was happening. I recorded it would be better if I was: More consciously aware of how I respond to what comes up and why – saw so many options in terms of responding This included whether to respond to something, and how I responded. For example, one leader would share something, and I had to consider whether to probe further in service of their development, or move on, in service of the group. Such decisions exist throughout dyadic coaching conversations. However, in a group, I recognised that there were more things to consider, specifically the other members and the group dynamics.
	Workshop 2	Following supervision after the first workshop, there was more structure to my reflections before, during and after the subsequent workshops. More comprehensive notes beforehand recorded what was important for delivery, as well as my hopes and fears for the workshop. During the workshop, critical moments were recorded for reflection later, as well as my impression of how it went, and what was different to my expectation. This allowed for much richer reflection when making changes to future workshops. The critical moments that I recorded echoed my reflections following the first workshop, in terms of the choices I had to make. These included when I chose to provide some input that I thought might be useful, specifically, transactional analysis. I also recorded a sense of 'missing' something when one leader described a previous role, and I chose to let it go, in service of moving on to the next leader. Two moments, specifically, highlighted things for me to focus on in the future. Whilst I offered the choice to leaders about how they would like to share their stories, I did not pay attention to how we came to a decision. I recognised that there is a need for me to ensure that all voices within the group are heard and considered, when distributing decision making. I also felt that the leadership discussion meandered, with a lack of insights drawn from the discussion. More specific questions could have provided focus and a link to the leadership vision task.

	Workshop 3	When one leader checked in to the workshop '<i>not in a great place</i>', the needs of the individual took precedence over the needs of the group, and this was explored before moving on, recognising that everything that happens for one member of the group becomes part of the group. This was well received by the leader, who shared in the survey response that they were grateful for this "<i>opportunity for growth</i>". This could be seen as a demonstration of 'consciously cooperating with the organic process of growth and development in the group in order to liberate and utilise its creative energy and resource' (Benson, 2019, p. 83). The positive response to the breathing exercise was satisfying, as I was not sure how it would be received. Evolving the metaphor exercise into something different, to meet a need that I observed at the time, recognised my level of comfort to try something unplanned with the group. Further confidence in the work that we were doing together came through hearing how leaders would apply what we were doing outside the workshops. One leader committed to trying the metaphor exercise with their team. This highlighted a ripple effect, as what happened in the workshops was applied outside them.
	Workshop 4	Once the structured set up and exercise were complete in the final workshop, the agenda was intentionally left open to promote discussion. In contrast with the first workshop, there was discussion between the leaders from the start, as opposed to me leading the conversation. For example, one leader raised a question about authenticity, sparking a group discussion. Leaders also shared what they noticed about each other, and the impact that it had on them. There was a great deal of emotion as leaders shared what they had learnt and were taking away from the workshops.
	Overall Programme	Supervision explored what I had learnt about my role as coach that I could take forward to the next programme. This included being aware of my prejudices and beliefs and, specifically, how I was driven by my desire for this not to be a waste of time. I could anticipate this based on what I know, but could not know how others would judge it. However, I was able to define that I was taking a non-interventionist approach and bearing witness to leader development.

	Event	Reflections
Programme Two	Set up	Of note was an awareness of the impact that the leaders could have on the coach. This could have a negative effect on setting up the group, if the coach is not able build the necessary trust and credibility from the start. No adaptations were identified moving forward.
	Workshop 1	My key reflection was an intensifying belief in the capability of the group, to make decisions that would support their growth and development. I had experienced this in the first programme, but had not understood its significance. This understanding was evolving, as evidenced by an exploration of unconditional positive regard during supervision. It was significant, as my belief in the group would determine how I responded to what happened.
	Workshop 2	I reflected positively upon how the discussions flowed, describing my style as 'loose, yet aware'. This aligned with my emerging belief in the group, which

		reduced my anxiety about what could happen, and I believed that, together, we could address whatever came up. I felt that there was clarity during the leadership discussion, and the content, specifically Grint's typology of problems, made a useful contribution. This contrasted with when I ran this part of the workshop on the first programme, when the activity had been more emergent and potentially confusing. At one point, I was aware that I was thinking about what people were saying, and was making links and looking for patterns in what I heard. This raised a couple of issues for me. Firstly, that I wasn't being truly present, that I wasn't fully listening or being curious, and could miss something. Secondly, that I was listening as I would in dyadic coaching, which then left me uncomfortable, as I was unable to follow up with questions, as we were in a group setting. This was similar to my experience on the first programme, when the issue at hand had been resolved without me having to question everything I noticed.
	Workshop 3	This workshop marked a significant point in the programme, in terms of content that was important and particularly relevant to their transition, specifically, how leaders relate to others. In-depth discussions during supervision meant that I was hyperalert to what was happening. For example, I was disappointed about the mistake that led to leaders joining at different times. I was also curious about why none of the leaders had questioned the change of time, given that all the workshops had been planned to start at the same time. It raised the issue of responsibility for me, leaders had seen the time and run with it without questioning it, or me. Meanwhile, the signalling in the agenda helped me to be aware of the different roles that I was playing. I noticed that I sat forward as an educator, and back during the discussions, and that I was thinking and planning what to do next whilst leaders were checking in. Supervision returned to the theme of decision making in the group, and the realisation that not all decisions are created equal. For example, some decisions can be planned for, for example, what happens if someone is unable to make a workshop. This was covered in the group contract, though we didn't agree on what would happen if someone was late. Secondly, there are decisions about process, for example, whether to work on something in pairs or as one group. There are choices to be made in the moment, in response to what happens, or what people have said in the workshop. There are also choices for individual group members to make about whether they would like to participate in an exercise. Clarity on the different type of decisions could support conversations with the group, in advance, to agree on how to handle them.
	Workshop 4	As in the final workshop in the first programme, other than setting up the exercises, my involvement was much reduced compared to the earlier workshops. The conversations were driven by the leaders and by what came up for them, with very little guidance or input from myself.
	Follow up	The follow-up interviews were designed to gather data for the research study, and were not explored with the leaders as part of the programme. Upon reflection, they extended the space that was created for leaders to reflect upon the learning and insights that they had gathered over the programme, as well as providing an opportunity to discuss how they would sustain development.

Appendix 17 Group contracts

1st Programme Group Contract developed during Workshop 1

What we would like to have in place for this to be effective...

Trust & confidence to be tight knit group that starts here for the future

- Can trust each other and sharing vulnerabilities
- Candour – talk about the baggage, when something is challenging
- Only stupid question is the one that isn't asked
- Be able to say just as it is
- Honesty & candour, open & honest
- Trust and is confidential

Confidentiality

- What is discussed in the room stays in the room
- Share the purpose of the group but not what happens in the group

Space – giving each other time to think things through, listening and trying to understand what is going on for each individual

Respect all coming from different places and background – okay not to understand but seek to understand and being with them along the journey

- All different and all have something to offer
- Objective to see where landing, comfortable to make transition, check and challenge that all are getting something out of it

Support - So tight knit 'I'm lost can you help me?'

Commitment

- Time to put to it, not just showing up but engaged
- Attend all 4 and if not catch up individually
- Being present, noticing when not ie not checking emails at the same time

Teams coaching etiquette

- Let people know what is going on eg Children, deliveries, dogs
- Cameras on if possible

2nd Programme: Group Contract developed during workshop 1

How we would like to work together:

- Listening to allow people the time and space to speak without interruptions
- Honesty
- Be open to challenge and permit disagreements to learn from
- Work as a group of five as opposed to in breakouts to maximise hearing from each other
- Limit use of power point slides
- Be open to share, recognising that what is discussed is confidential
- Coach to engage in supervision
- Use three hours if necessary
- Meet up outside group coaching workshop if desired
- If unable to attend a workshop at short notice, commitment to be brought up to speed by coach and other attendees.

Appendix 18 Results from use of wellbeing scale

This appendix presents the findings relating to the use of the mental wellbeing scale. All five leaders completed and shared the scale in the first group coaching programme. Four initially completed and shared their scales with me at the start of the second programme and three at the end. The table below shows the categorisation of scores into low, moderate and high levels of wellbeing, the change from baseline and type of change. The results show that two leaders experienced negative meaningful change and one, positive meaningful change.

Leader Code	Level of wellbeing at T1	Level of wellbeing at T2	Change from baseline	Meaningful positive change	Meaningful negative change
ODETTE	Moderate	Moderate	2.0	no	no
OKSANA	Moderate	Moderate	-2.0	no	no
OLLIE	High	Moderate	-4.0	no	yes
OSCAR	Moderate	Moderate	1.0	no	no
OLENA	High	Moderate	-6.0	no	yes
TILLY	Low	Moderate	1.0	no	no
TAARIQ	Low	Moderate	4.0	yes	no
TERRY	Moderate		MISSING		
TOM	Moderate	Moderate	0.0	no	no

When I was reviewing the initial responses received before the first workshop, I had to consider whether and how to use them. Wellbeing levels across the group were a mix of moderate and high. Leaders had consented to the results being shared anonymously in the workshop. However, as this was such a small group, I was aware that highlighting different levels could have caused leaders to wonder which level applied to them. This could have made them feel uncomfortable and I hadn't considered sharing the individual scores with the leaders at a separate time.

Every leader completed and shared the survey at the end of the programme and all wellbeing levels were moderate. This negative change in wellbeing for two leaders could be attributed to completion at Time 1 in early January. This meant the two week period it referred to, encompassed Christmas, so may not describe a measure of wellbeing at work.

The second time I ran the programme, four leaders shared their surveys with me before the workshops. Two of these scored a low level of wellbeing. This was not a concern as the categorisation places scores of less than 20 as low and between 20 – 27 as moderate. Both these leaders scored 20, so were on the cusp of moderate. Three leaders shared their surveys with me after the programme and all three showed moderate levels of wellbeing, with one achieving a positive meaningful change.

The wellbeing scale was specifically raised by me in 6 out of 10 post group coaching interviews. It was not always mentioned due to the time constraints in the interviews, or if leaders hadn't shared the survey with me. Staff leaders on the first coaching programme were favourable about its use. It was described as *"a good at that moment assessment"* (ODETTE). OKSANA shared that it *"helped me check-in with my own wellbeing"* and *"not to have it feels like a missed opportunity"*. OLLIE found it thought provoking, started them thinking about it, but felt there needed to be more of a narrative around why it was being used. One Leader on the second Group Coaching programme noted similarities between the survey and the Trauma Management Risk Scale used by Officers and another had forgotten about it.

The wellbeing scale did not serve as a measure for the programme, though it did raise awareness of mental wellbeing for some leaders. Familiarity with such instruments may have contributed to lower levels of completion for some leaders, who were already aware of the state of their mental wellbeing. This would suggest the value of its use in the framework may be dependent on organisational and cultural context. The leaders did not bring up the use of the survey in the workshops and it didn't become relevant at any point for me to bring it up. This could have been due to my own lack of clarity about the role it could serve within the programme, hence a lack of narrative and energy behind it.

Appendix 19 Detail behind how the framework evolved

All workshops	MC1	MC2 changes	Future development
Top Level	Four, 3 hour, online workshops, 9 - 12 with gaps between 3 and 5 weeks apart	Four, 3 hour online workshops with gaps between 4 and 6 weeks apart. Last workshop 14:00 – 17:00 and longest gap driven by client need to reschedule	- Keep all workshops in the morning - Provisionally add 5th workshop between 3 and 6 months after last workshop by way of follow up
Second Level	- Design agenda that establishes routine e.g. check-in/out, supports exploration of questions and can respond to what comes up for leaders Follow up with content, quotes and refs and include material from leaders - Build up experimentation eg breathing exercise at GC3 - Use of templates to explore thinking	- Build in time for whole group to hear and discuss together – no pairs/breakouts - Share feedback from surveys - Devote time to what happened between workshops - Include something to orient leaders around the programme and how thinking templates fit in - Include references to goals - Logistics: Email week before - Formalised use of templates that evolved during MC1 - Work with group around decision making - Focus on check-in & check-out (respond to where people are and refer back at check-out) - Share slides before workshops - Use of the chat for content and questions (in response to not slides)	- Recognise personal reflection that goes on and create more time for individual reflection - Include use of interactive tools eg whiteboard for what leadership means - Include anonymous feedback surveys in model if needed (WJ4 09/03/22 & WJ6 13/09/22)
Third level		Hold agenda lightly to respond to energy needs for breaks	Check in on levels of challenge and support (survey/chat)

		• Prepare for tech going down (phone numbers) • Hold goals • Hold knowledge lightly • State of curiosity in place of anxiety, experimentation & humanity •	• Consistent set of questions after each leader has spoken
As researcher		Capture • How do I think and feel and why? • What expected and what not? • What critical moments	

Appendix 20 Consolidation of learning

	Design and content	Delivery
Pre Group Coaching	Create Coaching Pack To be provided either before or after the conference call and definitely before the 1:1 interview and include If online: • Take the call where you are able to fully commit, concentrate & contribute • Creation of safe & productive environment and goal achievement a joint responsibility. Need for feedback to ensure it is working for people • Types of decision making and how they could be made • Clarity around responses to thinking templates • Need for good tech connection	Logistics • Details, dates and times correct from the start and all the way through • Plan workshops in the morning • Keep 3 hours
All workshops	Content to develop • Create image to use for navigation through the programme from the start, during workshops and the finish. Include Thinking Templates	Stage of group development • Leaders to allow for flow as opposed to waiting in turn to speak • Promote discussion and open questions

	and why knowing where you have come from helps and to summarise learning • Workshop survey/poll to ask about level of challenge, how close to what looking for • Exercise/content around imposter syndrome • Focus on practical advice and guidance about transition • Image to show how LTB fits with how I think others see me and how they do. Is Johari enough? Could include why knowing how you got here helps • Input on EQ • DIY Wellbeing template Key content to keep • LTB vision briefing in at GC2 • Typology of problems as focus for leadership • Metaphor exercise • Artefacts to bring learning together • Sharing the topics we covered Include in design: • Check-in to focus on what to walk away with today and capture separately to go back to • Email prep one week before workshop • More personal reflection time eg 2 x 10-15 mins • More participative content creation eg use of post-its/whiteboards online or in person • Informal space before and after the workshops to connect and address any questions	• Role of ways of working to feel safe – ongoing and dynamic – related to feedback Goals: • Focus on practical steps to achieve goals, what can you do next week, how can you use learning to achieve goals, when could you use this? Coach: • Plan for consistency of questions after set exercises eg how do you reflect/what do you think/how do you feel about what you just said? • Offer questions for the group to answer before coach does and share what came from previous conversations • Share process eg discuss after each input or when heard from everyone (M2 after metaphors) • Relax from the start with conversational style eg GC4 from breathing went straight into check-in and responsive to what happens. Finish early if necessary, go with where energy is eg F2 thanks me and I said for what. Conscious & relaxed to stay at ease • Offer input and thought provoking questions/ideas eg Trump could be insecure but not at expense of discussion and can follow up content in notes • Use the context eg spans and layers Structure: • Keep in full group up to 6 so all can hear from each other. Could ask to start in pairs so group can see the alternatives • Share content in text with supporting slides to be provided before the workshop • Use chat for questions, consent & feedback links etc Tech considerations

	• Could bring breathing exercise forward to use at start with wellbeing •	• Share mobile numbers before workshops as back up • Work with lack of feedback online (survey/poll to offer space for that) make explicit need for feedback to ensure it is working (also covered in coaching pack) could include inclusion-assertion-collaboration scale.
GC1	• Use personal reflection time to consider what will help them feel safe before group discussion – could use post-its	
GC2		
GC3		
GC4		COACH Questions • In 6 months what will you be telling us you have achieved? • Check for use of difference questions and learning • What will you do to sustain development? • What do you need and want to discuss?

Appendix 21 Action Phase RTA - Nvivo screenshot from first cycle

Name	Files	References	Created on
Context	12	25	19 Jul 2023 at 06:22
Aspects of the SL role	6	10	18 Jul 2023 at 12:46
Group Coaching	0	0	18 Jul 2023 at 07:04
Group Makeup	14	27	31 Jul 2023 at 11:58
Perceptions of group c...	21	49	2 Aug 2023 at 12:42
Practice	4	77	28 Jul 2023 at 09:26
Tech	5	14	28 Jul 2023 at 09:31
What could be better	20	89	18 Jul 2023 at 07:49
What worked	18	58	18 Jul 2023 at 07:36
Imposter Syndrome & Self...	14	28	19 Jul 2023 at 06:11
Not alone	9	12	1 Aug 2023 at 11:46
Leader Journey After GC	0	0	3 Aug 2023 at 09:59
Future Development	9	24	18 Jul 2023 at 07:38
Leader Journey Takeaw...	16	64	18 Jul 2023 at 07:30
Leader Journey Before GC	0	0	2 Aug 2023 at 14:04
Challenges	10	22	18 Jul 2023 at 06:37
Enjoy about role	10	16	18 Jul 2023 at 06:01
Goals for group coaching	9	19	18 Jul 2023 at 07:05
NSW	7	10	20 Jul 2023 at 11:26
Phase One Codes	0	0	3 Aug 2023 at 11:53
Identity	5	11	18 Jul 2023 at 07:34
Relationships	6	14	18 Jul 2023 at 06:07
Quotations	12	24	18 Jul 2023 at 14:39

Appendix 22 Action phase RTA – Nvivo screenshot from second cycle

Name	Files	References	Created on
NSW	11	15	8 Aug 2023 at 20:25
Practice	3	5	10 Aug 2023 at 06:...
Choices and decision...	5	26	8 Aug 2023 at 06:23
Consciously cooperating	5	29	8 Aug 2023 at 06:22
Language	3	7	8 Aug 2023 at 06:57
Researcher	4	12	8 Aug 2023 at 09:35
Space	2	4	8 Aug 2023 at 06:20
Elements of the space	10	23	8 Aug 2023 at 06:21
How space extended b...	17	37	8 Aug 2023 at 06:27
Ideas to improve use of...	15	45	8 Aug 2023 at 20:17
Inputs to the space	8	23	8 Aug 2023 at 06:44
Set up of space	10	46	8 Aug 2023 at 06:21
Within the space	7	26	8 Aug 2023 at 06:21
Transition Themes	0	0	10 Aug 2023 at 06:...
A - See and feel about...	20	69	8 Aug 2023 at 06:24
AB - How see and man...	9	12	10 Aug 2023 at 12:...
AC - How see self and...	9	26	10 Aug 2023 at 08:...
B - Self management	20	44	8 Aug 2023 at 06:25
BC - Self Mgt and Others	11	22	10 Aug 2023 at 12:...
C - Engaging with others	0	0	8 Aug 2023 at 06:24
Development jigsaw	2	2	14 Aug 2023 at 09:...
Learning about Coaching	8	11	10 Aug 2023 at 17:51
Normalising	14	25	10 Aug 2023 at 07:...
Role changes	13	16	10 Aug 2023 at 15:...
Transitions	24	61	10 Aug 2023 at 07:...
What I was curious about	2	11	8 Aug 2023 at 06:53
Working online	13	37	8 Aug 2023 at 06:33

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