Reflections from the field

Defying Definition: Competences in Coaching and Mentoring

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Abstract
How do you define coaching and mentoring?   What standards should apply?   What should a competency framework for a coaching role look like?   The issue of definitions and standards in coaching and mentoring circles is the subject of much debate.   A competence-based approach is appealing; clarity in the coaching process would be helpful.   But is it really a practicable proposition? This paper explores the difficulties inherent in a competence-based approach, and in attempting to define a process and standards (beyond a code of ethics) for executive coaching and mentoring.   It concludes that attempting to 'map' this highly complex area using conventional competence-based methods is impractical.

Key words:
Definitions, standards, competence-based approach, executive coaching and mentoring.

Introduction
The extensive, protracted debate around 'definitions' and standards continues to confound practitioners and researchers in the relatively immature profession of coaching and mentoring.

In 2003, the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), established to *'promote best practice and ensure that the highest possible standards are maintained in the coach/mentoring relationship',* commissioned a project to:

- 'Establish whether there is an underlying set of core competencies common to all types of coaching and mentoring practice'', and to…
- 'Identify whether it is possible to draw existing standards and competencies for all types of coaching and mentoring into a common framework.'

The precise wording of these aims, particularly the use of *'whether there is'* and *'whether it is possible'* indicates a deliberate caution in embarking on this quest, with good reason.   The advent of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in the early 1990s led to the almost obsessive generation of competences in many sectors, at great cost and with dubious benefits.   I, for one, experienced first-hand the laboured attempts to map jobs in the retail financial services sector at that time.   Despite all of this work, the obsession with definition has done little to improve the *customer experience* in financial services.   In fact, apart from giving the regulators some comfort at the time (but not since, as mis-selling continues to be uncovered in the sector) there have been no evidence-based claims demonstrating tangible benefits

derived from the use of competence methodology. There have been many *claims* that 'Training and Competence' regimes have added real tangible value; even the regulator – the Financial Services Authority – claims that it's good business sense, but no one has yet come forward to prove it. It is interesting that one role mapped in the drive for competence-based definition was the coaching role of sales managers, resulting in a clearly defined coaching process and standards. The outcome was, by and large, an impoverished form of coaching that was little more than a mechanical, predictable, repetitious, and therefore largely pointless exercise to put a tick in a box.

Apart from the difficulties inherent in competences, any relationship between coach/mentor and learner is shaped by the characteristics and personalities of those involved, and this adds further complications in attempting to define coaching and mentoring.

This paper draws on an exploration of current research supported by my own experiences and is intended to highlight the difficulties inherent in a competence approach to the definition of coaching/mentoring, pointing to the need for another way (although, what that alternative might be is not the subject of this paper). The paper also highlights the difficulties of attempting to prescribe a process where two personalities are involved in engaging together within it.

Complexities of Context and the Limitations of Competence

There can be little doubt that clarity around what a coach/mentor does and how a coach/mentor operates is of value in positioning coaching/mentoring as a bona fide profession. A lack of clarity is potentially disorientating for all parties in a coaching/mentoring contract, with capacity for misaligned expectations. Definition would provide a common stake in the ground, a benchmark, a template to which to conform, a comfortable safety net. However, seeking a universal definition of coaching/mentoring, with clearly drawn borders and a specified process, is fraught with difficulties, not least the possible promotion of an over-dependence on 'competence' above professional judgement, and a resulting over-rigid process-obsessed approach.

The pursuit of an all-embracing catch-all definition seems to me a Holy Grail quest – honourable in intent but ultimately fruitless. Each of us sees our definition through our own unique lens. Like the ontological argument for the existence of God, everyone has their own unique vocabulary and understanding of concepts; we all 'define' God, or Heaven, or a Coach, in our own unique blend of words and interpretations; therefore, no two definitions are exactly the same; therefore, it is virtually impossible to deny (or confirm) all possible definitions. However, for the sake of professional differentiation (comparing what a coach does with, say, a counsellor or therapist) shouldn't we at least *try* to reach a universal definition?

The NVQ framework for competence-based definition involves two main facets: a series of *elements* or activity statements, which together describe the key task areas and behaviours of the role; and underpinning each of these, a *range statement* that attempts to define the usual *context* in which the former sit. This approach is fairly sound for describing base-level, operational coaching, however the methodology is fraught with difficulties in describing more complex, professional-level coaching and

mentoring. Defining competences presents one major flaw in that "the notion of competence is concerned with predictable behaviours in predicable situations" (Barnett, R. 1994 p.73). Therefore, a competence approach is fine if coaching/mentoring can be constrained within a tight process with relatively few variations. One example is coaching in a repetitive skill such as processing orders or scripted questions in a call centre environment. Coaching in this scenario requires a fairly narrow set of skills applied in a largely predictable process. However, this type of coaching (more like instruction) would not be acceptable in an executive coaching situation, where the 'range variables' (NVQ terminology) making up the range statements would constitute a far longer list than the elements or activity statements themselves. Coaching in this scenario requires rapid assimilation of a vastly complex 'context', unpredictable and therefore almost impossible to rehearse or drill. It is like comparing, in the National Health Service, the routine task of changing dressings with the job of a consultant in a hectic Accident and Emergency department.

The case for caution in embracing a competence-based approach is best illustrated by examining a sample of professional opinion that challenges accepted norms in specific areas of coaching.

Challenging Norms: Layers of Complexity in the Coaching Process
Take as an example the generally accepted norm of **agenda setting** in establishing a contract between coach/mentor and learner. This appears simple enough to put into a process and competence framework, however consider the following:

Unique Interpretation:
Each learner's actions are fully consistent with the interpretation that persists within their own frame of reference (Flaherty, 1999 p.9). Consequently, in setting an agenda the learner's actions are determined by their interpretation of the agenda and what it means, which will be different to the coach's. Flaherty continues: "our job as coaches will be to understand the client's structure of interpretation, then in partnership alter this structure so that the actions that follow bring about the intended outcome". Of course, the 'intended outcome' is also open to different interpretations. Flaherty suggests that the first-cut of the agenda is therefore likely to be only a prototype, something that will need re-working, adding layer upon layer of complexity onto an apparently simple process.

Chicken and Egg:
Alfred Bandura (1988) observed: "people's beliefs about their abilities have a profound effect on those abilities". Their view of what is achievable is coloured by their experiences and mindset. In agenda setting, individuals can be self-limiting, choosing the comfortable option or assuming that they need to conform to a pattern most readily acceptable to the coach. Perversely, the learner is often in need of coaching before an agenda is set, in order to set an agenda for the coaching that is not self-limiting!

Re-setting the Agenda:
Nathan (2002), a chartered psychologist, observes that coaches will be faced frequently with a need to re-set the agenda, often in the same meeting as the original agenda setting. The coach needs to be able to "make a professional judgement

whether or not to take the client down a route different from the entry point". The use of 'professional judgement' adds more layers to the complexity of the process.

In financial services, the process of elimination used by financial planners in arriving at a suitable recommendation for a client has been mapped. The decision tree runs to pages of process description, and yet the professional financial planner can arrive at an appropriate conclusion in seconds, with the help of a calculator. Actuaries calculate probabilities, finance directors 'sense' there is something wrong with a balance sheet, surgeons make life-or-death judgements, all in the space of seconds, yet the decision tree charting the processes involved, taking account of the variables, would run to many pages. The same would be true for an experienced coach, adapting and responding to the sort of anomalies and conflicting signals given out by a client in a first meeting. What people say they want and what they need are not necessarily the same; clients sometimes withhold vital pieces of the jigsaw and can mislead with irrelevant data.

There are other examples of notable exceptions to the generally accepted norm:

- Does a coach need to have experience or technical knowledge in the area in which he is coaching? According to John Whitmore (1992), "the answer is 'no', not if the coach is truly acting as a detached awareness raiser". This is fundamentally challenged by McLellan (2003) who quotes two sources in her research into executive coaching: "a good coach should be able to have added-value conversations about strategic issues" (Steve Nicklen, Penna Change Consulting), and John Weston, head of the Institute of Directors' director development programme – "an executive coach must have been a top business person themselves and understood what it means to lead an organisation. They must have been there, seen it, and done it. They must have been practitioners."

- According to the accepted norm, goal setting must be owned by the learner, and the coach or mentor should not intrude in this area. Landsberg (2000) stresses the importance of creating 'a compelling vision' and cautions against the potentially myopic view of the learner. Individuals may lack the confidence to reach out for more ambitious or unconventional goals, and may need help in crafting a compelling vision or destiny. Landsberg believes that the coach should play an important part in influencing and guiding the learner towards a more compelling vision of the future, one which generates sufficient self-motivation to ensure it becomes a reality. Peltier (2001) believes that "goal setting is overrated" and should not get in the way of "immediate awareness", although he agrees with Landsberg that the coach should work "together with the client" to establish goals, influencing the learner in goal selection. Furthermore, a prescriptive approach to goal setting in complex situations is cautioned against by Skinner (2003), who concludes that "it is unlikely that there is one intervention that will always be effective".

- The reaction from a group of 40 coaching/mentoring practitioners, of varied experience, in a presentation by an executive coach, extolling the

use of 'tell', was deeply divided – some strongly disagreeing and regarding the approach as unprofessional, some strongly agreeing, believing that executives expect an added-value approach in which some direction and advice is entirely appropriate. It is generally accepted that a coach should avoid 'tell', relying on questioning to draw conclusions from the learner, thus encouraging ownership. But is giving 'advice' off-limits? Whitely (2003) is one of a growing number of practitioners who strongly disagree, asserting the need for the coach to be 'inspirational' when coaching to develop inspirational leadership attributes in executives. Whitmore (1992) is firm in his opposing view – "the coach is not a problem solver, a teacher, an adviser, an instructor or even an expert; he or she is a sounding board, a facilitator, a counsellor, and an awareness raiser". In Whitmore's view, coaches employing autocratic methods "deny their learners' responsibility, by telling them what to do". Goleman (1995) posits a contrary view – when giving feedback a coach should "point to a way to fix the problem, otherwise it leaves the [learner or client] frustrated, demoralised, or demotivated". Clutterbuck (1998) advocates a four-quadrant model in mentoring, in which one quadrant or style is 'Guardian' – here 'tell' is perfectly appropriate. Clutterbuck observes "the noticeable shift in recent years …towards non-directive [coaching] behaviours is admirable, but may sometimes obscure the complexity of the relationship". He continues: "in practice, the effective coach will vary the directiveness according to the attitudes and behaviour of the learner."

Practitioners cannot agree on innumerable other aspects of coaching and mentoring, and with each opposing view another potential 'range variable' enters the competence framework:

- Mentoring is generally accepted as involving internal mentors, with their knowledge of the organisation key to the effectiveness of the relationship. Microsoft, however, use only *external* mentors in their extensive and highly successful mentoring scheme, according to Glover (2002).

- Any coach or mentor that comes close to entering the area of counselling with a learner should exercise extreme caution. This is generally accepted, with many practitioners absolute in their resistance to crossing the boundary into counselling or therapy territory. However, Peltier (2001), a licensed psychologist as well as an executive coach, holds a different view on this – "to run from the therapy model, to abandon it completely, would be a mistake…the core ideas from accepted therapy theories have significant value for executive or management coaches". And the boundary moves again…

- Coaching methods and techniques are generally seen as useful tools for the coach and mentor. These could be included in competence range statements. However, not all leading practitioners agree on the value of 'techniques' and this casts doubt on the validity of their inclusion in a competence framework. Two notable examples are Whitmore ("obsession with techniques killed the coaching"; "responsibility and

awareness are the key, how you get there is not important") and Flaherty (who states unequivocally in his 'Five Principles of Coaching' that "techniques don't work!").

In the ongoing debate of 'what's in' and 'what's out' of coaching and mentoring, *context* appears to be a major determinant. The more complex the context, the more the accepted norms tend to be challenged by practitioners and researchers (Cox, 2003). Accommodating all of the anomalies and variables thrown up by the myriad of contexts in, say, executive coaching would require a set of competences that would be unwieldy and unworkable.

The People Dimension

Another dimension that adds further complexity is that individual characteristics, both in the learner and the coach/mentor, play a major part in determining outcomes. To what extent can definitions and competence frameworks accommodate the variations in behaviours necessary between coach and learner to result in effective coaching or mentoring? The possible permutations between two individuals are huge:

- There are 8 Myers Briggs personality types. In interactions between two people, this amounts to 64 possible combinations. Each one has its own unique subtle relevance in terms of how the coach needs to modify behaviour to get the most out of the relationship.

- There are four Honey & Mumford learning styles. In an interaction between coach and learner there are 16 possible combinations. The coach has to recognise the learner's preferred learning style as well as being thoroughly familiar with their own. For example, writing reflection notes: an Activist may find this tiresome; having decided what action to take, the Activist will want to get on with the action, not write it down. An Activist coach will need to recognise that their own reluctance to write reflection notes should not be imposed on their learner. A coach, faced with an Activist learner, will need to use their influencing skills to encourage the learner to write reflection notes.

- Then there are gender differences to consider. According to Deborah Tannen (1990), women are concerned with intimacy whereas men are concerned with independence. Women want a sympathetic ear, while men want to 'solutioneer'. Women prefer a coach or mentor to 'match' their problem with a similar anecdote of their own (empathising) whereas men would tend to be resentful of this, feeling that their problem is being belittled. Men tend not to seek help and can resent it when it is volunteered. These factors should be taken into account by a coach or mentor, and the tactics for any interaction should allow for these differences. The possible combinations of male/female coach/learner amount to 4.

- Allowing for Myers Briggs, learning styles and gender differences, the total number of possible combinations is 4,096 (64x16x4). Given that a coach's profile is a 'fixed' factor, the possible number of 'people-variants' (MBTI/learning styles/male-female) amounts to 64 (8x4x2). A coach who is truly effective across all possible types would need to know how to adapt to

each of these 64 varieties. Add to this the possible variations due to cultural differences, age, and other variations, for example mindset (optimistic, pessimistic), and the picture becomes highly complex.

Multiply this by the range of models that a coach uses and the permutations are mind-boggling. For example, if the coach uses the GROW model there are 64 possible variations to 'learn' in relation to GROW alone. The picture is probably impossible to learn by rote. It can only be understood through trial and error and diligent reflection. Even a 'master' coach will get it wrong now and then. Arguably, a coach *must* 'get it wrong' in order to develop, on the basis that with innumerable possibilities a coach is constantly learning and therefore mistakes are par for the course.

I have lost count of the number of people I have coached over the years – it is well over a thousand, many of them in short-term situations, but with a growing number of regular and repeat clients in recent years. I tried to analyse, some years ago, what made the difference between what I call 'operational' coaching and 'inspirational' coaching. The operational variety is the predictable, transactional, process-tied, routine sort of coaching that works well enough on a basic level. But to inspire, a coach has to take risks, trust his/her instincts, strive for ever-higher self-awareness, weigh up situations and decide on appropriate tactics in an instant, and develop an almost super-ability to read people and understand them. Chalk and cheese. It may be going too far to claim that inspirational coaching defies description. However, its richness would surely defy any attempt at wholesale mapping or charting – visualise a computer's attempts at writing poetry…

Conclusion

A competence framework could define the foundation-level processes and methodology of coaching and mentoring satisfactorily, and would be useful in providing a track for novices to follow. A Code of Ethics, such as that being developed by the EMCC, could provide, at *principle level*, a valuable means of defining and stipulating professional behaviour that would be of practical use for all interested parties. However, it is difficult to envisage how a competence framework and standards could be applied to higher-order coaching/mentoring, such as executive coaching, without the resulting output being convoluted to the point of being indigestible and therefore of little practical use.

The budding profession of coaching and mentoring will need to find other means to regulate higher-level practitioners, perhaps involving evidenced continuing professional development (CPD) and case-specific supervision (similar to therapists).

To conclude, the very nature of coaching and mentoring at the higher level is such that it will probably never be completely mapped or charted. This, of course, is a major reason why it holds such fascination for those engaged in it professionally, and why generations of master coaches will continue to inspire their learners and release their untapped potential.

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