

## **Understanding yourself as a coach**

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### **Introduction**

The motivation to become a coach often comes because of an individual's interest in people and desire to help them to reach their potential (Anderson, 2016). Quite often this interest originates from an interest in oneself. Coaches are usually curious about their drives, values and qualities that allow them to be productive and happy. They are also curious about qualities that make it more difficult for them to achieve what they want and create obstacles to their success and wellbeing.

This chapter is about how this desire to understand oneself is an important prerequisite for being a good professional coach. I will make a case for three levels of self-understanding that a professional coach benefits from developing: self-inventory, self as an instrument, and fully professional self. Starting with a brief discussion of what the self is anyway, in each of the following sections I introduce one of these three levels of self-understanding and suggest ways for developing them.

### **The nature of self in a nutshell: a precursor for self-understanding**

On a very basic level, understanding oneself often means knowing one's strengths and weaknesses. However, there could be much more to this process than that. In order to expand this picture, it is probably useful to start from asking how 'self' is defined. This is not an easy question to answer in spite of the many disciplines of knowledge dealing with it: philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, phenomenology, education, to name just a few. The actual fact that the puzzle of the self attracts that many disciplines indicates that this is a very complex matter. It is also a plausible explanation for why it is not easy to arrive at least at some consensus as to the notion of self (Gallagher & Shear, 1999).

The discussion about what the self is can be highly theoretical and this is not the purpose of this chapter. However, recognising the effort of many approaches to exploring this topic and trying to arrive at something that can be useful for practitioners I offer three ways of looking at the self (Bachkirova, 2011). When we think about the self, we usually mean one of these three ways:

- How we experience things – a very unique first-person perspective, like a personal window on the world.
- How we act – what allows us to respond to challenges, make decisions and engage with things, supporting our sense of agency.
- How we describe ourselves – a narrative about oneself, the description of who we think we are, creating a sense of identity.

From these descriptions we can see how difficult it is to arrive at one definition of self. Different disciplines tend to concentrate on one of these ways. E.g. phenomenology studies the way we experience things; biology and neuroscience – how we function and act; and social psychology – our identity and narratives. In my book (Bachkirova, 2011), in exploring the nature of self for coaching practice, I suggest that we should accept the fact that these three ways of conceptualising the self are quite legitimate. None of them can be reduced to another. Accordingly, self can be seen as a combination of three centres:

- Centre of awareness
- Executive centre
- Centre of identity

*Centre of awareness* is the most basic pre-reflective sense of self, a subjective perspective on the world. Even animals have it as it allows an organism to locate itself in space and time and recognise experiences as ‘mine’ (Claxton, 1994). This centre is crucially important for our functioning but very difficult to study as it can be described only from the first-person perspective and is by definition subjective.

*Executive centre* represents a perspective that can be more objective. It means that there are various properties and areas of the brain that are associated with the actions of the organism. To put it simply, the executive centre is a neurological network responsible for the coherent behaviour and functioning of the individual in the world (Gazzaniga, 2012; Kurzban, 2010).

*Centre of identity* could be seen as a narrative construction; a linguistically based aspect of human nature that enables us to make sense of our engagement with the world by creating various stories of who we are and what we are like. This is also a subjective and very fluid view on the way we see ourselves in certain contexts and certain periods of life.

It is important to notice that I label these notions of self as ‘centres’ only for uniformity and simplicity. Neither of them implies a specific place in the mind/brain which can be clearly identified. For example, what I name ‘executive centre’ can be seen as a neurological network of multiple mini-selves. Each mini-self is a particular pattern of links between different areas of the brain that becomes activated or inhibited when the organism is involved in an act (Bachkirova, 2011). The centre of identity should be understood as a combination of fluid stories that we construct about ourselves depending on the circumstances. Only the first of these notions may actually *feel* like a centre, but the first-person-perspective nature of it means that a physical centre for it is unlikely to be discovered.

There are some obvious implications of this view on the self for coaches. The first suggests that the nature of self is not as simple as we might assume. It would be difficult, for example to make some typically blunt and forceful recommendations to discover ‘your true self’, to be ‘true to yourself’, etc, as each of them would imply a further question: ‘which self?’. We need to recognise that our own nature is complex, may be as complex as the nature of organisations, events and anything else that is described by the complexity and system theories. In light of this, as coaches we need to be much more thoughtful and appropriately tentative about how we

understand our clients' selves and avoid imposing on them strong expectations for an "objective and accurate" evaluation of oneself (e.g. Hullinger, *et al*, 2019).

It would be wise to adopt the same attitude when we think about the nature of our own self. If we recognise complexity of our own self, we need to continue learning, observing ourselves in action, gathering feedback and questioning our perceptions that depend on many inter-related factors in complex contexts. I would also argue that for us this is not a choice – it is a requirement of being a professional coach. To discuss further the role of such learning for professional coaches, we shall explore three different ways, or processes, for understanding oneself as a coach in the next sections. These processes are not just discrete and random activities that we might be involved with when we wish to understand ourselves. I refer to them as levels because they, arguably, indicate the degree of complexity involved for each process and represent a typical sequence of a coaches' professional development path.

### **Level 1: Self-inventory**

This first level can be called self-inventory in the context of being a coach because, firstly, it involves undertaking an honest assessment of one's professional capabilities. It requires that we identify our basic strengths and weaknesses and what we need to do to fill the gaps. This level starts from some very important conditions, such as understanding that you need to have the sufficient knowledge and skills required to do the job. It includes consideration of the level of experience needed for particular assignments and monitoring how the changes in your experience with time influence your practice. For example, this monitoring should help you to establish how you deal with the complexity of the different contexts in which you work. These three aspects (knowledge, skills and experience) have to be regularly reviewed and improved with the use of coaching supervision and through the process of continuing professional development (CPD).

There is another category of knowledge about oneself that goes beyond this basic professional assessment. The self-inventory level of self-understanding can include extra information about oneself that could help to identify an important professional niche or specialisation in the wider field of coaching. For example, if coaches are trained within a particular school of practice, such as cognitive-behavioural, gestalt or existential, they may clearly associate their professional identity accordingly. Similarly, their growing level of expertise in a particular context or modality may allow them to identify specifically as, e.g., business coaches, maternity coaches, team coaches, etc.

Sometimes this level of self-inventory can help in building a more nuanced professional identity in addition to one's training or context of practice. For example, during the training to become a coach, and later through one's CPD, coaches may become engaged with many tools and exercises that are aimed at gauging their psychological preferences, traits, values and attitudes that have relevance to their practice. Coaches could experiment on themselves these procedures or various psychometric instruments. This might assist them to enhance their self-inventory by developing extra knowledge of their own psychological traits. With enhanced awareness of these traits, coaches might decide that some elements of their

professional identity would benefit from 'finetuning' and make the necessary adjustments.

There are specific examples as to how this extra multifaceted information about oneself as a coach can be used in a more formal way. For example, Walker (2004) has developed a model about different styles of working in the business of people development using three bipolar dimensions of capabilities which he identifies as logic, empathy and control. Using this model, coaches who know their characteristics and preferences in terms of these dimensions can identify their own 'coaching signature', which could help them to become more congruent with their approaches to practice.

To summarise, self-inventory as a level of self-understanding as a coach is important because it is necessary simply in order to identify oneself as a professional coach. It would be unprofessional, for example, not to have an appropriate qualification and commitment to further development. This level of self-understanding is a pre-requisite for starting your practice. It implies importance of the focus on oneself as a coach. This focus is pursued not in the session, where attention is fully on the client, but in any other professional activities that are undertaken. However, with further experience, reflection on one's practice and focussed professional development enable coaches to reach more advanced levels of self-understanding and it is to this that we now turn.

## **Level 2: Self as an instrument**

This level of self-understanding usually emerges when coaches become more experienced. They begin realising that they are much more than just a 'bag of tools', however useful and productive these tools may be. Their observations, confirmed by research (e.g. de Haan & Gannon, 2017) show how important the role of relationships is in the process of coaching. Simple logic suggests that effective relationships require the coach to be trustworthy in the eyes of the client. It is not surprising then that connecting with clients on a personal level and building relationships that are based on trust cannot be created only by the coach's skills and knowledge. It requires more than that.

Clients often bring to a coaching session issues that affect their whole lives. They need to feel that by engaging with topics of such personal importance, the coach is not just playing a role, however professionally. They want to connect with a person. Coaches also know that when they at their best, what they offer comes from personally resonating with the client in the moment and so, from the coach as a person. Such interventions are perceived as genuine because they are the expression of the coaches' life experiences, current worldview and feelings that came to fruition 'right now' and not only a recollection of the 'right thing to say'. I call this level of coach self-understanding as 'coach as a main instrument of coaching' (Bachkirova, 2016).

When a coach comes to the realisation that they are the main instrument of coaching, this entails a new level of self-understanding. The difference at this point is that they begin to pay great deal of attention in the session not only to the content of

the client's story, not only to what is happening to the client in the process of coaching, but also to their own internal states: their feelings, thoughts and intuitions. This level of self-understanding requires much higher degree of self-awareness because it implies a double focus during the session, including both the client and the coach.

In terms of the actions which usually follow from this level of self-understanding, it is possible to notice several specific features. For example, coaches feel more confident in bringing to the process an appropriate level of self-disclosure (Jourard, 1971). This is no longer a compulsive 'sharing' of their experiences, nor a timid holding back of any information in fear of deviating from the client's agenda. The ability to do this confidently and effectively is determined by the coach's sufficient and non-judgmental attention to the impulse to share something personal with the client. This impulse then is checked in light of other observed nuances: e.g. client's receptivity, timing, the importance of the implied message and then regulated in terms of the length and the form of sharing.

Another important change that comes with this level of self-understanding is a different relationship with one's own intuition (Sheldon, 2018), which is referred to as 'immediacy' in other fields of practice (Egan, 2017). Practitioner who developed this ability can notice their own emotions, hunches and subtle messages from the body as they occur and utilise them in the session. Such information becomes additional data that can be used to influence the course of the conversation. This can be done explicitly by including this data in the conversation, or implicitly - by informing the immediate or future interventions. Research by Sheldon (2018) has provided some interesting ideas that illustrate this level of work. She discusses the differences in the effectiveness of these type of interventions as attempted by novices and by more experienced coaches. This finding, in my view, confirms that the second level of self-understanding is qualitatively different from the self-inventory level as it requires further developmental work from coaches.

My assumption is that this level of self-understanding is also a foundation for the elusive quality of 'presence' that is now highly promoted in the professional coaching milieu. Noon (2018) has argued, on the basis of the results of his study, that presence is a way of being that is developed through practice and the experience of the coach. He advocates a more contextual and tacit understanding of this quality, which in my view would clearly require a higher level of self-understanding than provided by self-inventory.

Capacity for self-disclosure, immediacy and presence are undoubtedly the benefits that this level of self-understanding brings to the quality of a coach's service to their clients. I would also argue that there are additional benefits to coaches themselves when they reach this level of self-awareness. Seeing their whole self as instrument of coaching enables them to act in ways congruent to their current thoughts, beliefs and feelings. Their work becomes part of their natural self-expression. As they do not feel that they need to play a role in their professional encounters, this becomes more liberating, involving less emotional labour and therefore less tiring.

All the above suggest that enhancing the quality of self-understanding to the level of self as an instrument is a worthwhile endeavour. Educational literature on coach

development suggests what can be done in this regard. It is noted, for example that this process usually starts with a genuine curiosity about oneself, not just strengths and weakness, but emotions, physical states and fleeting thoughts. This focus of attention could be practised in more 'easy' contexts than coaching sessions, recorded and reflected on after you noticed them at more convenient time and environment. There are many useful exercises in the Gestalt tradition, and I can particularly recommend the book by John O. Stevens (2007), *Awareness: Exploring, Experimenting, Experiencing*, which is full of interesting activities designed to facilitate this process.

When it comes to coaching practice, supervision can play important role in developing this level of self-understanding as all its functions involve explicit work with the self-awareness of the coach. Although the experiences of this level are discussed in supervision 'after the event', an opportunity to explore them in a detailed and focused way enhances learning that can be derived from them. This helps to promote sensitivity and readiness of the coach to 'catch' them in time and in the midst of new events.

### **Level 3: Fully professional self**

This level of self-understanding implies a wider focus of attention expanding further from self-inventory level and even the self as an instrument. At this new level coaches see themselves not only as an instrument that is part of a complex dynamic system with a client, but also as being part of much wider set of social relationships that are at play when they coach. The focus of the coach's attention includes not only the client's story and its unfolding in the session, and not only the coach's internal states and processes, but also a complex interplay of the many different relationships in the interdependent environment of which both the client and the coach are part (Stacey, 2003). It could be said that in the coaching session this level involves a triple focus of attention.

Coaches who reach this level of self-understanding come to see coaching engagements as a self-organizing process of continuously active living systems (Thelen & Smith, 1994) and understand themselves as an integral part of such systems. Hämmäläinen & Saarinen (2006) argue that practitioners operating at this level have 'system intelligence' as they are aware of the influence of the whole on them as well as their own influence on the whole. It is important, of course, to consider what abilities such system intelligence involves in the context of coaching. The following are the constituents of system intelligence that I have adapted for coaching from Martela & Saarinen (2013). They include a broad set of skills or abilities that are required of the coach a) in the session and b) outside of it:

a)

- Awareness of the changing situation in the session that includes variation in states and actions of both the coach and the client and dynamics of the session
- Tuning into this dynamic by sharing emotions and observations in order to facilitate intersubjective perception of the process

- Agency as ability to adapt and act in different situations in the session
- b)
- Reflexivity as the ability to reflect on one’s motives, behaviours, ways of thinking and values that influence practice
  - Perspective-taking as the ability for adopting new perspectives and interpretations of practice
  - Long-term systemic orientation as an ability to recognize and attend to the cumulative and long-term effects of changes in the profession.

All of these abilities also need to be seen in the context of wider influences that coaches are subjected to. For example, coaches at this level of self-understanding are aware that they are affected by two dominant worldviews that co-exist at the moment: modernism and postmodernism. Being influenced by the modernist science-centred worldview, they may aspire for their coaching interventions to be evidence-based and supported by knowledge and theories provided by the core disciplines, such as psychology. Being influenced by the postmodernist view that emphasises the world as socially constructed, these coaches aim for their intervention to be focused on the meaning making conversations. Coaches with this level of self-understanding can recognise that modernist and postmodernist influences work at the same time and create various incompatible beliefs about our practice. For example, we, as coaches, believe in the unique self-expression of individuals but create uniform competences frameworks. We may hate hierarchies but develop categories of professionalism, e.g. master-coach (Bachkirova, 2017).

Some of these coaches recognise being influenced by another worldview – pragmatism. Bachkirova and Borrington (2019) advocate philosophical pragmatism as the most appropriate philosophy of coaching. This position can be differentiated from both modernism and postmodernism because it avoids reducing strategic action to a single model and allows greater flexibility for the role of the coach relevant to context and the task in hand. This attitude is compatible with complexity theories and with an understanding of self as a network of different mini-selves described above (Bachkirova, 2011). In this way, pragmatism allows the coach to strategically act in different ways according to changing situations.

**TABLE 1. Comparison Between Competent, Dialogic, and Pragmatic Selves.**  
(Adapted from Bachkirova, 2016 and Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019).

<b>Aspects</b> <i>Worldview</i>	<b>Competent Self</b> <i>Modernist</i>	<b>Dialogic Self</b> <i>Postmodernist</i>	<b>Pragmatic Self</b> <i>Pragmatist</i>
Role of the coach	Expert at least in the process of coaching	Partner in a dialogue	Co-experimenter
Skills and tools	Are the main assets of the coach	Are secondary in comparison to a meaningful conversation	Are means for experimenting

Concerned with	Good practice, effectiveness, impact	Joined meaning-making in the session	New ideas for responding to client's situation
Coaching relationship	Is a means for successful work (development of trust)	Is a purpose in itself: A model of meaningful dialogue	A product of working collaboratively
Aiming for	Resolutions and action points	Often does not lead to closure and/or appreciate the value of issues remaining unresolved.	Extended ability to cope with issues and to act
Potential problems	Excessive structures and frameworks may stultify the process and reduce creativity	Coaching process without structures could become circular without benchmarks for progress	The criteria for success might not be explicit

Table 1 shows the differences between three mini-selves that are in tune with the three worldviews just described. The coach can recognize their dominant worldview, as modernism, postmodernism/pragmatism and a corresponding mini-self, as competent/dialogic/pragmatic, which may capture most appropriately their predominant style of coaching. At the same time, coaches can develop a capacity to act as any of them depending on the requirements of the situation. For example, the focus of attention by coaches on good practice and impact (competent self) may be highly appropriate at the point of contracting but then can shift to mainly meaning-making in a conversation (dialogic self) and gradually – to experimenting and generating new ideas for the client's actions (pragmatic self).

What is important for the level of self-understanding as fully professional self is that coaches are able to take a look at who they are in relation to their practice and explore the ways they function in light of various important influences rather than being blindly led by them. This does not mean that they become fully independent from the ideas and discourses that affect them. This is not possible - we are part of our professional world as another complex and dynamic social system and as such we are constantly being 're-made' by this system. However, awareness of such influences allows a little more flexibility and space for manoeuvre in how we act, which also makes a contribution to this system and has some influence in the longer term.

Another feature that differentiates coaches at this third level of self-understanding is their ability to create a rationale of their approach to practice – their individual model of coaching as a unique professional offer to their clients. This ability requires a sophisticated analysis of their knowledge, skills, their own values and principles examined through the lens of good number of theories and perspectives that have been influencing their view on human nature, change and development. Building such a model has been described as the 'Three Ps': philosophy, purpose and process (Bachkirova, 2017; Jackson & Bachkirova, 2019), which can be simply



presented as answering three questions: 'why, what and how' in relation to the approach to coaching.

'Why' refers to examining values and theoretical frameworks, a philosophy of practice, something that could be called a 'mission' on a wider scale, something that explains the 'what', which is what you as a coach are trying to achieve in your work. 'How' is about the process – what you do as a coach, what actually happens in your coaching sessions. What is important is that these three Ps are well aligned. For example, it would be a misaligned model if your 'why' includes allegiance to a pure person-centred perspective, but your 'what' is about helping client to fit with specific demands of the organisation and your 'how' includes extensive use of psychometrics and other instruments. The model altogether should also be congruent to how you are as a person. It is in this way that this level of self-understanding builds on the previous level of the self as an instrument.

In order to develop this level of self-understanding of fully professional self, coaches may need to invest in further education or re-visit a wide range of theories and conceptual perspectives. They need to develop a good level of criticality in relation to various influences, particularly to the flood of popular ideas that might be otherwise taken on-board without any discernment (Bachkirova, *et al.*, 2018). In terms of more specific skills, coaches would benefit from learning to observe themselves in their practice and actions in the same way that they observe others. This could help in taking a detached perspective to how we are in the midst of the complex dynamics of various systems. Finally, this level of self-understanding depends nearly entirely on our reflexivity as a unique human capacity of paying attention to our own actions, thoughts, feelings and their effect in the interplay with the events in our environment. Good supervision for this work is simply invaluable.

## **Conclusion**

Each level of self-understanding that I have explored in this chapter corresponds to the three centres that represent the notion of self on a theoretical level, which were introduced earlier. Level of self-inventory responds to the needs described in the centre of identity – this is how coaches build their professional identity. Level of the self as an instrument responds to the needs of the centre of awareness – bringing more of your self-observation for the needs of practice. Finally, the level of a fully professional self is about coaches in action, having a coherent rationale and taking responsibility for the interventions that we offer to our clients. These parallels show that theories of selfhood are not that far from our self-understanding and self-realisation in coaching practice – a fascinating union that we can and should promote.

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