

Do we really know what we're trying to achieve? An investigation into the real content of coaching conversations

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Research paper

Purpose

The paper explores a divergence between organizational expectations of coaching and what actually happens. Coaching is assumed to start and end with goals/objectives that are intended to contribute to organizational performance. Exploring the main topics of coaching conversations, and the way in which topics change within individual interventions, this paper questions the assumptions behind the commissioning, contracting and assessment of coaching interventions.

Design/methodology/approach

An initial stage explored coaches' own descriptions of the content of coaching sessions at different points of a coaching intervention. A thematic analysis produced a taxonomy of 40 sample topics. This taxonomy was then presented to a wider coach population to explore shifts from topic to topic on a case by case basis. These shifts are illustrated with alluvial diagrams and principal patterns discussed from a pragmatic interpretive perspective.

Findings

The coaching conversations studied tended to focus initially on organizationally sanctioned 'competencies', migrating to more personal development issues, in particular topics that relate to the coaching client's sense of self and identity. It is suggested that contracting for such emergent outcomes may be beneficial to both organizations and practitioners.

Originality

The topics addressed in real coaching interventions and how they develop through the relationship has not previously been studied empirically. The findings represent a significant shift towards an evidence-based understanding of the process.

Practical implications

The findings pose fundamental questions of the extent of organizational control exercised and the implications of coaching supporting identity work in leaders.

Key words

Coaching content; leadership competencies; capacity building; critical coaching; managerialist discourse; identity regulation.

Introduction

The paper explores a discrepancy between organizational expectations of coaching and what actually happens. Coaching is assumed to start and end with goals/objectives that are intended to contribute to organizational performance. Exploring the main topics of coaching conversations, and the way in which topics change within individual interventions, this paper questions the assumptions behind the commissioning, contracting and assessment of coaching interventions.

The underpinning of coaching with goal-setting and pre-agreed objectives is conveyed as an article of faith in early coaching literature (e.g. Rogers, 2012; Whitmore, 2002). It is a paradigm that is reinforced by typical competency frameworks (e.g. EMCC, 2015; ICF, 2019) and the way in which research that aims to demonstrate effectiveness of coaching emphasises those characteristics as measures of performance (e.g. De Haan and Nilsson, 2023; Feldman and Lankau, 2005). This also aligns to the way coaching is traditionally conceptualised and commissioned in organizations (e.g. Kemp, 2022; Locke and Latham, 2019; Western, 2012). Yet a wide variety of practices with different theoretical underpinnings are documented (e.g. Cox *et al.*, 2024; Palmer and Whybrow, 2017), suggesting that coaching may be practiced in very different ways. Underlying theories of change and attitudes to goal-setting and objective-setting constitute a critical component of these differences. Indeed, very different approaches are postulated, particularly in those theoretical traditions of coaching that are more oriented to concerns of human development (see for example chapters by Maxwell and Bluckert, Sieler, Spinelli in the collection edited by Cox *et al.*, 2024). This therefore raises the question of whether the way coaching experienced by coaching clients (e.g. Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018) and aimed for by coaches (e.g. Bachkirova, 2016; Fatien *et al.*, 2022) accords with the dominant narrative of goal-setting and objective-setting. We can already note examples of more recent interpretive research that has explored the value of individual and personal meaning that can be derived from coaching by clients (e.g. Fatien *et al.*, 2022; Fusco *et al.*, 2016; Kilpatrick, 2022).

In this study we wished therefore to explore *in the first place* if the discrepancy between competing narratives of 'what happens in coaching' manifests in the topics of the actual coaching conversations in organizations. By gathering such data conceptual debates can be more grounded in evidence and a number of significant issues that exist in the field of organizational coaching can be acknowledged and more overtly addressed. Further, we wished to understand better how the conversations progressed from their starting point through the body of the coaching intervention.

Literature Review

Turning to relevant literature, the first aspect of the discrepancy between organizational expectations of coaching and what actually happens probably starts with the work of Locke from 1968 (Locke, 1968), and then Locke and Latham through their landmark monograph on goal setting (1990) and still writing as recently as 2019 (Locke and

Latham, 2019). This work has profoundly influenced both the management of organizations and fundamental assumptions of how coaching is practised and evaluated. In coaching practice this is notably articulated in the well-known GROW model. The GROW model's extensive adoption evidences the influence of goal setting in coaching. It is set out as a fundamental model in basic coaching skills texts (e.g. Rogers, 2012; van Nieuwerburgh, 2017); it receives mention in six separate chapters from different contributors of Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck (2024); and it appears explicitly as a sub-title of the third and fourth editions of John Whitmore's seminal 'Coaching for Performance'. Objective and goal setting are similarly implicit in both conceptualisations of 'effectiveness' as they appear in coaching research (e.g. Jones *et al.*, 2016) and the competency frameworks of professional bodies (AC, 2012; ICF, 2019).

Hence it is a natural fit for this goal-oriented activity to dovetail into a goal-oriented organizational management system. Indeed, in an early review of executive coaching provision, Feldman and Lankau (2005, p.832) noted that in contrast to mentoring, the executive coaching relationship is "formally contracted rather than informally developed" and further "does not require the development of close, personal bonds". They further argue that on the basis of contemporary research, coaching clients are primarily made up of executives with declining performance or in need of developing "specific skills" (p.834). Most significantly, they comment that the organization's responsibility to ensure a return on investment would lead (necessarily and correctly to their mind) to a narrow definition of role and scope and a focus on professional goals (p.841).

While more recent thinking may also consider more holistic outcomes of coaching, as recently as 2023, De Haan and Nilsson specified coaching as "a goal-directed activity" (p.642) and sought in their extensive meta-analysis to explore the hypothesis that "Coaching will have positive effects for well-being, workplace skills, preparedness, and *goal attainment*" (our italics, p.643). As regards corresponding advice to the HR practitioner, in one source contemporary to Feldman and Lankau, Valerio and Lee (2005, p.72) advise the HR professional to ensure clarity around both the required business results the coaching client is to achieve and the "skills, abilities and behaviours that the client must demonstrate in order to achieve these business results" (p.72). Current guidance from the UK Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development specifies as "generally agreed principles of coaching in organizations," that it focuses "on improving performance and developing an individual", with "the emphasis is on performance at work" (CIPD, 2024).

The assumption of goal-orientation feeds into accreditation models of professional bodies. The European Mentoring and Coaching Council specify 'Outcome and Action Orientation' as a coaching competency (EMCC, 2015), detailing at the foundation level that the coach "assists client to clarify and review their desired outcomes and to set appropriate goals". The International Coaching Federation specifies that coaches should "Partner with the client and relevant stakeholders to establish an overall coaching plan and goals" (ICF, 2019). While the ethics of developing an agreement with clients is indisputable, there is an assumption here that it is possible and feasible to 'set' goals and objectives and to see them through. However, there is good reason to doubt this assumption.

The other aspect of the discrepancy that we wish to address starts from the critical stances within the coaching field itself that acknowledge that coaching may contribute to wider developmental agendas (Garvey *et al.*, 2009), that goals and outcomes might be more emergent (Leary-Joyce, 2014), or that the wider development may be the primary route to sustainable changes in capacity to perform in role (Bachkirova, 2016; Jackson and Cox, 2024). From a theoretical perspective, Vroom's (1964) Expectancy Theory might predict an unreliable effect on motivation of goals set with priority given to the organization's conceptualisation of the employee, at the expense of the employee's own strength of valence. Learning theories such as Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory

would support a more emergent approach to outcomes as new and important questions are surfaced by the learning process itself.

Both aspects of the discrepancy we discuss are explicitly acknowledged by Western (2017) who groups the implicit intentions of different practices into competing 'discourses' of coaching thus providing a useful frame of reference. Western describes discourses of managerialism, psychological expertise (he terms 'psy-expert'), and alternatively the coach as a partner in exploring the client's existential journey ('soul guide'). Western's managerialist and soul guide discourses reflect the competency-driven vs capacity-driven contrast and echo Bates and Chen's (2004) 'performance' and 'meaning-of-work' paradigms of HRD.

In the literature, both in HRD and coaching fields, the possibility of more fluid approaches to the intention for developmental interventions have been recognised. It has been argued that these perspectives may better serve the complexity and uncertainties of management and leadership in modern organizations (Boselie *et al.*, 2019; McLaughlin *et al.*, 2019). Indeed it is also argued that leadership development can only meaningfully be addressed in the context of the leader's presenting challenges (Ely *et al.*, 2010; Ladegard and Gjerde, 2014).

In practice-oriented literature of coaching, in spite of the existence of more holistic approaches (e.g. ontological, existential, Gestalt), there is a substantial orthodoxy that suggests that executive coaching reflects Western's 'managerialist' discourse, and that it can, indeed should, be closely managed. This privileging of goal completion, particularly associated with skills development and performance, persists as an assumption in much practitioner advice and in the formulation of research. Indeed Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018, p.85) have critiqued "the field's almost obsessive focus on the end or destination".

It is important to notice that the literature that critiques the managerialist stance has empirical support from many qualitative studies that provide evidence about what organizational clients value as the result of being coached (e.g. Kilpatrick, 2022; Shoukry, 2017). These studies highlight the quality of trusting relationship in which clients feel free to explore their immediate concerns, longer standing doubts about their capabilities, the meaning of changes that needs to be made in response to growing demands, etc. There are also studies that demonstrate how coaches struggle with the discrepancy between the managerialist stance and their inherent motivation for becoming coaches (Fatien *et al.*, 2023; Kemp, 2022). Kemp (2022), for example, found that one of the main sources of emotional labour for coaches, manifested in challenges to authenticity, resource drain and even burnout, is "pretending to align with the corporate view on coaching in order to do 'real' work of coaching".

In juxtaposing the managerialist and 'real' coaching stance in this review we recognise that providing evidence for such debates is an issue. The need for confidentiality of coaching conversations has been a major obstacle for eliciting evidence that could enrich our understanding and enable a more fruitful dialogue. To overcome this obstacle, we designed a study that can shed more light on this issue by addressing the general question of what actual conversations were taking place in the coaching room and how they transformed from one topic to another. This allowed us to see if goals and objectives that are conventionally set at the beginning of the intervention were materialising in what coaches actually worked with and what organizations were really getting. The intention is exploratory and inductive without the imposition of a template analytical frame. We have described the data collection and analysis and discussed the impact of our findings on leadership development elsewhere (**Reference redacted for review**), while this paper concerns specifically implications for coaching practice, commissioning and delivery.

Methodology

The study was developed through two main stages. The first stage took a qualitative inductive approach aimed at developing a taxonomy of topics occurring in coaching conversations. The second stage used that taxonomy as a template for coaching practitioners to record the topics of their interactions with clients. In this section, we describe the methodological procedure of Stage 1, followed by the Stage 1 outcomes as these were subsequently incorporated into the Stage 2 data collection instrument. The second part of the section describes the methodology of Stage 2.

Stage 1 consisted of a qualitative survey (Braun *et al.*, 2021) administered to coaching practitioners prompting open-ended descriptive/narrative responses to the questions "what was the client's agenda for this session" and "what topic or theme did you together actually talk about most in the session". Respondents could record responses against one or more sessions, indicating whether it was a beginning, middle or end session and they could revisit the site to record topics of further sessions. When piloted, participants were free to describe their answers in the way they wished, as the research team decided not to prejudice responses with prompts or examples. Participants were encouraged to record items through the course of the coaching relationship, thereby potentially broadening the range of topics captured. However, at this stage the longitudinal connection between records of beginning, middle and end sessions of an individual case were not being made: i.e. there was no attempt at a case-based analysis.

Stage 1 data were collected between May and July 2019. Questions that may lead to the identification of either coaches or clients were avoided altogether, and although demographic data were collected, they were requested only on the first visit and were not linked to any other client-related data. Consequently, participants could record the data about their coaching topics unlinked to demographic data. Full participant and privacy information was provided and consent was confirmed at the start of the survey. In total 94 coaching records were collected and 70 demographic records.

Gender was recorded as female on 45 records (64%) and male on 25 records (36%). Other options were not used by participants. This is very close to the 67% to 33% split recorded on the 2016 ICF Global Survey (ICF 2016, p.9). Participants were predominantly based in Europe, followed by North America, with relatively small numbers based elsewhere in the world, but including Australia, Latin America, South Africa and the Asia Pacific region. Respondents reported a mean 272 hours (median 200) coaching per year, and a mean 13 (median 14) years of experience.

The descriptions of coaching sessions were coded separately by three researchers to establish a coherent and comprehensive thematic structure. Each theme was compared iteratively by all three as a group for overlaps, duplication and internal coherence. Reference back to individual coded entries was made to understand how they had been transformed into themes in order to arrive at thematic groupings that were consistent with the original data. A comprehensive taxonomy of 40 conversation topics resulted easily (see Table 1). For the purposes of improving Stage 2 participants' access to the appropriate topics for recording, the topics were organized into categories. At this stage, this categorisation was not intended to have any analytical or empirical force in its own right. Neither were categories and themes intended to occupy equivalent conceptual space: that is to say, it is possible that some may be interpreted more broadly than others (and therefore be selected by participants more frequently). The category headings are intended only as descriptive to signpost participants in Stage 2.

<<<INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE >>>>

In Stage 2 the 40-item taxonomy was embedded in a bespoke online instrument where participants could record one (primary) and optionally a secondary topic of sessions at three points of the intervention with a particular client (beginning, middle, end; labelled

here as T1, T2, T3 respectively). The two-level structure of categories and themes allowed us to provide a series of dropdown menus on the survey instrument to improve usability. Using pseudonymous login credentials of their own choice, participants could revisit their record over an extended period. Participants were recruited through professional and social networks. Records were collected between December 2019 and November 2020. Original deadlines were extended due to the expected disruption of participants' practices through Covid.

158 coaches responded, generating 153 valid client records of which 138 recorded themes for both T1 and T2, and 125 had a valid topic for all three timepoints. European respondents (48%) greatly outnumbered those in the Americas (22%) and very small numbers from Africa (4%), which may reflect both the prevalence of professional bodies and associated networks, and the reach of the research team. The Asia/Pacific region represented 27% of respondents of which the majority recorded Australasia/Oceania.

Findings

The data were conceptualised as a network of possible pathways, with the three time points constituting (conceptual) nodes which reflected decision points in the management of the intervention (T1, T2 and T3). In the context of a dominant narrative in the coaching field that the coach works to the client's initiating agenda, we were potentially interested in any and all cases where this was not borne out. In fact, quite cursory reading of the data suggests that consistency of agenda across three time points was the exception.

Hence the main focus developed and explored in this paper consists of two complementary questions:

1. What topics changed most readily after the initial conversation (i.e. $T1 \neq T2$; $T1 \neq T3$)?
2. And looking from the end of the intervention backwards, where did the discussions end up most frequently and where had these conversations started ($T3 < T2 < T1$)?

These questions are discussed and illustrated with alluvial diagrams. Note that although these individual pathways through the coaching interaction have been reduced to topic headings, there is no intention to attribute statistical probability. The interpretation is intended rather to explore what kinds of dynamics in organizations these pathways represent.

1. Changes in topic for the most frequent T1 topics ($T1 \neq T2$; $T1 \neq T3$)

Figure 1 shows the shifts in the most prominent main topics at T1 to T2. In this section we explore in more detail the nature of the shifts in focus within coaching relationships where these topics were selected at the outset. The four initial topics illustrated account for 34% of primary topic entries. These four topics were *managing people*; *developing presence and impact*; *being more strategic*; and *issues of confidence*. The first three of these themes were originally classified as 'leadership capabilities' while the fourth was originally classified in the 'personal and emotional challenges' category. The shifts we identify in the data can be described as follows:

- *Managing people at T1 dissolves into how the leader manages their role and themselves*
- *Developing presence and impact at T1 reflects an ongoing concern for the influencing role of leadership*
- *Being more strategic at T1 moves into topics that represent more detailed operationalisation of strategy and exploring the self*
- *Issues of confidence: different ways of growing into the leadership role*

<<<< INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE >>>>

Managing people at T1 dissolves into how the leader manages their role and themselves

In all cases where *managing people* appears as the priority topic at T1, the priority topic shifts to something else at T2. However, no single topic was strongly represented at T2 when *managing people* was the priority at T1. Of 11 new topics at T2 the majority represent leadership capabilities generally, with relatively less emphasis on topics that might relate to how to manage individual members, and more towards leadership processes and the leader's own capacities. For example, *managing stakeholders* and *change management* might be seen as more organizationally-oriented leadership processes compared to the T1 team-oriented *managing people* priority. Further, T2 topics such as *issues of confidence*, *being more strategic*, and *developing presence and impact* would seem to reflect capacities of the leader themselves rather than what appears to be a competency at the outset. Two more topics – *understanding the self and identity* and *motivation and drives* were presented to participants under the *working with the self* category. Their selection suggests a marked switch in some cases towards the leader's personal developmental issues alongside the move to enabling processes such as *managing stakeholders* and *change management* as mentioned previously.

<<<< INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE >>>>

Figure 2 shows the shifts in the same four T1 topics to T3. Here, there is an even greater shift towards personal and career management across a range of discussion topics between T1 and T3. The two most prominent T3 topics being *Understanding the self and identity* and *Self-care and burnout*, suggesting (along with *Personal well-being* and *Building resilience*) a turn towards a strong concern for the self and the individual's personal resources at the end of the coaching intervention.

On the basis of these shifts, we suggest that the articulation of managing people at the outset of coaching masks a much wider set of particularly more personal concerns. One would expect leaders to have only transactional issues with managing people (for example, how to deal with tricky personnel situations or team dynamics), or in some cases for people management issues to be symptomatic of more structural problems within the organization (for example, loss of motivation due to commercial setbacks in an economic downturn). At T3 the turn to personal resources may reflect a deeper, more holistic concept of the leader as a person (the idea of 'leading from who you are'). The generic shift from problem-solving to capacity building may represent an exploration of underlying causal effects.

Developing presence and impact at T1 reflects an ongoing concern for the influencing role of leadership

When clients initially present the issue of *developing presence and impact*, a large proportion either stuck with the same topic or shifted at T2 to closely related topics (see Figure 1). Closely related topics included *effectiveness of communication* and *managing stakeholders* for example. At T3 *being more strategic* also appears. Looking at the individual records to understand better what might have been meant by *being more strategic*, in one case the client's topics at T2 were *effectiveness of communication* (primary) and *delegating* (secondary – for clarity, secondary topics are not shown on the alluvial diagrams); in the other case T2 topics were *developing skills and behaviours* (primary) and *relationship challenges* (secondary). The impression here is that *being more strategic* may mean for these individuals, taking a more instrumental approach to

the management of their work in order to enhance their public presentation, networking and relationships.

The appearance of the themes *dealing with emotions* and *dealing with uncertainty and change* at T2 suggest individuals who may have seen the need to convey a more self-assured public image. In one case *exploring personal history, psychology and triggers* appears at T3. As the professional profiles of the individual clients were not captured in the research, we do not know at what level these individuals were operating, but the necessity to shift from pure technical competence to include more organizational political skills is a familiar challenge for middle management, particularly in technical disciplines. Further, this may involve some changes in some attitudinal or psychological dimensions.

Developing presence and impact as an initial topic was therefore more persistent through the relationship than *managing people*. This may reflect a quality in the leader that requires a more gradual process of building competency rather than a more concrete issue of problem-solving.

Being more strategic at T1 moves into topics that represent more detailed operationalisation of strategy and exploring the self

Topics which followed at T2 the initial topic of *being more strategic* seem to form two groupings. A first group of topics can be seen to reflect the ways in which a leader might go about implementing strategy: *managing people, developing others, and delegating* could reflect means to the end of *being more strategic*. *Effectiveness of communication* also appears at T3 but not explicitly at T2 and would seem to fit this idea of the operationalisation of *being more strategic*. In contrast, other individuals may have greater need to look inwards at their own capacity to act: *issues of confidence, building resilience* and *personal growth* all appear at T2. In addition, *self-care and burnout* appears at T3.

It is unsurprising that what is meant by *being more strategic* should vary by individual. Coaching offers an individualised approach to exploring or diagnosing what barriers the individual is experiencing to being more strategic and these may turn out to be more related to skills and activities, or more related to personal dimensions.

Issues of confidence: different ways of growing into the leadership role

Clients presenting with *issues of confidence* can be seen to move onto topics in three clusters. Firstly, personal issues that may underlie that presenting issue (*fit between role and self, exploring personal history psychology and triggers, career planning*). *Sense of wider purpose* also appears at T3. Secondly, there is a cluster oriented towards personal development (*building resilience, developing presence and impact, personal growth*). Thirdly there is a cluster of activities that are more oriented towards fulfilling the role as a leader (*being more strategic, managing people, managing stakeholders*).

These three directions suggest that the client may feel the need to explore more deeply the roots of their issues of confidence, that they see value in moving onto a more constructive developmental path, or that they are able quite quickly to turn their attention back to fulfilling their organizational role. It may be that in the latter case, some clients may be encouraged by their coach to 'fake it till they make it', i.e. to address the underlying issues through performance improvement rather than the other way around. It may equally reflect different orientations in the coach, as some may encourage work on self-efficacy while others may have a greater interest in a more diagnostic approach. The impact of the theoretical orientation of the coach selected to undertake the work is unlikely to be known at the outset.

Taking then the changes mapped from T1 onwards in relation to our research question we observe that the coaching agenda changes significantly in headline terms moving

away from the outset. We have no evidence in the data of whether this is under the control of the commissioning process (though evidence from earlier stages of the project suggests this is rarely the case – see Discussion, below). Coaches and coachees together may break problem situations down into more specific challenges and they may turn from functional drivers to personal development drivers. Overall, what the coachee needs appears to be more complex and emergent than that which is understood at the outset.

2. What were the common topics at the end of the coaching and from what agendas did they originate (T3<-T2<-T1)?

In addressing this question, we looked backwards from T3 and have picked out two potentially interesting transitions.

<<<< INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE >>>>

Clients gravitate towards the topic 'understanding the self and identity'

One of the shifts of coaching topic identified from T1 looking forward was the way in which issues presenting as traditional management competencies can resolve towards more personal concerns. Now, looking from T3 backwards, we see many initial agendas resolving towards *understanding the self and identity*, the most frequently cited issue at T3 (see Figure 3). The shift to *understanding the self and identity* originates primarily from *being more strategic*, *managing people*, and *career planning* (see the right hand axis of Figure 3). Although Figure 3 shows just the four most frequent topics (out of 40) at T3, the topics *personal growth* and *self-care and burnout* appear ranked equal sixth in the data analysis. So both looking forward from T1 and backward from T3, there appears to be some sort of shift from management competencies to personal enquiry. It would be useful to follow up with more interpretive research in order to ascertain whether this emerges from the coach, the client, the client's organizational system or the combination of all three.

A pressing need for identity work in organizations

The appearance of *effectiveness of communication* ranked second in topics at T3 could be read in the context of management competencies. However, the presence of the topics *personal branding* ranked fifth and *developing presence and impact* ranked equal sixth suggest a possibility that some coaching clients see the need not only to develop their skills but also to market their contribution within the organizational context.

Looking at the end of coaching interventions backwards, therefore, we see how the emergent meaning making of the developmental agenda orients increasingly towards the self of the client, whether that is in terms of capacity, confidence or career. Although this might be expected where the coaching modality is identified as existential or ontological for example, in fact only 2 participants identified their practice as such. That said, coaches identifying as Gestalt, client-centred, developmental or other humanistic accounted for 55% of respondents. (Practices that might be expected to be more specifically goal-oriented such as cognitive-behavioural, rational-emotive behavioural and solutions focused accounted for only 15% of respondents.) It may be that coaching practice as a whole is more individually enabling than organizations expect and that this cuts across many labels or conceptualisations of modality.

Discussion

In our introduction, we identified a disconnect between a managerialist discourse affecting commissioning of coaching in organizations and the discourse of 'real' coaching,

as reflected in the inclinations of coaches and the experiences of coaching clients. In particular, we described the dominant assumption in coaching practice that coaching interventions start with specific goals and work towards the achievement of those goals. Furthermore, it is assumed that these goals are set by the coachee's sponsoring organization in a way that is intended to contribute to organizational outcomes. Our findings, derived from the analysis of the actual coaching conversations, challenge these assumptions. In this section, we have centred the discussion around two phenomena which have implications specifically in relation to this formulation of the research problem: the changing of goals and agendas in general, and the emergence of work on identity and self, which is not predicted by the topics identified at the outset of the coaching intervention. We finish the discussion with the implications of our findings for coaching and HR practitioners.

Changing goals and agendas

The fact that agendas shift through the course of the coaching relationship is not overly surprising. It has been documented empirically (Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018) and is predicted by theories such as the paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and action learning (Revans, 1982). Given the strong influence of adult development on the field of coaching, it is in fact almost bizarre that the idea of goals set at the start of the intervention and met at the end still holds sway over these theory-driven predictions.

So if the agenda is changing it is meaningful to look at the ways in which they change. The patterns of shift in agenda topics identified in the analysis above may be understood to represent a range of possible chains of logic within the coaching space. Firstly, having dealt with the main presenting issue – perhaps the 'low hanging fruit' in consultancy terms - it is possible that the coaching space is then available to deal with the next most urgent/important topics. Hence the agenda shifts simply as an effect of successfully dealing with the initial, or most urgent (or easiest to address) trigger for coaching. If this is the case, one might ask whether the coaching should cease at that point. Practical experience suggests it rarely does at this stage. Secondly, it is possible that the initial topic represents the client's understanding of their challenges at the outset, while further exploration with a coach brings better insight into the underlying nature of the challenge. This is a familiar pattern to all manner of organizational consultants who may be bringing specialist knowledge and insight to an existing situation: the presenting issue is not the real problem (Schein, 1998). Thirdly, the understanding of the presenting problem may change as a result of transforming the problem through the effects of intervention. This is more likely to be enabled by the selection of a more constructivist- and learning-oriented coaching approach.

These three possibilities are partly acknowledged in the coaching literature. Clutterbuck and Spence (2017, p.218) summarize a range of perspectives arguing that goals ... can be seen as temporary responses to a set of needs generated by an understanding of internal and external contexts. As this understanding deepens, individuals become more able to formulate goals that will be intrinsically satisfying.

In a survey of 140 coaches, Coutu and Kauffman (2009) reported that 95% of participants said the focus shifted during the coaching engagement. A qualitative analysis of the reasons given suggested the largest proportion did so in the pursuit of deeper goals and around 20% of those responding suggested reasons related to the client's self-awareness. Garvey *et al.* (2014, p.179) open the question of whose goals might be dominating the coaching intervention which suggests that as the coaching relationship develops, new psychological contracts might develop between the coaching dyad. If this is the case, then it may be implicit that the organizational sponsor's influence gradually fades. Ordóñez *et al.* (2009) note the function of goals in narrowing perspective which may lead dysfunctionally to the neglect of wider perspectives of what

is actually important in the coaching client's development. They also remind us (p.11) that Locke and Latham recommended that

'learning goals' be used in complex situations rather than 'performance goals.' In practice, however, managers may have trouble determining when a task is complex enough to warrant a learning rather than a performance goal.

Yet, as Clutterbuck and Spence (2017) note, a more 'linear' view of goals and goal achievement does still dominate the practitioner literature and coaching assignments in organizations.

A fourth possibility sits slightly apart from the previous three suggested above. A constructionist viewpoint might suggest that the client's conceptualisation of their own presenting issue may be affected by discourses of leadership, their own beliefs of what is a legitimate personal leadership challenge, and narratives within the organization of the role of coaching. That is to say that the coaching client is to some degree socially conditioned or influenced to see the problem from a specific viewpoint, in particular, the organizational and job role context suggests addressing competencies in order to 'progress' or 'perform' better. Garvey *et al.* (2014, pp.178-9) highlight the potential influence of HR stakeholders in the coaching who may promote a competency model of development as a strategy of control. In Western's (2016) terms, this can be seen as the imposition of but one possible discourse of coaching (that of a managerialist perspective). Our data, and previous findings cited above, suggest that this exercise of disciplinary power is only partially successful (insofar as coaches and their clients seem to tend towards developing their own localised understanding of the agenda).

In summary, the shift in topic may in part be an effect of a more critical self-evaluation, a more critical understanding of the work context and/or part of the natural process of experiential learning. The marked migration evident in the data away from topics that would be familiar themes in management and leadership competency frameworks, and towards both more concrete specific challenges and at the same time issues more centred around the person of the client (their choices, their future, their psychological makeup) might support a view that with the help of the coach, the client is to some extent shaking off some of the constraints of disciplinary power (Koning and Westell, 2012; Petriglieri *et al.*, 2011).

These shifts have been described as a move away from the organizational *agenda*. However, they may be more attuned to organizational *needs*. A more holistic conceptualisation of leadership capability has emphasised adaptability and reinvention as much as pre-determined competencies in both role performance (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014; Brinck and Tanggaard, 2016; PWC, 2017) and career management (Briscoe and Hall, 2006); a situation that has only been further exacerbated by the disruption of Covid-19 (e.g. Bierema, 2022). This literature argues that leaders need to be more inventive and less conventional; more dynamic and less conservative; more independent and less constrained by bureaucracy. It is paradoxical that this might be better served by the naturally occurring shift away from working on competencies in coaching and towards the self.

Work on identity and self

The increasing prominence of the work on identity and self amongst the topics of coaching conversation is one of the most noticeable results in this study. It is unlikely that this result would surprise organizational coaches, but it might be a feature of concern for commissioners of coaching who are strongly aligned with the managerialist discourses of coaching.

In terms of the theoretical contribution of our findings, we believe that they are significant for the debates on identity regulation in organizations actively discussed in

organizational publications (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Anteby, 2008; Bardon *et al.*, 2017; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Paring, Pez , and Huault, 2017). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) introduced the term of identity regulation as processes through which organizations exert control over workers' identities. Since then, there has been a plethora of publications describing various means used by organizations attempting to exert control by shaping workers' reflexively organized self-narratives (e.g. Anteby, 2008; Bardon *et al.*, 2017; Knights and Clarke, 2014). For example, education and professional affiliations are seen as a powerful medium of identity construction because influencing "what one is capable of doing (or expected to be able to do) frames who one 'is'" (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p.630).

Interestingly, organizational coaching has not been recognised so far as one of such means. However, coaching can be construed as a direct form of identity regulation by the organizations. Clients are motivated to change according to a new role or to keeping a desired role by the fear of being unworthy of it, particularly when coaching is conceptualised within a managerialist discourse. Szekely *et al.* (2024) note that leadership identity has been proposed as a "prerequisite for leadership behaviour and commitment to leadership development experiences" and that consequently, "we might assume that facilitating leaders' identity work is also a critical ingredient of executive coaching interventions". Researching coaching for senior female executives, Skinner (2014) found that the development of a leadership identity was a significant element of coaching outcomes. She later (2020) proposed a methodology to facilitate this. Fusco *et al.* (2016) have documented the effect of a tailored coaching effect on leader self-concept during a programme specifically targeted at developing 'authentic' leadership.

In practice, the above managerialist approach to coaching is expressed in the way coaches are typically commissioned to start with what is considered valuable for the organization (Segers *et al.*, 2011). There is a clear expectation that coaching clients not only improves their skills according to desirable competencies but makes use of trusting relationships with a coach to adjust their image, attitudes and preferences according to the expectations of the organization (Skinner, 2014; Western, 2017). A typical approach of identity regulation through coaching could be seen as grooming the lower grade leader to higher grade by developing specific qualities required for this role as defined by the organizational sponsor (Segers *et al.*, 2011).

At the same time Kunda (1992) argued that the corporate propaganda that continuously promotes the values and virtues of the organization as a regulator of identity, may increase it, diminish or may even backfire. We believe that our findings indicate a different reaction to active imposition of organizational expectations by undermining somewhat the process of identity regulation. It is possible that focusing on further understanding of self and identity during trusting and confidential environment of coaching is a form of passive resistance to identity regulation. This might not be a conscious strategy by clients or coaches, but it would not be a surprising reaction of coaches, considering concerns about one of the recent tendencies of commissioning parties to exert more control on coaching by selecting coaches perceived to be more compliant, imposing regimented structures on coaching assignments and implementing rewarding/punishing evaluations of coaches by simplistic measures of the results of coaching.

These managerialist practices in commissioning go against the grain of many specific theory-based approaches in coaching that positively embrace a focus on the self: Gestalt coaching (e.g. Maxwell and Bluckert, 2024) is oriented theoretically towards awareness rather than objectives; Spinelli (2024) describes existential coaching's concern for identity-related insecurities as an aspect of the client's internal conflicts; Drake (2024, p.120) says that "Narrative coaching helps people shift their stories and their identities as storytellers in order to generate new options and new results". Adopting the perspective of mini-selves Bachkirova (2022) argues that it may be unhelpful to the

individual to force the honing of one identity to conform to organizational imperatives at the cost of other aspects of their personality. She also argues that coaching for individual development of clients and projects meaningful for clients could be more beneficial even for organizations in the long run if identity regulation is not the main agenda (Bachkirova, 2024).

Our feeling about the topic *understanding the self and identity* is that it is likely to reflect more of an exploration of the client's own sense of self in all its complexity equally or even more than the development of a social 'front' desired by the organization. Athanasopoulou and Dobson's (2018) review of executive coaching outcomes hints at a similar reflection in noting (p.75) "effective, positive or life-changing experience" as a theme of outcomes across studies, and that "For coaching purchasers (e.g. HR departments) coaching success means positive business results and for coachees it means personal development benefits".

Implications for coaching practitioners and their relationship with HR

We have identified a disconnect between conventional managerial narratives of what should be discussed in coaching and how it is controlled on the one hand, against the realities emerging from this analysis of what is actually discussed. This disconnect - while unsurprising to practitioners we talk to - is somehow not noticed in conventional disciplinary discourses. In principle, it seems desirable that both coaches and those who commission them should know what they are about. This would include an engagement (without presupposing agreement) with the critical perspectives highlighted in our discussion and other similar arguments. This in turn might facilitate more sophisticated contracting that takes account of emergence, different styles of practice and the practicalities of realistic levels of control and monitoring. It is worth noting at this point that early piloting research for this project asked coaches to record the level of organizational involvement in the coaching intervention. Despite a discourse in the field suggesting a level of hands-on management of the process, less than half of interventions were contracted with specific outcomes through a three-way contracting process. Of those, only half were followed up with a three-way review at the end of the process.

This raises important questions for coaches as they contract with HR:

- Is the coaching proposal set out in such a way that it can be managed with sufficient clarity of its purpose, value and process?
- Can coaches be sufficiently clear about the values and principles underlying their own approach?
- Do frameworks highlighting the role of personal meaning making such as Bates and Chen in relation to HRD and Western in relation to coaching offer a valuable framework for structuring the agreement for coaching?
- Are coaches' focus on personal development more attuned to the needs of modern organizations and could it be delivering greater impact and value than the competencies targeted in the triangular contract?

We have also highlighted how discussions shift from classic management and leadership competency frameworks towards reflections on the self and personal meaning making. Issues of self and identity appear as a significant concern lying behind more prosaic skill areas. Hence the nature of the coaching work opens up more enduring aspects of the self, emphasising longer term time horizons and the client's *capacity* to deal with problems as they arise. Some coaches may be specifically looking to carry out this kind of work, while others may be unprepared or even unaware of the shift in which they are participating. This has ethical and educational implications:

- Are coaches trained do recognise and handle their positionality within the complexities of competing discourses and the exercise of disciplinary power?

- Are coaches who have been trained to coaching competencies (*sans* critical perspectives) furnished with the wherewithal to operate ethically within their competency as recommended by professional ethics frameworks?

Conclusion

In this paper we explored the results of the study that highlights how the dynamics of topics discussed during coaching indicates a discrepancy between what is institutionally expected of coaching and the much broader possibility of what actually happens. The findings suggest that coaching conversations migrate from organizationally sanctioned 'competencies' to the issues of personal significance. This indicates what we call a passive resistance to the managerialist approach to coaching which corresponds to what is discussed as identity regulation by organizations (Alvesson and Wilmot, 2002). We hope that this phenomenon of such resistance is further researched, as it has significant implications for contracting of coaching assignments, for conceptualisation of coaching as an organizational service and, potentially, for the future of coaching industry as a whole.

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Ethics

The project was approved by University ethics committee.

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