


Academic Paper

How have workplace coaches experienced coaching during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Judy Irving 

Abstract

This exploratory interpretive study provides impactful preliminary evidence on which to base further research into coaching amid challenging circumstances. Thematic analysis of transcript and visual data from eleven semi-structured interviews examines practitioner perspectives of workplace coaching during the exceptional disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic when abnormal stress amongst professionals was widespread. Findings revealed multiple environmental pressures affecting both coaches and coachees. These pressures added complexity to managing coaching interactions, driving intentional self-care on the part of coaches as well as multiple delivery-oriented innovations. Flexibility and adaptive capacity were found to be foundational for successful practice.

Keywords

Covid-19, executive coaching, complexity, wellbeing, change

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Introduction

The onset of the Covid-pandemic in the UK caused widespread disruption to the workplace (CIPD, 2020) and added layers of anxiety and pressure to the lives of the majority of working professionals (Tull et al, 2020; WHO, 2020), including coaches and their clients. Very little is known about the practice of coaching in workplaces where society-wide pressures create stress across the workforce, with only a few coachee-focused studies conducted in the wake of the 2008-9 financial recession (David et al, 2016) and during the early stages of the pandemic (Fleisher et al, 2020). This study is therefore pivotal in its potential to appreciate practitioner perspective of workplace coaching in challenging times, to help inform development of context-specific training and support for practitioners, with knock-on benefits for coachees as a result.

Here, workplace coaching is defined as 'coaching provided to all levels of employee by external or internal coaching practitioners who do not have formal supervisory authority over the coachee' (Bozer & Jones, 2018, p.342), reflecting tri-party relationship between coach, coachee and organisation in offering employees 'time, mental space, support and guidance' to facilitate

development appropriate to the organisational context (Op cit, p.342). This inclusive definition covers coaching described as executive coaching, leadership coaching, business coaching or workplace coaching which are often used interchangeably (e.g. Blackman, et al, 2016; Ely et al., 2010; Theeboom et al, 2014). This broad definition informed recruitment of participant coaches working in varied professional settings, appropriate for an initial exploratory investigation of a little understood phenomenon.

Literature

Coaching during Covid-19

Research relevant to coaching in challenging circumstances is limited to a number of small-scale empirical studies with coachee-focus and a few theoretical commentaries, as summarised below.

Table 1: coaching in difficult circumstances

coachee focus	performance/wellbeing gains	post-recession 2008-9: David <i>et al</i> (2016) medical staff during CV-19: Fleisher <i>et al</i> (2020)
	mechanisms for coping/stress mgt	military context: Ebner <i>et al</i> (2018)
	flexible delivery helpful in disruptive environments	high pressure telecommunications organization: (Williams, 2017) medical staff during CV-19: Fleisher <i>et al</i> (2020)
coach focus	calls for new coaching models addressing uncertainty/complexity	increasing societal ambiguity: Inglis & Steele (2005)/Cavanaugh & Lane (2012)
	coaches to upskill in response to market competition	commentary post-recession 2008-9: Whitmore (2011)
	suggested 'best fit' coaching approaches	solution-focus/positive psychology: Williams & Palmer (2020)/Palmer <i>et al</i> (2020)

Given uncertainties of how workplaces will operate post pandemic (IFOW, 2020) and the possibility of repeated large-scale disruptive events in the future (Whitmore, 2011), greater understanding is required. This research therefore can serve to confirm or challenge theory and coachee experience through empirical understanding from a coach perspective, and within a unique context where both client and practitioner are managing the same multi-layered pressures around work-life balance, job security and personal wellbeing (CIPD, 2020, EMCC, 2020; Tull *et al*, 2020; WHO, 2020)

Challenges and opportunities of virtual coaching

Although virtual practice is commonplace, with up to 70 percent of coaching conducted by phone or video pre-pandemic (Sherpa Coaching Survey, 2020), stay-at-home orders issued by the UK government in March 2020 suddenly enforced virtual practice in an unprecedented fashion. Table 2 summarises the limited research related to virtual coaching.

Table 2: themes within virtual coaching literature

practical benefits	reduced travel time	Filsinger (2014)
	time flexibility beyond office hours	Ghods and Boyce (2013)
	reduced logistical cost potential for informality	Field and Hunt (2011) Jackson and Bourne (2020)
potential challenges	building trust remotely	Ghods and Boyce (2013)
	building rapport/relationship	Filsinger (2014)
	loss of visual cues	Ghods and Boyce (2013)

* The term 'virtual coaching' is used to describe all coaching conducted at distance, whether by means of email, telephone or video technologies^[1].

Early evidence suggests parity of experience for both coach (Berry et al, 2011) and coachee (Ghods, 2009; Poepsel 2011) when working virtually. Concerns over managing complex relational interactions remotely can be mitigated through intentional effort in relationship building (Berry, 2005) and open communication about challenges (Cox & Dannahy, 2005), although first online sessions have been noted as more difficult if parties have not met previously (Ghods, 2009). Other considerations include differences in media preferences (Filsinger, 2014) and comfort with remote relationship (Reyes, 2009) as factors which coaches should address to facilitate successful outcomes. Mortenson's (2015) work on the 'remote manager as coach' and Cox & Dannay's (2005) evaluation of an e-coaching/mentoring programme suggest that coach-led transparency is key in overcoming obstacles, especially with regards to emotion. This study has potential to offer new perspective on best practice given the likelihood of increased working flexibility post-pandemic (IFOW, 2020).

How coaches experience coaching

Research by Cureton et al (2010), Mukherjee (2012), Kennett & Lomas (2015), Feehily (2018) and Tee et al (2019) report coaching and mentoring to have benefits for practitioners in the form of facilitated efficacy, improved wellbeing and skill development. Coaching practices like reflective practice and engaging with supervision helped facilitate learning in terms of goal attainment (Tee et al, 2019), adaptive capacity (Feehily, 2018), work satisfaction through connection (Cureton et al, 2010), altruism (Feehily, 2018) and management of work-life balance (Mukherjee, 2012).

Although none of these small-scale studies specifically address coaching during widespread societal upheaval, they all reflect elements of uncertainty in their research contexts, mirroring aspects of the changeable circumstances exemplified by the pandemic, and imply potential for beneficial impact for practitioners despite complex conditions. This study can add specific insight about practitioner experience during crisis periods, building on this existing body of work. What opportunities might there be for coaching practice to promote efficacy in times of global-scale insecurity?

Methodology

This study aimed to explore patterns of practitioner experience amongst a group of UK-based workplace coaches offering coaching during the early period of the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the subjective focus of the study, a qualitative interpretive research strategy was adopted (Bryman, 2015). As the research explored lived experiences, it is phenomenologically inspired (Cresswell, 2013), interpreting descriptions, and is therefore language-oriented, rather than quantitative and numerical (Bryman, 2015).

Participants

Participants were recruited purposively to fit a profile enabling collection of relevant insightful data, using the professional networks of the researcher. Enlisted contributors met two criteria: (i) coaches who ordinarily practiced within the workplace, and (ii) those with practice experience both prior to and during the course of the first lockdown. Pragmatically, and to facilitate comparative analysis, only UK-based coaches were recruited, who would have been subject to more or less the same Covid-related restrictions and experienced the onset of the pandemic synchronously. Eleven participants took part, meeting suggested sample size requirements for qualitative research (Guest et al, 2006). The study sample comprised coaches with varying lengths of practice experience (1-20+ years), operating across varied client contexts (corporate/higher education/non-profit) and using a range of coaching approaches. The sample included internal and external coaches and a mix of genders and cultural backgrounds. While such demographics were not considered in participant selection, they were collated for context in relation to data interpretation.

Data collection

Data was collected using hour-long semi-structured interviews combined with photo-elicitation, gathering both visual and language-based information. Visual data can serve to both (i) verify the verbal (Harper, 2002), and (ii) elicit additional and different information than that provided verbally (Richard & Lahman, 2015). This blended approach was considered appropriate to research undertaken in the unusual contextual circumstances surrounding the pandemic, and exploring under-researched phenomena. Indeed, Rose (2012) champions the use of pictorial data as a source of rich emergent insight, which I deemed useful in an exploratory study.

Given the restrictions on in-person meeting during the data collection window, all interviews were conducted online, synchronously, using internet-based communication software. This method is now commonly accepted as a viable and practical alternative to in-person meeting (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Lo Iacono et al, 2015), and may indeed have potential for increased authentic self-representation (Sullivan, 2012), given the relative anonymity of the medium. Interviews were conducted in a private room to ensure confidentiality and anonymity and were recorded digitally to allow for later transcription.

An interview guide was prepared in advance to facilitate consistency across interviews (Patton, 2015), though interviews were conducted flexibly to allow reflection on new topics as they emerged. The guide included prompts to discuss photos selected by the participants, who had been asked to identify images meaningful to them in advance of the interviews, either photographs they had taken, or ready-made pictures, or a mixture of both, with the proviso that the images resonated with their experience of coaching during Covid-19. They were asked to describe both the choice and content of images, facilitating conscious deliberation of experience in the rare context of global pandemic.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage model of reflexive thematic analysis, referencing quality criteria outlined by Tracy (2010) to support best practice. Repetitive review of original manuscripts and images facilitated an iterative process of data familiarization, coding, theme generation and review before three overarching themes were named and discussed. A multi-modal approach to engaging with data was adopted (Maher et al, 2018), alternating iteratively between reading physical manuscripts and organizing data in Nvivo, enhancing ability to 'move from micro- to macro-view (p.12) with the aim of improving rigour. As part of this process, two specific data reduction strategies were used to crystallise themes: (i) identification of key quotes providing powerful representations relevant to the research question, and given their usefulness in pattern recognition (Miles and Huberman, 1994), (ii) review of verbal and visual metaphors described by participants. These exercises served as reference points to check themes against the whole dataset (Clarke et al, 2015). Themes were then depicted in relationship with one another using a pictorial framework for the data narrative, provided in the Findings section of this paper.

Reflexivity

Recognising the importance of reflexivity as part of qualitative inquiry (Berger, 2015), I acknowledge my personal perspective as influencing this research. As a practising workplace coach operating prior to and during the Covid-19 pandemic, my personal standpoint inevitably raises issues around interpretive bias. I kept a detailed reflective diary to encourage awareness of my positionality throughout the research process.

Findings

Three interrelated themes were captured from the data, painting a picture of unique societal and workplace conditions shaping coaches' personal and professional behaviours. Each overarching theme encapsulates concepts from related sub-themes and represents patterns identified from across the dataset (Figure 1).

Figure 1: summary of themes and subthemes



Coaches experienced enhanced and layered complexity during the early part of the pandemic, requiring increased focus on wellbeing, which in turn facilitated adaptive capacity to manage unpredictable in-session practice. Despite coaches operating in different client contexts, applying varied coaching approaches and with differing levels of practice experience, similar views and experiences were expressed by the majority of contributors.

Complexity and uncertainty



Participants described life as feeling significantly more complex and uncertain during the pandemic, for themselves as working professionals, and for clients they supported through coaching. These images selected by participants convey a lack of clarity and direction, a sense of turbulence, of facing the unknown, while simultaneously depicting conditions inspiring growth towards new horizons.

Responses to economic pressure



Most participants indicated a decrease in work volume, through pressures on clients' organisational spend, or reduced enrolment of internal coachees. Anna suggested an urgency for coaches to differentiate themselves as competition for work opportunities increased, saying:

...what is this going to look like... the coaching profession once we've come out of this?... it's really thinking...what's your area? What do you stand for? Can you define your...coaching philosophy? What are your ethics? What is your duty of care?

Participants piloted new initiatives as viable value propositions to their client-bases, e.g. pro-bono trials as precursor to fee-generating packages (Alison), leaner, cost-effective online programmes (Rodney). Others engaged in pro-bono work to gain experience of alternative programme models and a broader range of clients (Luke, Anna, Iona), which Luke described as 'an investment in my practice'.

Cathy committed to formal training, while others developed themselves informally through reading, 'time and space to think more and develop' (Iris). Alison responded to specific issues arising with coachees, studying matters related to Black Lives Matter and the effects of Covid-19 in the workplace.

Outcomes from blurred boundaries



Disturbance to typical working conditions blurred boundaries delineating work and home for both coach and coachee, prompting change in interactions with clients.

Anna summarised the layers of nuanced complexity in conversational topics, saying:

... not just around what it might have been in terms of goals and objectives they may have previously been working on, but dealing with much more complexity of handling what was around them, ambiguity as well, the impact of what family had on people. And also, them then thinking about their own wellbeing and as time progressed...noticing where the boundaries had become much more blurred. So, work had become home and home had become work and...noticing how that was really tiring...and then needing to be making some changes for themselves, so that it was sustainable

Although listening/questioning style and tone differed from coach to coach, generally a more watchful tack was needed to avoid assumptions of understanding, to ensure coachees felt safe and to maintain appropriate boundaries (Anna, Cathy). Cathy invited wider context, in recognition of the added complexity of the time:

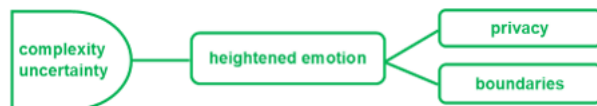
...to really open up the space to everything... just check out... the home stuff... I think it's important to give them that opportunity...to look at the whole picture. You know, maybe it's a 'How's everything?'...I don't think I'd ever say 'How is home?', but I think, to open up the scope of the whole situation. 'How's this whole situation impacted on you?' (Cathy)

Coaches without experience of coaching from home expressed discomfort in having ‘...stuff come into your home... coming into your professional life and your dining room’ (Luke) and were eager to recreate conditions consistent with professional pre-pandemic practice (Emily, Donna). Adaptive strategies included reflection time away from home (Luke, Emily), dressing professionally (Donna) and designating space or rooms for coaching work (Anna, Iona, Donna, Luke). Emily’s rationale sums up the intention to recreate environs facilitating professional practice:

... I’ve had to adapt because it’s easy to be more relaxed when you’re at home. It’s easier not to dress for it, not to you know prep for it...I don’t want it to feel different for my clients. I want them to feel that I’m still consistent, with consistency as part of that whole set up of...safety.

Unexpectedly, there were also gains for some coaches from practising in less clearly delineated working conditions. While both Emily and Donna acknowledged the need to remain professional, Donna highlighted as positive the inadvertent invitation into each other’s homes as helping with relationship building.

Responses to coachee emotion



On the whole, coaches reported amplified coachee reactions, displayed either through overt emotion or secondarily as added pressure on pre-existing stressors. Coachees were more prone to tears and unpredictable outbursts, or spent a larger proportion of time discussing emotional aspects of topics:

... there’s been a different kind of emotion that I’ve noticed with some coachees... there’s been a lot more tears during this period... (Anna)

.... she just suddenly burst into tears...And we were both surprised and taken aback by it. (Iris)

...I’d say usually, maybe 40% of my session might be quite emotional...working in a more therapeutic way, and at the moment it’s probably nearer 70 to 80%. (Iona)

Anna began addressing privacy as part of contracting, aware that a coachee had had someone else in the room during a session. Luke began wearing headphones as a visual cue for coachees they would not be overheard. Others allocated specific rooms in their houses for practice (Anna, Donna). Given the potential for greater emotional fragility, coaches were intentional in considering boundaries between coaching and therapy (Anna, Iona, Emily, Amanda). As Anna put it ‘as coaches we hold a therapeutic space, but we don’t provide therapy’.

Even when clients displayed typical emotional responses, pre-existing challenges appeared amplified, ‘reinforced by Covid’ (Amanda). As Walter put it: ‘... so the pandemic...is definitely like accentuating, accelerating, making stuff more intense, but the stuff that people really care about is the same stuff’. One coach, preparing clients to return from maternity leave, did not see emotion displayed beyond the norm, attributable to her clients’ niche context, which has always invited emotion.

Focus on wellbeing

Generally, interviewees spoke of purposeful self-management as necessary to facilitate capacity to work, and more specifically as coaches working in support of others.

Coaches saw themselves as ‘works in progress’, in need of ‘recognising that we are doing the best we can in extraordinary and unpredictable circumstances’ (Iona), recognizing the importance of ‘breathing space’ (Luke) in preparation for and post-coaching, drawing hope for self and clients from seasonal changes witnessed in nature (Emily, Luke). Rodney emphasised multi-layered self-care as necessary to manage complex conditions, using the analogy of strengthening ‘thigh muscles’ to tackle surface level ‘knee problems’. These depictions of intentional self-management served to enable coaches to ‘hold[ing] sunshine’ on behalf of clients in the midst of the uncertain circumstances characterising the pandemic.



Coaching practice, while requiring energy and effort, also nourished and replenished them as an outworking of the process. As a by-product of the coaching alliance, coaches gained social connection and reward from assisting others in a difficult time, which in turn fed their wellbeing.

Intentionality for wellbeing



...I think as a coach...there is this thing where...you kind of feel like you need to be in a good place yourself to be able to work as a coach with other people (Donna)

Routine walking replenished internal resources (Emily, Luke, Alison), as did ‘moving away’ (Luke), replicating the distance usually afforded by working outside the home:

‘...that’s kept me...in a good space, in a good place, kept me healthy...I think, you know, my coachees have had something from that’ (Luke)

Reflective practice facilitated grounding and renewal, for example through pre-session meditation (Alison), or as Emily recounted:

I’ve... come back to the way I prefer to work, which is to take time before a coaching session to just sit and get myself into the space... which I used to do a lot more of, and I hadn’t realised I’d stopped...that’s been really rich and fruitful for me. And hopefully, for my clients...one of the things

about being a coach... is knowing your own reaction to things and being able to know when that informs work and when you need to bracket it off from work.

The context of professional support was heightened: reassurance, comradery and advice gained from participation in informal communities of practice and through supervision. Anna expressed the factors underpinning the felt need for such support:

...with some of the magnitude of how some people have been feeling, who have been really struggling through this, you know, that's been difficult. And that's where supervision is really helpful.

Two coaches also expressed intent to engage with counselling during the pandemic if necessary, to address their own wellbeing, and to facilitate effective engagement with coaching work.

Connection aids wellbeing



Multiple participants bolstered their own resilience as a result of meaningful interaction with clients and the recognition of sharing similar societal circumstances. Alison found coaching helped her maintain an 'even keel', that:

... helping them find that way forward, actually helps me find my way forward as well...if your coachee leaves in a better place than when he or she started, then that can be actually quite energizing

Donna suggested that the nature of coaching:

... helping people connect with that resilience that they have...that...ability to think wider than they naturally have...you can kind of tap into that I suppose as the coach or even get energy from seeing other people make changes themselves.

Unsurprisingly, internal coaches used to working in office environments noticed a lack of connectedness while working from home. Those with families felt less lonely, but nevertheless were aware of less informal 'organic' conversation with colleagues. Walter described virtual interaction as:

...I'm in an empty room...we have a call, we chat, I end my call. So its complete isolation, from an interaction back to the isolation, there's no sort of 'ebb and flow'...there's not that general sort of 'peak and trough'....you lose a little bit of the serendipitous...'water cooler' kind of stuff'.

In contrast to other work-related interactions, he recognised coaching conversations as less clinical or transactional:

...radically coaching is probably less so, right... it's interesting to me because with coaching there is perhaps more of a connection because of discussing... it's all about the connection, isn't it? So in a way, perhaps....it's magnified it [the connection] (Walter)

Contributing feeds wellbeing



Gratification was expressed as pride in maintaining professionalism in trying circumstances (Iona), enjoyment in practising (Cathy, Iris) and enrichment as a result (Iona). Participants had a heightened sense of usefulness (Anna, Iona, Emily), as captured in Anna and Iona comments:

...one particular client who has had some...life events and...going through a transition in their role as well...that's been quite a...huge thing for them... through the coaching...they've benefited hugely...they've said they wouldn't be in the place they're in now had they not had...some of that additional support. So that's been incredibly rewarding (Anna)

...perhaps because of the heightened emotional stuff that people bring into the space at the moment, and acute anxieties...it's lovely to be helpful, isn't it? To be able to provide that space and protect it in a way that people can make positive use of themselves (Iona)

Cathy, Anna and Alison observed the value of the process of coaching. Cathy said:

...there's a real opportunity in coaching to help people grow at this moment... and grow resilience... that's really I think what coaching is partly about...not crumbling when things around them aren't going the way they want them to go, but what...can we find here now, to build you up, to enable you to grow in this situation?... so in a way [the pandemic has] amplified the opportunity for coaching

Flexibility in practice

Overall, coaches expressed a 'sense of difference', a need to 'find new ways to practise' (Luke), displaying an openness to learning in unpredictable coaching conditions, though few experienced the same things. Depending on past experience, some noted greater contrast with pre-pandemic praxis than others. Some faced challenges in interpreting situations involving layered meaning or unforeseen reactions, as evidenced in the image and description selected by Iris (below). The unpredictability of session flow and coachee reactions inspired adaptive creativity which Iona described through the image of a crane painted in the likeness of a giraffe.



creatively adapt techniques [Iona]



"partly in sunshine, partly in shade": unpredictable coachee reactions in-session, even with same coachee from session to session [Iris]

Adaptation was seen as part and parcel of coaches' inherent commitment to ongoing development, though pandemic conditions were viewed as a specific driver during this time (Alison, Cathy, Walter, Luke). Amanda noted:

... what's interesting about being coaches is that you're having to constantly.... improve is a strong word for it, but kind of think about what you're doing and how you're doing it...you have to be adaptable anyway...or I feel you should be, to what your client needs and wants from you and what resonates best with them.

Building rapport



While virtual rapport building was a concern for some as a result of perceived technological hindrances, participants were all able to coach successfully, irrespective of previous experience. Those accustomed to coaching via internet-interfaces faced no difficulty.

Coaches worried about relationship building in new virtual coaching relationships or when switching from face-to-face to virtual meeting. Would physical cues and body language be harder to read? Would technological difficulties interrupt conversational flow (Cathy, Walter, Amanda, Donna, Iris, Iona)? Concerns were usually based on assumption, and on reflection, unwarranted. Walter advised:

....don't get hung up on the online thing. I've made some assumptions around the level of emotional connection....it's probably more, more imagined than real....be mindful of your own hang ups, and your own perceived limitations.

Iona noted: *'I take my cue as much as I would if I were matching to build rapport in a room'* (Iona).

Coaches, did, however, use new strategies to mitigate against possible challenges, adjusting focus to sensory emphases relevant for phone and online media (Iris, Cathy): *'I could hear tears'* (Iris). Iona began relying on historical relationship more:

...there's a lot at the moment about using what I know, to fill in the gaps about, what isn't necessarily obvious...so I'm really using the rapport that I've built in previous sessions...I always look over the previous sessions notes before I work with somebody but... I find myself often flicking back a little bit further, in older notes to just remind myself what I know, so that I can make whatever sensible connections that I need to.

Some participants found virtual coaching facilitated rather than hindered rapport; seeing people in their homes made interaction *'feel very personal and less businesslike....in a nice way, not in an unprofessional sort of way'* (Donna). Using online tools like Zoom or Skype allowed coaches to *'see the little video of yourself'* (Amanda), informing changes in facial expression or physical stature with rapport-building in mind.

Adapting tools in-session



In general, coaches described changes to their modes of practice, adapting to conditions and coachee responses flexibly, to manage unpredictability. Overall, effect was still achieved for coachees, even when coaches presumed suboptimal delivery.

Usually, participants made only minor adjustments, creatively adapting previously-used techniques for virtual use, e.g. screen-sharing to review visual information (Donna), mimicking use of a flipchart with pen and paper (Amanda) or having a whiteboard visible on camera with coach acting as scribe (Emily).

Conditions sparked a posture of ‘...give it a go. I think, why not? ...try things and be open about you’re doing...you might lose something...but there are.....other gains in different ways...embrace it’ (Iris). Some trialled new techniques, adopting a speculative attitude as an opportunity for growth. Only one coach shied away from using a pre-pandemic method, saying:

...I thought it might be really interesting with this particular person to try something using the space in the room. But I chickened out in the end because I thought, I can't, I don't know how to manage it (Amanda)

Coaches intentionally used humour more, bringing ‘...fun into the room’ (Iona), especially when discussing coachee self-care. Anna saw humour as a means to ‘turn it upside down and look at things differently’, especially after several months of restrictions, with positive benefit for both coach and coachee.

There was also heightened focus on partnering, ‘walking with the client’ (Anna) or providing ‘stillness in a turning world’ (Cathy), given that ‘everyone is struggling with quite different things’ (Donna) and ‘the magnitude of uncertainty that so many people are having to deal with...there have been more situations where, you know, there really isn’t an answer’ (Anna). Donna advocated ‘an acceptance of whatever the circumstances are’. Luke described a session epitomising such a flexible, partnering approach, as follows:

... having a phone call in a car park with a woman who's unloading her Sainsbury's delivery has never happened in a coaching session before...you won't find that in any coaching manuals...I was conscious of a sense of, uncertainty, I suppose that.... either of us might not be engaging...but maybe we kind of hallow that a little too much. Maybe coaching isn't a sacrament, you know, maybe it is just something that just needs two people to be interested enough in it for it to happen in the weirdest, and apparently, least propitious circumstances...

Discussion and conclusions

Coaches operating in challenging societal circumstances

Shared coach-client experience

Shared experience of complex circumstantial challenge might influence the coach-client dynamic. While allowing coaches to engage empathically, facilitating practice, multilayered pandemic-induced stressors (CIPD 2020; EMCC, 2020; Grant Thornton, 2020) also challenged practitioner capacity for practice. While evidence supports coaching as helpful for coachees in managing both complexity (Inglis & Steel, 2005; Cox, 2013), and the stress of unpredictability (Williams, 2017; Ebner et al, 2018), research not specifically address common coach-coachee experience amidst crisis conditions, or highlight challenges from the coach point of view. This research therefore contributes new practitioner-oriented knowledge on both these fronts.

Innovation

Coaches responded with agility to both financial challenges and skill gaps presented by pandemic conditions. As Tamiolaki and Kalaitzaki (2020) suggest, complex circumstances, while difficult, may also have stimulated growth. Given the likelihood of cyclical economic insecurity in the future (Whitmore, 2011), observed examples of innovations from this study might help practitioners prepare for ongoing uncertainty. Clear definition of an individual's coaching proposition seems increasingly pragmatic as the marketplace becomes more competitive and nature of future work patterns remains unpredictable (IFOW, 2020).

Coaches devised and trialled novel market-appropriate coaching packages during Covid-19; adding new empirical insights to work by Fleisher et al (2020) and the EMCC (2020) describing innovative approaches during times of upheaval, which highlighted demand for short-notice coaching access to address immediate needs. Findings extend pre-pandemic research of coaching in volatile settings, e.g. in Williams' (2017), exploratory study on coaching in a highly changeable technology company, linking flexibly structured coaching with unpredictable work environments.

From a client-interaction perspective, this study contributes new detail about complex circumstances as a driver for coaches to invest in development. It adds depth to Whitmore's (2011) post 2008-9 recession call for intentional development through training, by highlighting specific proficiency deficits around dealing with coachee emotion, complex problem-solving, and a more holistic approach to coaching conversations. This builds on evidence gathered by professional coaching bodies at the start of the pandemic, documenting a shift in demand for coaching to manage Covid-19 related uncertainty, and citing a call from coaches for appropriate training and support from their professional community (EMCC, 2020; Grant Thornton, 2020). This research adds to the limited number of studies specifically addressing coaching and complexity (Inglis & Steele, 2005; Cavanaugh & Lane, 2012) suggesting that more, and nuanced work is needed.

Wellbeing as preparation for and outcome of coaching

Coach wellbeing proved to be both foundational to and a by-product of practice during the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing new information on practitioner wellbeing as priority during times of abnormal pressure, to ensure capacity to work, particularly when work involves the support of others managing layered stressors.

Self-care as preparation

Coaching preparation required purposeful input over and above pre-pandemic levels as coaches intentionally cared for themselves in anticipation of encountering clients in stress. This was perhaps more evident for those adapting for the first time to working with emotion and personal issues in coaching interactions. While research on learning to coach acknowledges the benefit of reflective practice and supervision in adapting to first-time practice (Moore & Koning, 2016; Tee et al, 2019), this study provides new information on the efficacy potential of these praxes when coaching in challenging times.

Preparation also involved creating distinct spaces for and away from work, adding coaching-specific insight to research on enforced home-working, and blurred home-work boundaries, from a wellbeing perspective. Coaches reported needing to create 'distance' for cognitive processing, preparatory and retrospective, and delineating dedicated, private physical space in which to conduct coaching sessions, albeit remotely. Again, reflection time was a key factor here.

Wellbeing gains from coaching practice

An unexpected finding of this research was the multiple ways in which the practice of coaching contributed to coach wellbeing during the pandemic. Echoing research from both coaching (Feehily,

2018) and mentoring spheres (Kennett & Lomas, 2015), coaches highlighted wellbeing-related gains to include feelings of altruism, a sense of belonging through collaboration, and enjoyment in the coaching process. This is consistent with a Coaching Federation report (2020) prepared during the pandemic reflecting wider views, where members expressed positivity about the opportunity for coaching to provide support during the anxiety and stress of Covid-19.

Unique to coaching in difficulty, the study reports coaches to have found particular motivation and inspiration from witnessing clients' problem resolution during the pandemic. Although expressed more broadly in this study, this finding adds empirical evidence to Mukherjee's (2012) data showing coachee-led discussion of work-life equilibrium as a catalyst for intentional consideration of this same issue for coaches. It also adds weight to Feehily's (2018) research on embodied practice, where coach takes inspiration from coachee and applies coaching tools and techniques personally.

Contributor accounts also highlighted gains through meaningful and life-giving connection with coachees, emphasising the particular significance of connection during the early months of lockdown as mandatory home-based and online working came into effect. Adding to similar mentoring-related research undertaken in the context of workplace flux (Cureton et al, 2010), participants reported coaching to have countered feelings of isolation. This was particularly true for internal coach participants, who had experienced reduced informal colleague contact. The research therefore corroborates potential for developmental relationship to nourish the practitioner. Significantly, the potential for online interaction to enhance rather than detract from connection is noted, as a result of intensified relational focus. The work thus provides coaching-specific empirical evidence of a more general phenomenon noted by Sullivan (2012) in the field of virtual working.

Adapting coaching delivery

This study is among the first to consider, from the coach perspective, the manner in which coaching sessions are delivered when operating in difficult or unpredictable circumstances. Existing research, while documenting coaching to be a pragmatic and flexible process (Cox, 2013) adaptable for useful application in unpredictable conditions (David et al, 2016; Williams, 2017; Ebner et al, 2018; Fleisher, 2020), does so through the lens of coachee outcomes.

Creativity

This research empirically supports an attitude of creativity and openness as helpful in devising appropriately flexible coaching strategies for effective practice in complicated irregular contexts such as the Covid-19 pandemic. While studies by Williams (2017) and Fleisher et al (2020) point to the appropriateness of flexibility in how coaching sessions are facilitated in changeable and pressured working environments, suggestions are limited to making space for interruption and short notice appointments. This study supports additional creative strategies including making pragmatic adjustments to tools used pre-pandemic on the fly, or trialling previously untested approaches, consulting candidly with coachees in-session to facilitate outcomes. Where other studies call for new thinking from the coaching community to drive approaches suited to practice in an increasingly non-linear society (Cavanaugh & Lane, 2012; Palmer et al, 2020), this research moves beyond theory and suggests explicit exemplars from practice.

Core competencies

New insights are offered about the value of core coaching competencies when managing unpredictable coaching encounters. Coaches reported an emphasis on and intentional application of proficiencies like listening, summarising, paraphrasing and reflecting as a platform with which to meet emerging challenges and manage potentially erratic coaching sessions. Beyond acknowledgment of coaching as a flexible instrument (Cox, 2013), the literature does not seem to address core praxis with specific reference to the context of crisis.

Lastly, and critically, findings affirm the value of coaching in times of societal turbulence, adding credence to existing work citing parity of experience between in-person and virtual coaching for both coachee (Ghods, 2009; Peopsel, 2011) and coach perspectives (Berry et al, 2011). Practitioners can deliver value to coachees in the midst of multi-layered challenge and atypical practice norms, even when they perceive their performance to be less than optimal. In the case of rapport building, where coaches feared inferior quality of relationship via virtual means, this study corroborates research by Berry (2005) and Cox and Dannahy (2005) supporting intentional effort and transparency in overcoming difficulties with coaching virtually.

Opportunities for future research

Coaching theory, practice and supervision

The complexity of managing personal pandemic-related economic and psychological stress, enforced adaptation to home-based and virtual working, and the support-focus of others inherent to coaching has created multidimensional challenge for coaches. Consequently, coach wellbeing merits further investigation to inform theoretical understanding, and perhaps coach training and preparation for those working in crisis-oriented contexts. A particularly interesting element to the wellbeing piece in this research centred on the potential for coaching as a practice to nourish the coach. A more in-depth grasp of this phenomenon could inform supervisory support approaches.

A better understanding of how shared context between practitioner and client is also needed, how this might affect the coaching alliance and process outcomes from both coach and coachee perspectives in times of crisis. As global-scale events recur, greater levels of sharing or of registering mutuality could be useful, and could inform the development of appropriate coaching models. Indeed, Whitmore (2011) and Cavanaugh and Lane (2012) recognise a need for novel approaches in light of the complex challenges anticipated in the future. Future investigations might explore approaches specifically considering complex problem-solving, well-being and flexible coaching delivery.

Coaching context

Although all study participants practiced within the workplace setting, they represented a range of demographic profiles and professional contexts, meaning that findings offer a broad picture of workplace-oriented coaching during Covid-19 but cannot provide nuanced insight into any of the representative demographic groups. Participant coaches in my study exhibited varying experience levels and coaching approaches, operated in different professional settings, worked for-profit and pro-bono, and practised as both internal and external coaching providers. Future research might focus in on any one of these orientations in isolation to investigate specific challenges and opportunities for each subgroup. Examples might include working with senior leaders directing decision making in crisis periods, or exploring genres of coaching such as cognitive-behavioural or solution-focussed coaching thought to be appropriate for crisis context (Williams & Palmer, 2020). Furthermore, future work could tease out sector-specific differences to help coaches working in corporate versus public sector contexts, for example.

Alternative methodological approaches

The study sample of eleven participants, while appropriate for the scope of this research, makes findings ungeneralizable. Larger scale interpretive studies could serve to validate or contradict patterns elucidated here, and are encouraged. Future studies might also adopt randomized sampling approaches to counter possible bias introduced via purposive sampling from within the researcher's professional network. Finally, studies using in-depth idiographic focii might offer

deeper insight into coaches' individual experiences informing understanding within different workplace contexts.

Endnotes

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Virtual coaching is described variously in the literature as 'remote', 'distance', 'scalable', 'distributed', 'online', 'internet', 'email', 'e-coaching', 'Skype', 'telephone', 'phone' or tele-coaching (Filsinger, 2014)

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About the authors

Judy Irving develops postgraduate programmes and personal/professional development initiatives at the University of Oxford. This research formed part of her dissertation which won the Association for Professional Executive Coaching and Supervision (APECS) Prize for the Best MA Dissertation on Executive Coaching or Supervision.