Exploring the meaning and experience of coaching in relation to the learning and development of non-executive directors:

A grounded theory study

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Abstract

In recent years, boards have been faced with increasing pressure from governments, regulators and company stakeholders to upgrade their performance. In addition to measures related to board composition and structure, the learning and development of non-executive directors has been advocated as a promising avenue for boards to reach higher levels of effectiveness. In fact, however, very little is known about experiences with the learning and development of non-executive directors. In this context, many scholars have referred to the world of boards as a 'black box'.

The present study aims to shed more light on the learning and development of non-executive directors by conducting an in-depth investigation into what role coaching plays and how both clients and providers make sense of their coaching experiences. The choice to focus on coaching is partly inspired by suggestions made by various researchers that non-executive directors should develop the capacity to self-reflect and engage in meaningful and effective dialogues about their work in order to increase their effectiveness. Coaching would be an ideal instrument to facilitate this. However, limited research exists in the field of either corporate governance or the social sciences that specifically elaborates on experiences with the use of coaching for non-executives or boards.

The present study provides empirical evidence pertaining to the relevance of coaching for non-executive directors and the approaches that match their needs and attributes. The study has been designed from a critical realist perspective, adopting a qualitative approach to gain insight into events, their deeper meanings and the social mechanisms that may be influencing them. Data consisted of actual coaching experiences, collected via semi-structured interviews with sixteen participants – a combination of coaches and non-executive directors from various countries. The grounded theory methodology has been applied for data collection and analysis in order to ultimately arrive at a model for the coaching of non-executive directors.

This study contributes empirically based insights into how coaching with non-executive directors is being practised and how these clients make sense of what coaching is or what it can do for them. New evidence is provided to suggest that the

coaching of non-executive directors is characterised by ambivalence, and that this has a strong impact on how coaching is structured and delivered. Furthermore, this study provides new evidence that approaches currently in use for the coaching of top executives are not fully applicable to non-executive directors or the boards they are part of. The findings suggest that the best match for this clientele are approaches that are situational, intuitive and pragmatic.

The study contributes to coaching practice by providing an empirically based framework for the coaching of non-executive directors and boards. It is constructed based on the insight that the working alliance becomes the most important factor in positioning the coaching, defining the agenda and achieving meaningful results. The framework provides guidance to practitioners on how to set up the coaching and which aspects to focus on in each stage of the relationship. Practical implications are included for how professional bodies can educate and prepare coaches who aspire to engage with this client group. Finally, the study prompts corporate learning and development professionals to identify non-executive directors as a client group and to explore how they can contribute to their learning and development.

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1 Introduction

Non-executive directors (NEDs) fulfil an important role in organisations. As members of the (supervisory) board, they are the key point of connection between the stakeholders of a firm and the managers entrusted with its day-to-day functioning (Taylor, Dulewicz & Hay, 2008; Monks & Minnow, 2012). In recent years, NEDs are increasingly being confronted with the need to upgrade their performance, primarily because the business environment is affected by unprecedented levels of volatility and uncertainty (McKinsey & Company, 2020; Barton & Wiseman, 2015). These changes also have implications for the dynamics between executives and non-executives and require new constructs to be developed around what good board performance looks like. Moreover, boards are coming under increasing governmental and regulatory scrutiny due to the last financial crisis and numerous corporate debacles, such as the emissions scandal at Volkswagen (Li et al., 2018). In each case, the question is asked as to why the board did not intervene. It is therefore now largely agreed among scholars that boards need to step up in terms of their performance. However, there is less agreement regarding how NEDs should go about doing this (Shekshnia & Zagieva, 2019; Charas, 2013; Korn Ferry, 2013).

Traditionally, research that investigates how to increase the functioning of NEDs and boards has focused on the relationship between the so-called 'usual suspects' and the performance of a board. These usual suspects are as follows: the demographics of a board, the role of the CEO, the insider/outsider ratio on the board and the influence of board members' stock-holding (Finkelstein & Mooney, 2003; Daily, Dalton & Canella, 2003). However, there is increasing criticism of this type of research, suggesting that the results are ambiguous and based on weak inferences. Several authors (Goergen & Renneboog, 2014; Winter & Van de Loo, 2012; Levrau & Van den Berghe, 2007) argue that the behaviour of NEDs at the personal level, as well as at the level of the board as a whole, is driven by factors that cannot be explained by these traditional research frameworks in corporate governance. They therefore advocate studying NEDs from other perspectives. Several suggestions have been made on this subject, for example, to look at group dynamics or the way NEDs experience learning and change (Huse, 2009, pp. 10-32). In particular, the learning capability of NEDs has attracted attention as a promising factor that may improve

individual and group performance (Charas, 2014; Garratt, 2005; Jackson et al., 2003). The present study aims to follow up on the suggested research agenda by exploring the learning and development of NEDs, particularly with regards to the use of coaching.

This introductory chapter provides an overview of the key aspects of this study and the factors that have inspired it. The first section elaborates on what NEDs actually do, followed by what has motivated me personally to engage with this research project and why I am interested in the coaching of NEDs. The next section positions the research within current debates on coaching research and explains what type of research is performed by the present study. This section goes on to outline the objectives of this study and how it aims to contribute to coaching research. The third section provides an overview of existing literature related to the research question in order to contextualise the present research. The chapter concludes with a section outlining the key features of the methodology used in the present thesis and how this thesis is structured.

1.1   What are non-executive directors?

As the role of NEDs is quite unique and not necessarily known to everyone, it is useful to clarify what they do and in which contexts. The title of 'non-executive director' is not a protected one, and nor is there consistency in the titles used for this position. The role is sometimes also referred to as board director, supervisory director or simply director. NEDs are part of the board of directors and are traditionally studied within the domain of corporate governance (Klarner, Yoshikawa & Hitt, 2017; Zattoni, Douglas & Judge, 2013; Huse & Gabrielson, 2012). The role of NEDs is part-time, with most boards only meeting approximately six to nine times per year. Non-executive directors often have more than one directorship and sometimes combine the role with a full-time top executive role in another organisation. Various researchers have concluded that there is no ultimate agreement about what tasks NEDs perform and how these should best be executed (Petrovic, 2008; Roberts et al., 2005; Van den Berghe & Levrau, 2004; Hillman & Dalziel, 2003). Still, guided by codes of governance issued in various countries, there is currently at least a general understanding of the types of activities that NEDs may be expected to perform (Germany, 2020; The OECD, 2019; The UK, 2018; The Netherlands, 2016).

Essentially, these codes state that while executive leaders are primarily responsible for setting corporate strategy and overseeing its realisation, the key responsibility of NEDs is to have oversight on those executives. Within this supervisory responsibility, non-executive boards are required to fulfil a wide range of tasks. They have to evaluate the financial health of an organisation, check the strategic plans and assess the company's risk management (Hernandez, 2012; Hillman, Nicholson & Schropshire, 2008; Henry & Kiel, 2004). Additionally, they are responsible for selecting, reviewing and (if necessary) replacing the CEO and other top executives. Boards are further tasked with negotiating the CEO's salary, nominating new non-executive board members and supervising major strategic decisions related to (for example) mergers and acquisitions (Nadler & Nadler, 2017; Hilb, 2009).

Ultimately, it is possible to state that boards have three roles: a control role related to oversight, a service role related to guiding and supporting the executive team and a strategic role that relates to direction-setting (Lückerath-Rovers, 2014; Hooghiemstra & Van Maanen, 2004). However, some researchers argue that, in practice, the role of NEDs is strongly situational, meaning that the interpretation of this role ultimately depends on the type of organisation to which they are connected, where that company is located and the professional maturity of the governance system in that organisation (Eulerich & Stiglbauer, 2012; Roberts, McNulty & Stiles, 2005; Pye & Camm, 2003). For example, it makes a difference whether a company is family-owned or listed on the stock market, as well as whether the company is a subsidiary of a holding or (for example) controlled by investors, like a private equity firm. The nature of the board and its responsibilities may be slightly different in each situation.

An important distinction may also be the national context. Boards in Anglophone countries are often set up in a so-called one-tier structure, where the CEO is also the chairman of the board, while some top executives can also be board members in addition to their executive role (Spencer Stuart, 2020; Institute of Directors, 2018). For its part, the mainland European system often follows a two-tier structure, where the board is explicitly a supervisory entity separate from the executive team (Moraru, Ungureanu & Sumovschi, 2018).

At an individual level, the actual responsibilities assigned to board members can be influenced by whether they can be seen as 'independent', i.e. lacking personal ties to the company or the owners, or 'affiliated', i.e. have connections with the organisation beyond the board (Pan, 2018; Benton, 2016; Sonnenfeld, 2004). For example, some topics on the board agenda, such as CEO salary, will not be decided by affiliated directors, as they cannot be expected to look at this topic in an impartial way (Useem, 2006).

Most mature boards have organised themselves into committees, each of which focus on a specific topic, e.g. the remuneration committee, the strategy committee or the audit committee (Yamanaka, 2018). These committees have a dedicated chairperson from the board and will hold separate gatherings, sometimes with executives as guests, in order to prepare proposals for the board. Regardless of what interpretation is used to define their tasks, NEDs are personally liable by law to the same extent as executive directors, and can therefore be held accountable for the success or failure of the organisation for which they are a board member. In the worst-case scenario, as a result of underperformance of a company, the board could be taken to court by stakeholders (Thaten, 2018; Lublin, 2004).

1.1.1   Role of the board chairperson

The chairperson, or simply the chair, plays an important role on the board, as he or she carries additional responsibilities on top of what can be expected from NEDs (Shekshnia & Zagieva, 2019; LeBlanc, 2003). While it is obvious that the chairperson has to facilitate the board meetings, they also lead the work of the board. The chairperson plays an important role in the architecture and effectiveness of a company's governance system, seeing to it that the right board committees are set up for crucial topics and that information, feedback, and recommendations from the various committees are properly communicated to the plenary board. The chair further ensures that the right topics are selected for the board's annual agenda and are discussed at the right time; moreover, he or she (often supported by a corporate secretary) prepares board meetings by making sure that all NEDs have the relevant and necessary information (Kakabadse & Kakabadse, 2007).

As the leader of the board, the chair is also the natural point of interface with stakeholders for decisions taken by the board. In listed companies, the chair often leads the annual shareholders' meeting and communicates to the press about decisions related to corporate governance (van Hamel et al., 1998). Under the one-tier corporate governance practices, the roles of chairman and CEO are often entrusted to the same person: the 'president leader'. This assigning of the two roles to the same person has been frequently criticised (Leblanc & Pick, 2011; Chen, 2003), as it is questioned whether it is actually possible for leaders to maintain a clear distinction between these roles. The primary responsibility of the chair is to run the board, while that of the CEO is to run the company. In the two-tier governance system often found in continental European companies, a separation of the CEO and chair position is more common practice (Eulerich & Stiglbauer, 2012; Bezemer et al., 2012). Although all board members should aspire to develop a good relationship with management, scholars argue that, particularly in a two-tier governance system, the chair should invest significantly in developing a close working relationship with the CEO. Much of what goes on in the boardroom depends on the quality of this relationship (Schuit, 2010; Kakabadse, Kakabadse & Barratt, 2006). Some go so far as to say that the chairman should operate as a mentor to the CEO (Burton, 2000; Ng & de Cock, 2002).

1.1.2 Required qualifications

Being nominated as a board member for an organisation is perceived as a great honour and a significant accomplishment in a leader's career (Lückerath-Rovers, *et al.,* 2014). However, Guerrero & Seguin (2012), argue that this perceived significance of the role may be the reason why the motivations of executives for attaining a board role should be viewed with suspicion. The perceived honour and status could lead to the risk that individuals are pursueing board roles for the wrong reasons. They might be more concerned with the status and with becoming a member of powerful networks, than with fully understanding their responsibilities and growing their effectiveness in a board. Such board members are also not likely to express dissenting views in boards or to challenge management, which ultimately could erode the performance and added value of boards. Aspiring board members are therefore urged to seriously reflect on their motives for seeking such roles and to become more aware of what the role demands of them.

Not only do board roles require substantial and often new capabilities from executives, but by committing to a board role, individuals also accept a personal and, to some extent, high risk liability for the success of an organisation (Thaten, 2018; Lublin, 2004).

Board members are expected to bring significant experience as executive leaders in organisations. They have held or still hold C-level roles like CEO, CFO, COO or senior executive roles in functions like risk management, human resources, legal or IT. Sometimes they have had senior roles in other types of organisations like political parties or unions. Financial acumen is deemed essential for all board members, in order to read complex financial statements, assess how a company is performing and be able to estimate the quality of risk management deployed. NEDs are expected to have knowledge and understanding of the industry and the field in which a company operates. Their strategic responsibility requires the ability to assess threats, opportunities, how the company is developing in comparison to the industry and what best future direction would make sense (Petrovic, 2008; Huse 2005; Pye and Pettigrew, 2005; Roberts *et al.,* 2005).

As the work of NEDs involves interacting with other board members and various stakeholders, their interpersonal, communication and stakeholder management skills need to be very well developed. In that context, the role of board member is associated with individuals who have reached advanced levels of personal maturity and emotional intelligence. Independent thinking is also considered as one of the key requirements for non-executive directors. While it is deemed important for NEDs to take the views of management into consideration, scholars suggest that it is ultimately crucial that they are capable of arriving at their own judgement (Conger & Lawlor III, 2002; Ingley & Van der Walt, 2003). NEDs should be able to provide critical perspectives on issues of extreme strategic complexity and ambiguity. This requires NEDs to approach their work with a reflective, exploratorative stance and with considerable detachment.

An important question in the context of the present study, is whether NEDs are leaders and should be expected to develop specific leadership capabilities? Traditionally, the role of NED has not been seen as a serious leadership role, but as

an extra-curricular activity, usually taken on by white male executives in the later stages of their careers or after retirement, as a member of "The old boys network" (Westphal and Stern, 2007). The NED role provides them a way to remain involved with business, albeit at a different pace. This resonates with a conservative view on boards to primarily exist as a fairly ceremonial entity which is not expected to challenge management too much, but is available as an optional advisory resource for management when consulted (Guerrero, La Palme & Seguin, 2014). In recent years however, the idea of a NED role as a low-impact retirement option has been criticised for a number of reasons. Firstly, the perception does not match with stakeholders' increased expectations regarding board performance. The greater accountability expected from boards, implies that NEDs make an effort to be fully informed about the decisions of management and need to play a pro-active role in all governance related matters.

Secondly, it has been argued that although the role of NED is different from management, it is part of the group that leads a company and therefore unmistakably a leadership role. Because the decisions of a board can have far reaching implications for the direction, functioning and performance of an organisation, NEDs should see themselves as co-leading the organisation (Charan, Carey & Useem, 2014). Similar to other groups of leaders, NEDs need to therefore invest in further growing their capability to perform this leadership role with skill and effectiveness. The increased accountability and expected greater involvement of NEDs in strategic leadership activities moves board work away from being an extra-curricular retirement activity, to becoming a professional leadership role - one which someone does not qualify for by being part of "the old boys network", but a role which has to be learnt and professionalised.

This implies that NED roles could be performed by more groups than the typical aging white male executive. It holds a potential for greater diversity in boards, because a board role becomes a professional choice for those who are willing and able to develop the right capabilities. Accordingly, we see the welcome emergence of what is being called the "career-choice" NED (Broadbent, 2013; IDDAS, 2011). Characteristic for these NEDs is that they consciously decide to mainly dedicate themselves to board work and to do so at a relatively early age. They aspire to already

built up a portfolio of board positions by their 40s or 50s and are driven by different motivations and role interpretations than conventional NEDs.

1.1.3 How different are non-executive directors from executives?

One of the reasons behind my interest in investigating this client group in the context of learning and development is the fact that their task is in reality quite unique compared to those of other leaders in organisations. There are various factors that distinguish NEDs from executive leaders (Pick, 2007; Levrau & Van den Berghe, 2007):

Partial affiliation. Non-executive directors are not necessarily employees of the company over which they have oversight. In many cases, they sit on several boards (having several mandates); for some NEDs, these mandates come on top of their regular 'day job'. In practice, therefore, NEDs often devote only limited amounts of their time to board-related work.

Episodic interactions. Most non-executive boards only meet a few times a year, although board committees (a small subset of the board) can meet more frequently. As a result, NEDs spend limited time together with the whole board in the boardroom. This reduces their available opportunities to bond as a group and collectively make sense of their tasks.

Power arena. Because of their substantial experience as leaders, most NEDs are accustomed to sitting at the head of the table and holding positions that grant them power, recognition, and influence. The setting of a non-executive board might therefore be fertile ground for frustration or power clashes.

Interdependent relationship. In contrast to management teams, the role and position of NEDs does not reflect their authority in the company's hierarchy. Although they collectively have some power over executives, they are not really the superiors of the executive board. Non-executive directors therefore depend heavily on the willingness of management to provide them with relevant and timely information and to engage in a collaborative relationship.

Aura of formality. The structure, physical setting, social rituals and processes of non-executive board meetings create a type of formality and status, that is uncommon among other leadership meetings.

Size. Boards of directors often consist of larger number of members in comparison to executive leadership teams.

Conflicting agendas. While it is important for the board to work with a shared agenda (representing the interests of stakeholders), the diversity of stakeholder groups that individual NEDs represent, along with their potentially conflicting objectives (i.e. continuity of the firm versus short-term revenue for investors), could make it difficult to arrive at a collective agreement.

These factors will not only influence the effectiveness of boards but likely also have implications for the way in which NEDs engage in learning and development activities.

1.2   My motivation for this study

Coaching as a professional activity has played an important role in my life for the last fifteen years. I have been involved with the coaching of leaders both in my private practice and at various educational settings around the world. In my private practice, I coach leaders either individually or in teams. Individual coaching engagements usually last for about one year and often continue for multiple years. The team engagements are of shorter duration and are typically aimed at improving collective performance in the context of strategy deployment. In addition to my private practice, I also coach leaders and teach at INSEAD business school, where I have been part of the faculty since 2008. Most of the coaching there happens within the context of executive education programmes and is usually delivered as group coaching (Ward & Van de Loo, 2014). Participants in the executive education programmes are mostly senior leaders from large international firms and from various parts of the world. They either enrol individually into open programmes offered by INSEAD or join their colleagues in customised programmes commissioned by their firm.

The coaching approach at INSEAD is strongly informed by a psychodynamic lens on organisational behaviour (Cheak & Kets de Vries, 2015; Lee, 2010; Kilburg, 2004). It

is also the approach I have been mostly trained in through the INSEAD EMCCC programme (Executive Master of Coaching & Consulting for Change). There are four key assumptions that underpin this approach to coaching. The first of these is that there is a rationale or logic behind every human act, even if the act seems irrational. This rationale is often related to the individual's unconscious needs or desires. Second, the psychodynamic approach assumes that we are all products of our past and that these early life experiences continue to influence us throughout life. The third assumption is that different parts of the mind can be in conflict with each other, leading to mixed or conflicting feelings or inconsistencies between what an individual says and what they do. Finally, the psychodynamic approach assumes that there can be unconscious communication between coach and coachee (countertransference).

In recent years, both in my private practice and in the programmes at INSEAD, I have become more selective regarding the types of clients I work with. Wherever possible, I have opted to work with leaders at the top of organisations; these could be either leaders who work in C-suite roles (e.g. CEO, CFO, COO, CIO) or those who operate at the level of NED. One important reason for this is that I have found work with these clients to be more challenging and therefore to offer me greater opportunities to expand my understanding of leadership and learning. My personal experiences with C-suite leaders have played a role in my motivation to commence this research project. During coaching engagements with leaders at the top of organisations, I have noticed that there are different factors at play than when I coach leaders at other levels in organisations. Specifically, these leaders are often less concerned with solving specific issues or developing particular leadership capabilities. The topics on which they seek guidance are more closely related to forming accurate judgements on complicated situations and dealing with the power dynamics in the executive leadership arena (McGill & Clarke, 2019). In addition, especially when I am coaching them individually, they display a need to engage with me in a different way: the relationship is more intimate and unstructured, and they often do not want reflection but are instead seeking straightforward advice. The nature of the coaching relationship resonates quite well with the 'Trusted Advisor' concept, which Wasylyshyn (2017) describes in her account of coaching a leader during their transition towards the CEO position.

These different experiences with top executives have increased my curiosity and desire to determine whether the coaching of leaders at the top of organisations could indeed be characterised by different dynamics compared to the coaching of executives operating at other levels. While exploring the setup of my research project, I decided to further narrow down the focus to the coaching of NEDs. This was particularly inspired by coaching experiences I have had with NEDs in education programmes at INSEAD business school that were not completely successful. Since 2010, the business school has been offering an open programme called the IDP (International Directors Programme). This programme includes coaching in a module dedicated to behaviour in boards. Multiple coaches are involved in the programme. We observe and provide feedback to participants during a roleplay simulation and work with them for a full day in a group coaching session. It was through this experience that my colleagues and I, all of whom are very experienced coaches, were confronted with the fact that we did not know a lot about how we should coach this clientele. Although, based on the coaching evaluations submitted by participants, it appeared that we managed to do a reasonable job, there was also clear criticism from participants regarding the methods we employed.

The overall conclusion was that we were not achieving the same level of success as we normally reached with executives. Further examination of the evaluations among coaches and the programme director yielded the realisation that the methods we used for executives could not simply be transferred to this client group. They were particularly unreceptive to the psychodynamic approach, as it appeared to them to be too much like therapy. Moreover, they wanted the coaching to be more specifically about becoming a better NED. Although we, as coaching faculty, initially wanted to defend our approach and to criticise the learning attitude of the client, we eventually had to admit that we apparently lacked an adequate understanding of our client and their needs. We also came to understand that we did not have meaningful frames of reference from literature or our coaching backgrounds on how to coach NEDs. Ultimately, with some trial and error, we found an approach at INSEAD that works for the coaching of such participants in the IDP. Still, these experiences prompted me to conclude that creating knowledge about the coaching of NEDs would contribute significantly to both coaching practice and the academic coaching community.

1.3   Positioning and objectives of this study

Multiple researchers over the past decades have made attempts to assess where the coaching field stands in terms of research and, in relation to this, which types of future research would add most value to the further advancement of the field (Jackson & Cox, 2020; Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2015). Some conclude that the coaching field has reached a level of maturity where there is less need for process studies and more need for research focused on coaching outcomes to prove that they work (Greif, 2017; Woods & Guillaume, 2016; de Haan et al., 2013; Grant, 2010). Others suggest that future coaching research should delve deeper into aspects such as the impact of client readiness on coaching effectiveness (Kretzschmar, 2010) or 'the interpersonal interaction between coach and client, with an intention to establish patterns in the way coaching is conducted' (Myers & Bachkirova, 2018, p. 298). The present research project builds on the observation that the coaching field has conducted insufficient research on process topics (Fillery-Travis & Cox, 2014), particularly with regards to what occurs during coaching itself. Dedicating more research to such topics would allow the field to identify the 'active ingredients' of coaching, namely those aspects of the coaching process that make a difference to those involved in it, and to identify these ingredients within different coaching types and variations of practice (Carey et al., 2011; Bono et al., 2009, p. 393). Furthermore, this study also aims to answer the call to deepen connections between coaching and leadership development (Korotov, 2017; MacKie, 2015; Day et al., 2014). In particular, it aims to develop a deeper understanding of what leadership is at the highest levels in organisations, how leadership development takes place and how the actors involved in coaching affect the process and results of coaching for leadership development.

Although NEDs hold the ultimate accountability for the success or failure of organisations, they have not frequently been researched from the domains of either leadership development or coaching (Jackson et al., 2003). As a result, there is limited understanding of factors that influence their further growth. One of the reasons for this lack of research could be that it remains somewhat unclear whether NEDs should be identified as leaders or as something else. Charan et al. (2014) make a convincing case that NEDs are actually leaders, although they lead in different ways than executives. Another reason could be that it has been difficult for a long time to gain access to board members for research purposes (Zattoni, Douglas & Judge,

2013; Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007; Parker, 2007). The world of boards is often referred to as a 'black box', because much of their work is highly confidential and conducted behind closed doors. The present study aims to reduce this black box phenomenon by creating knowledge about how NEDs and boards invest in their development, along with the ways in which coaching plays a role in that.

1.3.1 Research Objectives

The main purpose of this study can be summarised as follows:

- To explore the meaning and experience of coaching in relation to the learning and development of NEDs, from the perspectives of coaches and clients.

1.3.2 Supporting Objectives

1. To critically review literature regarding the learning, development and effectiveness of NEDs and coaching as a relevant intervention.
2. To explore perceptions and experiences of coaches and clients using Grounded Theory methodology.
3. To contribute to theoretical knowledge and coaching practice by identifying factors influencing the use and value of coaching for the learning and development of NEDs.
4. To synthesise the insights from these experiences to develop grounded theory on the mindsets and trajectories of NED coaching.

1.4 Literature

It is important to contextualise the present research with regards to the literature on the learning and development of NEDs and coaching as a relevant intervention. Literature has been used in this research study in a way that differs somewhat from traditional grounded theory practice. In classic grounded theory research, a literature review is typically conducted after data collection is complete (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser & Holton, 2004). This allows the researcher to enter the field of study with an open mind (no theoretical preconceptions) and use literature only to make sense of the collected data. By contrast, for the present research, I follow the guidance of researchers who provide an alternative perspective on the role of

literature in a grounded theory approach (Lempert, 2007; Schreiber, 2001). Their view is that conducting a literature review before data collection is essential to gaining a rudimentary understanding of the field of study. It informs the researcher about critical aspects regarding the actors involved, access to research subjects and challenges within the field; in short, it does not limit data collection but rather enriches it, as it helps the researcher to make the interview questions more relevant and more focused on areas that could add to the understanding of phenomena not fully covered by existing research.

Accordingly, the literature has been explored from three perspectives:

1. The learning of NEDs as relevant to coaching;
2. The coaching of top executives, with regard to whether this provides any relevant insights for the present study;
3. The role of coaching in board review.

1.4.1 The learning of non-executive directors as relevant to coaching

While the learning and development of NEDs is increasingly highlighted as a promising area of focus to aid boards in improving their performance, very little is actually known about experiences with these types of activities. One of the reasons for this apparent void in research could be the 'black box' phenomenon noted above (Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007). Another factor is that it has traditionally not been obvious to NEDs that they should prioritise learning and development activities. This could be related to the fundamental assumption that a board role is taken up once all learning through an executive career has been completed. However, this situation is slowly changing, and learning is increasingly being prioritised (Garratt, 2005); such learning is mostly focused on the legal, financial and technical aspects of board responsibilities. Various scholars therefore argue that boards would benefit significantly if they invested in development activities to deal with issues related to board dynamics, communication and decision-making, as these are identified as major obstacles to board excellence.

It seems likely that coaching could play a role in such learning. However, only three contributions could be found in the literature that elaborate on the use of coaching for

NEDs. Based on experiences in his coaching practice, Domine (2020) explains multiple ways in which coaching can be useful for NEDs. Burgers (2013) suggests that NEDs tend to perceive coaching as an instrument for helping underperforming board members rather than improving those who already perform well, Shekshnia (2016) describes a case in which he combines the roles of chairman and coach to successfully elevate a board to higher levels of maturity. In particular, coaching methodologies such as the creation of a safe reflective space appear to have made a huge difference to this board. While these three contributions are very valuable and provide some insight into the coaching of NEDs, they also leave many questions unanswered and, as such, further confirm the lack of guiding models or debates in this field within coaching or corporate governance.

1.4.2 What relevant insights does the coaching of top executives provide?

An examination of literature on the coaching of top executives reveals a number of themes that may also have some relevance for NEDs.

According to clients, coaches need to demonstrate credibility with top executives by providing direct advice based on their understanding of the business reality in which the leader operates. It is suggested that a systemic approach be used to maximise the success of coaching with top executives, either by integrating the coaching in a broader leadership intervention or by including various stakeholders around the coaching client. Another theme highlighted by literature on top executives is the importance of developing a greater trust relationship with the client. Finally, some pitfalls have been identified related to negative transferential mechanisms and power dynamics. Although it is likely that these themes will have some relevance for NEDs, further structured research on this client group is necessary to clarify how exactly such pitfalls arise and what the impact is on coaching.

1.4.3 The role of coaching in board review

Owing to its emergence in the literature as the key means by which boards learn and upgrade their effectiveness, I have explored the topic of board review, particularly as there seem to be some natural connection points with the coaching discipline. The instruments used in board review, such as feedback questionnaires, interviews and observation, are quite similar to those used by many coaches for other client groups. Coaches have also been suggested as possible external facilitators in a board review

process. Furthermore, the literature suggests that approaches to board review can benefit from a coaching paradigm. However, although one possible early conclusion from the literature could be that a natural potential connection exists between board review and coaching, the reviewed contributions also highlight that there is no evidence base to date to substantiate this.

1.5 Methodology

I have designed the study from a critical realist perspective (Hamlin, Ellinger & Beattie, 2009; Bhaskar,1978). This paradigm is concerned with the explanation of social phenomena by revealing the underlying mechanisms that produce them. To some extent, critical realism shares the same ontology with positivism, assuming that the world exists beyond our observation of it, yet rejects the epistemological principles of positivism, assuming that the goal of science is to study what we can measure and observe.

The epistemology of critical realism incorporates constructionism and interpretivism, which implies that choices regarding what to study, how to conduct research and how to interpret data are very much influenced by the belief systems and backgrounds of those involved in the research. For example, I am very much aware of how my background as a faculty member at INSEAD business school and my involvement with NEDs as a coach have played a role in the objectives for this study and in the research process as a whole. The epistemology of critical realism also refers to how data is analysed. As a critical realist, I do not assume that the data gained from my participants will be sufficient to form an accurate picture of what happens in coaching situations and relationships. I have therefore dug deeper to understand which collection of filters are being used among participants in order to approximate how these filters relate to the phenomena brought up in the interviews (Oliver, 2012; Willig, 2013).

The methodology I have used in this research is grounded theory, which aligns with my critical realist position and my assumptions about how knowledge can be obtained (Oliver, 2012). The name of this methodology is somewhat confusing, as it refers to both a research process and the end result: namely, a new theory that is grounded in data (Walsh, 2015). One central aspect of this methodology is that data is analysed

from the start and that this analysis influences later stages of data collection. This implies that working with the data reflects back to the method and underlying methodology; as a result, the process becomes iterative and reflexive, deepening as the research progresses (Neal 2009). The version of grounded theory used here leans towards the Glaserian approach, owing to the flexibility it offers for data analysis and the stronger emphasis it places on the emergence of theory (Urquhart, 2013). My intention is to arrive at a theory that explains the relationships between the characteristics and mindsets of NEDs in relation to coaching, along with the implications for what form of coaching might be best to offer them.

Guided by previous grounded theory research on similar types of phenomena (Walker-Fraser, 2011; Kretzschmar, 2010), I have recruited a sample size of 16 participants, informed by the understanding that such a sample would be appropriate to produce a sufficient level of saturation for this study. The study has not been limited in its geographical scope; participants have been recruited from mainland Europe, UK, Canada and Australia. Moreover, two groups of participants have been selected: (a) coaches who have been or still are involved in coaching NEDs, and (b) NEDs who have experienced coaching. Of the 16 participants interviewed, five were NEDs, while 11 could be classified as providers of coaching or similar services. Of the five NEDs, three were also coaches.

1.6   Thesis structure

Chapter 1 has explained my professional motivation for pursuing this research topic and clarified the purpose and significance of this research. The chapter has also provided an outline of the research area that will be examined in this study. Existing literature has been introduced along with a suggestion of what the knowledge gap in academic debates might be. Chapter 2 contextualises the study by reviewing relevant literature pertaining to the experiences and approaches of coaching provided to top executives and to non-executives. Chapter 3 explains the methodology applied in this study and clarifies my theoretical perspective and paradigmatic stance. The chapter additionally details and defends the choice of methodological approach and explains the participant selection process. Furthermore, it describes the data collection methods and data analysis process employed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of issues related to validity, reflexivity and ethics. Chapter 4 presents the

research findings from this study and identifies the key themes. Chapter 5 discusses the most important findings in the context of the literature and explores the underlying mechanisms or factors that might explain these findings. Chapter 6 describes the contribution of this study to theory and its implications for coaching practice. This chapter also discusses the limitations of the study and provides some personal reflections on the research process.

2 Literature review

As mentioned in the motivation section, my colleagues at INSEAD and I initially had few or no guiding models or frames of reference to inform the coaching we were asked to do with NEDs in programmes. It was also clear from participants' reactions that simply copying methods used for executive coaching was not the best option. This suggested to me that the coaching of NEDs is an emerging field within coaching that could significantly benefit from research. The purpose of this literature review is therefore to determine what exactly the state of knowledge is in this field, with the ultimate goal of ascertaining the ways in which research could add to further building the body of knowledge.

Figure 2.1: Literature review framework

This chapter consists of five main sections (see Fig 2.1), which emerged from the literature corpus. Each of these sections relates to one of the sub research objectives which pertains to critically review literature regarding the learning, development and effectiveness of NEDs and coaching as a relevant intervention. The five sections also appear to be useful ways to cluster literature for a study aimed at uncovering the learning and development of an emerging client group (Nadler, 2004; Jackson et al., 2003). A relevant starting point in the first section of this review is to explore literature on the role which learning and development plays in improving the effectiveness of

NEDs; this is accomplished by looking into literature on their development needs and the assumptions about learning that exist in relation to this role. The second section of this review looks into what literature can tell us about experiences with the coaching of this client group. The third section examines literature on the coaching of top executives, working under the assumption that they differ from NEDs but that there may still be findings from existing research that may have some relevance for the present study. The final section was not predetermined but emerged from literature and explores the extent to which a relationship exists between coaching and the main vehicle for board development, board review.

2.1 Review Strategy

The approach used to collect and analyse existing literature follows and adapts the STARLITE strategy (Booth, 2006), which stands for: Sampling strategy, Type of study, Approaches, Range of years, Limits, Inclusion and exclusions, Terms used, and Electronic sources. Notably, I have chosen to use this strategy pragmatically. For example, because the topic of coaching provided to NEDs appears not to have been extensively covered in the research, I had to be more resourceful to find relevant literature. The electronic databases consulted did not produce many useful hits with search terms based on my research objectives. I have therefore adopted a purposive strategy, specifically citation snowballing. By building on the literature references included in the limited publications found in the domain of corporate governance, as well as in journal articles covering a broader domain than coaching alone, it was possible to extend the literature base.

On the quest to find additional literature, I also turned to frequently cited publications that were not research-based or peer reviewed (i.e. books and opinion articles) but that still seemed to provide useful experience-based insights. These publications have been used cautiously and critically, as they often lack methodological rigour, transparency and validity. It was my intent to only include the most recent publications (i.e. those from the last 10 years). However, as it proved difficult to populate the literature base solely with sources from this period, older literature has also been included.

The electronic sources consulted were largely obtained from the following journals: Consulting Psychology, the British Psychological Society publication, the International Coaching Psychology Review, and the International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring. Moreover, papers in the Journal of Corporate Governance, the Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, Personnel Psychology and Applied Positive Psychology were also included. The literature review was eventually also enriched by themes that emerged during data collection, such as board review, which led to further exploration of topics in the literature. This approach exemplifies the iterative nature of Grounded Theory research, in that it involves going back and forth between literature and data collection.

2.2   NED learning and development

Various researchers (Goergen & Renneboog, 2014; Winter & Van de Loo, 2012; Levrau & Van den Berghe, 2007; Huse et al. 2009; Hambrick et al 2008; Roberts et al., 2005) argue that research on boards has in the past been too focused on topics that have not led to greater understanding of what truly makes a difference in the effectiveness of boards. Often this research attempted to relate factors like the composition of boards, the independence of NEDs or the extent to which boards are in control, to the financial performance of a company. Therefore, the suggestion is made to change the research agenda towards more behavioral perspectives of boards and governance. With the rationale that studying actual board behaviour will bridge the gap between theory and the reality of board performance. Suggestions are made to apply research models which include for example the competencies of boards, like the general, functional, firm specific and board specific knowledge and skills of NEDs. Particularly the evolutionary perspective on boards and NEDs has been suggested as one of the alternative areas for future research. This perspective assumes that the dynamics of actual board behaviour and corporate governance are rooted in various learning and influencing loops (Charas, 2014; Huse et al., 2009 page 39; Jackson et al., 2003; Sundaramurthy and Lewis, 2003). Board learning processes are therefore expected to take place at multiple levels: societal, institutional, organisational, group and individual level. However, to date this advocacy has not led to significant research on this perspective specifically or on the topic of learning in boards in general. Which is surprising to say the least, because it seems like such a vast and meaningful area to study. The reasons for such a void in research could be

found in three assumptions which may have some ground but also could be unchallenged. Firstly, the disciplines that tend to be involved in research on boards do not naturally prioritise this topic. Researchers explain, (Zatoni et al., 2009; Hambrick et al., 2008) that the majority of research on boards is conducted by either economists, who tend to focus on optimal incentive and monitoring systems in governance or conducted by legal scholars, who tend to be preoccupied with governance rules and regulations. This has led to the incorrect assumption that corporate governance is the territory of these disciplines and less a meaningful field of research field for those who are preoccupied with organisational behaviour in general and learning in particular. A second reason mentioned for the lack of research on boards is the so called "black box" phenomenon, or the assumption that it is extremely difficult to get access to NEDs or boardrooms for data collection (LeBlanc & Schwarz, 2007; Daily, et al. 2003). The formal and somewhat secretive character of board work renders NEDs to be cautious about being observed or opening up to "outsiders" about the effectiveness of the board. This caution is to a certain extent understandable as any sensitive information, which leaks to the market may for example influence the share price or competitive position of a company. Still, we could question whether this black box phenomenon doesn't simply challenge researchers to make a greater effort to gain the trust of boards or to find approaches that mitigate the risks perceived by them. A third suggested explanation for the void in research on the learning of boards is the assumption which exist among boards and NEDs themselves about how individuals qualify for NED roles (Coulson-Thomas, 2007, 2008; Levrau & Van den Berghe, 2004). The assumption is that all a leader requires to be fit for a board role is significant executive experience at the top of an organisation. Those selected for boards should therefore be considered capable and not in need of much further learning. This assumption that a management career suffices to qualify for a board role could according to the authors be debated for a number of reasons. Firstly, it assumes that the role of an executive leader is almost the same as that of a NED, while as explained in the Introduction chapter, the roles are fundamentally different. Secondly, the NED role requires capabilities that are not necessarily learnt in a management role. Thirdly, the argument is made that a strong emphasis on capabilities gained during a managerial career can even have negative effects on the performance of NEDs. NEDs could struggle with their roles because they approach issues predominantly through a general management lens rather than

with the oversight mindset required for NED work. While a managerial career indeed provides the necessary business credibility and understanding, it cannot be considered enough to gain proficiency in board roles. Nevertheless, the assumption that NEDs have already learnt all they need to know through their past roles, could be one of the reasons why traditionally both in the practice of boards and in research on boards, learning has not received a lot of attention.

Fortunately, the situation is slowly improving. In recent decades, some publications have identified a positive trend in the training and development of NEDs (Korn Ferry, 2013; DNB, 2013). We have also seen the emergence of development opportunities for NEDs offered by institutions and business schools such as INSEAD, IMD in Europe, Wharton in the US or the UK Institute of Directors. While this is encouraging, there has not been any research to date, on how these initiatives are experienced by NEDs or how useful they are in growing the maturity of boards. Considering the earlier mentioned assumptions of NEDs about a limited need for education, questions could be asked about what is motivating them to participate in these programmes. Are NEDs truly attracted to the value of these educational experience on boards, or for example more to the possibility of enlarging their network or are they actually most interested in the status which prestigious business schools can offer? It would therefore be good to know more about how these programmes assess the development needs of boards and cater specifically to them. For example, whether these educational offerings emphasise the traditional legal and economical aspects of corporate governance which includes topics such as accounting, risk management, M&A and capital markets or also include the more often more organisational behavioral topics related to the difficulties which boards experience in growing their effectiveness as a decision- making group? Paying equal attention to these topics would match the growing advocacy that behavioural topics are crucial to the success of boards. In order to further explore this theme, the next section takes a closer look at the behavioral dimensions of boards the development needs these present to NEDs in general and specifically in relation to growing their effectiveness.

2.3 The development needs of NEDs

There is general agreement among corporate governance scholars that the role of NED requires individuals to have gained significant experience in executive or functional leadership roles in organisations, and that financial acumen combined with strategic insight are essential to qualify as board member. There is more debate in literature as to what the capabilities are which boards or NEDs need to develop in order to increase their effectiveness. Key authors in this regard are Binnion et al. 2020, Klarner et al. (2018), Nadler (2004), Gabrielson and Huse (2004), LeBlanc and Pick (2011) and Charas 2013 & 2014.

Instead of pointing at specific skills or knowledge which NEDs need to develop, Klarner et al., (2018) identify four clusters of capabilities which boards can focus on to maximise their effectiveness.

1. Board organising capability; getting better at organising the expertise of board members in a way that allows each to contribute effectively
2. Board relationship building capability; improving working relationships between board members, with executives, employees and other stakeholders. Which includes investing time in mutual understanding and getting to know each other well.
3. Board integration capabilities; improving the way board members are capable of assessing strategic proposals or activities relating to the current and prospective opportunities in the market.
4. Board reconfiguration capabilities; knowledge and skills related to identifying when changes are needed in the board composition or in the expertise needed in the board in response to adapt to changing market demands.

Growing the qualities of board members in these four clusters may well lead to higher board effectiveness, however a key question remains what effectiveness actually means? As the roles and expectations of boards can vary significantly depending on the specific governance constellation in a firm, it is also possible to conclude that there will be variation in what boards and NEDs need to invest in to grow their effectiveness. According to various authors (Nadler, 2004; Garratt, 2018; Huse, 2009) The role of a boards can range from very passive to providing significant added value to the success of a firm. The suggestion is made that this could be seen as a

continuum, which implies that boards could find themselves at various evolving levels of maturity or professionalism. In answer to the question what may raise the effectiveness of boards NEDs beyond the basic experiences and skills which they need to qualify for such roles, it is fair to conclude that while there are several types of capabilities which boards could develop, the extent to which these are relevant and useful, ultimately depend on the task aspiration a board has, the role of a board in the governance constellation and the effort which board members are willing to dedicate to developing their capabilities.

Literature suggests that even when boards have the ambition to grow their task effectiveness they will also have to acquire greater skill in handling the dynamics related to decision making and communication processes in the board and with management (Westphal & Zajac, 2013; The next sections therefore specifically explores what types of dynamics boards are confronted with and why they present such a developmental challenge for them.

2.3.1 Board dynamics as a crucial development need

In a 2009 research report, the British research and education foundation for Law and business administration (ISCA) suggests that appropriate boardroom behaviours are an essential component for best practice in corporate governance. They argue that the absence of guidance on what appropriate boardroom behaviours are could be perceived as a weakness in governance systems. While this is a strong and welcome advocacy to focus more attention to the behavioral factors of governance, the explanation provided by the ISCA of what constitutes boardroom behaviours remains a bit obligatory (a deeper understanding by NEDs of the culture, vision and values of the organisation they serve and the importance of transparency, accountability, disclosure, trust and confidence). According to Gabrielsson and Huse (2004, p. 21) appropriate board behaviour extends beyond the board room and could be best described as the processes and relational dynamics between the various actors in and around the boardroom, they therefore suggest that the right term to use is Board dynamics. If not handled well, these dynamics could result in for example the following decision-making bias.

1. *Satisficing:* accepting decisions that are 'good enough' rather than looking for the optimal solution;

2. *Routines:* codified memories of past experience, beliefs and values build habitual ways of making decisions;
3. *Political bargaining*: among coalitions of actors, shifts in coalitions affect organisational decisions. Goal conflicts are also solved through bargaining.

Other authors have also contributed to a better understanding of the challenges which board members face as a result of board dynamics (Charas, 2014; LeBlanc & Pick, 2011; Petrovic, 2008; Wei Shen, 2003). The specific issues referred to are: lack of trust between management and board members, differences in commitment and effort of board members, strong personality conflicts between NEDs and boards being managed in unprofessional ways. Board dynamics could also be caused by misunderstandings between CEOs and the board about what the nature of their collaboration should be. This does not necessarily concern formal roles but rather pertains to the styles of communication, clash of expectations regarding the preparing topics for the board by management or regarding the involvement of board members in the work of executives.

Charras (2013) explains that the development challenge which board members face with regards to board dynamics can also be a very nuanced one. The case is made that next to dealing with collaboration challenges, it is particularly important for directors to gain understanding of the unwritten rules about what is communicated at the "front stage" (formal gatherings) of boards and what could better be dealt with at the "backstage" (Informal interactions). Her research suggests that board meetings are expected to be used for formal dissemination of information and decision making, while the real discussion about issues is expected to take place in meetings prior to the board. These could be committee meetings, executive sessions, pre-board dinners or spontaneous conversations over the phone or in person. Coalition building, the expression of open disagreement or engaging in debate, could best be reserved for these informal gatherings and is not expected to take place in the board meeting. Failure of NEDs to understand these rules of engagement could be perceived by other board members as a threat to board room stability. These NEDs tend to be characterised as uncooperative, overbearing, overpowering or egoistic and they risk being ultimately removed from the board. The findings are in line with the research of Engbers (2020) and Samra-Frederics (2000) who argue that board dynamics strongly

influence socio-cognitive processes and communicative events between board members and their stakeholders. This particularly results in things remaining unsaid or unchallenged in board meetings, which does not aid in growing the effectiveness of boards.

Another dimension of Board dynamics is presented by Binnion et al., (2020, p. 23) who suggest that boards, like most groups, are influenced by unconscious processing and assumption building. Building on Bion (1961), the author suggests that boards could potentially also fall into patterns of behaviour caused by three basic assumptions:

Dependency - the group relies on one person (usually the leader) to create security and protection for the members of the group.

Fight-Flight - either active aggression and competition within the group or with individuals outside the group. Alternatively withdraw or avoid the primary task of the group.

Pairing - setting up two individuals in the group to provide emotional and intellectual support to the rest of the group.

In conclusion, what the literature highlights is that further professional development is a relevant topic for boards and NEDs and that there are various factors for boards and NEDs to consider in the context of increasing their effectiveness. Some of these relate to the added value which a board aspires to have within a governance system and others concern the interactions of the board as a group and with other stakeholders. Supporting boards and NEDs with development activities implies that next to the fundamental requirements for board work, the agenda should include topics related to motivation for board roles, understanding of possible roles and contributions of boards within governance frameworks, and skills to handle dynamics related to decision making and collaboration in groups.

2.4   What role does coaching play for non-executive directors?

For some years already, researchers have advocated that boards should prioritise self-reflection (Huse, 2007; Nicholson & Kiel, 2005; Sonnenfield, 2002). These researchers suggest that NEDs develop the capacity for self-reflection and engage in meaningful and effective dialogues about their work as an ongoing element of their

roles in order to increase their effectiveness. Coaching would be an ideal instrument to match this advocacy. Some authors even suggest that coaching is increasingly being considered by NEDs as one of the options for use in growing their effectiveness, both individually and as a board (Kakabadse & Kakabadse, 2008; Coulson-Thomas, 2008; Jackson et al., 2003). However, there is little existing research on either corporate governance or the social sciences that specifically elaborates on experiences with the use of coaching for non-executives or boards. The limited volume of literature on the coaching of non-executives raises questions regarding the extent to which coaching is actually being used by this client group.

I was able to find only three publications that contribute to building a knowledge base on the coaching of NEDs. These are from Domine (2020), Berger (2013) and Shekshnia (2016). Relying on his professional practice and experience with coaching boards, Domine (2020) argues that coaching is an important instrument for use by NEDs in optimising their performance. In his view, board coaches have an added value for NEDs, as they understand the context of board work and have the necessary credibility to accompany them both individually and as a group. Specifically, they can:

- Observe board meetings to assess the board dynamic;
- Work with boards at meetings to establish practices that can enhance group dynamics;
- Facilitate discussions with boards that allow directors to share perspectives, identify hidden issues and have courageous conversations.

While this publication confirms the use of coaching for NEDs and how coaches could consider engaging with them, it leaves the reader wanting for more. The suggestions made by the author demonstrate that he has gained significant experience with the coaching of boards; however, the paper does not provide specific examples of cases or comments from clients that could support the claims being made.

Some interesting light is shed on the coaching of NEDs by Burger (2013) in a thus-far-untranslated Dutch publication based on individual interviews with (among others) four NEDs about their experiences with coaching. Her findings reveal that although coaching is viewed positively by her participants, they also see it as a remedial solution, to be applied when things are not really working out or used as an accepted

development option that NEDs themselves can provide or suggest to C-suite leaders. Coaching is in this sense not conceived of as an activity that requires professional coaches per se. There is very low acceptance of individual coaching offered to NEDs as a 'forced activity' (within a wider initiative). Non-executives tend to ridicule such activities behind the scenes and simply go through the motions to tick the required boxes. The reason provided for this attitude is that many individuals in these roles have received so much praise throughout their career regarding their excellence as leaders that it is difficult for them to accept that anybody might be able to help them improve their performance now that they are at the pinnacle of leadership. What also stands out in Burger's findings is that coaching – and for that matter, the coach – should essentially provide a very sharp and tough mirror to the client. This is different from delving into the biography of a client, as according to NEDs, this is the domain of psychotherapists. Instead, the agenda for coaching should be about how to improve performance and impact. The coach is expected to be authentic and confronting yet refrain from prescribing or providing an opinion.

The value of this publication is that it provides a nuanced view of how NEDs actually speak about coaching in the Netherlands. It also stands out because her participants provide views on collective as well as individual coaching of board members. Furthermore, the individuals interviewed genuinely open up and engage in a trustful, reflective mode with the researcher about the use of coaching. As such, it represents a good attempt to overcome the 'black box' phenomenon referred to earlier. However, the publication is less inspiring with regards to what coaching practitioners could potentially do with this information. For example, the contribution could have been further enriched by analysis of the data, leading to a framework or recommendations for the coaching of NEDs.

Non-executive directors' current view of coaching is reminiscent of how coaching was initially perceived by top executive leaders when it began to gain popularity as a development instrument. At that time, several authors identified that the dominant opinion about coaching among the most senior leaders was that it was an activity for those who were still on their way to the top (Kampa-Kokesh & Anderson, 2001; Kralj, 2001; Saporito,1996), not for those who had already arrived. Coaching – and, for that matter, learning activities – were very much seen as appropriate instruments for fixing

deficits or helping people to learn the executive trade. Linked to this was the assumption that the higher you climbed up the leadership ladder, the less you needed to be developed. However, various scholars (Stevens, 2005; Goldsmith, 2009) suggest that top executives' perception of coaching has evolved positively over time. It is now quite common to perceive coaching as an instrument for successful, thriving individuals who have already reached a top position. These individuals do not necessarily use coaching to fix specific shortcomings but rather because they simply want to continue performing at their best. It is not particularly clear from the literature what led to this change in perceptions among top executives. One potential influencing factor may have been the efforts made by scholars in recent decades to demonstrate that executive coaching is a credible instrument for leadership effectiveness (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2015; McKenna & Davis, 2009; Grant & Cavanagh, 2007). Additionally, publications suggesting various models and frameworks that provided more consistency, professionalism and structure to coaching approaches may also have contributed to the acceptance of executive coaching among top executives, as well as their stakeholders (Stokes & Jolly, 2009; Joo, 2005; Stern, 2004; Kilburg, 2001). This indicates that an increase in research into the coaching of NEDs could potentially increase acceptance of this practice in the future.

2.4.1 Using a coaching paradigm to grow the maturity of a board

The third relevant contribution regarding experiences with the coaching of NEDs is a unique case study by Shekshnia (2016). This article is unique because it provides a rare view of what really happens behind the closed doors of board meetings and how board members actually respond to coaching interventions. The case describes how a coaching philosophy and coaching instruments were used to build and lead a board of directors. What is remarkable about this case is that the author combines three positions: 1) his competence as a professional coach; 2) his research capability as a business school professor; 3) his formal role as the non-executive chairman of the newly created board of Siberian Coal and Energy (SUEK). The researcher is both an insider and an outsider, as well as both a provider of coaching and beneficiary of the coaching process. The advantage of being able to act as an insider is that any potential obstacles regarding credibility are off the table. Moreover, the researcher's other positions allow him to apply a methodical coaching approach and employ a

research lens to make sense of the experience. One question that could be asked is that of why the researcher adopts these three positions. One of the main reasons the author mentions is his initial observation that the behaviour of board members in meetings was surprisingly unprofessional and seemingly driven by individual narcissistic dispositions:

> *'I watched classic psychological defensive mechanisms floating in the boardroom, such as interrupting an opponent to state one's position a second or even a third time, non-verbal irritation and even traditional Russian yelling.' (Shekshnia, 2007)*

He therefore concludes that his experience as a CEO and chairman is of much less relevance than the experiences he has as an executive coach and professor at a business school. The most significant challenge he identifies is that of how to create a safe space in which people feel comfortable and their self-esteem is not threatened. According to the author, self-esteem plays an important role for these board members.

Building a safe space in this case study included emphasising the prevention of hidden agendas, demonstrating professional credibility, opening up, speaking about one's weaknesses and seeking feedback. This safe space becomes one of the most important instruments of the coaching engagement. The notion of a safe space resonates with other publications that discuss the value of a so called 'transitional space', or 'identity laboratory', in which leaders can experiment with new roles and behaviours (Florent-Tracy, 2009; Ibarra, Snook & Guillen-Ramo, 2008; Korotov, 2007). In addition to investing in a safe space, the researcher also uses various other coaching instruments over an 18-month period, including many types of feedback exercises, active listening, 360 degree assessment tools and personal development plans, to develop the board. Another approach that appears to have generated positive results is dealing with each group member individually in addition to working with the group as a whole.

From a critical perspective, the combination of roles in this case could be perceived as potentially risky and quite difficult to replicate in practice. Confusion could arise

regarding the roles that the researcher plays when interacting with the board members. Is it clear when he is operating as coach, as chair of the board and/or as a researcher? One could also question the ethical dimensions of the research. A relevant question is therefore whether the researcher could have also guided the board towards similar positive results in his sole capacity as a professional coach. The case could additionally benefit from more transparency with regard to how the collected data was analysed and translated into findings. Nevertheless, this case still stands out as a very insightful contribution regarding the coaching of NEDs. It also sheds light on what new forms of research could look like for audiences that are difficult to access, and it further demonstrates that experiences with the coaching of NEDs is a meaningful topic to explore.

The three sources reviewed in this section testify that although there is a lack of literature on the coaching of NEDs, it is a development instrument that they use. All three provide valuable insights for the present study. Domine (2020) uses his experience to advocate for how useful coaching can be for NEDs. Burgers (2013) gives a voice to this client group by allowing them to share their opinions and thoughts on coaching. The study indicates that, compared to executive leaders, NEDs predominantly view coaching as a remedial instrument. The case of Shekshnia (2016) takes us into the reality of an immature board and reveals how coaching methodologies, particularly the creation of a safe reflective space, can help boards to grow as a group. While these three publications are of tremendous value for understanding the potential relevance of coaching for the effectiveness of boards, they also lack rigour in their research methodology and leave many questions open. Most of all, it is unclear which academic debates the authors aim to contribute to and in what way. They also do not suggest any frameworks or structured ideas for further research that others might follow up on.

2.5   What can we learn from the coaching top executives?

Because of the limited literature on the coaching of NEDs, I have deemed it useful to also examine what we could learn or infer from experiences with the coaching top executives. While their roles are indisputably different in terms of leadership level, they do operate close to NEDs. The key authors reviewed for this section; suggest four main themes. emerge from reviewing the key c found this part of the review. The

first, theme relates to the aspects which increase the credibility of coaches (Stevens, 2005; Passmore, 2010) The second theme relates to the importance of use of a systemic approach when coaching top executives (Wasylyshyn, 2017; Kahn, 2011; Goldsmith, 2009; Kralj, 2001) A third theme which emerged relates to the working relationship between coaches and client (Wasylyshyn, 2017). Finally, literature is discussed that reveals some of the potential pitfalls that coaches may encounter when working with individual leaders or groups at the top of organisations (Bernhardt and Korotov, 2010; Carlock & Florent-Treacy, 2010),

2.5.1 Credibility of coaches

With regard to the working ingredients of coaching provided to top executives, Stevens (2005) argues that according to his research participants, the credibility of coaches plays an important role. In particular, it is key that the coach is grounded and familiar with the challenges faced by leaders at the top in leading a business organisation. His findings are based on interviews with seven CEOs and corporate presidents, all of whom had undergone coaching. Stevens explains that credibility of the coach, and thus the willingness of participants to listen to or be influenced by the coach, is to a large extent dependent on how the coach comes across in the first encounters.

Credibility also stands out in the work of Passmore (2010), who elaborates on the importance of it when coaching top-level executives by clarifying the purpose it serves. The data in his research is collected by interviewing six participants, all of whom hold executive board-level positions and who have been coached by one of two coaches. One particularly remarkable aspect of this study is that it directly gives a voice to the clients regarding their actual coaching experiences. According to Passmore's findings, credibility is related to the coach not only asking challenging and supportive questions but also being willing to give advice, especially when this advice is based on the coach's ability to understand, empathise with and interpret the leadership dimensions of the client's role. Another notable finding offered by this research concerns the usefulness of take-away tasks (homework) in the coaching process. It appears that top executive clients view the value of take-away tasks differently than their coaches do. When the task is reflective, clients experience homework as valuable; however, when the homework is more action-oriented, it is

perceived to be less valuable. Passmore relates this appreciation of more reflective tasks to the seniority of the clients. However, it is also suggested that power dynamics within the coaching relationship could be a driver for this finding. While the assumption in coaching is that the client will be less powerful than the coach, the author argues that, particularly when working with leaders at the top, the reverse is usually true: it is the client, not the coach, who holds the dominant power position. According to Passmore, the reason for this differing power balance can be found in the status and experience of the client.

2.5.2   The use of a systemic approach

An additional theme in the coaching of top executives is the use of a systemic approach. Multiple scholars argue that it is a crucial ingredient of this type of coaching (Wasylyshyn, 2017; Kahn, 2011; Goldsmith, 2009; Kralj, 2001). However, what is meant by a 'systemic approach' differs from author to author. Some advocate that the coaching of top executives should be best designed to have a positive impact at the organisational level, while others explain that it relates more to involving stakeholders of the individual's role to provide feedback and support. For example, based on a case study, Kralj (2001) contends that coaching at the highest organisational levels should include a blend of individual, team, and organisational interventions. This study is particularly remarkable because, although coaching plays an important role in the project, the two professionals involved in delivering the project identify themselves as consultants rather than coaches. The scope of the intervention is very broad; it includes co-designing a new organisation, establishing a new leadership, facilitating a team-building process, and co-creation of a performance management system. Another distinctive element of the approach is that the consultants invite the executive team to drive the development process themselves. This suggests that it is important for the leaders involved to maintain a sense of control.

Goldsmith (2009) presents a contrasting interpretation of what a systemic approach entails. In fact, he suggests deliberately avoiding a focus on organisational change. In his view, the goal of coaching is behavioural change; based on his experience as a coach for top executives, he concludes that such change is dependent on two factors, namely the readiness of the individual being coached and the extent to which they are held accountable by their environment to actually practice the new behaviour.

For that reason, the systemic approach he suggests implies collecting feedback from and contracting with superiors, peers and subordinates of the top executive being coached. For his part, Kahn (2011) offers what appears to be a less polarising and more integrative view of systemic coaching. Using a single case study of a leader coached by the author, Kahn explores how the coaching relationship interfaces with organisational, interpersonal and intrapsychic systems. The value of this approach is that it gives the coach more practical and theoretical freedom with regard to the coaching agenda and ensures that the individual is aligned with the organisational reality. However, this approach does not clearly establish whether stakeholders should be actively involved in the coaching or whether the coaching should be part of a wider organisational development activity.

2.5.3   *More intimate relationship with top executives*

Wasylyshyn (2017) also reinforces the idea of a systemic approach. However, her contribution is distinctive in how it elaborates on the nature of the relationship between coaches and top-level clients. While her publication relates to Goldsmith (2009) regarding the value of a multi-systems approach and stakeholder-centric engagement, the key focus is on the nature of the relationship that coaches need to develop with top executives. According to Wasylyshyn, an important condition for success is that the coach takes significantly more risk and invests far more of him- or herself in the relationship than when coaching other audiences. The researcher uses the results of a longitudinal case study to illustrate the experience of a coach guiding a top executive on the journey to becoming CEO within a multinational corporation. Her findings lead her to develop a new concept for how coaches should aspire to engage with these types of clients. The concept is encapsulated by the term 'Trusted Leadership Advisor' (TLA). The three distinguishing characteristics of this concept are as follows:

1. The degrees of candour, permission, trust, and vulnerability should be significantly higher. The coach must be willing to operate with more boldness and intimacy. The reason for this is that the coach should delve deeper into the psyche of the client.
2. The engagement is broad, with the intention to last for many years. In her experience, the coaching of top executives is a boundary-less

process, not a contained program. The coach does whatever needs to be done and is not confined to a rigid model or approach (Kauffman & Hodgetts, 2016)

3. The coach deliberately solicits frequent input from key superiors and other senior stakeholders, including the top executive board. We can recognise this as a multi-systems approach. Interestingly, the executive coach also shares information about the coaching with these constituents.

While this publication is thought-provoking and pulls together some of the findings that were also presented in previous research, most of Wasylyshyn's findings stem from the experience and reflections of the coach. It would be useful to know whether the client has similar views to the coach regarding the necessity of engaging in a different type of relationship and how exactly this worked out for the client. Interestingly, it is this particular inclusion of the client voice that makes another of this researcher's publications so remarkable (Wasylyshyn, 2014). In this work, the author makes a point of actually including unedited (and un-analysed) reflections from top executive clients on their experience of undergoing coaching with the researcher. This leads to very personal reflections about (for example) their mindsets when beginning the coaching or committing to behavioural change so as not to disappoint their coach. All clients relate the success of the coaching to the intense and multiple-year relationship established with the coach. In particular, they appreciate having someone who quickly creates a high level of comfort through her style and communication perspective and who is there to reflect with them, regardless of the issue in question.

2.5.4 Potential pitfalls when coaching leaders at the top

The majority of the reviewed literature sources on the coaching of top executives present coaching as fairly successful. This is remarkable, as it gives the impression that the coaching of top executives is always effective, which is difficult to believe. I have therefore also searched for literature on coaching engagements where success was not apparent or where the coach struggled to succeed. Not only do I feel that this would balance the picture, it would certainly also provide useful information.

Two articles stand out in this context. The first, by Bernhardt and Korotov (2010), is a case study of a coach dealing with a regional CEO in a leadership programme. The client was not willing to engage in group coaching (with four other executives) as part of the programme because of a critical 360 feedback report that he received. The client strongly criticised the coach on his capability and the professionalism of his approach and refused to continue the process. The authors explain that later on in the programme, and after consulting his superior about the feedback, this client calmed down and opened up to coaching again; however, the impact of this negative experience on the coach during the process was significant. For many days, the coach experienced strong feelings of incompetence and feeling 'like a fake'. Only with the help of supervision and further reflections during a programme with colleagues was the coach able to digest the experience.

One of the major learning points from this case mentioned by the authors is that of how working with high-calibre executives requires coaches to keep a keen eye out for strong transferential and counter-transferential dynamics that could emerge in these coaching situations. This insight echoes the high-risk aspect of coaching at the top, as mentioned earlier by Wasylyshyn (2017). While the article does not comment on this issue, one can infer from the description of the case that the superior power position occupied by the client, and the client not accepting the coach as an equal authority, both played an important role in the process.

Power dynamics are also very much at play in the second article, presented by Carlock & Florent-Treacy (2010), about a failed coaching engagement with top executives. The study demonstrates how coaching at the top, particularly in the context of a group intervention, can imply entering into a difficult power arena, where the stakes are high and individuals are unwilling to readily cede status or power. The authors apply a form of action research to describe the engagement of a coach with a family business that urgently needs help with two challenges: first, improving conflictual relationships between the four major shareholders, who also have top management roles in the business conglomerate; second, revamping the business by developing an operating structure centred around vision, decision-making and governance. The first point appears to be the most important condition needing to be met in order to move the situation forward, and this is where the coach begins. After

interviews and multiple sessions with the main actors involved, the coach succeeds in establishing a protocol with the family and the non-executive board for how to collaborate with each other effectively. Unfortunately, this carefully constructed stability is broken when the CEO, after a short while, decides to pursue his own plan. This action causes a deep rift with his siblings and sparks an explosive legal conflict between them. The situation deteriorates dramatically, and the family is ultimately forced to sell the company to their bank. Although these negative outcomes can be ascribed to multiple factors, the coach involved experiences it as a personal failure, which leaves him feeling inadequate and emotionally disturbed. In his view, he could, among other things, have established a better alliance with the whole family system and not just with the four major shareholders. Another important lesson offered is that coaches should avoid entering such power arenas alone; the authors suggests that these engagements should always be handled by two coaches, and that regular supervision to test personal motivations and interpretations is also fundamental.

This exploration of literature on the coaching of top executives has highlighted a number of meaningful themes. The question remains, however, as to the extent to which these can be simply translated to the context of NEDs. First, the credibility of the coach appears to be important to clients. Top executive leaders infer this credibility from coaches' ability to not just ask open reflective questions but also provide direct advice based on sound business understanding. It is highly likely that NEDs will also base their judgements of coaches' credibility on the extent to which they can demonstrate knowledge and insight into the realities of boards and corporate governance. Various scholars emphasise the importance of a systemic approach to maximising the success of coaching with top executives. For some scholars, this implies offering coaching as part of a broader leadership intervention, while others position coaching as a separate, complete intervention in itself and aim for a systemic engagement with the client organisation, including the various stakeholders around the coaching client. How this could be applied to NEDs is difficult to determine without specifically researching coaching applied to this group.

Furthermore, literature on the coaching of leaders at the top also suggests that a greater level of intimacy and risk-taking is required in order to develop a trust relationship. I expect that this will be similar when coaching NEDs, particularly

because they are cautious to opening up to outsiders about what takes place on a board. Finally, the reviewed papers also reveal some pitfalls that can arise when coaching top executives, which are related to negative transferential mechanisms and power dynamics in the wider system. As boards are part of the higher leadership cadre in any organisation, it is most likely that these phenomena will also play a role in their coaching. Yet, again, further research is required to develop a more comprehensive picture of whether and how these dynamics occur.

2.6   Coaching in relation to board review

While coaching of NEDs does not generate many hits in a literature search in the social sciences domain, it does however feature in corporate governance publications in the context of non-executive boards conducting an annual evaluation of themselves, also referred to as 'board review' (Long, 2006; Kiel & Nicholson, 2005). Coaching is discussed from three perspectives. First of all, when using external facilitation for the review, a coach could be invited to drive the process. Second, instruments and approaches are suggested for the purposes of data gathering or reflection that are strongly grounded in the coaching discipline (Ungureanu, 2013; Veltrop, 2012).. Third, coaching is suggested as a useful instrument for following up on identified development points after the core review has taken place (Minichilli, Gabrielsson, Huse, 2007). The following section presents an overview of what board review is, what instruments are used during the process and what role coaches can play in facilitating board review. The section concludes with two approaches to board evaluation that stand out owing to how they have integrated the coaching paradigm.

2.6.1   What is board review?

Board review is often prompted by national corporate governance codes or shareholder expectations and urges boards to demonstrate that they regularly assess their own performance. The annual or bi-annual board review could therefore be conceived of by boards as a formality aimed at ensuring conformity with expectations. However, according to various researchers, these reviews are increasingly being considered as promising vehicles for boards to identify how they can improve their functioning (Nordberg & Booth, 2019; Ungureanu, 2013; Veltrop, 2012). It has been argued that the very process of conducting a board evaluation can be a powerful development experience for boards, as the feedback they receive can prompt

members to adopt a more reflective attitude towards their roles and behaviour (Domine, 2020; Rasmussen, 2015; Szabo, 2015). This is supported by the findings of Muir (2012), who studied the effectiveness of board reviews in the UK. He concluded that while early board reviews appeared to focus on governance processes, with actions leading to changes in the mechanics of how boards are run, there is now a growing interest in and emphasis on the interpersonal dynamic: how decisions are made and how behaviour contributes to (or detracts from) board effectiveness. Notably, however, the author also cautions that board review in many cases does not necessarily lead to follow-up developmental actions.

Van der Berghe and Levrau (2004) suggest that, at minimum, a board review involves board members exchanging thoughts about how the year has progressed, while the most comprehensive version could involve assessing performance from three perspectives: the systems perspective, the board as a group and individual NEDs. The individual perspective deals with factors such as personal styles, skills, biases and impact. The group perspective examines factors such as formal and informal leadership, cohesion, information sharing, conflict resolution, reflection, biases and groupthink. The systems perspective focuses on the clarity of roles and responsibilities within the governance framework, conflicts of interests and liability, accountability, decision-making, communication and the quality of stakeholder relationships. Some authors further argue for the value of also including the CEO and top management in their review (Nicholson, Kiel & Tunny, 2012; Minichilli, Gabrielsson & Huse, 2007).

2.6.2 The use of external facilitation for board review

As discussed above, when boards decide to use external facilitation for their review, it is highly possible that they will turn to coaches for this purpose (among other professionals). Scholars increasingly advocate for the use of an external facilitator, as this contributes to the transparency, neutrality and consistency of the process while maximising psychological safety for all involved. Experienced facilitators are also likely to have been exposed to various practices in various other boards and will therefore be able to bring new or different perspectives to the evaluation process (Levrau & Berghe, 2004). Next to coaches, it appears that large consultancy companies and boutique firms specialising in executive search services often also

present themselves as facilitators for board review (Muir, 2012). Because of their expertise in working with or selecting NEDs, they bring the advantage of understanding the demands of the role. Nevertheless, the choice of executive search firms in particular is not completely without issues, since their involvement as facilitators for board review may create a potential conflict of interest.

Regardless of who is chosen as facilitator for the board review, it is important that the proposed person gains the trust of all stakeholders involved, starting with the chairperson and the CEO. This trust could be based on perceived independence, style and professional background, as well as on specific experience in facilitating processes with NEDs. Some scholars (Kiel & Nicholson, 2005; Jackson et al., 2003) argue that when a choice is made to use external help in conducting the board review, the consultants should bring considerable expertise in the areas of corporate governance and performance evaluation. Muir (2012) places a stronger emphasis on choosing experienced external evaluators who understand the business of the client organisation and who are capable of developing real rapport with the board. For their part, Nicholson and Kiel (2005) propose using the following questions to assess potential candidates for the role of board review facilitator.

1. Does the proposed facilitator have sufficient skills and experience to conduct a review?
2. Has the facilitator conducted board reviews for other boards like ours?
3. Does the facilitator have access to benchmarking information and alternative governance ideas that will add value to the process?
4. Will the facilitator be able to form a balanced and objective view of our board?
5. Will the board trust the facilitator sufficiently to ensure a positive outcome?

The extent to which external facilitation of board review has become accepted is demonstrated by the fact that even the Central Bank of the Netherlands (2013) recommends the use of external facilitators, particularly coaches, by boards of financial institutions .

2.6.3 Instruments used in board evaluation

The literature reveals that there are three main instruments used in board evaluation, which are quite similar to those used in executive coaching: interviews, observation, and questionnaires (Nadler, 2004; Hilb, 2004). Each has its own benefits. Conducting individual interviews for board evaluation provides a unique opportunity to collect data on the perceptions, meanings and constructs of NEDs. Another advantage of the individual interview is that it encourages candid disclosure of sensitive issues, particularly where confidentiality is assured (Conger & Lawlor, 2002). The interview method notably does not necessitate only individual conversations. If the board welcomes a group approach, the interviewer can also work with several people simultaneously, or the board as a whole, rather than with individual members. Under these circumstances, the interviewer takes on the role of a moderator or facilitator, which implies a more active role than that of solely being an interviewer.

Huse, Minichilli and Schone, (2005) make a strong case for the use of observation. This technique involves observing the NEDs during meetings in the boardroom. The observer neither stimulates nor manipulates the participants (no questions are asked, etc.) but rather takes note of the participants' behaviours, activities and other points of interest. The major advantage of observation is that the data is collected as events occur and is thus a record of what actually occurs rather than what an individual perceives; thus, it is free from respondent bias, although still subject to observer bias. It is also easier to identify contextual influences on behaviours (such as seating arrangements in the boardroom or use of technology) and can additionally be an effective way of seeing all board members in action at the same time. Observation can be especially useful when the evaluation objectives relate to issues of boardroom dynamics or relationships between individuals.

Other researchers are in favour of using a survey, as it allows for obtaining 'hard' or quantitative data on the performance of a board (Charas, 2013; Nicholson & Kiel, 2005). This instrument is quite popular and most frequently used in board reviews because of the specific and measurable data it produces. Another benefit is the possibility of comparing and contrasting responses between individuals and over multiple years. This instrument also could be particularly useful for identifying trends in the collective responses of the board. However, despite its popularity within

corporate governance, an important caveat must be mentioned: namely, that the outcome of surveys could be influenced by responder bias, social desirability effects, or the fact that each board member could be using a different frame of reference to which they relate the performance of the board. As mentioned, these instruments are not unfamiliar to the coaching discipline. Using interview, observation or 360-degree feedback reports has been quite common practice for the coaching of individual executives or leadership teams in recent decades (Maxwell, 2017; Hooijberg & Lane, 2009). It is therefore remarkable that there appears to be almost no connection in literature between the coaching discipline and corporate governance. It seems obvious that these two fields would benefit from getting closer to each other and beginning to build bridges in research in order to aid the performance of NEDs.

2.6.4 Coaching-like approaches used in board review

Although coaching is not explicitly used in board review, we do see it emerge as a paradigm informing the way that reviews are conducted. Two particular examples stand out in the literature. The first is an approach presented by Winter and Van de Loo (2012). These authors describe a framework called 'The Board On Task', which deliberately aims to develop the capacity of NEDs to self-reflect and engage in meaningful and effective dialogues. Their suggestion is to use the framework to arrive at meaningful dialogues about the interplay of task, role definitions and ideas, which could occur both within and between the groups of the executive and non-executive board. Furthermore, the framework enables these dialogues from three lenses: (1) the wider organisational system lens; (2) the board as a leadership group lens; and (3) the individual lens. For each of these three lenses, the framework suggests deeper exploration of 'essences' (core features of the board), 'abilities' (skills and processes) and finally 'traps' (biases and groupthink). One remarkable characteristic of this approach is that while coaching is not explicitly used as a label for the review activities, the nature of the process appears to be strongly based on the coaching paradigm. Unfortunately, this publication provides little information on researched experiences with the use of these frameworks. This is unfortunate, as it positions the value of this contribution predominantly on the prescriptive side. It would, for example, be interesting to understand how NEDs respond to the various steps in these approaches and how useful they find the outcomes to be. The strength of this framework appears to be its systemic and multi-layered nature, which makes it all-

encompassing. However, a potential risk is that this rich approach could also be perceived as too structured and laborious, which may backfire with NEDs.

One second interesting example of board review in which the coaching paradigm plays an important role is presented by Hawkins (2018). While the framework was originally applied to team coaching of executives (Hawkins & Smith, 2013), the author also suggests using it for work with boards. The mnemonic 'CID-CLEAR' is introduced to explain eight stages of the coaching process:

1. *Contracting*. This refers to the first conversations between a team leader, sponsor or gatekeeper and the coach, aimed at understanding why the team needs coaching and what their current circumstances are.
2. *Inquiry*. This is the stage at which a coach collects relevant data and impressions about the team, their performance, functioning and dynamics. It could include individual semi-structured meetings with each member of the team, particularly the board chairperson, using a 360-degree feedback instrument, as well as conducting interviews with the most critical stakeholders (e.g. the executive leadership team).
3. *Discovery, Diagnosis and Design.* The data collected in the inquiry stage is sorted and analysed to identify emerging hypotheses and sketch some possible maps of the coaching journey.
4. *Contracting*. Meeting with the whole team to fully agree the process, objectives and programme for the team coaching. This includes agreeing not only on what needs to be addressed in the coaching work but also on how the team and coach should work together to achieve the greatest value.
5. *Listening*. The goal of this stage is to deepen understanding of the issues that have emerged in the data collection stage. The coach should engage in listening and observing the teams' work at four levels: facts, patterns of behaviour, patterns of emotional expressions and relating (through metaphors and non-verbal communication) and the emotional climate. Finally, the coach should listen to the assumptions, mindsets and motivations of the team and the team members that underlie what is being said and how it is said. The latter includes stories the team tells

about itself and its world.

6. *Explore and Experiment*. The coaching in this stage should allow the team to explore and experiment with new ways of operating.

7. *Action*. Finding out how to move from awareness into action; determining how the team will act differently and deliver better performance.

8. *Review*. After having gone through all previous stages, ultimately leading to new action, the coach needs to guide the team in creating an ongoing process to review the planned actions for change. This is not only about progress that has been made, but also any disappointments or surprises.

This framework seems to be based on actual work with boards and NEDs; however, it is not very convincing with regard to genuinely appealing to the characteristics of boards. Most notably, it fails to address the issues of boards being somewhat reluctant to open up to outsiders and board members having only a partial time commitment to each of the boards they sit on. The steps described above assume almost the same conditions and ownership as an executive team, but boards are in reality different in meaningful ways. It would therefore add to the framework if the author could also describe NEDs' experiences of and reactions to it.

This exploration of the literature on board review shows that these reviews are perceived as important instruments for increasing the effectiveness of boards. Rather than being a mere formality, board reviews is increasingly considered to be a development activity in which reflection, feedback and learning plays an important role. It appears that, next to other professions, coaches can certainly add value as external facilitators of review activities, although there is little literature to support this. While the setting is different, it has also become clear that some of the instruments used in board review (such as feedback questionnaires and interviews) are very familiar to the coaching discipline. We can also see the relevance of coaching in two suggested board review approaches, which lean heavily on the coaching paradigm. Unfortunately, the authors provide no evidence for these approaches based on research.

2.7 Summary

This review has contextualised the present study with regard to literature on the

learning, development and effectiveness of NEDs and on coaching as a relevant intervention. A primary conclusion is that research on the coaching of boards and NEDs is very limited and that, from the perspective of the literature, this field is still very much in its infancy. One of the factors that may have led to this current situation is that it has traditionally not been obvious to NEDs and scholars in the corporate governance domain that they should prioritise learning and development activities; the fundamental assumption has been and remains that a board role is taken up once an individual has learned all they can through an executive career. Fortunately, there is an increasing amount of literature that explains why learning and development is in fact one of the most important areas for boards and NEDs to consider if they wish to improve their performance, particularly since issues related to board dynamics, communication and decision-making are identified as significant and complex obstacles to board excellence.

While it seems likely that coaching can play a role in such learning, this could not be fully substantiated due to a lack of available literature on experiences with the use of coaching for this client group. The only three contributions found provide inspiring insights but still leave many questions unanswered. Domine (2020) discusses the possible ways in which coaching can be useful for NEDs. Burgers (2013), in line with the assumption mentioned above, suggests that NEDs tend to perceive coaching as an instrument for 'fixing' underperforming board members rather than improving those who already perform well. Shekshnia (2007) describes a case in which he combines the roles of chairman and coach to successfully elevate a board to higher levels of maturity. In particular, the use of coaching methodologies such as the creation of a safe reflective space appears to have made a huge difference to this board. While the authors could be seen as pioneers in establishing a knowledge base for this type of coaching, their publications also demonstrate that there are still no agreed frames of reference for supporting an informed debate on the use of coaching for NEDs.

An examination of the literature on the coaching of top executives reveals a number of themes that may also have some relevance for NEDs. Coaches need to demonstrate credibility with top executives by providing direct advice based on their understanding of the business reality in which the leader operates. The use of a systemic approach to maximise the success of coaching with top executives is

advocated, either by integrating the coaching in a broader leadership intervention or by including various stakeholders around the coaching client. Another theme highlighted by literature on top executives is the importance of developing a strong relationship of trust with the client. Finally, some pitfalls have been identified related to negative transferential mechanisms and power dynamics. Although it is likely that these themes have some relevance for NEDs, it is necessary to conduct structured research on this client group specifically to clarify how exactly these might manifest.

Literature on the board review process has revealed that it is an important instrument for helping boards to upgrade their effectiveness and that some natural connection points exist with the coaching discipline: first of all, because of the feedback-based reflective nature of review activities, but also because coaches would be obvious professionals to use as external facilitators in the board review process, and finally because the literature suggests that approaches to board review can benefit from the use of a coaching paradigm. The reviewed contributions further highlight that although there is a natural connection between board review and coaching, there is to date no evidence base to substantiate this.

What this chapter has ultimately demonstrated is that, as things stand, researchers or practitioners interested in the topic of coaching provided to boards and NEDs will find little guidance in the existing literature. This is unfortunate, as the present review indicates a need for coaching activities among this client group, as well as a likelihood that coaching instruments will match well with boards and their specific challenges. Research into this emerging field within coaching is therefore more than useful – it is urgently required.

3 Methodology

As many scholars have argued, the challenge of research not only involves formulating the correct research question, but also developing and applying a research design that is appropriate for the researcher's desired contribution and consistent with the paradigms that the researcher adheres to (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Johnson & Duberley, 2000). In this chapter, I aim to clarify which philosophical and methodological considerations have formed the basis for the choices I have made in the design of the present study.

The first section of this chapter explains the philosophical considerations that have guided me in this research and how they align with my research aim and objectives. In particular, critical realism has played an important role in the design of this study. The subsequent sections delineate why grounded theory has been chosen as the approach to data collection and analysis, along with a description of the specific methods applied and an explanation of how study participants were recruited. This chapter concludes by addressing topics related to the quality, reflexivity and ethics of this research.

3.1 Research paradigm

During this research, I have come to understand how fundamental my paradigmatic stance is to the way I engage with all elements of the project; it has impacted the type of language I use to explain my research questions, the kinds of topics I have focused on, the ways in which I have collected data, and certainly the way I have distilled the findings (Jones, Torres & Armino, 2013). In this context, the concept of a 'paradigm' could be explained as the deeper assumptions made by researchers about ontology, or what the nature of reality is, and epistemology, or how we can obtain knowledge about this reality (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The paradigm to which I feel closest as a researcher, and which therefore underpins the present research, is critical realism. This approach considers the social world to be 'real', in the sense that it generates effects and exists independently of our identification of it (Ackroyd & Fleetwood, 2000). Critical realism is particularly focused on revealing the underlying mechanisms that explain social events or phenomena (Hamlin, Ellinger & Beattie, 2009; Bhaskar, 1978).

Some scholars contend that critical realism could be seen as a third research philosophy located between positivism and social constructionism (Easton, 2010; Alveson & Skoldberg, 2009), while others claim that it is in fact an advanced element of modernism and should be viewed as a form of post-positivism (Bachkirova, 2017). There is much to say for both perspectives: to some extent, critical realism shares the ontology of positivism, assuming that the world exists beyond our observation of it, yet it also challenges the idea that we can truly know what reality is, simply because all measurement is flawed. Epistemologically, critical realists are constructivists who believe that each of us construct our view of the world based on our perceptions of it. All description of that reality is mediated through filters of language, meaning-making and social context (Edwards, O'Mahoney & Vincent, 2014).

Critical realist assumptions have played an important role in formulating the main objective of this study:

- To explore the meaning and experience of coaching in relation to the learning and development of non-executive directors, from the perspectives of coaches and clients.

The assumptions underpinning this objective are that NEDs and their coaches provide meaning to coaching in a specific and consistent way, and furthermore, that this strongly influences how they engage with coaching and that there is an explanation for why this is the case. As much as I am aware of what has shaped my assumptions, I suppose that my background as a business professional and leader in corporate environments, along with my long history of involvement in executive education, also play an important role. What has remained constant for me throughout my time in these environments is a view of leadership success and effective organisational behaviours as not simply random, but rather the result of causal mechanisms and capable of being influenced to a certain extent (Goldsmith & Reiter, 2007; Collins, 2001).

Bhaskar (2016; 1978), who was the first to position critical realism as an alternative paradigm, proposed that our social world operates in a similar way to the natural

world, where phenomena can be broken down into progressively more basic, stratified layers. He envisaged particular combinations of internally and necessarily related objects that act as a generative mechanism for phenomena at a higher ontological level. In his view, all phenomena can be in part explained by, but not reduced to, their underlying generative mechanisms. This means that, for example, the way a leader behaves towards another person may be generated partly by his/her beliefs about power and control, which may be generated by broader social tendencies, which in turn emerge from the influences of political and economic structures in a particular country. We may therefore state that leadership is, for example, a phenomenon that is socially real (Kempster & Parry, 2011; Ackroyd & Fleetwood, 2004). Furthermore, the reality assumed by critical realists is a complex, multi-layered, multi-causal web of interacting forces. For example, although some aspects of the power possessed by leaders are visible, a large proportion of them may be less so. However, the effects of leadership are quite observable and sometimes felt by those around the leader. Critical realists therefore point out that the world can be stratified into three levels of reality:

- *Empirical* – observable by human beings;
- *Actual* – existing in time and space;
- *Real (or 'Deep')* – powers that are often unobserved yet causally effectful.

A critical realist is led by the idea that we should strive to approach a deeper understanding of what exists in these three levels of reality, while remaining fully aware that we may never completely uncover it. As a researcher, it is also important to consider that, although the key idea behind critical realism is that all description of reality is mediated through filters of language, meaning-making and social context, this does not imply that 'all beliefs are equally valid in the sense of that there are no rational grounds for preferring one to another' (Bhaskar, 1986, p. 72). While reality cannot be known for sure, it can be described by means of accounts that are better or worse, truer or less true.

When working with my research data, this perspective implied that, while it was important for me to stay close to the authentic data obtained through my participants,

my position as a critical realist meant that it was not my objective to view that data simply as an accurate picture of what happens in the coaching of NEDs. A critical realist needs to dig deeper to understand which collection of filters are being used among the identified population and approximate how these are related to the phenomenon being studied (Willig, 2013; Oliver, 2012).

3.1.1 Critique of critical realism

As a researcher, it is also important to consider the limitations of the paradigm in use. In that context, I have considered that there is also criticism of critical realism. Such criticism is mainly related to the interpretivist epistemology and the question of how researchers can substantiate their knowledge claims (Kempster & Parry, 2011; Johnson & Duberley, 2003). In particular it is questioned how reliably researchers can make claims related to deep structures and causal mechanisms. In other words, how can we really know anything about these powers?

Within critical realism, there is a risk of knowledge justification becoming self-referential. In the present study, I have also considered this risk; it was therefore important to not only arrive at immediate conclusions based on my analysis, but also to relate these conclusions to existing research publications from the corporate governance or coaching field focused on NEDs. While working with the data, I also took guidance from Kempster and Parry (2011), who point out that, while deep causal powers may not be observed through events, they can be interpreted and explored though an understanding of the interplay between actors, structure and context. In this regard, I have related my findings to a number of factors presented in the literature that are likely to have a strong influence at the level of causal mechanisms. For example, the highly formal and secretive way in which corporate governance is often positioned, or the characteristics of the people who tend to take on board roles and the nature of the academic disciplines which traditionally have been involved in research on boards.

3.2 Why a qualitative approach?

The nature of the research question and the exploratory purpose of the present research project convinced me that a qualitative research design would be the right choice. According to some scholars, qualitative research has 'come of age' over the

past two decades as a prominent research approach for executive coaching (De Haan, 2019; Morgan, 2007). It has demonstrated the capability to generate rich data, allowing the researcher to conduct an in-depth examination of the phenomenon under study from multiple perspectives. A qualitative approach has also been suggested as the technique of choice for studies in which leaders or leadership play a role (Conger & Toegel, 2002; Conger, 1998), primarily because it enables the emergence of nuanced, contextualised and rich findings pertaining to organisational structures, relationships and practices. The research path used in qualitative research is often inductive rather than deductive. Theories or hypotheses are not necessarily the starting point of this research approach. A key feature of the qualitative approach that I find very appealing, especially when used in combination with grounded theory, is that it allows the researcher to get deeply involved with the data by examining the language that research subjects use, the topics they address, the way they create meaning and how they engage with actors. This allows researchers to derive patterns, assumptions and relationships. It requires the researcher to be a primary instrument in making sense of the data, and either to suspend or examine their own beliefs around the topic (LeBlanc, 2004; Lincoln & Denzin 2003). The qualitative approach to research aligns with the goal of my research project, which is to explore a field within coaching that is largely under-researched and where there is no existing theory or even sufficient description available. The present research concerns clients who are actors in the leadership system of organisations (namely, NEDs), and my aim is to explore the coaching of this group in an open manner.

The evolution of qualitative research has given space for further differentiation of the ways it can be applied, particularly in combination with research methodologies. In relation to coaching, De Haan (2019) suggests that there are four types of qualitative research, each with a different perspective and nature of researcher involvement. In the first type of qualitative research, action research, the researcher is the same person as the coach or coachee and participates in the sessions studied. The second type, case-study research, looks at the session(s) more retrospectively and from the outside. The third type, field research, is again contemporaneous with the studied coaching relationships but involves multiple practitioners and sessions. The fourth type, and the type that resonates most with my research objectives, is process research, in which the researcher stands truly outside of the sessions themselves and

asks questions about the sessions post hoc. I have found this differentiation into four types of qualitative research genuinely useful for the positioning of the present study, particularly with regards to more precisely determining what role I want to play as a researcher in the project and the kind of data I aim to investigate.

It is important to note that the choice to adopt a qualitative approach in the present study was not made out of disregard for the quantitative approach, but was rather driven by the research focus. Because quantitative research is traditionally associated with research that aims at fundamentally different objectives (theory testing and the use of quantifiable data to make statistically reliable correlations and generalisable statements about the topic under study), it is often positioned as the antagonist of qualitative research. However, it has also been suggested that discussions about which of the two approaches to use are sometimes too deeply rooted in a mechanistic or technical perspective (Morgan, 2007). An increasing number of researchers are offering a less polarised view of these two approaches (Feilzer, 2010; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), claiming that, although paradigmatic stances may exist that favour one approach or the other", a better way to view these two approaches might be that they each have an important role to play in social sciences and can therefore complement rather than exclude each other. In that context, a third more pragmatic approach to research is therefore promoted: mixed methods research. Proponents of mixed methods research strive for an integration of quantitative and qualitative research strategies. Under such approaches, qualitative methods are often used to illuminate, compare or expand on the quantitative findings (Morse et al. 2018; Grant 2013). For the purposes of the present research, I have deemed a mixed methods approach too premature.

3.3 Research methodology

The methodology I have adopted in this research is grounded theory. This approach aligns with both my critical realist position and design assumptions about how knowledge can be obtained (Oliver, 2012; Urquhart, 2013; Glaser, 1992). The name is somewhat confusing as it refers to both a research process and the end result: a new theory, which is grounded in data (Walsh et al., 2015). A central aspect of the methodology is that data is analysed from the beginning, and that this analysis influences later stages of data collection. It implies that working with the data reflects

back onto the method and the underlying methodology, enabling the process to become more iterative, deeper and more reflexive as the research progresses (Neal, 2009).

A key premise of grounded theory is the emergence of theory. Grounded theorists work from the idea that theories should be 'grounded' in data obtained from the field, particularly from people's actions, interactions and social processes (Creswell, and Plano Clark, 2007). It is also essential that grounded theories offer something beyond a descriptive account of what is occurring in the situation under study. In fact, the theory is expected to provide a systematic explanation for both why and how events take place (Locke et al., 2003). Grounded theory is a particularly good fit for the present study because it explores an area within coaching where there are still few or no theories available. The methodology will be applied to ultimately generate a theoretical framework, designed to identify specific factors that influence the use and appreciation of coaching as an intervention for the learning of NEDs. Furthermore, this framework will lead to recommendations for practitioners regarding the positioning and approach of coaching for this particular group of clients.

Although Walsh et al. (2015) argue that grounded theory is ontologically and epistemologically flexible, it has since the late 1980s become the dominant qualitative approach in many disciplines. In their seminal book 'The Discovery of Grounded Theory', Glaser and Strauss (1967) present the fundamental principles for the grounded theory process, along with systematic guidelines for collecting and analysing data. The defining components of the original grounded theory practice invite the researcher to develop a dynamic and iterative approach to working with the data. In addition to immediate analysis and coding of incoming data (Glaser, 1978), the researcher is also expected to use a process called theoretical sampling; this means that, during the research, additional data sources are chosen for their potential to develop emergent analytical insights. Furthermore, memos are written throughout the study to capture the researcher's internal analytic dialogue, prompt reflexivity and select further data for coding and analysis.

3.3.1 Which version of grounded theory has been applied?

Researchers planning to use grounded theory inevitably come to a point where they are required to choose between what are referred to as the *Glaserian* or *Straussian* versions of the approach (Charmaz, 2014; Cooney, 2010). After their collaborative work on grounded theory, the two founders of the methodology went their separate ways while continuing to work on and refine grounded theory as a concept. Ultimately, this led to two conflicting ontological perspectives on how to apply the methodology. There are those researchers who say that the approach offered by Glaser (1992) employs a positivist perspective because it works on a conceptual level relating concept to concept, and accordingly suggest that it can tap into latent structures that are always present and that drive and organise behaviour (Neal, 2009). Glaser therefore holds that, as a result, theory will simply emerge from the actual data. This conflicts with the perspective of Strauss, who, together with Corbin (1997; 2015) developed a different perspective on grounded theory. These authors essentially advocate that the purpose of grounded theory is not always to generate a theory. In their view, researchers may also use the methodology to produce useful descriptions. Their interpretation of grounded theory leans more towards a relativist ontology and the constructivist paradigm, which explains that society, reality and the self are constructed through interaction and thus rely on language and communication. It assumes that people can and do think about their actions rather than responding mechanically to stimuli (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher and the researched therefore create the outcomes together.

These two approaches also differ on the extent to which verification should be part of grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2000). Strauss (1997) advocated that induction, deduction and verification were essential steps of the analysis, while Glaser (1992) argued that grounded theory is solely inductive. Glaser's approach to analysis is less structured than that proposed by Strauss and Corbin. Glaser essentially describes two types of coding processes, substantial and theoretical, while Strauss describes three: open, axial and selective. The proponents of the Glaserian approach are generally more attracted to the open way in which data analysis is prescribed; those who prefer a Straussian approach are generally more attracted to the clearer guidelines for data analysis (Maijala et al., 2004). There is concern that Strauss's more explicit approach to data analysis makes it unnecessarily complicated (Heath

et al. 2004; Kendall, 1999). Others go so far as to state that such a strong emphasis on procedures encourages researchers 'to look for data, rather than look at data' (Robrecht, 1995). Glaser (1992) argues that Strauss and Corbin's procedures force data and analysis into preconceived categories, ignore emergence and result in 'full conceptual description', which is not grounded theory. However, Cooney (2010) points out that the approach adopted by Corbin and Strauss (2015) is more nuanced and in fact advocates that researchers should also trust their instincts rather than focussing too tightly on the analytical procedures and guidelines.

In choosing which version of grounded theory to use, I found that I adhered most to the Glaserian perspective as it more closely aligns with my critical realist ontology. I also appreciate the flexibility offered by Glaser, including the many different options for how to relate categories at the theoretical coding phase. The other features of the approach used are summarised below (Urquhart, 2013):

1. The aim of Grounded Theory is to generate or discover theory.
2. The researcher has to set aside theoretical ideas in order to let the substantive theory emerge.
3. Theory focuses on how individuals interact with the phenomena under study.
4. Theory asserts a plausible relationship between concepts and sets of concepts.
5. Theory is derived from data, acquired from fieldwork interviews.
6. Data analysis is systematic and begins as soon as data is available.
7. Data analysis proceeds through identifying categories and connecting them.
8. Further data collection (or sampling) is based on emerging concepts.
9. These concepts are developed through constant comparison with additional data.
10. Data collection can stop when no new conceptualisations emerge.
11. Data analysis proceeds from open coding (identifying categories, properties and dimensions) through selective coding (clustering around categories) to theoretical coding.

12. The resulting theory can be reported in a narrative framework or a set of propositions.

3.3.2 Alternative methodologies considered

Before choosing grounded theory, I also explored whether other methodologies could be considered to answer the stated research question. For example, the case study approach (VanWynsberghe & Khan 2007; Easton, 2010) would have allowed for a highly in-depth investigation of what takes place in one or more specific coaching relations or situations. This could possibly have uncovered context-specific mechanisms in order to clarify at a profound level what occurs in particular cases. However, I decided not to opt for this approach because my research objective is focused on generating theory based on data about the meaning and experience of coaching in relation to the learning and development of NEDs, from multiple perspectives and situations. The specifics of a case's context could be relevant in such an endeavour, but (in my view) to a much lesser extent.

Another methodology that I considered is action research, which is deemed appropriate when the research aim is the development of theory, with action and change through a participative process. (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2013). A key feature of action research is that it is both about taking action and creating knowledge. An important dimension of this approach is that the members of the system being studied actively participate in the research process (De Haan, 2019; Coghlan & Brannick, 2010; Cox, Shoukry and Cook, 2020). This methodology may have been useful for retrieving rich data about the experience of coaching related to a specific issue or theme in the coaching of NEDs. However, I have opted to discard it for two main reasons. First, this approach requires significant time investment from participants, while NEDs are known to not have high availability. Second, it simply did not match my research aim of developing a deeper initial understanding of coaching this clientele.

3.4   Research participants

Participants for this research were identified using a purposive sampling strategy, which fits well with qualitative research. As explained by Bell, Bryman & Harley, (2019), the most important goal of purposive sampling is to recruit participants who

are both relevant to the research question posed and who understand the social phenomenon under investigation. Guided by previous grounded theory research on similar types of phenomena (Walker-Fraser, 2011; Kretzschmar, 2010), I have recruited a sample size of 16 participants, with the understanding that such a sample would be appropriate to arrive at a sufficient level of saturation for this study. Such a limited number of participants is congruent with a qualitative research strategy aimed at generating 'deep' data about their experiences rather than proving validity through recruiting a large number of subjects.

Two groups of participants have been selected: (a) coaches who have been or still are involved in coaching NEDs; (b) NEDs who have experienced coaching. In the context of the present research question, I had a particular interest in gathering data from both subject groups, as previous research on the coaching experience has demonstrated that the way coaches make sense of what happens in coaching is not necessarily how clients perceive it (De Haan et al., 2010).

The initial group of coaches for the first round of interviews were recruited via my professional network, with e-mail being used to approach them. They next received a general message explaining the purpose of the research and an invitation to an interview, after confirming that they have professionally coached one or more NEDs. Coaches in my network were also useful in referring me to other potential participants. The NEDs turned out to be much more difficult to access. I initially invested quite some time in approaching potential research participants through the alumni network of the INSEAD programme for NEDs. Unfortunately, this did not generate any positive reaction. As a second option, I approached some of my contacts on LinkedIn and asked coaches whether they could refer me to former clients. This was more effective and did bring me in contact with a total of five NEDs who had experienced some form of coaching and were willing to speak about it in an interview.

My initial plan was to conduct three rounds of interviews. Subjects for the second and third round of interviews would be selected based on the themes emerging from the previous round regarding what data to collect next and where to find them (Walker-Fraser, 2011; Kretzschmar, 2010). In reality, I ended up with only two rounds of interviews owing to the difficulty of gaining access to NEDs. The initial analysis of the

first round of interviews was particularly useful for identifying, for example, how coaching is perceived among NEDs. The second round of interviews with NEDs allowed me not only to get better access to them but also to address coaching in a language that made sense to them.

3.4.1 Participant characteristics

The study has not been limited in its geographical scope. Participants were recruited from mainland Europe, the UK, Canada and Australia. Of the 16 participants interviewed, five were NEDs and 11 could be classified as providers of coaching or similar services. Of the five NEDs, three were also coaches. Gender-wise, the group consisted of six women and 10 men. Ethnically, they could all be described as white, and their ages were all above 40. Three participants had an academic background, while 13 were from business backgrounds. All providers of coaching had significant experience coaching NEDs. The NEDs all acknowledged having multiple years of experience both in that role and on more than one board.

Table 1: Table of participants

	Nationality	Gender	Name
1	UK	Male	Norman
2	NL	Female	Celine
3	UK	Male	Ben
4	Swiss	Male	Carl
5	Germany	Female	Carla
6	NL	Male	Neil
7	NL	Female	Ciska
8	Russia	Male	Bjorn
9	Canada	Male	Chris
10	Australia	Male	Boris
11	NL	Male	Cecil
12	NL	Female	Carmen
13	UK	Male	Casper
14	NL	Male	Norbert
15	NL	Male	Clive
16	NL	Male	Chester

All names are pseudonyms to preserve participant anonymity.

*Names starting with the letter C = Coach

*Names starting with the letter N = Non-executive director

*Names starting with the letter B = Both coach and non-executive director

3.5 Methods of data collection

In order to obtain the data needed for the research, audio-taped, semi-structured interviews (Charmaz, 2014) were used as the primary mode of data collection. Interviews were considered as an appropriate instrument for use in accessing the rich individual experiences of subjects (Carson, 2001), as they are open, flexible and experiential (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). The main appeal of the interview as a form of research inquiry is that it offers the researcher direct access to interviewees' points of view, both in terms of the attitudes they hold and their accounts of their experiences. Unlike instruments that do not incorporate interaction between the researcher and subjects, theoretical interpretations are not simply imposed on the persons being studied. Through the dialogue created during an interview, the subjects and researcher can both take part in making sense of the experiences, explanations

and emotions articulated by interviewees (Smith & Elger, 2012). Ultimately, this approach therefore holds the potential for the conversation to be both useful and beneficial to the interview subject.

Choosing to work with semi-structured interviewing raised a number of challenges for me during the data collection phase. As Robson (2002) points out, the interviewer must perform multiple tasks simultaneously and with skill. The first of these, namely establishing a connection with each participant in order to create an atmosphere of trust and openness, turned out to be very important. While my intent was to avoid influencing participants in the way they responded to questions, it was sometimes necessary to help them understand the context and types of perspectives I was interested in. For example, some of the participating coaches found it hard to be specific about what it is that they do or experience during their coaching sessions with their NED clients. These coaches had a tendency to provide general answers or descriptions, which needed to be further unpacked.

3.5.1 Interview guides

The literature review was instrumental in developing the interview guides, as it enabled me to select topics related to the research objectives. In addition, the insights I gained into the role, context and development needs of NEDs gave me relevant vocabulary and an idea of where I could probe further during the interviews. Two interview guides were developed, one for coaches and one for NEDs. I was able to pilot the interview guide for coaches with someone in my network who had been recommended to me as a very experienced coach of NEDs. This person was quite generous with her time and allowed me to try out all the questions in the guide with her. This pilot interview gave me a number of insights regarding how to build up the series of questions, as well as what types of answers they might yield. For example, I noticed that the coach was quite eager to discuss the content of the topics that were dealt with in coaching sessions (the *what*), which left less time for process questions (the *how*). The coach also noticed this herself and urged me to take more control of the conversation in order to prevent her from drifting too far off topic. This experience proved quite helpful during the actual interviews, as it helped me use the available interview time effectively.

The pilot also prompted me to further reflect on what exactly the objective of the interviews should be. I realised that, although my research aimed to explore the meaning and experience of coaching in relation to the learning and development of NEDs, I was not particularly interested in the general or prescriptive opinions of respondents about corporate governance or coaching. Rather, I was more interested in their perspectives based on actual exposure to coaching processes or relationships.

The length of the interview was kept to a maximum of one hour. While I could have opted for a longer timeframe, I was also conscious of the fact that this might have made the prospect of contributing to the research less attractive for my participants. Moreover, my experience as a coach had informed me that it is quite possible to reach a meaningful level of intimacy and depth in a one-hour conversation. The interviews were recorded using an application on my iPhone and then stored in a password-protected file on a cloud server. The audio recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription agency. Some of the interview transcripts were in Dutch and therefore required translation into English; this was done with the help of a professional translation agency.

3.5.2 Evolution of the interviewing

During the first round of interviews, it became apparent that the questions I had prepared about coaching led to some confusion or at least ambiguity for participants. Some of them simply denied the existence of coaching for NEDs. They had not seen it or experienced it themselves and therefore could not tell me much about it. Others confirmed that coaching-like activities took place but that it was not labeled as coaching. Particularly when a participant mentioned to have no experience with the coaching of NEDs, I briefly struggled with how to continue the interview because my follow up questions were based on the assumption that we could further explore the process of coaching provided to NEDs. I also noticed that particularly the NEDs I interviewed expressed light signals of irritation that I wanted to probe on the topic of coaching. They seemed to wonder whether I understood how things actually worked in boards and whether this would become a useful conversation for them. It was an uncomfortable position for me to be in. However, because participants had expressed the willingness to speak to me and had received my information sheet, I assumed

that they still had valuable information to provide in the context of my research and that perhaps I was not approaching the topic in the right way.

I managed to turn the conversations in a fruitful direction by asking participants what challenges NEDs experience in their activities and how boards work on improving their effectiveness. Both coaches and NEDs found these useful prompts for an explorative and rich conversation. The answers I received led to two insights. The first one is that I needed to be more mindful of the fact that for some participants the traditional notion of coaching was not going to be helpful and that the interview guide needed to be accordingly adapted. Secondly, in response to questions about how boards improve their effectiveness, participants explained that this mostly happens through board evaluation, which could include coaching-like activities. It therefore became apparent to me that board evaluation was a notable topic to include in the interview guide.

3.5.3 Memo writing

The Grounded Theory approach requires an iterative process of collecting and analysing data. Therefore, immediately after each interview, I created memos to process my initial thoughts, observations and questions (Sharmaz, 2020; Kretzschmar, 2010). These memos allowed me also to look for unstated assumptions and constructs of research participants.

3.6 Analysis of data

I initially attempted to use the coding software NVIVO for the analysis, but I very quickly found that it did not work especially well for my purposes. Further data analysis was conducted according to the following process:

Open coding. After re-listening to the recordings of the interviews and (where necessary) correcting the transcripts, I first took the transcripts through the process of line-by-line open coding, also referred to as initial coding (Charmaz, 2014). The challenge I set myself at this stage was to take a fresh look at the data without bringing any preconceptions to the coding (Glaser, 1992). The focus in this initial coding process was on attaching codes to groups of words, particularly those that revealed combinations of action and implications.

Selective coding. A review of the open codes allowed me to undertake the second coding step: selective coding, also referred to as focused coding (Glaser,1992). Selective coding can help to direct the analysis process early on without limiting it. The aim of this step was to identify categories of codes and their properties and to see how these codes related to dimensions of the research question, with the ultimate objective of arriving at codes that were more conceptual than the initial codes identified earlier. The challenge in this process was to allow these codes to genuinely emerge from the data, while also retaining a broad range of selective codes in order to remain open-minded about both the data and its interpretation. Memos played an important role during this stage because they captured my coding decisions and considerations. Where it made sense to do so, I used 'in vivo' codes (Strauss, 1997), which are codes derived from actual participant statements. In vivo codes are particularly relevant for research based on a critical realist paradigm, as they demonstrate that the analysis of the data is emerging authentically from the data itself (Urquhart, 2013).

Theoretical coding. This fourth stage could be seen as the most sophisticated one in the process. It helped me to theorise the codes identified earlier. A theoretical code underlies the identified codes and shows the relationships between them, rather than replacing them with a new code that represents a theory (Glaser, 1992). Theoretical codes are therefore meant to be integrative; they lend form to the selective codes a researcher has collected. Theoretical codes can come from the coding families put forward by Glaser (2005; 1978) or can be self-generated by the researcher. Developing theoretical sensitivity is useful in this stage. This is the ability to understand and define phenomena in abstract terms and to demonstrate abstract relationships between the studied phenomena (Sharmaz, 2014). Glaser recommends that theoretical codes should not be 'forced' and advises that it is better to have no theoretical code than a forced one. He argues that theoretical codes should 'earn' their way into your grounded theory.

Abduction. The fifth stage of the process is focused on recontextualisation of the phenomena and theoretical integration. Essentially, this step involves comparing the identified characteristic causal mechanisms or the processes that serve to explain

them with the extant literature. I therefore spent considerable time reading relevant literature and making an attempt to relate my emergent theory to other theories in the field. The extant literature also served to question and challenge my initial interpretations in terms of whether other mechanisms could be identified in the data.

Critical review. The sixth and final stage involved reviewing the findings. Feedback from my supervisors and several coaching colleagues on the identified findings and emerging framework played an important role in this step. Furthermore, I presented the findings to a group of NEDs in a programme at a Dutch business school. The comments and questions they raised about the findings were useful in further shaping my emerging theory and framework.

3.7   Issues related to quality

As a researcher, I am aware that in order for research to be accepted as knowledge, it is essential to clarify which criteria of quality have been used and how these have been applied. Quality criteria serve as a frame of reference for methodological best practices. They provide the possibility of framing our work in a systematic and structured manner (Tracy, 2010). The following section clarifies which criteria of quality I have adhered to in the present research and how I have made an effort to integrate these into my research methods.

Traditionally, in the positivist paradigm and quantitative research, the criteria used to judge research quality are validity and reliability. Validity refers to how well a scientific test or research method actually measures what it sets out to, or how well it reflects the reality it claims to represent. Reliability stands for consistency of measurement, or the extent to which an instrument measures the same attributes each time it is used under the same conditions with the same subjects (Bryman, Bell & Harley, 2019). Multiple researchers argue that, in qualitative research, alternative criteria should be used to judge quality. However, there is little consensus about what then constitutes an appropriate set of evaluation criteria. Often, the choice of criteria depends on the type of research and the specific methodology employed (Sharmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Kempster & Parry, 2011; Tracy, 2010; Creswell, 2007). The criteria I have found most relevant for my research question and the grounded theory

approach are those presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These refer to credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

I have applied these in the following way:

- In order to reinforce credibility, which refers to establishing that the results of qualitative research are believable from the participants' perspectives, I used purposive sampling and recruited participants who had significant experience either as a coach for NEDs or as a user of such coaching. During the interviews, I frequently summarised and reported my understanding back to participants with the goal of checking whether I had correctly interpreted their answers. Finally, I regularly discussed my initial findings with other scholars at INSEAD business school or Oxford Brookes University.

- In order to reinforce transferability, which refers to the extent to which the qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts, I made a significant effort to clarify the research process, the type of participants involved and the research conditions. This could help any researcher wishing to transfer the results to a different context to arrive at an informed judgment about whether it makes sense to do so. In addition, I also tried to use thick description to describe my findings in sufficient contextual detail, which also supports this criterion (Kempster & Parry, 2011).

- In order to reinforce dependability, I created specific interview questions for providers of coaching, with a separate interview sheet for NEDs. I also tested my research questions with a coach and a NED to assess whether they generated substantial data about the phenomena of interest. Finally, I described which changing circumstances may have influenced the research.

- I reinforced confirmability by describing the efforts I made to ensure that the research findings are based on the participants' narratives and words rather than potential researcher biases. The strategies used for this purpose included detailing the process of data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation. During this iterative process, I recorded which topics seemed unique and interesting during the data collection, and I also wrote initial

memos to capture my thoughts about the coding. Throughout the coding process, I have provided explanations for why certain codes have been merged together and elaborated on the meaning of the themes.

3.8 Reflexivity

Reflexivity can be described as an ongoing process of reflecting on our subjective experience and our biases as researchers to examine how these inform our research. The following section explains how three types of reflexivity have been taken into account in this research: 1) epistemological assumptions; 2) method; 3) discipline.

3.8.1 Epistemological assumptions

Reflexivity in relation to epistemological assumptions refers to what Johnson and Cassell (2001) describe as becoming more aware of our own thinking by critiquing our epistemological stance and the effect this has on our research. The assumptions that I hold as a critical realist are important in this context. The goal of the present research is to explore experiences with the coaching of NEDs under the critical realist assumption that the analysis of these experiences will reveal a persistent reality existing independently of our thoughts. However, in conducting my research, I have remained conscious that the knowledge I generate from the data must be seen as both provisional and fallible. While I am aware that I will approach an understanding of the causal mechanisms at work in the phenomenon under study, I also know that I will not achieve absolute certainty about these.

Another important factor of which I have been fully conscious is that the reality conveyed to me through the data is mediated through the participants' own filters and frames of reference. For example, participants who are NEDs are part of an elite leadership group and therefore potentially accustomed to being perceived as special or at least different. In early memos, I took stock of this and related the data with literature that has captured the typical characteristics of elite leadership groups (Carpenter, 2011; McDonald & Westphal, 2011; Pettigrew, 1992). Epistemologically, I am assuming that there are underlying generative mechanisms that I can uncover by analysing the data and comparing it with existing literature. This is all underpinned by the expectation that this will help to explain the operation of the identified themes. I am furthermore assuming that the causal explanations I find should make sense and

provide epistemic value to understanding what is different or characteristic about the coaching of NEDs.

3.8.2 *Reflexivity with regards to method*

My background as a business leader and executive coach, along with my experience as a researcher, both played a significant role in the choices I made with regards to methods in the present research, particularly concerning the research question, methodology, data collection, data analysis and choices about how to present my findings. For example, the choice to investigate the learning and development of NEDs in relation to coaching was motivated by my experiences with this client group at INSEAD business school. Critical realism was chosen as the research paradigm because of the positivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology that I developed while working in corporate organisations and executive education. Grounded theory and the iterative nature of this methodology was a good match with my background because the critical realist in me appreciates the notion that a theory will emerge from the data. While it is not my goal to eliminate the influence of my background, I attempted to mitigate my biases in the following ways:

- I critically discussed the research question with other researchers, with the goal of assessing whether such a question could lead to a valuable contribution to knowledge.
- I made the choice to work with grounded theory, a thoroughly 'tried and tested' methodology in coaching research, utilising a clearly defined process to arrive at my findings.
- I opted to apply a data collection approach involving questions that were sufficiently open to allow participants to voice their personal views.
- The interviews were recorded, transcribed and (where necessary) translated into English. This allowed me to go back to two versions of each interview in order to check my understanding and interpretation of what participants had said and how they had said it.
- At the end of each interview, I sought feedback from participants about whether they had found the process useful, whether there was anything I had missed and whether they had any suggestions about how to further increase the effectiveness of the interview.

- I regularly wrote personal memos to capture my reflections on the research process, particularly when things were not turning out as I had expected or when I found myself at a crossroads regarding data collection or analysis.
- I shared my findings with colleagues at INSEAD business school in France and Singapore, who regularly act as coaches to NEDs, and in workshops with NEDs at TIAS business school in the Netherlands.
- I had monthly supervision sessions with two doctoral supervisors throughout the entire research period, which added an objective and critical perspective to the choices I made and the options I was considering.

3.9 Issues related to ethics

In qualitative research, it is important to pay serious attention to ethics-related issues, particularly as concerns how to safeguard participants from experiencing harm or negative consequences from the research (Miller et al., 2012). This section clarifies the ethical dimensions of the present research project, along with the measures I took to consider and/or mitigate these.

- At the early stages of the research project, my awareness of ethical issues was raised by applying for ethics approval for research involving human participants from Oxford Brookes' University Research Ethics Committee (UREC).
- When participants agreed to be involved in the research, they received an information sheet explaining the purpose of the research and their role in it.
- A consent form was sent to participants to allow them to consciously consider their participation.
- After the UREC meeting, I answered further ethical questions raised by the committee regarding my research. In addition, I supplied evidence of how their concerns would be addressed during the research.
- I agreed to conduct interviews with participants at specific times. Those conducted in person were held in a private room; for those conducted virtually, I asked participants to arrange a space where they could speak freely and confidentially.

- Before recording the interviews, I asked participants if they agreed to be recorded. I also made them aware that they had the right to stop the recording at any time, and that if they had second thoughts about any comments made, these could be deleted.

- The research data and any identifying information has been kept in a separate locked filing cabinet in my home office. My computer files are password-protected, and I have sole access to my computer.

- The actual names of all participants involved in the research have been kept confidential. On the transcripts, I have made sure to use coded names. I will also use pseudonyms in any subsequent publications arising from the research.

3.10 Chapter summary

The goal of this chapter has been to provide a deeper understanding of the methodology applied in the present research. An explanation is provided for why a qualitative research approach fits well with the research question and the contribution to knowledge I aim to make. I have described how the critical realist paradigm is fundamental to my ontological and epistemological beliefs and have also highlighted the potential limitations of this paradigm. With regard to the method for data collection and analysis, I have defended why Grounded Theory aligns well with my critical realist position and my design assumptions about how knowledge can be obtained. The sampling strategy has been clarified, along with the processes used for data collection and analysis. Finally, I have demonstrated which measures I adopted to deal with potential issues related to quality, reflexivity and ethics.

4 Findings

The transcribed interviews have yielded rich data related to the research question, which explores the meaning and experience of coaching in relation to the learning and development of NEDs. This data has been analysed using the key steps of grounded theory: 1) Transcription; 2) Open coding; 3) Selective coding; 4) Theoretical coding; 5) Abduction; 6) Critical review. The following chapter presents the outcome of this process, with minimal interpretation, as the latter will be provided in the discussion chapter.

The analysis yielded four core categories. The first one, 'Not Coaching', refers to the observation that, although services provided to this client group resemble coaching, it is important to clients that they are not defined as such. The second core category is 'Open Mind', which captures a collection of codes indicating the pragmatic and intuitive approaches being used. The third core category, 'A Tough Job', relates to codes that capture the complexity of coaching provided to NEDs. Finally the fourth core category 'Special Coaching Capabilities' refers to codes which emphasised that coaches aiming to work effectively with this audience need to bring special knowledge and experience.

4.1 'Not Coaching'

Coaching appears to be an ambiguous phenomenon in the world of NEDs, which is reflected in how it is both labelled and offered. Coaches and NEDs alike articulate the paradoxical view that coaching both does and does not exist in the world of boards: *'In fact, what we do is a little in between, in that sense' (Norman).* One of the coaches even stated that it is extremely rare for NEDs or boards as a group to undergo coaching. During the interviews, it felt very much as though I was excavating something that was clearly there but that was also not easy to abstract; e.g., *'I have no experience of non-executives being coached, with the exception of the chairman'* (*Norman).* Also illustrative is that, while the NEDs among my participants did speak about having been coached as a board, they did not comment on being coached as an individual by a professional coach for their board roles

When coaching does take place, the ways in which it is labelled are quite varied and somewhat vague. The majority of coaches explain that, while the services they provide to NEDs could fall under the category of coaching, they typically call it something else in practice:

> *'I sometimes coach individual non-executive directors, although usually that doesn't have the name of coaching. It has the name of having lunch and working through a couple of issues that people might have.' (Ciska)*

When I probed further on why this was the case, they explained that it is often a result of how the client wants to label the activity. Some of the labels used for the coaching of NEDs include 'buddying', 'intervention', 'sounding board', and 'talking through some issues'. For some reason, it seems important to clients that the activity in question is not called 'coaching'. The interview questions often also prompted coaches to think out loud about how best to label what it is that they do with NEDs. This indicated that perhaps the definition of their activities had not been a topic they had been required to think about frequently, or to which they assigned a lot of importance: *'So it's not called coaching in a sense. I think it's more kind of issue-focused rather than personal-focused. Does that make sense?' (Ben)*.

In addition to being unsure about how to define the activity, this participant also presents the idea that what happens between coach and client is different than what, in his mind, traditionally falls under the category of 'coaching'. The activity instead serves to work through specific issues. This implies that conversations should be task-focused and not delve into (for example) the client's behaviour patterns or deeper-seated problematic beliefs.

Coaches also explain that coaching activities for NEDs are supposed to be somewhat hidden and secretive, not something that should be spoken about openly or explicitly. This is reflected in the way in which individual coaching for NEDs in particular is financed. Most coaches explain that while development activities with boards as a group are paid for by a corporate budget, individual coaching is paid for from a private budget; this is not because the organisation refuses to pay, but rather because the

individual prefers it to be discreet. Non-executive directors are apparently concerned about the potential negative consequences that might ensue if it should become known that they are using a coach.

Another finding in the context of this core category relates to the coaches themselves. I noticed that a majority of them were reluctant to share details about their clients or coaching situations during the interviews. They had a tendency to discuss these matters at a general level and only shared more details after gentle probing. I had the impression that they were mirroring the cautiousness of their clients in this regard. However, it could also be that they were not used to speaking about their work with NEDs in an explicit manner.

The ambivalence around coaching for NEDs and its hidden nature appear to be related to this client group's beliefs about their level of competence and their status. The following section covers the data that points to these beliefs.

4.1.1 'The Aura Thing'

When participants explained that their activities were not supposed to be labelled as coaching, an obvious question arose in response: *why?* The answers were a mix between the socially low acceptance of coaching as a suitable development instrument at this level (even if it is being used) and a form of denial by individual NEDs that they do in fact have coaching needs. The key concept that emerged from this data was that the special and very high status of NEDs would suffer from being linked to coaching. One of the coaches articulates this as follows:

> *'There is a huge aura thing with boards that makes coaching not so obvious. Because they (NEDs) have been in the position of CEO before, there is the assumption that they can judge the performance of executives. Which is not true, they have to learn it. So, admitting that you need coaching is still not done. It is seen as a sign of not being fit for the job.' (Cecile)*

This 'Aura Thing' was surprising to me, as it differs from the mindsets that exist in business around coaching provided to top-level executives, where coaching is

accepted and even seen as a privilege of having reached this top position. Participants also highlighted this difference. As one coach comments:

> *'Some executives find it rather positive that they are working with a coach because it demonstrates that they are willing to reflect, to learn, to develop, to grow. But obviously if you're a board member, you don't need that right? And this relates to the paradigm or the assumption that board members are like supermen and superwomen.'* (Ben)

According to participants, the lack of transparency about needing coaching also has to do with the types of personalities that occupy board roles and the principles to which they hold each other. Using coaching is equated with weakness. One of the coaches explains why:

> *'You know the board members often are alpha males and alpha females. And it can be seen by other alpha males as a sign of weakness to work with a coach.'* (Carl)

Participants build on this by explaining that there is a belief, particularly among experienced NEDs, that that there is nothing more for them to learn. Linked to this was the idea that while it may be a good thing for aspiring or junior board members to engage in learning activities, experienced NEDs have no need for this type of further learning:

> *'One of my observations is that a lot of people think that once they join a board, that they don't need to learn anymore. That they've done it. They've got to the pinnacle of their career and they stop learning, and even in organisations where they're very keen for their staff to be trained and developed, they won't spend any time or money on developing themselves.'* (Boris)

The concept of 'The Aura Thing' indicates that it is not the credibility of coaching that causes tension; NEDs appreciate coaching as an effective development instrument. However, it is very important for them not to be associated with coaching themselves, as it implies that one still has more to learn. This raises interesting and perhaps new

questions for the coaching discipline. Has coaching, because of what it represents (i.e. learning), reached the boundaries of the audiences it can be related to? Do we need to empathise with audiences like NEDs and devise different constructs that better match their realities – or, alternatively, should we find ways to lower their resistance? I consider these questions to be new because I have not encountered any such discussions in the literature.

4.1.2 Coaching labelled as board evaluation

During the interviews, it became apparent that the most acceptable way to position coaching (or development) activities for NEDs is within the context of board evaluation. This is particularly relevant when it concerns coaching offered to the board as a group. While interview questions about the specific use of coaching activities sometimes yielded vague or limited answers from participants, particularly NEDs, questions about board evaluation resulted in vivid descriptions by both coaches and NEDs about experiences with activities that exhibit a strong resemblance to coaching.

> *'Well, yes. I find that the self-evaluation is a good starting point for the discussion because it allows all the board members, both the executive and non-executive, to comment on the effectiveness of the board, but also to comment on the effectiveness and the behaviour of their other colleagues around the board table.' (Norman)*

Most participants explain that regular board evaluation has become commonplace for boards. In particular, the NEDs explain that there is actually a growing interest from boards in external guidance during such evaluations, not only to increase its effectiveness but also to ensure compliance with regulation:

> *'I need to say it right; every other year you are required to be guided externally, so one year you can do it under your own guidance, directing it yourself. However, you always have to receive external guidance once every two years.' (Norbert)*

Participants clarify that such an evaluation does not need to be a yearly event; it can take place whenever a board feels the need to organise it. It can also be initiated in

response to issues between directors, between board and management, or because of challenges in the governance system. Interestingly, most of the NEDs and some of the coaches interviewed tended to use the term 'self-evaluation' rather than board evaluation. This stems from the idea that a good board should regularly assess itself. However, the emphasis on conducting the evaluation themselves may link with the previous sub-theme ('The Aura Thing') regarding board members operating at a level where developmental support is not publicly accepted. The term 'board self-evaluation' would therefore indicate that it is not obvious and perhaps even undesirable to use a coach for this process. Nevertheless, the participants brought me to the understanding that such inferences would not do justice to current practice among boards.

Both participant groups do however acknowledge the importance of external guidance or coaching during the board evaluation. They even explain why: *'Most important, I think, is that if you are guided externally, it is easier to get something on the table, because it is being requested by someone who has no interest in it' (Norbert)*. Accordingly, I have concluded that coaches are seen as valuable guides in board evaluation.

This topic then led to conversations with participants on how they select the coach for their evaluation. I was particularly interested in how important it is for them to establish a longer-term relationship with a coach who acquires a deeper understanding of a board. In fact, the data suggest that this is not necessarily important. When looking for external guidance, it is not important for NEDs that the coach already has an established relationship with a board; some boards even make the conscious decision to choose a different coach each time in order to get an alternative perspective or style. This indicates that attachment to a particular coach, which is often seen with the coaching of executives, is not necessarily present for boards. This is somewhat counter-intuitive, as boards could benefit from developing a long-term relationship with a coach. This may be influenced by the fact that boards do not see themselves as clients for a long-term developmental relationship, as mentioned under the sub-theme 'Not Coaching'.

This first section of the findings portrays how the perceptions of coaching at the level of NEDs are significantly different than what we might be accustomed to with top executives, in the eyes of both clients and coaches. The need for coaching is clearly present, and coaching is also appreciated as a credible development instrument; however, it has to be labelled in a different way to be accepted. Coaching offered to the board as a group will most likely be labelled as board evaluation or self-evaluation. The next section elaborates on what the data suggests about approaches and practices in this type of coaching.

4.2   'Open Mind': Intuitive and pragmatic practices

The second core category derived from the analysis relates to the approaches and practices used by participants. Very much in line with the ambiguous labelling of coaching activities for NEDs, it was also quite challenging to obtain explicit data from participants about the frameworks or structures used. The coaches indicate that the approaches they use are intuitive, pragmatic and relatively informal. They refer to this as 'keeping an open mind'. This pragmatic approach is visible in four dimensions: the way that coaching is contracted for, the processes followed, the type of instruments used, and the practices for assessing outcomes of the coaching.

4.2.1   Connecting and contracting

The first cluster of data that pointed in the direction of this pragmatism and informality is formed by the responses of participants to questions about how clients and coaches find each other and how they contract for coaching. It emerged that, rather than using a commercial tender or comparative selection process, coaches and clients mainly find each other through informal networks or gatherings. This is the case for both individual coaching and for work concerning board evaluation. As one participant explains: *'My last client was referred to me through someone I sat next to at a lunch. So that's how it goes' (Carl).*

Another way in which clients and coaches find each other is through educational programmes at business schools, where they meet an educator (in many cases, a professor) who also provides coaching activities for boards. It is striking that the selection and engagement of coaches occurs in a manner that is almost detached from any organisational system. Participants explain that clients tend to connect

directly with the coach rather than using intermediate functions such as Human Resources departments. The person making the connection may be a representative of the board, such as the board secretary or the chair, but there is usually no other corporate function involved: '*Ninety per cent of the boards come to me directly. Usually the chair of the board or the chair of the governance committee*' *(Chris).*

Non-executive directors' need to establish these connections in a manner almost disconnected from the organisations they govern could be related to the desire to not be seen as needing to use, or a need to be fully in the driver's seat. Alternatively, it may be that organisational functions like Human Resources are not considering the board in their planning of development activities. Boards could in this sense be a 'blind spot' for them.

The data indicates that the coaching is often contracted for in a rather indirect way. It is not explicitly planned from the beginning, but mostly evolves over time. It is usually a follow up of other work or the result of a growing relationship. When the engagement is with individual NEDs, the contracting for coaching becomes more specific as the relationship matures. When it concerns the board as a whole, the coaching is often performed to follow up board evaluation activities. Even when coaching is on the agenda, it may be the case that the coach is engaged for an issue that represents only a symptom of a deeper core challenge faced by the board, and to which the coach can only gain access over time. While we see this as well with the coaching of other client groups within organisations, it appears that with NEDs, the coach not only needs to look for the deeper challenge, but also needs to have significantly more patience to allow the willingness to address that challenge to emerge. We may therefore conclude that this type of coaching requires an unusual amount of flexibility and patience from coaches, not just in terms of what is contracted for, but also in terms of the skills or processes to be used, depending on how the agenda evolves:

> '*Usually the evaluation is the starting point. I mean not always, sometimes it's a recruitment issue that they need help with, with finding the right person. And then that starts the engagement. But other times it is the board effectiveness evaluation and then leading on to the development plan. So it tends to grow, and more often than not the reason why I'm engaged in the first place is not*

actually the reason for the future work, because we uncover things that need fixing that they didn't contact me about in the first place.' (Norman)

'Sometimes it's happening indirectly, for example, I'm busy with something else, but there's something – where they ask, what should we do now? How to make a good joint decision on this? I'm currently doing something whereby I notice that it is not explicitly agreed in that project, but I'm still guiding the entire board on that topic. Of course, the chairman takes the lead in this type of matter and that's what I am actually coaching her on at the moment.' (Casper)

'So often the team coaching happens as part of a development programme, but not specifically. They don't say, oh, we need a team coach. But what ends up being done is team coaching.' (Norman)

Especially for boards as a group, it seems that the rationale and motivation for coaching activities is often grounded in other activities that bring out the need for coaching. This could indicate either that it is difficult to make a case to boards for coaching as a stand-alone activity, or that they consider coaching in an integrated way, embedded in something else.

The evolving nature of the engagement is also reflected in the duration and frequency of the meetings that take place. Coaches explain that the agreements with their individual clients in particular are deliberately not for a long period or set up with a fixed number of sessions and regular intervals, but that they are more episodic in practice. As one coach explains: '*I work with non-executive board members, but the last two, three years it was occasional and from time to time without long-term contracts' (Bjorn).*

This loose approach to planning the coaching meetings could be related to the client's need to avoid naming or structuring the engagement as a coaching process. However, it could also be related to the fact that the work of boards is episodic, which implies that they only confronted with issues for which they need coaching, from time to time.

4.2.2 Intuitive approaches

The second cluster of findings related to the core category of 'Keeping an Open Mind' comprises data on approaches used for the coaching of NEDs. The processes and approaches that coaches use tend to be situational, pragmatic and somewhat intuitive. For example, in response to a question about whether there is any particular frame of reference that is used in the work, multiple coaches explain that it depends on the situation, and that they do not have any strong attachment to a common or specific body of knowledge for this type of coaching: '*No, I am not fussed about academic models. To me it depends, and at some point, best practices are best practices' (Chris)*.

Participants tend to use various sources and frames of reference in their work with boards. As one person explains:

> '*I'm very much influenced by Manfred Kets de Vries and his publications, but also my personal experience of working with boards, and I'm reading quite a lot of books, articles, HBR [Harvard Business Review] stuff, and then some other publications, or it could be LinkedIn and such.' (Carl)*

This intuitive stance also comes across in how participants explain the way that they work with boards in the coaching process:

> '*I listen to all the demands from the board members and the challenges, I write them all on the whiteboard – conflict resolutions, delegation, behaviour typology – and what I do is I just ask questions as questions arrive and I take them as they come. As questions arrive, I address it all to the frameworks that I've developed over the years.' (Boris)*

Another participant's statement resonates with this. She explains that while thorough analysis of the client and their needs is crucial, she tends to go into the work with an open mind: '*Of course I do my homework, but it's not a fixed picture in my mind, I am a person who likes to work in the here and now. Just let it come' (Carmen)*.

This 'open mind' approach allows the coach to address whatever comes up during the client engagements. It should be noted here that an open mind does not mean a blank mind; the coach is expected to have done the necessary preparation. This is also consistent with the fact that core challenges need time to surface. Coaches also clarify that going in with frameworks that are too strong would not work for a board context, as this could force board members in a certain direction rather than respecting the board's need to be in the driver's seat.

The preference of clients for loosely structured coaching is also reflected in the use of instruments. The data suggests that instruments do not play a hugely important role in the coaching. Nevertheless, NEDs are not completely against the use of instruments. The following section elaborates on how participants view the use of instruments during the coaching and the ways in which they are specifically applied.

4.2.3 The use of coaching instruments

The intuitive and pragmatic method of working is also reflected in how (coaching) instruments are used: *'I hardly use any instruments during coaching. Sometimes I do a 360 degree qualitative survey over the phone, but that's not often.' (Ciska)*

Coaches emphasise that it is important for the coach to observe what is happening in the moment and to use that as material for the learning process. In this context, coaches also point out that when engaging with boards, they mostly work with another consultant in the room, in order to have four eyes observing rather than two and acquire a better understanding of what is taking place. This is not an unfamiliar approach to the coaching of other client groups; for example, it is often used with top-level executives. However, participants gave the impression that because issues with NEDs are so hidden, one needs to be even more present in the moment:

> *'You have the real-life experience of the group dynamics and you can always, make this case in point which you cannot make when you work with an individual. I'm focussed on the individual but I'm only seeing the situations through the eyes of the individual, and if I do work with the board I'm not alone.' (Carl)*

Participants who mainly coach individual NEDs claim that they hardly use any instruments, tools or specific methodology during coaching. Those who coached boards as a group appear to be more likely to use certain instruments:

'In 95% of cases we have prior conversations with everyone, by telephone or face to face. So all non-executives, but also executives who are not in the evaluation, because we want their input as well, what they think about how things are going.' (Casper)

The most popular tool used by coaches with NEDs is the interview, while 360 degree feedback questionnaires seem to be the next most popular tool. Other tools that research participants prefer to use during coaching activities are observation, evaluation, and literature, as one of the coaches explains:

'I've seen questionnaires, they're more about kind of on the effectiveness of the board. Something about dynamics. So questionnaires yes, interviews yes. Observation, I think is not used as much as it could be.' (Ben)

Multiple participants also indicated that they have created their own instruments, as they found there were no instruments available for the coaching of NEDs:

'My process is to send out an assessment task, which is a 360 feedback. It's not very complicated. It's not senseless numbers of questions. It's maybe 17 questions that canvas the four quadrants: the internal pulse, the behaviour, the culture and the logistics. Then, I follow up with one-on-one interviews, and then after one-on-one interviews I will have collated all of the data.' (Boris)

4.2.4   Knowing when it has worked

A final group of data in the core category of 'Keeping an Open Mind' relates to how the effectiveness of coaching NEDs is evaluated. The first finding in this regard concerns how the majority of participants (both coaches and clients) reacted to my questions about this topic. While they appreciated the question, it appeared almost as though this topic was not an immediately obvious thing to reflect on, or even that it was a little simplistic. Most participants took some time to answer this question in a

concrete way before admitting that, ultimately, it is their own judgment of changed behaviour or processes that informs them about the effectiveness of the coaching. They also gave the impression that establishing the effectiveness of the coaching work is not an activity that clients or other parties tend to ask for, either when contracting or reviewing a development intervention. Considering the evolving nature of coaching engagements for this client group, as discussed above, this makes a certain amount of sense. Most coaches admitted that in order to assess the effectiveness of their work, they mostly look for signs of a change in dynamics within the board. As one participant explains: '*It's when you see the dynamic change and the bully gives way to the less assertive person and that people can actually start to make a good contribution*' (Norman). Another participant expresses a similarly pragmatic approach regarding observations about changes in the functioning of the board. She will have a series of structured questions in mind to assess whether her coaching has been effective, but these will not be posed in the form of an evaluation sheet or similarly formal instrument:

> '*Are they (now) a more or less integrated team? Is there increased confidence among themselves? Can you also talk about things you do not so well, individually or as a team? Can you have a functional conflict in the team?*' (Carmen)

Apart from noting changes in the dynamic, three of the research participants claimed to observe changes in the non-executive client's understanding or improvements in the quality of their work; for example, an increased effectiveness in the quality of the corporate governance system as a whole, or improvements in the quality of decision-making. A good example of this is the following statement:

> '*One sign is that this guy is looking more at the big picture. I mean that the corporate governance with this guy is getting stronger. That means this guy is making more of an effort to work with the management, with the owner as well.*' (Bjorn)

When asked what they do with these observations, several participants describe how they create a report themselves and present this to their clients. Particularly when the

context of their work is a board evaluation, these observations could quite naturally form part of the evaluation report they produce.

Some research participants go somewhat beyond their own judgment in assessing whether their coaching of non-executives has been effective. These participants use client feedback as a means of obtaining data that is less subjective, if still not quite objective:

> *'Mainly by asking the client: did you reach your goals? Do you see changes in your own behaviour? How did it go? I always ask to give a figure. I very often get 8.5 or 9, so that says something. But of course, that is only the perspective of the coachee, and usually I leave it at that. So that's not scientifically the most fool proof method of measuring the results.' (Celine)*

It appears that, overall, in accordance with the ambiguous nature of coaching as an activity for boards or NEDs, there is no strong tradition of establishing outcomes of the coaching process in this context. If this is included at all, it is handled in a subjective way, using the coach's own observations or by asking participants for their own judgments and experiences. When the work concerns board evaluation, a written report is created by the coach to consolidate the observed outcomes.

This second section of the findings has elaborated on the approaches and practices used or experienced by participants. What has emerged is that these approaches are intuitive, pragmatic and informal, which highlights the importance of 'Keeping an Open Mind' when coaching NEDs. The findings falling under this core category have been presented from four perspectives: the way that coaching is contracted for, the processes followed, the type of instruments that are used and the practices for assessing outcomes of the coaching.

Coaches emphasise that it is important for a coach to observe what is happening in the moment and to use these observations as material for the learning process. This could place significant demands on coaches and potentially complicate work with NEDs and boards. Coaches have frequently commented on the complexity of this type of coaching, leading to the core category 'A Tough Job'. The next section

therefore explains how this complexity is experienced, particularly because of the dynamics within boards, the characteristics boards have as a group and their propensity for conflict. The section also covers data that indicates what this complexity requires from coaches and what motivates them to do this work.

4.3 'A Tough Job'

The third core category that emerged from the analysis captures the phenomenon of participants attributing a high level of complexity to the coaching of NEDs; it is positioned as a significant and therefore special challenge, not a task to be taken lightly. Coaches frequently used the word 'tough' when describing issues or experiences, particularly as regards working with the board as a group:

> *'It's [boards are] a tough client. They are sophisticated, they are knowledgeable and have high expectations. Boards are probably the toughest client for any adviser and not many people can do it. It tends to be a very narrow group. And you need to be at the top of your game in order to do it. So they are very demanding and they can tell within five or ten minutes whether you're on top of the field or not.' (Chris)*

Having had experience myself with coaching and educating all sorts of tough leaders at the business school where I work, the data I obtained made me wonder what was so particularly unique about the complexity of coaching NEDs. Participants ascribed the uniqueness of this challenge to a number of factors: among others, these included the difficulty of the corporate governance issues boards are required to deal with, the subtleties of board dynamics, and the fact that because of their strong personalities, board members are not easy to coach. The following sections elaborate on these topics.

4.3.1 Complexity caused by board dynamics

Coaches explain that some of the complexity arises from the unusual characteristics and context of boards. For example, one key characteristic of boards is that, in contrast to executive leadership teams, there is not necessarily a collective identity. As one participant explains:

'A lot of boards don't really consider themselves to be teams, although they would really like to work together effectively and find it uncomfortable if there is conflict or bad behaviour in the boardroom.' (Norman)

Not having a team identity may indeed introduce additional complexity to (for example) building a collective agenda or taking responsibility for the quality and outcomes of team processes. It could also lead to individuals concentrating only on their personal risk and liability, which could result in 'just playing it safe' on the board. It is easy to imagine that, without collective accountability for the functioning of the board, coaching activities like feedback and reflective conversations could become difficult to implement.

Another dynamic that influences the complexity of coaching with this client group is caused by issues concerning how the role of NEDs should be interpreted in practice and what the boundaries are between tasks of the board and those of management. According to almost all participants, NEDs convey confusion about their role and therefore feel uneasy in it:

'That there is such a discussion, for example about who determines at some point how high the (performance) bar will be, if it works? Do we do that as a supervisory board or does the CEO do it? Which in turn raises the question, but what gives you the right to determine the bar? So then we had the question, from what perspective do you look at it, from what legitimation? You never get a totally black-and-white answer.' (Casper)

Related to the role of ambiguity is the tendency of some NEDs to compete with management, wanting to tell them exactly how to do their job. The following quote illustrates this clearly:

'Often you'll find people who are kind of experts in their field getting kind of too far into operational topics and not standing back enough. So, for example, the hospital board I was on, we had one of my colleagues [on the board), he'd been a global quality director for one of the very big international personal care organisations. And there was a big issue with quality in the hospital in terms of

we had a MRSA outbreak, which is a nasty bug. He kind of got almost too involved… he was kind of… here's what you need to do, almost being an executive rather than non-executive.' (Ben)

This raises questions for the coaches about what it is that board members are supposed to be doing, how they can assert when they have done their job correctly, and what they might need to improve in order to do a better job. The differences of opinion among NEDs regarding how and when to practice restraint and refrain from getting involved with management tasks, could introduce difficulties to the functioning of a board. This could therefore make the task of coaching them to higher levels of effectiveness more challenging. It appears that NEDs not only have questions about their role, but because of these questions, can also become quite unconfident in their behaviour. From this, one could infer that there may be a risk of coaching conversations becoming consumed by long discussions about task alignment rather than reflections on development, or that coaches may be confronted with groups that find it hard to make choices.

4.3.2 High propensity for conflict

Another concept that emerges in the context of the complexity associated with the coaching of boards is, according to participants, the volatility of the dynamics and the consequent high risk of conflict. These dynamics often occur because of issues related to interpersonal communication and collaboration. A quote from one participant explains why this is the case:

'It's more the soft skills that they are looking for [in the coaching]. Because even if the board members I work with are all extremely well-seasoned in their professional field, it is always on the technical side. They are not so savvy on the interpersonal group dynamics.' (Boris)

Thus, although NEDs are often very mature executive leaders who have successfully led executive teams, there seems to be something about the nature of boards that makes collaboration more difficult for them. Participants provided explanations for this that pointed in the direction of strong egos and struggles for dominance, as illustrated by the following statement:

'I think behaviour (as a topic) is quite commonplace. In a dysfunctional board, there's usually bullying behaviour, so there's quite a few people who need coaching. The sort of coaching questions that come up are about: How can I ask the right questions in an environment where there is almost hostility to me asking my own questions?' (Norman)

These clashes, moreover, do not occur only between board members; often, because of the monitoring role played by boards, conflict can also arise between NEDs and management:

'I just did a board review in another country, which resulted in the CEO getting fired. That is always a tough one to deal with. Luckily, I was able to do a follow-up session with them the next morning, to get them to regroup.' (Boris)

In accordance with the above-mentioned finding that the coaching agenda tends to evolve in these circumstances, the coaching of NEDs is also classified as a 'tough job' because of pitfalls related to what is presented as the 'coaching question':

'Because more often than not, the issue that's presented is not the issue and there are other fundamental underlying issues. And I think the problem that coaches can have is that they can rush in, think that they've got a solution, try and get the team to work to that solution. It all seems as if it's fixed and actually they haven't dealt with the issue at all.' (Norman)

While this issue can also come up in the coaching of executive leadership teams, and a coach needs to always look for the root cause, it would seem that the somewhat undefined yet high-stakes setting of the boardroom makes this problem more profound.

4.4   Special coaching capabilities

Building on the perception that there is significant complexity involved in the coaching of NEDs, participants (coaches and NEDs), emphasise how crucially important it is for a coach to bring special capabilities to the table. First, there is the need to possess

'relevant knowledge' in order to be accepted as a credible coach by NEDs or to truly have an impact from their perspective. Knowledge of corporate governance is particularly important here; not simply from a theoretical perspective, but also practical knowledge of what it is that boards do and how they function. As the following participant explains:

> *'I think it's really critical to have understanding of corporate governance and what that means in the different industry contexts. I think it's really critical because unless you understand the role of the executive, the role of the non-executive and the importance of corporate governance and risk management all of that stuff, it's very difficult to do a good job.' (Ben)*

Note that the definition of 'relevant knowledge' is not limited to understanding the work of NEDs, but also extends to the roles of top executives. It is about understanding the functioning of the entire system of governance, along with its multiple stakeholders; in addition to executives, the broader system could include investors, government authorities, employees and unions. This indicates that it is important for coaches to take a systemic view of the reality of NEDs.

Furthermore, according to participants, coaches require an understanding that extends beyond the formal aspects of how governance works. It is also important to be familiar with the behavioural dynamics of the actors involved in corporate governance, as well as the potential tensions that can arise between them. One participant describes it as follows:

> *'There is a lot happening in boards and not just between board members, but also with how certain CEOs are able to sort of split the board sometimes. So, it's quite interesting to understand dynamics.' (Ciska)*

As the data shows, the interests of executives and board members are not necessarily aligned. This could lead to an antagonistic relationship developing in which devious tactics are deployed. It appears important that coaches are aware of how this can play out and how to handle these dynamics.

In addition to relevant knowledge, another theme that comes up when exploring what both coaches and NEDs associate with effective coaches is the general topic of 'experience' as an important construct. One participant puts it simply: '*As with everything, you must have a mix. You should indeed have a mix of experience and enthusiasm*' *(Neil).* Notably, this does not only refer to mature life experience or business experience. In addition to the obvious mature emotional intelligence, it appears that a coach also needs to also display a good degree of modesty. The following quote illustrates this:

> *'You need to have good "bedside manners" about you as well. You can't talk down to directors, you can't be pedantic. You need to have good interpersonal skills, especially when you're delivering negative advice on how to improve on opportunities for development. You have to be really conscious of egos and you need to have good bedside manners.' (Chris)*

Having experience also relates to coaches demonstrating a strong character, as is illustrated by the following quote:

> *'You have to be somebody that they recognise as not a sissy, but as an experienced person who is able to call a spade a spade. Sometimes you have to say something that may come across to them as difficult to digest.' (Ciska)*

What is interesting about this point is that it not only indicates the requirement that coaches not be intimidated by their audience, but also highlights the importance of the coach being seen as equally tough. This implies that coaches should make an effort to demonstrate this toughness early on in order to gain credibility.

Within this concept of what is required from coaches, I also explored with participants the extent to which it is necessary for coaches to have had some board experience as a NED themselves. Interestingly, multiple research participants responded that board experience is not necessarily a prerequisite to becoming an effective coach of NEDs. The following comment is illustrative of this:

'No, I have never sat on boards. I have probably assessed hundreds of directors. I don't think it impaired me at all. Some coaches sit on boards, some choose not to. Actually, you can be trapped in a board. I mean, the average board position now is 300 to 400 hours a year. If you sit on one board you're limited. I can coach many boards and not be restricted.' (Chris)

Participants take this idea even further by arguing that not only is board experience not a requirement, it may actually hinder coaches from engaging with clients in a neutral manner. This is because the coach may bring in their own experience or the approaches they used as a board member, which may prevent them from fully concentrating on the client's unique situation.

4.4.1   A special privilege

Perhaps because of the complexity and challenges associated with this client group and the consequent demands on coaches, participants describe their work with NEDs as a special privilege: '*I find it exciting. It has impact in their work. I can make them more functional in their roles. In that sense it's a privilege, it's honourable work' (Carmen)*. The high stakes attached to the coaching of boards also translate into a deep sense of contribution when coaches feel they have achieved results. One participant describes what drives her in this work as follows:

'I like to get them more effective, so that the organisation continues to benefit. I'm their instrument. They are also often nice people, interesting people, who can think broadly. I learn a lot… I think that is a privilege... It's something that gives lots of value to me. To them, but also for yourself.' (Celine)

Making a positive difference in the world was frequently mentioned in the interviews, particularly because of the expected impact that boards have on large organisations:

'I am very happy to do it [coaching non-executives] because I'm very much driven by sustainability and how to leave a better world. I think in the business world, there's so much to gain helping organisations to be more ethical, helping them to really look at their existence, their added value… you can really make a contribution.' (Boris)

As much as I can empathise with this sense of privilege, it is also possible to call this idea into question. This perspective assumes that boards do in fact have a huge impact on the functioning of organisations; however, this depends on what role a board plays within the entire governance system of a company. As the literature tells us (Charan, Carey & Useem, 2014; Nadler, 2004) some boards are strong contributors to the success of a company, while others have a more ceremonial role with little impact. Moreover, this brings up the earlier question of how coaches and NEDs would even know in an objective way that their coaching has worked. This notion of privilege could also be related to an aura of exclusivity, something that is only for the selected few. This would indicate elements of counter-transference between coaches and NEDs around the belief that what happens at this level is very special and should be treated as such.

4.5 Summary

This chapter has identified three core categories resulting from the analysis of data on the meaning and experience of coaching in relation to the learning and development of NEDs, from the perspectives of coaches, clients and other relevant stakeholders. The first of these, 'Not Coaching', refers to the data from both coaches and NEDs, which presents a paradoxical view of coaching: it would appear that, in the world of boards, coaching both exists and does not exist. Coaches admit that they are coaching boards and individual NEDs, yet it is important that the label of 'coaching' not be applied to this activity. The participants explain that it is not the credibility of coaching that is at issue for NEDs, but rather its association with still having more to learn. A more acceptable way to position coaching or development activities for NEDs is to use the label of 'board evaluation', particularly when the activities concern the board as a group. At an individual level, it is important for coaching to be labelled with different names, such as 'sound boarding' or 'working through some issues'.

The second core category, 'Open Mind', refers to experiences and perspectives on how the coaching of this client group takes place. What emerges from the data is that these processes can be characterised as intuitive and pragmatic. This is apparent in multiple aspects: the ways that clients and coaches find each other, how they contract

for coaching, the fact that the coaching agenda has an evolving nature and the ways in which coaching is evaluated. It can be determined that it is particularly important for clients that processes not be too structured and that coaches be ready to intuitively respond to whatever comes up as the engagement evolves.

The third and final core category, 'A Tough Job', covers data from participants indicating that the coaching of boards involves dealing with an extremely high level of complexity and challenge. Among other things, this is caused by the fact that boards do not necessarily have a team identity or take responsibility for the quality and outcomes of team processes. In addition, the fact that boards struggle with clarity when it comes to their tasks and relationship with management could make it difficult to identify reference points or goalposts in a coaching context. Furthermore, the conflict-heavy dynamics of board communication and collaboration discussed by participants suggests that it is not easy to engage boards in an open and reflective conversation. It is therefore deemed important for coaches to understand both the formal dynamics and the influencing tactics of stakeholders behind the scenes. Coaches are also expected to have special capabilities related to emotional maturity, knowledge of corporate governance and a strong personality in order to generate credibility with NEDs. These findings also reveal that, due to the existence of a transferential mechanism between coaches and NEDs, both groups develop similar mindsets about the uniqueness, complexity and privilege of operating at this level.

5 Discussion

The main findings of this study, as laid out in the previous chapter, form essential building blocks to support the emergence of a theory around the coaching of NEDs. In order to allow this theory to further take shape, the following chapter analyses and interprets these findings in the context of the literature. The goal is not simply to relate the findings to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, but also to consider the findings from various perspectives, particularly in relation to the critical realist assumptions underpinning the objective of the present study, which assumes that NEDs and their coaches provide meaning to coaching in a specific and consistent way. It is further assumed that there is an explanation for why this is the case and that this strongly influences how NEDs engage with coaching. In doing so, I aim to explain what wider factors and underlying mechanisms could give rise to the core categories identified in the findings, as well as to inform the development of theory on the working ingredients of coaching for NEDs. This approach is in line with my critical realist paradigm, which holds that all phenomena can be explained in part by, but not reduced to, their underlying generative mechanisms (Oliver, 2012; Bhaskar, 1978). The chapter does not intend to cover all the findings generated in this study, but instead discusses the most significant ones, which in my view provide fundamental cornerstones for theorising. Five main sections will be covered:

- Ambivalence as a recurring characteristic
- The incompatibility of coaching as a construct;
- Why the working alliance plays an important role;
- Why is it such a "tough job";
- A non-executive director coaching framework

5.1 Ambivalence as a recurring characteristic

In summarising the findings, we may conclude that coaching appears to be treated with ambivalence in the world of NEDs. Participants present the paradoxical view that coaching simultaneously does and does not exist for these clients. Each NED interviewed acknowledged the value of coaching or working with a coach. However,

they rarely spoke about coaching as something they would use themselves to improve their individual effectiveness. For their part, while coaches confirm that NEDs make use of coaching-like activities, they also acknowledge that this activity is framed in a different way: it is not supposed to be referred to as 'coaching'. One strong example is that when a coach works with the board as a whole, the activity is typically framed as 'board evaluation'. In line with the diverse names used for the activity, the coaches also explain that their work with NEDs tends to be situational, pragmatic and somewhat intuitive. Most importantly, it seems that in the coaching of both boards and of individual NEDs, the coach initially acts as a sounding board or facilitator to help the client work through task-related issues. The scope of the coaching trajectory is usually not firmly set at the beginning but instead takes shape over time ('*It evolves*'). This pragmatic approach is also reflected in the use of coaching instruments and the relationship itself; rather than emphasising processes or the use of instruments in the coaching of NEDs, it is in fact the working alliance between coach and client that becomes the most important instrument.

While the ambivalence around the coaching of NEDs is clear and permeates various aspects of the process, it is less clear where this ambivalence comes from. Therefore, in order to understand what generates this particular approach to coaching, the following section explores the core theme of 'The Aura Thing', relating it to aspects of status, self-esteem and its potential impact on the coaching process.

5.2   The incompatibility of coaching as a construct

One of the crucial findings from this study is the reluctance of non-executives to be associated with coaching and learning. As this differs remarkably from how coaching is often perceived by executives, there is value in exploring why this is the case. The first dimension to explore is that of how coaching is perceived by NEDs. One coach in the present study provides an explanation that contains some clues in this respect: '*Admitting that you need coaching is still not done. It is seen as a sign of not being fit for the job*' *(Cecil)*. Coaching is somehow associated with 'not being ready'. As a board role represents the highest level of authority in the leadership cadre of organisations, the individual who holds such a role also perceived to have reached the most advanced level of competence in both business and leadership. Having reached this level of mastery provides them with the credibility or licence to oversee

top management. Combining that status with further learning, and particularly using coaching for that purpose, appears to be less appropriate. Of course, this belief does not do justice to the many purposes that coaching in organisations serves; however, it appears to be deep-seated among NEDs.

This finding accords with the observations of multiple authors in the domain of corporate governance that NEDs assume their general management career to have fully prepared them for a NED role (Guerrero & Seguin, 2012; Renneboog & Zhao, 2011), as a result of which they do not require any further development. The present research extends this point by highlighting that the situation is more nuanced than it seems. First of all, the study reveals that NEDs and boards do have coaching needs and are using coaches; this implies that they have moved on from the belief that they have learnt everything they need to know in their management career. Second, everything is perceived as normal, provided that the activity is referred to as something other than coaching. This informs us that there is something wrong with the construct of coaching, at least for these recipients. It appears that, for those at the absolute highest level of status in business, coaching is too deeply associated with not being 'a full master'; again, not as an activity but as a construct. In order to gain deeper understanding of where this perception of coaching could originate from it is useful to revisit current definitions of coaching and identify the main characteristics they present.

5.2.1   Current definitions of executive coaching and related assumptions

Within the field of executive coaching, an often-cited definition is provided by Kilburg (2000 p.65-67) *'Executive coaching is a helping relationship formed between a client wo has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and, consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client's organisation within a formally defined coaching agreement'*

While this definition appears to provide a general understanding of executive coaching, several authors (Passmore, 2015; Ennis et al. 2008) explain that it is

possible to identify many different types of executive coaching, which serve different categories of needs. As a result, it is difficult to state that there is one uniform definition of what executive coaching is or what it provides. Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2015) identify at least nine other explanations of what executive coaching is in literature. These differ in the aspired goals, type of client, learning process and the characteristics of the coaching practice. What stands out in these definitions of executive coaching is:

- The primary client is not just the individual but there is some form of a three-way partnership involving the organisation which the individual is a member of (Michelman, 2004).

- The client has managerial or leadership responsibilities, therefore the coaching is aimed at either improving the effectiveness of the client in delivering these or at preparing the client for greater or other responsibilities. (Ennis et al., 2008).

- Clear goals are formulated at the start of the coaching process, which to some extent could also be assessed at the end of the coaching. (Neil, 2007.)

- The coaching is not just seen as a problem-solving process but aims to provide sustainable long-term leadership growth to the client. (Stokes and Jolly, 2009).

- Executive coaching is focused on both intra-personal and inter-personal development challenges (Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2007).

The underlying paradigm and agreement in these definitions is that executive coaching is explained as a specific type of professional intervention in which one person (the coach) helps a leader (the coachee) to reach a higher level of effectiveness. It is also quite an accepted principle that the employing organisation pays for the coaching or is involved in the contracting (Korotov, 2017 p.143). In further positioning executive coaching, scholars highlight that executive coaching has gained strong acceptance among firms and leaders as a valuable element in leadership programmes (Passmore, 2015; De Rue and Myers, 2014), particularly because of the psychological safety it offers and the possibility to focus on specific developments in the life and work of the coachee. Nevertheless, executive coaching is still not an undisputed instrument. Millard and Korotov (2014) suggest that executive coaching continues to have a mental health stigma in the eyes of coachees, because it is seen

as a form of psychological help. The findings of the present study indicate that it is particularly this stigma, combined with the leadership developmental aura of executive coaching that forms an obstacle for coaching to be embraced by NEDs. Executive coaching, as a term, is perceived as too strongly connected to learning. Furthermore, the assumption in current definitions is that executive coaching also deals with the intra-personal aspects, is also not welcomed by NEDs as they (at least initially) prefer a task orientation in their sessions. According to the findings, NEDs tend to predominantly either use a coach as a sounding board to talk things through or for board evaluation. This does not entirely match with the goal-focused dimension which many definitions of executive coaching prioritise. It appears that the aspects of executive coaching, which contribute to it's credibility as a professional development instrument for executives, seem to resonate with NEDs in a similar way. The dissonance is not simply a matter of perception, it also related to the fundamentally different responsibilities which NEDs have and their different relationship with organisations. NEDs are not necessarily part of the (multiple) organisations which they govern, therefore it is not obvious how to involve the organisation in the financing, set up or the processes of their coaching. In summary, although the field of coaching available to NEDs is still emergent, the findings of the present research suggest that the current assumptions about coaching provided to executive leaders are not aligned with the reality and needs of NEDs. It is therefore not entirely surprising that they are reluctant to embrace it as a matching construct for their roles. While there is a need for coaching-like services in this client group, it is clear that the definition of these services should be different in order to reflect the realities and expectations of NEDs.

Constructs related to supervision may resonate better with these types of clients and their coaching needs. In supervision (Sheppard, 2016; Drake, 2014; Bachkirova, 2008), the engagement between coach (supervisor) and client is not established on the assumption that the client still has a lot of learning to do in order to become a master at their profession; in fact, the opposite is true. Although the goal of engaging in coaching implies gaining deeper insight, and with that profound learning and improved performance, conversations are more focused on the sharing of expertise and an interpretative evaluation of practice. While it could be seen as a form of coaching, supervision is an accepted activity for accomplished coaches to be associated with. It does not question their expertise nor necessarily impair their self-

regard. There are, however, limitations to using the construct of supervision for coaching in the context of NEDs, as their work does not involve coaching but rather corporate governance, which introduces a broad range of responsibilities and tasks that often have to be executed in collaboration with others on a board. Still, some of the assumptions related to the nature of supervision and the types of conversations it entails may also be of relevance for the coaching of NEDs.

5.2.2 The significant role of status

The finding of 'The Aura Thing' indicates that status plays an important role in how coaching is perceived and used by NEDs. Participants explain that board members have a certain high-status aura, which coaches need to take into account when working with them. This piqued my curiosity and prompted me to look deeper into the topic of status and how it could be influencing the realities of NEDs.

Various scholars argue that, in organisational reality, status is in fact a very important topic (Mitchell et al., 2020; Zitek & Taylor Philips, 2020). Status is seen as an inherently social phenomenon that manifests in relations between people (Van Kleef & Cheng, 2020), and it is desired because of the various social benefits it provides to individuals; these include autonomy, wellbeing, self-esteem, social acceptance, and access to resources. This is particularly true for high-status roles such as board members. A board role is highly desirable due to the significant social capital it confers (Guerrero, LaPalme & Seguin, 2015; Westphal & Stern, 2007). By joining a board, an individual often gains access to top-level networks, receives an attractive income and instantly achieves a high status in business communities. It is also very likely that positive dynamics related to the 'halo effect' (Thorndike,1920) will occur, either in the way others perceive board members or how they see themselves. Simply because of their status, a board member becomes a person that others listen to and consider an authority.

At the same time, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the role of the NED does not in fact come with significant formal authority (Nadler et al., 2005). Therefore, the authority of NEDs depends on their status in the eyes of others. It is very important for NEDs to ensure that the positive status perceptions of their environment remain intact. In this context, Hasty and Maner (2020) make the interesting suggestion that high-status

individuals must constantly be alert for signs of social disapproval or actions that might erode their status. We can therefore conclude that it is quite natural for NEDs to be cautious about whether coaching adds to or reduces their status.

Participants in the present research explain that the importance of status also has to do with the types of personalities that occupy board roles and the principles to which they hold each other: *'You know the board members often are alpha males and alpha females. And it can be seen by other alpha males as a sign of weakness to work with a coach' (Carl)*. This reinforces the findings of previous research (Pick, 2007), which has shown how status influences perceptions of others both outside of and within boards. Drawing on observations of ten board meetings and interviews with NEDs from five boards, the author identifies factors that influence the extent to which individual NEDs feel confident in their role. It appears that NEDs are very much aware of each other's status, experience, and reputations outside of the board. While NEDs have equal responsibilities on the board in principle, this awareness influences the authority and 'airtime' each person is deemed to deserve: those with a lower status will be more inclined to only speak when invited to do so on their (former) area of expertise, while others contribute more assertively on all topics, and in so doing confirm their high-power status on the board. The legitimacy of NEDs to speak and influence decisions is therefore not granted by their role. The stronger the perceived status of a board member, the more influence they have over the board.

These are, apparently, the rules of the game. Any information that exposes a board member as still being a learner could further reduce the airtime granted to that individual. Publicly discussing or sharing information about receiving coaching would therefore be contraindicated. The author also clarifies that this dynamic can only be changed by the chairperson, as this person has the highest status on the board. The chairperson essentially grants individuals permission to change the traditional rules of the game by running meetings differently or by assigning influential board tasks to board members on the basis of criteria other than assumed status. This also indicates that the chairperson could be critical in changing perceptions around coaching, provided that he or she has a positive regard for coaching.

The findings about the importance of status in the present study resonate very strongly with a study by Brundin and Norquist (2008). Their research focuses not on perceived reputation, but rather on how tough the individual is seen to be from an emotional perspective. Their findings show that a display of negative emotions in boardroom communication may alter the power and status relations among board members. In their study, a CEO who is also a board member engages in a series of interactions with the non-executive board in a with highly negative, emotional manner, expecting service (help) from the board. Instead, however, he later finds out that his negative emotions, particularly in combination with his display of lower emotional energy, prompt the other board members to emphasise their control role over him. What the individual failed to do was to use emotions as power and status energisers, which in the board's opinion would be more in accordance with his role as a board member. The study suggests that there is somehow an expectation for board members to appear tough and not to show any emotional weakness. It is highly likely that, in such boards, the idea of coaching is considered something for those who are 'not tough enough'; thus, opting to engage in coaching would reduce an individual's credibility.

In summary, this exploration of the core category, which participants referred to as 'The Aura Thing', has facilitated further understanding of how and why status plays such an important role in NEDs' perceptions of coaching. Status motivates many NEDs to take up their roles, it provides them with credibility and opens up access to considerable resources. However, it also appears to be an obstacle to fully embracing the construct of coaching. I have related this finding to other research and shown how status dynamics could influence the mindsets and behaviours of NEDs in various ways. Furthermore, I raise an issue for the coaching discipline, specifically the need to explore whether the construct of coaching needs to be evolved to match the realities of high-status audiences such as NEDs. Acknowledging status as an inherent factor in the realities of NEDs opens up the possibility of taking it more seriously. While it would be desirable to reduce the influence of status on their coaching, the present study shows that we must acknowledge status as part of their reality. If not handled correctly, i.e. with the right constructs and with the support of the chairperson, the use of coaching could potentially backfire on any NED.

The next section of this discussion chapter elaborates on the working alliance between coaches and NEDs. In particular, it examines how relationships are established, what role the alliance plays and how coaching typology and transferential dynamics can help us to make sense of this type of relationship.

5.3   Why the working alliance plays an important role?

Participants note that their work with NEDs tends to be situational, pragmatic and somewhat intuitive. They explain that instead of using a range of instruments, the working alliance between coach and NED(s) itself becomes the main instrument. Further exploring the drivers and dimensions of this type of relationship can contribute to a greater understanding of what characterises the coaching of NEDs.

The findings reveal that the coaching relationship with NEDs differs from executive coaching relationships. While the general intention of executive coaching is to help executives maximise their performance and achieve their business goals, the coaching of NEDs appears to focus on other things. This coaching has been characterised by participants as issue-focused. As they explain, these issues often centre around individual interactions within boards and with other stakeholders. As one participant asks, '*How do I make the best use of myself? How do I not fall into traps?' (Carmen).* Coaching non-executive directors on such themes requires a relationship characterised by a high level of trust with regard to confidentiality; moreover, the coach needs to understand the reality in which non-executive directors exist. Based on this, the coach can become a sounding board for the non-executive director, and both can interact with each other almost as equals: *'So there is a teaching, learning element but there is also sort of balance of power... the non-executive director doesn't treat you as a transactional element that one can just buy' (Casper).* While, in general, the initial coaching sessions can be characterised as issue-focused, there is clearly some form of bonding occurring between coach and client, which creates the conditions for the working alliance to become the main instrument in the coaching. This requires the coach to generate trust with the client and to identify with their status, role and challenges. These findings relate to the research of Wasylyshyn (2017) and the concept of TLA (Trusted Leadership Advisor) that she suggests as a result of her findings. In particular, the importance of a higher level of intimacy between client and coach is mirrored in the present study. Moreover,

the idea of the coach developing a strong identification with the reality of the client concurs with the present findings.

The findings on the working alliance also relate to the research of Huggler (2012), who offered an explanation for why this working alliance is so important. This finding is based on a study of six CEOs who voluntarily sought a therapeutic intervention to enhance their job performance. Her study suggests that alliance-building is particularly necessary in the first phase of the relationship to overcome a trust threshold. Engaging the leader early on rapidly creates the space to address feelings of aloneness, humiliation at having to ask for help, and defensive intellectualisation of the therapy. This relates to the concept of the coach functioning as a 'container' for the client's emotions (Bion,1970). Also linked to this is the idea of the coach creating a therapeutic 'holding environment' for the client (Winnicott, 1955). While, for Huggler, the alliance serves to address deeper emotions early on, participants in the present study explain that the coaching relationship with NEDs tends to develop in a different way and for a different purpose. Specifically, the working alliance is established more on the basis of 'being on the same wavelength'. Because the initial main goal is to be a sparring partner or sounding board for specific issues encountered by the NED, the quality of the working alliance depends at first on the compatibility of styles and the extent to which the client feels understood. Coaches explain that as this relationship naturally evolves, more space is opened up to address emotional issues. This is the case with both individual NEDs and with boards as a group. Participants explain that the coach needs to have more patience and adopt an indirect approach to allow the readiness for other types of conversations to emerge. It is very likely that the ongoing growth of the relationship also allows the coach to find the language and approach that will work with a particular individual.

5.3.1 Why is the working alliance the main instrument?

The finding that the working alliance plays an important role in coaching is not a new concept in the coaching field; several authors have researched the dynamics of the coaching relationship (de Haan & Gannon, 2017; Lehmann-Willenbrock & Kauffeld, 2015; de Haan et al., 2010). However, few studies have pointed to the working alliance as the main instrument of the coaching engagement, the fact that this seems

to be related to the coach acting predominantly as a sounding board, or NEDs' preference for an intuitive, pragmatic approach.

There are two studies that exhibit some similarities with the present findings, although they focus on different client groups and have different emphases. The first, from Baron and Morin (2009), studied 30 internal coach/client pairs involved in a leadership development program at a manufacturing company. Their study highlights the importance of taking the time to establish a true working relationship between coach and coachee. However, the authors do not comment on the working alliance being the main ingredient of the coaching. Moreover, the context and client group differ significantly in comparison to NEDs. A second study by de Haan et al. (2013) found evidence for the key importance of the quality of the working relationship (the 'working alliance') as perceived by the client for the outcomes of the coaching. The project examined the relative impact and importance of various factors, common to all coaching approaches, for pairs made up of 156 executive coaching clients and 34 experienced coaches. The most interesting suggestion offered by these authors is that the specific skills, actions, or personalities of individuals in these relationships may be less important to the outcomes than what these individuals create 'in between' themselves; that is, the strength of their working alliance. While this resonates strongly with the present study, it is not in complete accordance with it, as participants have emphasised that successfully establishing a working alliance with NEDs requires coaches not only to identify with the realities and issues of these clients, but also to match the personal maturity level of NEDs.

5.3.2 *Classifying this type of coaching relationship*

While the previous section clarifies that the working alliance becomes the main ingredient in the coaching of NEDs, the next section examines how this type of coaching relationship can be classified and the potential further implications of this finding.

Myers and Bachkirova (2018) present a conceptual framework that could be useful for contextualising this type of relationship within the coaching discipline. The model they describe represents four types of coaching, each of which involves a different way of engaging and working with clients. The one that resonates most with the

present findings is the type of coaching that combines client-led and dialogic coaching. What is notable here is that the process used is not visibly directed by the coach, while the use of conventional techniques is limited or unnoticeable. Participants in the present study indicate that this is similar to the way their coaching sessions usually flow. Client-led coaching focusses on creating reflective space rather than following a structured development path. The relationship is characterised by trust, intimacy and collaboration, with the coach not expending significant effort to introduce activities in order to find solutions for the client. However, the coach is still involved in the process, encouraging deeper exploration of topics and providing his or her perspective. This type of coaching also resonates with West and Milan (2001, p. 8), who describe how the coaching relationship should create the right conditions for reflective learning by establishing a 'psychological space'. This is a space that allows the client to gain perspective on his or her experiences and leadership tasks within the organisation. These explanations resonate strongly with how coaches have described their work with NEDs, even if this coaching tends to be initially more focused on resolving specific issues than deeper sense-making.

Furthermore, as is highlighted in the findings chapter, coaches clarify that they still spend a considerable amount of time preparing their sessions with boards and individual NEDs: '*Of course I do my homework, but it's not a fixed picture in my mind, I am a person who likes to work in the here and now. Just let it come' (Carmen).* It is perhaps because of this preparation that they are able to go in with an open mind and respond to whatever comes up in the moment. Thus, while coaching with NEDs is portrayed as situational, intuitive and pragmatic, this does not indicate a lack of preparation. In fact, it may well be the opposite: in order to be highly flexible and intuitive during the coaching sessions, a coach needs to be more prepared than in other types of coaching relationships.

The term 'client-led' may evoke an image of the client acting as the main driver of the coaching. However, in the context of the present study, 'client-led' indicates a collaborative relationship between NED and coach. As mentioned earlier, it is important that both parties treat each other almost as equals. Participants point out that it is particularly important for the coach to also take on the role of critical challenger when issues arise that are related to interpreting the tasks of boards and

their responsibility towards management. This is an area that appears to frequently cause confusion and tension: '*He kind of got very, almost too involved he was kind of: "here's what you need to do", almost being an executive rather than non-executive*' *(Ben).* According to participants, the likelihood of a coach and NED establishing a collaborative relationship of respect and equal power is not only a matter of the coach's expertise and understanding of governance, but is also dependent on the extent to which the coach and client are at the same level of personal maturity in the relationship: *'You have to be somebody that they recognise as not a sissy but as an experienced person who is able to call a spade a spade' (Ciska).* As leaders often pursue board roles in a later stage of their life, participants point out that coaches need to bring similar levels of depth and life experience to the table in order to be credible as a 'sparring partner' for NEDs. This creates high expectations for the coaching discipline in terms of the quality of education and further development offered to those who aspire to develop the capability to coach NEDs.

The working alliance is just one of the aspects that, according to participants, makes the coaching of NEDs such a demanding endeavour. Complexity stands out as a key feature of this type of coaching for many reasons. The next sections explore why this might be the case and how this contributes to a better understanding of coaching for this clientele.

5.4   Why is it such 'A Tough Job'?

Coaches express that they experience working with boards as 'A Tough Job' in comparison to working with other client groups. This phrase has multiple meanings for them: it refers to the characteristics of boards, the complexity of the coaching themes, and transferential dynamics that may arise. All of this requires coaches to be at the top of their game. The following section further explores what may be causing this complexity and what implications it has for the coaching of NEDs.

According to one participant, the 'tough job' characteristic is related to the intellectual calibre of boards and their high standards: *'It's a tough client. They are sophisticated, they are knowledgeable and have high expectations. Boards are probably the toughest client for any adviser and not many people can do it' (Chris).* As NEDs often have C-suite experience or have run their own company, they can be expected to be

very seasoned and quick to spot inconsistencies. Additionally, as suggested by Shekshnia (2016), board roles tend to attract individuals with strong and dominant personalities. Boardrooms can therefore be 'high-alpha' arenas in which one needs to be on guard, making coaching quite challenging.

In addition to the characteristics of board members, the complexity of the themes involved is another reason why the coaching of boards and NEDs is such a demanding endeavour. While boards do present some similar challenges to executive teams, they also present additional and unique complexity (Charas, 2014, 2013; Korn Ferry, 2013; Leblanc & Pick, 2011; Petrovic, 2008). Participants in the present research also discuss why these challenges are so unique. For example, they highlight the tricky dynamics that may arise in the relationship between board and CEO: *'There is a lot happening in boards and not just between board members, but also with how certain CEOs are able to sort of split the board sometimes' (Ciska)*. Participants conveyed that, when working with a board, it is important to have a solid understanding of corporate governance and to realise that the reality of corporate governance is systemic in nature. Issues often have systemic root causes that may initially be unclear when the issue is first presented. The systemic nature of these issues implies that they cannot really be solved in isolation or by working with a single stakeholder; coaching interventions in one part of the system will influence other parts of it, or the effect of an intervention may be reduced by the lack of changes in the wider system. It is therefore not useful to view issues in isolation or to work only on a small part of the system. In one representative example, a participant spoke about a board's struggle to determine how high the (performance) bar should be for the company: *'Do we do that as a supervisory board or does the CEO do it? Which in turn raises the question, but what gives you the right to determine the bar?' (Casper)*. This systemic complexity implies that the working alliance that a coach needs to establish is not only limited to the board. CEOs and other C-suite leaders, whether or not they are members of the non-executive board, also play an important role in the effectiveness of the governance system. There may additionally be other stakeholders that play an active role in the system, such as investors, owners or family members. In some countries, such as Germany, boards will also include representatives of the workers council or unions.

5.4.1 Engaging in a systemic way

The explanation of a 'tough job' in this study adds to existing research on systemic coaching (Drake & Pritchard, 2017; Hamlin et al., 2013). A systemic approach in coaching is often interpreted as soliciting feedback from stakeholders, involving stakeholders in the contracting for coaching, or the need to integrate coaching with multiple activities aimed at organisational development. However, I would argue on the basis of the findings that a systemic coaching approach for boards means something else. In this setting, a systemic approach requires actively working with the wider governance system in a firm, making them part of the intervention in order to have a real impact on raising the quality of governance. This includes working with multiple stakeholders both within and outside the organisation. This finding may have significant implications for how coaches and boards engage with each other on more deep-seated issues. It suggests that improving the performance of boards through coaching requires readiness on the part of both the coach and the board to define the issues as complex and systemic and to work with the whole system from the beginning. As the reality of corporate governance is not necessarily a safe place, this raises the question of whether coaches and boards are willing to accept increased levels of risk in order to gain better performance of the governance system.

In this context, the word 'tough' also refers to the energy required from coaches to engage with this wider system. Participants make particular mention of how their coaching activities will sometimes consume them completely on an emotional level; this is especially true when working with the board as a group in an advanced stage of the relationship, when the agenda evolves to address deeper issues related to tensions or limitations in the governance system. One participant gave the example of a family company in which the work became very intense, as the assignment required dealing with the non-executive board as a collective and their stakeholders while also being mindful of the broader emotional dynamics within the family.

Due to the systemic reality of corporate governance, participants suggest not taking on these assignments alone and instead engaging at least one partner. This implies that establishing a working alliance when engaging with boards at a systemic level is not necessarily an individual endeavour. Coaches need to be capable of establishing

the working alliance together with their colleagues; this is likely to also create interesting dynamics between the coaches.

5.4.2 Transferential dynamics in the working alliance

Another aspect of the data informing the 'tough job' is that, particularly when coaches are working on deeper-seated issues, participants explain that they are also quite "at stake". This refers not only to the fact that the coach needs to be fully committed and should have the willingness to handle potential risky situations, but also to the implication that coaches will be exposed to transferential dynamics. These can arise both when coaching individual NEDs and when working with the board and other stakeholders. A coach who enters the governance system becomes part of it to a certain extent. Stakeholders will project their hopes, expectations or interpretation of stereotypical roles onto the coach, who needs to deal with this in such a way that it does not become an obstacle to the coaching process: '*That's how far it goes. He felt his mother never saw him, so apparently, I was her in this role' (Carmen).* There are clearly forms of projective identification taking place, where a client's unacknowledged or unwanted feelings are transmitted to a coach (Kets de Vries, 2009).

According to the literature, coaches working with boards can potentially become entangled in three 'basic assumptions': dependency, fight/flight and pairing (Brisset, Sher & Smith, 2020, p. 19). Dependency is a dynamic in which extremely high expectations are projected onto an individual (for example, a coach) who is expected to solve all of a group's problems; when the individual does not fulfil these expectations, the group reacts with disappointment and hostility. The second basic assumption, fight/flight, could result in the board viewing others as enemies and expecting a coach to stand with them or against them. The 'flight' element in this basic assumption could also lead to a board being unwilling to address a difficult issue and instead finding less important areas to fully concentrate on. It is likely that a coach who points this out risks being seen as the bringer of undesirable news. The third basic assumption, pairing, implies that the majority of a board will step back to eagerly follow the lead of two paired members; for example, these could be the chairperson and the CEO. The pair typically paints a picture of rosy future possibilities, and accordingly ignores the difficulties in the current reality. Coaches working with boards

must first be mindful of how these types of basic assumptions can play out in boards; second, they must acknowledge that as a result of these, the coach may be invited to go along with them, or risk being cast out if they are challenged. In this context, Domine (2020, p. 31) cautions that individual board members are generally unaware of how these 'mental phenomena' are impacting the group's work. The present study adds to the literature by suggesting that dynamics such as dependency or pairing are more likely to occur when the relationship evolves and deeper issues are addressed. In relation to this, participants explain that coaches can initially expect to be exposed to the flight dynamic among boards, as a result of which boards may avoid addressing difficult issues by concentrating on less important areas.

Kets de Vries (2009) suggests that transference and counter-transference are very likely to occur in coaching relationships with clients at the top of organisations but also notes that these dynamics may also provide valuable information to coaches if they are willing and able to use themselves as instruments to unpack what the client is transmitting to them. He describes several cases from his practice in which the coaching of CEOs triggered complex transferential dynamics. The author argues that coaches need to pay attention to the symbolic role they play in the fantasies of their clients; they are not neutral bystanders, and they will be exposed to seductive resonances (2009, p. 6). Participants in the present study have directly and indirectly offered examples of how this occurs in the coaching of NEDs: *'Are you talking to the man who is sitting across from you, or the man you have in your mind?' (Celine)*. The present study adds to the understanding of transferential dynamics in the context of boards by indicating that participants, in my view, also indirectly reveal seductive resonances in the coaching relationship. This becomes particularly evident when examining the tendency of NEDs and coaches in this study to position the coaching as exceptionally difficult. While various forms of complexity do arise in this context, one could also question why complexity is highlighted so frequently by participants. Could it be that coaches and clients are colluding in a transferential dynamic aimed at reinforcing the status of the client and the unique nature of their work? As status plays an important role in the functioning of NEDs, it is very likely that such collusion is to a certain extent necessary for coaches to establish a strong sense of rapport with this client group. Still, the question remains as to how conscious coaches and clients are of this dynamic and what it enables or obstructs.

As transferential dynamics are generally considered to be largely unconscious, participants in the present study suggested using a partner in each assignment who can help them to reflect on what is taking place. They also suggest creating safe methods and moments in the process to explore with clients what potential dynamics might be emerging and what these could mean. It is likely that structured supervision could also be highly useful for coaches to improve their awareness of these dynamics. De Haan (2011) reminds us that transferential dynamics should not necessarily be avoided or ignored. In his view, they offer rich learning material and can be highly useful in bringing hidden traces of previous relationships to the surface or pointing to what is happening in the coaching relationship.

To summarise, due to the importance participants attach to the working alliance as an alternative to using a range of coaching instruments or methodologies, I have explored the mechanisms that play a role in shaping this relationship throughout this section. One of the key insights emerging as a result is that, although the coaching tends to be initially issue-focused and has a 'sounding board'-type character, it is very important that a strong bond is formed between client and coach. The rationale for this goes beyond the credibility of the coach. In order to create rapport with NEDs, it seems that coaches need to resonate and to a certain extent identify with the personalities, status and challenges of their clients.

The situational, pragmatic and somewhat intuitive nature of the coaching relationship can be related to the coaching typologies offered by the literature. There is a particularly strong match with 'client-led' and 'dialogic' coaching; here, the coach is not preoccupied with introducing development activities in order to find solutions for the client, but instead is primarily tasked with creating a psychological space for the client. The coaching agenda evolves further as this psychological space becomes stronger, in the sense that more difficult or deeper topics can be addressed.

The working alliance with NEDs is portrayed as a 'tough job' by participants owing to the ambivalence and complexity involved. There are a range of suggested reasons for this. First, the strong, dominant and demanding personalities of NEDs can make them difficult to coach. Compared to the challenges of executive leaders, those of

NEDs present additional and unique complexity, particularly because of the tricky dynamics that may arise in the relationships between board members or between the board and CEO. In establishing a working alliance, coaches must also be aware that the nature of governance issues often necessitates a systemic approach. This implies something beyond what is traditionally described in coaching literature as 'systemic'; specifically, it suggests actively working with the wider governance system beyond a board and involving multiple stakeholders, both within and outside the organisation.

A final characteristic of the working alliance is that it demands significant energy from coaches. Participants have described how their coaching activities will sometimes consume them completely on an emotional level. Explanations for this can be found by noting that, particularly when working on more deep-seated issues with boards or a governance system, coaches are required to immerse themselves in the client reality and put themselves 'at stake'. Transferential dynamics are likely to arise in the working alliance, leading to the projection of roles and feelings onto the coach, or from the coach to board members. While these may be helpful for the process, they also imply exposure to significant risk for the coach.

5.5 Non-executive director coaching model

By pulling the core categories of the data together, as required by grounded theory methodology (Sharmaz, 2014; Kemster & Parry, 2011), relating these to the literature and identifying what conclusions can accordingly be drawn about the coaching of NEDs, a new coaching model has been derived. This model is intended not only to serve practitioners, but also to be useful for scholars in further exploring this type of coaching.
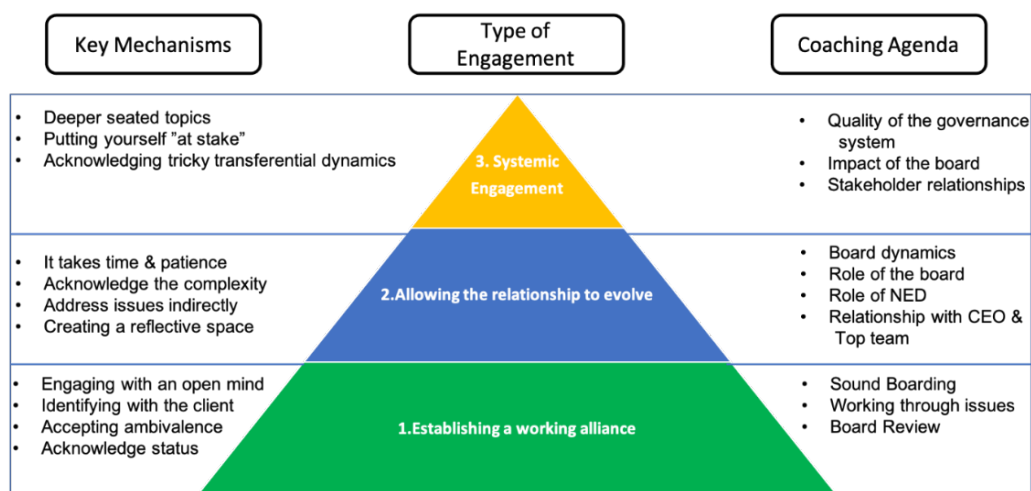
Figure 5.1: Non-executive Director Coaching Model

The model intends to stay close to the data and findings of the study by explaining what the main active ingredients of the coaching are, which mechanisms and assumptions play an important role in shaping them and which types of topics can be addressed. The model reflects the fact that the working alliance plays a central role in the coaching of individual NEDs and boards. The extent to which this alliance evolves influences the level of trust and intimacy that exists between coach and clients, which in turn has an impact on the depth of issues on the coaching agenda. The model is therefore time-bound, suggesting that in the early stages of a coaching engagement with NEDs, different interactions take place than in the later stages. The progression in this model resonates with the earlier work of Lee and Roberts (2010), who suggest that similar developments occur in clients' receptiveness to deeper coaching, related to the concept of coaching for authentic leadership. However, a major difference is that their model is deliberately created from the psychodynamic coaching paradigm; accordingly, it aims to create space for leaders to examine the relational assumptions that unconsciously underpin their leadership styles.

5.5.1 Coaching at the first stage – Establishing the working alliance

In the first stage of the coaching relationship, coaches and NEDs are recommended to prioritise establishing a sound working alliance, as this will be the main instrument in the coaching. This implies that the structuring of the coaching or the use of instruments should be very light. The chance of an effective working alliance being established depends on whether the coach and client are on the same wavelength. Compatibility of personal maturity plays an important role, together with the coach's

level of understanding about the reality of boards and corporate governance. At this stage, it is important for coaches to understand and acknowledge what status means for NEDs and how it influences their assumptions about learning. Considering this client group's paradoxical relationship with learning, the coach needs to be careful not to undermine the reputation or self-regard of the NED. However, owing to the risk of colluding with the client, this attitude should also be lightly explored to reveal what useful information for the coaching it contains. Furthermore, this part of the model advocates that there is also significant work to be done in the training and preparation of NEDs so as to increase their understanding and appreciation of ongoing learning as an important factor contributing to effectiveness in their roles.

In this first stage of the relationship, it is very likely that some ambivalence will arise in relation to contracting for the coaching; although it is crucial to invest in an effective working alliance, clients may not initially contract for a long period or with a clear articulation of their needs. Due to the episodic nature of board work (boards only meet around six to eight times per year), the coaching session may also follow a fragmented pattern. The agenda for individual NEDs will likely centre around 'sound boarding' or working through issues. For boards as a group, the agenda in the first stage will often be defined as 'board review'. The role of the coach is primarily to make themselves available as a sparring partner or facilitator. The dialogic relationship created between coaches and clients at this point allows both parties to influence the content of coaching sessions. Although coaches are recommended to prepare well for sessions, they are advised to go into sessions with an open mind and intuitively respond to whatever comes up. While the nature of this type of agenda-setting may give the impression that NEDs are not interested in establishing a long-term relationship with a coach, this is not necessarily the case. Participants in the present study pointed out that coaches need to be patient and wait for NEDs to develop readiness for an extended relationship, either because they experience the value of such an ongoing commitment or, when working with the board, they realise that problematic issues revealed by a board review need to be addressed.

5.5.2 Coaching at the second stage – Allowing the relationship to evolve

The relationship with a coach may remain at the first level for a long time or may end at this point as NEDs or a board may not yet be ready to work on an advanced

agenda. However, this study suggests that the agenda often evolves. One of the reasons why the relationship evolves is to be found in the reflective space established by the coach. It is likely that the safety of the reflective space creates the opportunity for NEDs to acknowledge that issues may exist behind the issues initially presented. Participants also suggest that using an indirect approach to challenging NEDs is most welcomed to help them open up. This is the stage at which the ongoing development of the working alliance allows the coach to test and explore whether topics related to board dynamics could be addressed.

Another strategy that may aid in creating further rapport with NEDs is for the coach to acknowledge the complexity of board work. According to this study, a recurring challenge that boards may have the readiness for at this level is the question of how to interact and work with management. This refers more to dynamics and assumptions held about the relationship than to fundamental agreements about the governance system. In the coaching of individual NEDs, this could be the stage for exploring topics related to motivation for board work, concerns about one's role and status in the board and aspirations as a board member. In this stage, the agenda for the coaching of individual NEDs can take on the character of more developmental coaching.

5.5.3 Coaching at the third stage – Systemic engagement

As the working alliance evolves to the third stage, boards and coaches develop the readiness to focus on more deep-seated issues. These relate not only to the functioning of the board but also to the total constellation of individual board members, the board as a group and other stakeholders in the governance system. According to the findings, this is the toughest level of coaching work with boards. The nature of the work becomes inherently systemic, under the assumption that issues cannot be addressed by concentrating only on isolated elements. At this stage, the working alliance takes on a different shape, since it will need to be broadened to include other stakeholders. As governance can be organised differently in each company, the nature of the working alliance with stakeholders and the choice of who exactly should be included in the process may differ from one situation to another.

Readiness to work in this manner goes beyond the quality of the working alliance – it requires boards and coaches alike to have the appetite and confidence to enter into more risk-laden interventions. The readiness relates, for example, to whether coaches have the maturity to handle the associated emotional and power dynamics that may arise, which are often quite taxing. Stronger personal commitment is required from the coach, and coaches will increasingly be required to put themselves 'at stake'. Transferential dynamics can also lead to unexpected projections both in clients and from the coach, which can also add complexity and risk to the work. It is likely that the complexity of working at a systemic level requires coaches and boards to commit for a longer time horizon. Participants recommend that coaches do not engage in this level of work alone, but instead bring at least one other partner to improve their ability to observe what takes place in the system and share the load. I would argue that the complexity of work on this level requires regular supervision as a necessary condition for coaches to keep functioning at their best and avoid pitfalls.

5.6   Summary

In this chapter, I have further examined the findings with the aim of explaining what wider factors and underlying mechanisms could underpin the core categories identified, as well as to inform the development of theory on the working ingredients of coaching for NEDs. The main building blocks for theorising are as follows: 1) the importance of the working alliance; 2) the fact that the coaching of NEDs is situational, pragmatic and intuitive; 3) the fact that the work is characterised by various complexities. An important driving factor influencing these features is that, especially in the early stages of working with NEDs, there is a significant level of ambivalence involved in the process; this is apparent in the contracting, the labelling of activities, the frequency of meetings and the topics on the agenda. Therefore, the resulting model suggests that the working alliance plays a central role in the coaching of both individual NEDs and boards. The extent to which this alliance evolves reduces the level of ambivalence of the coaching engagement. Clients develop a stronger commitment to the coaching, the depth of issues on the coaching agenda increases and the work becomes more deliberate and more systemic. While this creates the opportunity to address more deep-seated and contextual issues in the wider governance system, it also requires coaches and boards to tolerate more risk and transferential dynamics.

6 Conclusions

The purpose of this study has been to explore the meaning and experience of coaching in relation to the learning and development of NEDs from the perspectives of coaches and clients. This chapter presents a summary of the contributions made by the present study to theoretical knowledge, leadership development and coaching practice. I will also discuss the study's limitations, explore potential avenues for future research, and finally share some personal reflections on the learnings I took away from this research experience.

6.1 Contribution to theoretical knowledge

The outcomes of the present study contribute to the notion that the coaching field is far from completely developed. It remains a highly dynamic discipline in which new dimensions are constantly being uncovered. Based on the findings it is fair to say that the coaching of NEDs represents such a new territory within coaching. While this is one of the first international studies on experiences with the coaching of NEDs and more research is needed, the findings succeed in providing a coherent mapping of the field in terms of perceptions, client needs and how the coaching could best be conducted. The data also suggests that the coaching of NEDs is a promising and meaningful area for the coaching discipline to dedicate further research to in order to better understand what it's distinctive features are and to aid the further professionalisation of this type of coaching.

This section will first outline how the present study has addressed the identified gaps in knowledge, then highlight the empirical evidence provided regarding how coaching is perceived by the client group and what the characteristics are of coaching approaches and processes. The section concludes with how the study contributes to understanding what is expected of coaches regarding knowledge and expertise.

The literature review identified three specific gaps in theoretical knowledge:

1. A lack of empirical research on experiences with the coaching of NEDs, both from a coach and client perspective;

2. A lack of evidence regarding how coaching is perceived by NEDs, as well as what this might imply for the positioning of coaching and the design of processes to engage and work effectively with this clientele;

3. A lack of an empirically informed frame of reference to support an informed debate on the use of coaching for NEDs.

These gaps are important, owing to the high likelihood that the use of coaching by boards and NEDs will increase in the near future. This is due in part to pressure from regulators and stakeholders to perform board evaluations, but also because of boards' own development needs. Researchers and practitioners interested in the coaching of boards and NEDs would benefit greatly from consistent and evidence-based guidance.

The results of this study address the three theoretical gaps in knowledge and contribute to initiating an empirical debate on the coaching of NEDs. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that coaching is currently being used for the learning and development of NEDs and that it has significant relevance for this client group. Furthermore, I contend that the mindsets existing amongst clients and coaches with regard to this type of coaching and the practices applied distinguish it from practices common among other leadership audiences. This therefore justifies positioning the coaching of NEDs as a separate field within the coaching discipline.

The literature review has revealed that research into the learning and development of NEDs in general, and into their coaching specifically, remains very limited. This is the case not only with regard to coaching literature, but also research in the field of corporate governance. This gap in the literature is remarkable in light of the agreement among scholars that individual NEDs and boards as a group face a range of challenges for which coaching-like reflective development activities are sorely needed, particularly in the area of board dynamics. Nevertheless, there has been little empirical evidence to date of how coaching is being practised with NEDs, and more specifically, how these clients can make sense of what coaching is and what it can do for them. As a result, there is a lack of debate surrounding this type of coaching. Coaches aspiring to engage with NEDs will also find little guidance in the literature on what is different or effective for working with this clientele.

Several reasons for this dearth of literature can be identified. The first is the observation that, traditionally, NEDs and scholars in the corporate governance domain have not seen the prioritising of learning and development activities as an obvious course of action. The fundamental assumption was and remains that a board role is taken up only once one has learnt enough throughout an executive career. Second, due to the context of corporate governance and the part-time nature of their role, it has not been entirely clear whether NEDs should be identified as leaders (and therefore an audience for leadership development activities) or as something else; this may have placed them outside of the awareness of coaching research and the social sciences domain. Third, it has been difficult for a long time to gain access to board members for qualitative research.

The present study provides new evidence that mindsets regarding the coaching of NEDs and the practices used therein are characterised by ambivalence. This has a profound influence on how coaching is positioned, structured and delivered. While NEDs do currently use coaching, they also exhibit some reluctance about being associated with the construct of coaching because it does not accord with their status. The idea of still being in the position of 'learner' threatens their sense of self and reduces their credibility as 'Captains of Industry', in the eyes of both other board members and the leaders they are supposed to govern. When coaching is labelled in a different way – for example, as 'sound boarding', or 'working through an issue' – it becomes more acceptable to NEDs. This finding contributes to debates about the definition of coaching for NEDs and similar audiences, helping it align better with the realities experienced by these clients. It is possible that constructs related to supervision would resonate better with these types of clients and their needs. While their responsibilities and tasks differ fundamentally from those of a coach, some of the assumptions driving the nature of supervision and the types of conversations that take place between supervisor and supervisee may also be relevant for the coaching of NEDs. This is particularly true because the term 'supervision' does not necessarily suggest to others that the client is still learning the trade.

New evidence has been presented that indicates that coaching for boards as groups is typically labelled as 'board evaluation' or 'self-evaluation'. Participants explain that

regular board evaluation has become an activity commonly engaged in by boards to increase their effectiveness and ensure compliance with regulation. In particular, NEDs refer to 'board evaluation' as the framework in which coaching activities take place. The findings confirm that there is a growing interest among boards in receiving external guidance by a coach during such evaluations, and the data also suggests that there is a good fit with coaching methodologies. This contributes to debates on the development of boards and the adoption of board evaluation. However, NEDs note that selecting the same coach for multiple evaluations is not necessarily important to them. Some boards even make the conscious decision to find a different coach every time in order to test out an alternative perspective or style. This indicates that attachment to a particular coach, which we often see with the coaching of executives, is not necessarily present for boards.

This study provides new evidence to support the importance and role of the working alliance between coaches and NEDs. This relates strongly to NEDs' mindsets regarding coaching, along with the fact that it is preferable not to frame the working relationship as 'coaching' per se. Participants note that their work with NEDs tends to be situational, pragmatic and somewhat intuitive. Therefore, rather than using a range of instruments, the working alliance between coach and NED(s) actually becomes the crucial structuring instrument. It provides the trust and comfort required by NEDs to experience a reflective space. This finding contributes to debates on the role and purpose of the working alliance for these types of leaders. While some researchers (de Haan & Gannon, 2017; Huggler, 2012) argue that this alliance serves to address deeper emotions early on, participants in the present study explain that coaching relationships with NEDs tend to develop in a different way and for a different purpose. The working alliance is established based on the compatibility of styles and the extent to which the client feels understood in a professional sense. This creates the space for issue-focused sound boarding and is not intended to address more deep-seated issues. Coaches explain that as the relationship naturally evolves, more space is created to address emotional issues later on. This is the case with both individual NEDs and with boards as a group.

This study provides new evidence to suggest that approaches currently used for the coaching of top executives do not necessarily translate to NEDs and the boards on

which they sit. Participants explain that what matches best with this clientele are approaches that are situational, intuitive and pragmatic. This applies to the way that coaching is contracted for, the coaching processes followed, the type of instruments used and the practices employed to assess coaching outcomes. The findings highlight that the nature of coaching engagements with NEDs is less about designing a trajectory based on a deep understanding of client needs and more about keeping an open mind for whatever may come up in the process, which also reflects the perceived desire of NEDs to be 'in the driver's seat'. This further contributes to debates on what client-led coaching and dialogic coaching might look like for these types of leaders (Myers & Bachkirova, 2018) in two key ways: NEDs require coaches to be even more 'in the moment' and alert to what might come up during the coaching, and coaches also need to be mindful of how the power balance in the relationship is developing in order to ensure it is not only client-led.

The study provides empirical evidence that the coaching agenda with NEDs evolves as the relationship between coach and client becomes more mature and that the coaching also tends to be more episodic. The latter is related in part to the fact that boards meet only a few times per year and have more than one board mandate. Coaching is therefore not an activity that is planned from the beginning; a coach may be engaged to address an issue that relates to or is symptomatic of a deeper core challenge faced by the board or an individual NED. Participants note that, at least initially, the agenda is not necessarily about themes that are often encountered during the coaching of managers (such as maximising performance, delivering business goals, or making a personal transition). Instead, coaching in this context is characterised by participants as issue-focused. Participants further explain that these issues often centre around individual interactions within boards and with other stakeholders. Client readiness to discuss core challenges is initially low; this relates to NEDs' reluctance to occupy the vulnerable position of someone who could still benefit from further learning. Coaches need to be mindful of how the relationship is developing and adapt the agenda according to clients' readiness to address more deep-seated issues. Patience and a sense of indirectness can therefore be identified as a characteristic of this type of coaching. This contributes, first, to debates on what it is exactly that coaching provides to clients and how this develops (Korotov &

McCourt, 2010), and second, to debates about the impact of client readiness on coaching effectiveness (Kretzschmar, 2010).

The findings provide new empirical evidence to suggest that when the coaching of NEDs is aimed at issues that go beyond the functioning of the board to address the quality of governance in a firm (the constellation of individual board members, the board as a group and other stakeholders in the governance system, etc.), the nature of the work becomes inherently systemic. Participants contend that such an approach is appropriate when issues cannot be addressed by concentrating only on isolated elements in the governance system. An important condition for entering into such coaching activities is that the working alliance with a board must have evolved to the most mature stage, where both boards and coaches have developed the readiness to focus on deeper issues. At this stage, the working alliance takes a different shape, as it will need to be broadened to include other stakeholders. Because governance can be organised differently in each company, moreover, the nature of the working alliance with stakeholders and the choice of who exactly should be included in the process might differ depending on the situation. Applying a systemic approach requires coaches and their clients to be conscious of whether they have the appetite and confidence to enter into more risk-laden interventions. This requires a stronger personal commitment from the coach, as they will increasingly be 'at stake' themselves under these circumstances and need to be willing to handle the strong emotional and power dynamics that may arise (and can be expected to be quite taxing). Accordingly, participants suggest not taking on these assignments alone but instead working with at least one partner. While a systemic way of working is not new to coaching, there has been no empirical evidence to date on the ways in which this applies to boards. The present study shows that a systemic approach is not aimed at involving others for support or feedback, but rather stems from the notion that boards form part of an organisation's governance system, in which stakeholder actions have consequences for others. This study thus contributes to debates on what a systemic approach could entail in the coaching of leaders at the highest levels in organisations and how this should be approached.

Furthermore, this study contributes empirical evidence that aids in identifying the qualities required by coaches if they are to be credible and effective when working

with NEDs. Participants refer to this type of coaching as a 'tough job', pointing to multiple factors that cause this work to be highly demanding and that are also consistent with the literature. These are the topics with which boards struggle, often as a result of dynamics within a board and with stakeholders (Charas, 2014, 2013; Korn Ferry, 2013), the content and rules of corporate governance, the 'high-alpha' types of individuals that boards attract (Shekshnia, 2016) and finally, the characteristics of boards themselves. In comparison to executive leadership teams, boards do not necessarily act as a team. Individual NEDs can serve different and sometimes even opposing interests in a board, and it therefore cannot be assumed that they will operate under a team mindset. As a result of these factors, participants explain that NEDs have high expectations for their coaches and are one of the toughest client groups for coaches to deal with. Coaches thus need to be 'at the top of their game', exhibiting the highest levels of personal maturity combined with a deep understanding of how corporate governance works. This contributes to debates on the characteristics of exceptional coaches and how they might differ from other, more average coaches (Wasylyshyn, 2017; Dagley, 2010).

The present study also provides new empirical evidence that strong transferential dynamics may occur in multiple ways when working with this client group, which creates risks and opportunities for the coaching process. Transferential dynamics can arise both during the coaching of individual NEDs or during work with boards or other stakeholders. For example, participants note that clients will project their hopes, expectations or various stereotypical roles onto their coach. However, this could also happen the other way around. For example, while the study shows that it is important to acknowledge the status of clients in order to establish a working alliance with NEDs, coaches can also be exposed to a form of 'seduction' that encourages them to collude with the client through strong mirroring of the client's mindset, or by too easily accepting the characterisation of board work and board coaching as 'exceptionally difficult'.

This finding is in line with literature outlining that boards could potentially become entangled in three 'basic assumptions': dependency, fight/flight and pairing (Brisset, Sher & Smith, 2020, p. 19). Participants provide the example that a board's tendency to initially focus on symptomatic issues rather than core challenges could be seen as

an avoidant strategy. This exhibits some similarities to behaviour explained by the fight/flight dynamic. Coaches working with boards must first be mindful of how these types of basic assumptions can play out within boards; second, as a result, the coach may be invited to go along with these assumptions or risk being cast out if the assumption is too strongly challenged. Coaches also need to realise that individual board members tend to be unaware of these 'mental phenomena' and their impact on the group's work. These dynamics may also provide valuable information to coaches, provided that they are willing and able to use themselves as an instrument in order to unpack what the client is transmitting to them.

6.2   Contribution to coaching practice

This study is motivated by the observation that, although the coaching of NEDs is an emerging domain within the coaching of leaders in organisations, there are no meaningful frames of reference for how such coaching should best be approached. This implies that the present study, being one of the first to provide empirical evidence on the coaching of NEDs, can offer useful ideas for practice. In this section, I outline the implications of this study for coaches, NEDs, professional bodies, providers of coaching training, providers of coaching, and corporate professionals in the fields of learning and development.

The main beneficiaries of the present study are coaches aspiring to work with NEDs as their clients. This study provides them with new knowledge, based on empirical evidence, regarding how coaching is perceived by their clients, how to frame the coaching relationship and what pitfalls to be aware of. This unlocks a client group that many coaches will thus far have remained unfamiliar with, simply because there has been a paucity of relevant empirical research available to them. The working alliance-based coaching model for the coaching of NEDs developed herein includes guidelines on what elements coaches can focus on at each stage of the relationship. The framework demonstrates that when coaching NEDs and boards, the working alliance becomes the most important factor in positioning the coaching, defining the agenda and achieving meaningful results.

The proposed framework guides the coach to be aware of three significant features of their work. First, it identifies the importance of incorporating an understanding of

the client's social status and internalised expectations regarding their role and behaviour, with the assumption that these will become less important as the working alliance grows. Second, it notes that the development stage of the working alliance determines which topics can be placed on the agenda during coaching sessions. Furthermore, the model urges coaches to accept that coaching is perceived with ambivalence by boards and NEDs, and that it is therefore important to use different labels for this activity ('sound boarding' or 'board evaluation' being the most useful of these). Coaches should also adopt an intuitive, situational and pragmatic approach based on a client-led and dialogic typology of coaching. As the relationship progresses, NEDs will be more likely to have developed the readiness to address issues that require them to challenge their assumptions and expectations regarding their roles and learning needs. The proposed framework therefore recommends that coaches should not rush to challenge deeper assumptions or values early on in the relationship but should instead take their time to let the relationship grow. Finally, the framework informs coaches that the issues presented will become increasingly systemic in nature as the working alliance evolves and will therefore require the involvement of multiple types of stakeholders.

The findings indicate that NEDs could benefit from using coaching to further their growth and improve their performance. It specifically helps them to reflect on the value that coaching can offer them and why it is not threatening to their status or credibility as a board member. Furthermore, the present findings suggest that when selecting coaches, it is important to look for those who have significant mastery of the coaching profession, knowledge of corporate governance and personal maturity; this is not necessarily related to potential outcomes of the coaching but does improve the likelihood of establishing rapport and a solid working alliance with the coach. Non-executive directors can use the coaching framework to better decide on which topics to include in their coaching agenda and at which stage of the coaching trajectory. As such, the framework helps them to more precisely determine what type of engagement with a coach they require and why. This study additionally demonstrates to boards that issues related to the quality of the governance system are often systemic in nature and will therefore require the involvement of other stakeholders in the governance architecture. Boards are also cautioned to be mindful of potential

dynamics related to basic assumptions made by groups, which may prompt them to avoid addressing core issues or to use their coaches incorrectly.

Practical implications for professional bodies are also presented by the present research. Based on the evidence that the coaching of NEDs is an emerging domain in the coaching field, professional bodies need to acknowledge the knowledge gap that exists in information on experiences and frames of reference for this type of coaching, both for clients and for practitioners. I therefore recommend that professional bodies begin to organise conferences and workshops that will enable the sharing of experiences in this field and the further development of guidelines on this type of coaching.

Moreover, the present study identifies that, while this is an emerging domain, a wide variety of professionals and firms from fields like executive search and consulting are already operating in it. While this is not necessarily an issue, since a large proportion of the challenges faced by boards are behavioural, the coaching discipline could add tremendous value to the professionalisation and alignment of approaches in the coaching of NEDs using its existing body of knowledge. One example of this could be the need for coaches to be aware of and deal with transferential dynamics.

This research further presents a number of practical implications for the training and development of coaches. This could be particularly useful for coaches who work with leaders at the highest levels and who may be confronted with NEDs either as stakeholders or as a new client group. These coaches need to be made aware that the approaches they use with executives cannot simply be transposed to the context of NEDs, as the coaching of the latter client group requires the use of different assumptions, structures and ways of engaging. Other experienced coaches may be inspired to find more opportunities to grow and broaden their capabilities in catering for this new client group. Coaches will need to be trained to understand the context of corporate governance, including the precise role played by boards, the types of challenges this context creates for the stakeholders involved and how NEDs can invest in further growth.

The study could be of value for providers of coaching, whether these are coaching firms or educational organisations like business schools. This research opens up the possibility for them to more consistently adjust their offerings to the identified needs of NEDs, while also providing legitimacy for including NEDs as a client group for coaching activities. I recommend that providers begin to use the proposed coaching model, which presents them with a way to both frame coaching to these clients and understand the potential pitfalls involved. Board evaluation, specifically, is a type of coaching activity in which traditional providers of coaching could become more active for two key reasons. First, the instruments used (such as interviews, 360 feedback and reflective conversations) are well understood by the coaching discipline. Second, because of the types of issues faced by boards, they could benefit significantly from psychologically trained coaches.

The study points corporate learning and development practitioners towards a fact they may have overlooked: namely, that NEDs are a client group within their organisations. As learning and development practitioners are typically instrumental in the majority of coaching activities within their firms, it would be obviously beneficial for them to also become more involved in the coaching of NEDs. As it stands, most NEDs approach coaches directly and either pay for coaching themselves or exclude internal learning and development professionals from coaching activities with the board. This is unfortunate, as these professionals have a valuable role to play in assessing the clients' development needs and selecting coaches of the appropriate quality. The present study further shows that senior internal learning and development professionals can also be approached by NEDs for reflective conversations. For that purpose, the proposed coaching model and the present study as a whole can offer these professionals preliminary guidance on how best to engage in these activities.

6.3   Limitations of this research

This study is subject to a number of limitations. Participants for this research were identified using a purposive sampling strategy through contacts in my network.
These participants came from different backgrounds and countries, were of different genders, and made themselves available because of their direct or indirect connection to me. Although this connection was crucial to being granted access, it may also have influenced the ways in which they answered the interview questions

(for example, their willingness to provide useful or interesting answers). To complement this study, subsequent research could mitigate this by selecting participants through a corporate governance industry association or recruiting individuals who have participated in coaching offered by an institute, rather than using the researcher's networks.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the choice to work with semi-structured interviews presents a number of limitations. As coaching of NEDs is a relatively new field, participants sometimes found it difficult to be specific about what it is that they do or experience during the coaching sessions, and I may have influenced their responses while unpacking their first answers with them. Moreover, while I appreciated the variety in participants' backgrounds and nationalities, this also meant that not all participants spoke English as a mother tongue. There is accordingly a possibility that some nuance may have been lost, either in the way participants formulated their answers or in how I interpreted them. The same applies to interviews that were conducted in Dutch and later had to be translated into English for analysis.

In the various steps of the data analysis process, my choice of grounded theory methodology implied that I had to make certain subsequent choices. It is possible that these were open to bias, particularly at the theoretical coding stage. A grounded theory researcher needs to let the data speak for itself and allow the theory to emerge; however, I also need to take into account that both in my private practice and at the business school where I work, I have been involved in the coaching of NEDs. As a result, I necessarily bring some experiences and knowledge about this client group and their coaching to my research. While this background was useful for establishing rapport with my participants during the interviews, it may also have influenced some of the choices made during the analysis. These points have been discussed with my supervisory team, who have maintained a critical perspective on my choices and have significantly challenged all assumptions I made.

6.4   Potential areas for future research

As discussed in Chapter 2, the topic of coaching NEDs has scarcely been covered in the literature. More research into this emerging field within coaching is therefore strongly required. While this study contributes to charting the field, follow-up research

is necessary to dive into specific sections or questions regarding this type of coaching. It is recommended to study in greater depth what takes place in one or more specific coaching relations, using (for example) a case study approach.The present study additionally provides evidence that NEDs engage with their coaches in a different way: the relationship evolves over time, creating a reflective space for more challenging topics. Future research could delve into one or more of these relationships more profoundly, with the goal of uncovering in detail how exactly the relationship evolves and what context-specific mechanisms influence the development of the coaching.

This study has provided insight into the types of issues that boards struggle with; however, further research could be conducted to deepen understanding of how boards are coached on these issues, particularly how such issues become visible when the board or parts of the governance system are in the room and how specific coaching interventions unfold. Reflections from participants during or shortly after the coaching could be used to capture the immediate reactions evoked in them by the process. Such research could provide understanding of how coaching interventions impact boards and what it exactly is that they learn.

Moreover, this study provides evidence that there are some differences between the coaching of individual NEDs and boards as a group. Work with boards tends to begin with board evaluation, which opens the way for examining core challenges of the board and even the wider governance system. Further research is recommended to further explore the characteristics of either working with a board or with individual NEDs. For example, one potential topic to investigate might be how the coaching of individual NEDs develops over time as they are coached on their transitions from manager to NED and subsequently to more mature roles in boards.

This study provides further evidence that coaches need to possess significant maturity and knowledge of corporate governance in order to be considered credible by clients. The findings also show that coaches come from a variety of professional backgrounds. Further studies could provide more detail on the background required to perform effectively as a coach. Potential topics of research could include the amount and nature of corporate governance knowledge required, along with how this

knowledge relates to the specific coaching work. It would also be highly useful for the training of coaches to determine the importance of being a psychologically educated coach and what characteristics separate exceptional board coaches from others.

The importance of status for NEDs has been highlighted by this study. Further research is recommended to capture the thoughts of NEDs on this theme (for example, their specific fears or anxieties about being associated with coaching). In addition, future research could explore the factors that influence NEDs to change their perceptions of self during coaching.

Finally, while this study has demonstrated that coaching is being used by NEDs and boards and has provided empirical evidence of the coaching processes used, future research could be directed at outcome studies in this type of coaching. One particularly interesting avenue would be to determine the results of coaching interventions aimed at improving the functioning of a board or raising the quality of the governance system in an organisation. Research of this kind could be useful in identifying the ingredients that work to deliver the desired results or what the obstacles to these results might be. This would allow coaches and boards to engage with confidence not only in a coaching relationship but also to achieve specific objectives. Moreover, such research could prompt the development of objective frameworks for use in assessing the outcomes of coaching provided to this client group.

6.5 Personal reflections on my learning from the research process

Completing this study has been an existential journey for me, one that I could not have completed without the support of two wise, highly experienced and most of all very patient supervisors. They not only helped me to learn the mindsets, skills and approaches necessary to complete this research, but also allowed me to learn more about myself. Their continuous belief in me enabled me to overcome my fear of failure, frustrations about becoming stuck and frequent sense of confusion. Having occupied the role of teacher and coach for so long, finding myself in the position of learner has been a profound growth experience for which I am very grateful.

I have learnt to wrestle with my internal leadership development educator in order to practice more academic detachment. During this process, I became aware of my desire to be seen as an expert and have subsequently learnt how to approach my material and work process more from a researcher's perspective. This enabled me to 'get unstuck' and make greater progress in this research project. Owing to the magnitude of work and information I had to deal with, once data collection was complete, the entire endeavour seemed to me like an insurmountable mountain. I learnt to not let the time pressure raise my anxiety, but instead to take it one activity at a time. What further increased my enthusiasm to continue was the profound joy I experienced at discovering how to write certain chapters or how to apply the appropriate research techniques – in short, the joy of learning. I have also learnt how to deal with tough feedback and the associated disappointment. After having spent weeks writing a chapter, I was initially shattered to receive feedback implying that my work needed to be fundamentally rewritten. Later, I found that I got better at taking the time to digest feedback and accept that its purpose was to make me better, which then provided me with new motivation to begin again with full energy.

As a novice critical realist researcher, I initially struggled to fully understand how this paradigm works in practice. However, while working with the data during analysis, I was happy to realise how naturally aligned the critical realist approach is with my own way of thinking. Identifying the key themes that emerged from the data already provided useful answers to my research questions. Still, as a critical realist, I wanted to dig deeper to understand what social mechanisms were influencing or causing these themes to arise. Only then did I feel there would be a sufficient explanation for the phenomena under investigation.

Applying grounded theory for the first time also brought some challenges. Theoretically, I was convinced that my chosen methodology was appropriate for a new emerging domain within coaching. I was less convinced about what it meant that a 'new theory' would emerge from the data; somehow, that sounded like magic or 'new-age' thinking. However, I learned to simply trust the process and experienced that, after fully working with the data, a theory does indeed emerge that is neither preconceived nor magically created, but rather a logical outcome of the data itself.

This study has also brought about a personal transformation in terms of my confidence to speak about NEDs in general and their coaching in particular. Although I had some prior experience with this client group, the study pushed me to develop deep knowledge about the processes of corporate governance, the role of NEDs and their coaching. Where I had previously regarded this group with professional curiosity (and to be honest, also some reverence), I have now come to see them predominantly as an object of study about which I am quite well informed.

As a coach, I have deepened my understanding of coaching literature, and as such have become more aware of the vast body of knowledge that coaching represents. The data collected in this study reconfirmed to me how varied the use of coaching can be. Moreover, I discovered just how important it is to not simply bring my own assumptions about coaching to client relationships, but instead to be more curious about the constructs they use to provide meaning to coaching activities.

6.6   What have I learnt as a researcher?

Finally, I have learnt what it means to be a researcher and to join a community of researchers. I initially did not have this identity, and it took some time before I could connect with it. I have now reached a point where I see research not just as a task that needs to be completed but as a way of being. I enjoy the process because of how it enables my personal growth; most of all, however, I am motivated by the contribution I can make to the development of the coaching field. Therefore, I hope to continue doing research even after completing this doctorate. Looking back, I can say beyond doubt that this has been the most life-changing learning experience I have ever had and that I would never have wanted to miss it**.**

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8   Appendices

8.1   Participant Information Sheets

Participant Information Sheet

Coaching Provider

Invitation to take part in research

Study Title:

Coaching as a learning and development intervention for non-executive directors: experiences, meanings and practices in use.

Dear: (name of the participant)

Invitation

You are receiving this information as part of the formal invitation to take part in a research study on the coaching and learning of non-executive directors. This document explains why the research is being done, what it will involve and how confidentiality will be assured. Participation is entirely voluntary and on an individual basis. Data collection will take place during the first half of 2015.

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After signing you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Please read the following information carefully and decide if you are happy to give your consent.

NB: Any clients with whom the researcher has had or continues to have a professional relationship, are not eligible to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

This research aims to explore practices and experiences of coaching provided to non-executive directors. Executive Coaching is a well-established and well-researched instrument for the development of senior leaders in organisations. However, a specific area

within coaching that has not been researched to the same extent is the use of coaching for non-executive directors.

Non-executive directors are often selected for their roles because of their demonstrated competence in top leadership roles. However this background doesn't necessarily imply mastery of the mindset, skills and attitudes needed to be effective in a board. The specific dynamics of a board and the complexities of the non-executive director role may require them to invest further in their capabilities. It is very likely that some of them use coaching for this purpose. This research therefore aims to find out what experiences are with this form of development as seen by two groups of actors involved. The study will be conducted by interviewing coaches and non-executive directors.

Why have I been invited to participate?
You have been approached because you have indicated that you provide coaching to non-executive directors.

What data is being collected?
All participants will be taken through a 1hour interview focused on their personal experiences with the topic. Their answers will be audio taped for subsequent research analysis. The goal of this analysis is to find general themes, therefore no client or organisational names will be registered

The ultimate aim of this research is to create a framework, which identifies specific factors and themes that influence the use and appreciation of coaching as an intervention for the learning and development of non-executive directors. The findings will lead to recommendations for practitioners and boards.

What will happen to me if I take part?
If you decide to take part in this research, you will be asked to sign a consent form and send it to the researcher. He will ensure that this form is stored securely. You will then be approached by the researcher to plan and participant in a 1hour meeting for the interview.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?
The audio recordings of interviews will be transcribed and analysed to generate themes and quotes about experiences. The transcripts will be anonymised so that it will not be possible for others, except the researcher, to identify individuals in this study. The data collected will only be analysed by the researcher. All the data will be stored securely, be password

protected and only pseudonyms will be used following interviews. As such maximum confidentiality will be maintained within the limitations of the law. Data generated will be retained in accordance with the University's policy on Academic integrity and the Data Protection All research data will be retained for a period of 10 years in accordance with the Oxford Brookes University Policy for Academic Integrity after which all data will be destroyed.

Withdrawal

You are free to decide at any time during the research and for whatever reason, to be withdrawn from the research. As a result of that the data already supplied by you will be removed from the research and destroyed.

Potential Risks & Measures

The researcher is very much aware that the context of boards and their coaching is a very sensitive one and that there might be potential risks to the personal reputation of a coach, their clients or the interest of an organisation, should participation in the research lead to wrong public perceptions.

The research will therefore not focus on generating identifiable individual or organisational data about clients.

Still, if it is concluded during the interview or from the transcripts that there is actual risk for the participant related to participation in the research, their data would be removed from the research and destroyed.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the data analysis will be used to complete a doctoral thesis as key element of the Doctorate of Coaching and Mentoring at Oxford Brookes University. Further intention is to create academic publications based on the findings of this research. Essential condition is that the agreed confidentiality will also apply to those publications. You can be assured that your name or any identifiable characteristics will not be included in any written report. Upon completion of the doctoral thesis a summary of the research findings will be available to you after request by e-mail, should you wish to receive one.

Who has reviewed the study?

The research has been approved by the university research ethics committee, Oxford Brookes University.

Contact for further information?

If you have any further questions please contact the researcher

Franklin Vrede

13054650@brookes.com

+31 613864166

If you have any concerns about how this study has been conducted you can contact the supervisors mentioned below, or the chair of the university research ethics committee via: *ethics@brookes.ac.uk*

Supervisors

Dr. Tatiana Bachkirova MEd, MSc, PhD

Reader in Coaching Psychology

+44(0) 1865 488367

tbachkirova@brookes.ac.uk

Dr. Ivan Mitchel Msc, PhD

+44 (0)1865 488614

imitchell@brookes.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

March 2015

Participant Information Sheet

Non-Executive Director

Invitation to take part in research

Study Title:

Coaching as a learning and development intervention for non-executive directors: experiences, meanings and practices in use.

Dear: name of the participant

Invitation

You are receiving this information as part of the formal invitation to take part in a research study on the coaching and learning of non-executive directors. This document explains why the research is being done, what it will involve and how confidentiality will be assured. Participation is entirely voluntary and on an individual basis. Data collection will take place during the first half of 2015.

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After signing you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Please read the following information carefully and decide if you are happy to give your consent.

NB: Any clients, with whom the researcher has had or continues to have a professional relationship, are not eligible to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

This research aims to explore practices and experiences of coaching provided to non-executive directors. Executive Coaching is a well-established and well-researched instrument for the development of senior leaders in organisations. However a specific area within coaching that has not been researched to the same extent is the use of coaching for non-executive directors.

Non-executive directors are often selected for their roles because of their demonstrated competence in top leadership roles. However this background doesn't necessarily imply mastery of the mindset, skills and attitudes needed to be effective in a board. The specific

dynamics of a board and the complexities of the non-executive director role may require them to invest further in their capabilities. It is very likely that some of them use coaching for this purpose. This research therefore aims to find what experiences are with this form of development as seen by two groups of actors involved. The study will be conducted by interviewing coaches and non-executive directors.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been approached because you are a non-executive director and have personally used coaching services.

What data is being collected?

All participants will be taken through a 1hour interview focused on their personal experiences with the topic. Their answers will be audio taped for subsequent research analysis. The goal of this analysis is to find general themes, therefore no client or organisational names will be registered

The ultimate aim of this research is to create a framework, which identifies specific factors and themes that influence the use and appreciation of coaching as an intervention for the learning and development of non-executive directors. The findings will lead to recommendations for practitioners and boards.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part in this research you will be asked to sign a consent form and send it to the researcher. He will ensure that this form is stored securely. You will then be approached by the researcher to plan and participate in a 1hour meeting for the interview.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

The audio recordings of interviews will be transcribed and analysed to generate themes and quotes about experiences. The transcripts will be anonymised so that it will not be possible for others, except the researcher, to identify individuals in this study. The data collected will only be analysed by the researcher. All the data will be stored securely, be password protected and only pseudonyms will be used following interviews. As such maximum confidentiality will be maintained within the limitations of the law. Data generated will be retained in accordance with the University's policy on Academic integrity and the Data Protection Act. All research data will be retained for a period of 10 years in accordance with the Oxford Brookes University Policy for Academic Integrity after which all data will be destroyed.

Withdrawal

You are free to decide at any time during the research and for whatever reason, to be withdrawn from the research. As a result of that, the data already supplied by you will be removed from the research and destroyed.

Potential Risks & Measures

The researcher is very much aware that the context of boards is a very sensitive one and that there might be potential risks to the personal reputation of participants or the interest of an organisation, should participation in the research lead to wrong public perceptions.

In addition to the above mentioned measures to maintain confidentiality, the following procedures will therefore be used: the interview will take place at a location that is considered safe by participants, communication will take place using mail addresses and phone number that are not shared by participants with others. If it is concluded during the interview or from the transcripts that there is actual risk for the participant related to participation in the research, their data will be removed from the research and destroyed.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the data analysis will be used to complete a doctoral thesis as key element of the Doctorate of Coaching and Mentoring at Oxford Brookes University. Further intention is to create academic publications based on the findings of this research. Essential condition is that the agreed confidentiality will also apply to those publications. You can be assured that your name or any identifiable characteristics will not be included in any written report. Upon completion of the doctoral thesis a summary of the research findings will be available to you after request by e-mail, should you wish to receive one.

Who has reviewed the study?

The research has been approved by the university research ethics committee at Oxford Brookes University.

Contact for further information?

If you have any further questions please contact the researcher

 Franklin Vrede

 13054650@brookes.com

 +31 613864166

If you have any concerns about how this study has been conducted you can contact the supervisors mentioned below, or the chair of the university research ethics committee via: *ethics@brookes.ac.uk*

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Reader in Coaching Psychology
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tbachkirova@brookes.ac.uk

Dr. Ivan Mitchel Msc, PhD
+44 (0)1865 488614
 imitchell@brookes.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.
March 2015

8.2   Consent Form

Consent Form

Full title of Project: *Coaching as a learning and development intervention for non-executive directors: experiences, meanings and practices in use.*

Name, position and contact address of Researcher:

Franklin Vrede, Doctoral Student

13054650@brookes.com

+31 613864166

Please initial box

1.   I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.   ☐

2.   I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.   ☐

3.   I agree to take part in the above study.   ☐

Please initial box

Yes   No

4.   I am aware that the interview will be audio-recorded   ☐   ☐

5   I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

☐   ☐

6.   I agree that my data gathered in this study may be stored (after it has been anonymised) in a specialist data centre and may be used for future research.

☐   ☐

_____   _____   _____

Name of Participant   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____

Name of Researcher   Date   Signature

8.3 Interview questions

<div align="center">

Interview Questions
- Coaching Provider -
Researcher: Franklin Vrede

Study Title:

Coaching as a learning and development intervention for non-executive directors; experiences, meanings and practices in use.

</div>

Date:
Name of Participant

<div align="center">

Questions

</div>

1. Coaching Practice: Could you explain to what extent you are involved in the coaching of non-executive directors?

Back up questions

1.a. What is distinct in your coaching approach?

1b. Are you mostly coaching individuals or teams? What do you prefer?

1c. How long have you been involved in coaching non-executive directors?

1d. What percentage is this work (coaching of NEDs) of your work portfolio?

1e. Is there any connection of the coaching to an annual board review?

1f. Why do you think they select you as a coach?

1g. Who selects you (client or someone else?)

2. Contracting: What development need do clients mostly approach you for? Please provide an example?

Back up questions

2a. What approach do you use to agree with your clients about goals and set up of the coaching?

2b. How stable is the need of clients over time?

2c. Do you use any instruments? Which ones? And how do you use the outcomes?

2d. For what period and frequency do you contract with your clients?

2e. Where does the coaching usually take place?

2f. Are there any others involved in the contracting?

3. Coaching Characteristics & Capabilities: To what extent is coaching NEDs in your experience different compared to coaching other target audiences?

<u>Backup questions</u>

3a. When did you feel ready to coach NEDs?

3b. To what extent has the nature of their role influenced your specific approach?

3c. What moments in the coaching are potentially tricky when coaching NEDs?

4. Impact: What in your experience are outcomes of the coaching process?

<u>Backup questions</u>

4a. What specifically makes coaching work for this target audience?

4b. Which factors determine whether the coaching is average or a great success? (How important is the relationship you have with the individual, their readiness, influence of contextual factors)

5. Further Comments: Anything I did not ask that you think would be good to consider?

<div align="center">

Interview Questions
- Non-Executive Director -
Researcher: Franklin Vrede

Study Title:

Coaching as a learning and development intervention for non-executive directors: experiences, meanings and practices in use.

</div>

Date: (date of interview)
Name: (name of the participant)

Questions

Experience as a non-executive board member: Could you please give me a brief understanding of your experience and current involvement as a non-executive board member?

Use of coaching: How have you used professional coaching services as a non-executive director?

<u>Backup questions</u>

Where did the idea come from to look for a coach?

How did you find your coach?

Was anybody else involved in that selection process?

How was the coaching financed?

Are you still working with the coach?

Contracting: How did you agree with your coach about the goal and set up of the coaching?

<u>Back up questions</u>

What coaching needs did you express at the start of the coaching?

Were any assessment instruments used? Which ones? How did you appreciate these? How did the coach use the outcomes?

Was the contract for a number of sessions, a time period, a relationship or something else? And how did you experience this?

With which frequency did you meet your coach? How did you appreciate that?

Where did the coaching usually take place? How did you find that?

How long would a session take?

How important was that for you to involve others in the contracting?

The Coaching Process: Could you please describe how you and the coach would work in a coaching session?

<u>Back up questions</u>

What did you work on most: your own behaviour, the technical challenges of corporate governance, dynamics in the board, or something else?

How did your relationship with the coach develop over time?

To what extent did the coach provide positive reinforcement?

To what extent did the coach challenge you? Please give an example

What were you not so positive about? What did not work as well as it could have done?

What was your role in the coaching?

How important was board experience of the coach during the coaching?

Did the coach ask you to do some homework or preparations? Please give an example

To what extent did the coach use specific development tools or exercises during the coaching? Were others aware of the coaching? Were they involved?

How did the coaching end?

View on coaching: To what extent did your view on the meaning or process of coaching change over time?

<u>Back up question</u>

What influenced this the most?

What happened during the coaching that you had not expected?

Outcomes: To what extent did the coaching deliver concrete outcomes for you?

<u>Back up questions</u>

To what extent have you learned things that you can directly apply in the board?

How do you see the effect of your changed capability?

What do you think determined the type of impact the coaching had?

To what extent would you recommend coaching to other non-executive directors? Why?

Further Comments: Are there any other thoughts you would like to share with me about your experiences with coaching?

8.4   A sample page of the open coding document

Diverse views on the coaching practice

- "It is more accepted nowadays than it was five or 10 years ago"
- "Well, I work with boards of all different size in all sectors, private, public and voluntary sector. Both with individual board members and with teams."
- "I don't have a contract that it's coaching. I work with non-executive directors but from time to time and without long term contract"
- "Well, it depends on how you define coaching"
- "Board evaluation is often the starting point or the framework"
- "I've done much work with boards and I have always sat on boards as well"
- "No I would not use that name, coaching is for C- 1 or C-2"
- "Most of them don't believe they should be subjected to any form of performance appraising"
- "You know board members are often alpha males and females and it can be seen as a sign of weakness to work with a coach"

Loosely structured

- "So there are a lot of referrals and some find me through work that I have done at the business school"
- "I don't use any power points, I don't have any plans, I just have them sit in a half circle and ask: what is preventing you from being at your best?"
- "I present the outcomes to the chair or to the committee or whoever is in charge, and then there may be a follow up after that"
- "I started doing coaching of boards 15 years ago, first informal then more formal"
- "My last client was someone I was referred to through someone I sat next to at a lunch"
- So it tends to grow and more often than not the reason why I'm engaged in the first place is not actually the reason for the future work

Role unclarity & collaboration issues

- "Most of the stuff is focused on the dynamics of boards"

- "There can be a lot of tension and suspicion between board and executives"
- "They spent 45 mins talking about: what is our role?"
- "In a family company you have to deal with the board and the family system"
- "Many board members have untested assumptions about how things work"
- "They are sometimes not necessarily a team, they can represent different interests in the board"
- "Board members wanting to take over from executives"
- "Being an experienced executive does not make you a good board member"
- I would say it's often conflict management and courageous conversations in the board

8.5 Coding Schema

Verbatim Text	Node Coding	Themes	Category for Reporting purposes
"I don't have an contract that it's coaching. I work with non-executive directors but the last three years it was from time to time and without a long term contract"	Loosely contracting and planning for coaching	flexible intermittent relationship	How coaches engage with clients
"I don't use any power points, I don't have any plans, I just have them sit in a half circle and ask: what is preventing you from being at your best?"	Just asking questions	Loosely structured	Coaching approaches
"They spent 45 mins talking about: what is our role? What do we expect, what is our focus and our task?" "There can be a lot of tension and suspicion between board and executives"	Question marks about NED role and responsibility	NEDs struggling with their roles.	Issues addressed in the coaching
"So it tends to grow and more often than not the reason why I'm engaged in the first place is not actually the reason for the future work"	Often a need behind the presented need	Evolutionary nature of the coaching	How the relationship develops
"Yes. I find that the self-evaluation is a good starting point for the discussion because it allows all the board members both the executive and non-executive to comment on the effectiveness of the board, but also to comment on the effectiveness and the behaviour of their other colleagues around the board table"	Board self-evaluation as the frame for reflective discussion	Coaching being integrated	Positioning of coaching
"90% of the boards come to me. Usually the chair of the board or the chair of the governance committee." He continues: "The corporate secretary might come to me, but I have to educate the corporate secretary that I might work with them, but they are not my client. My client is the board. I have to be free to recommend courses of action to the board that might be adverse to that of senior management. So the client, for the coach, is not management."	Prioritising the chair and board as main beneficiaries of the coaching	NEDs in charge of their own coaching	Roles involved in initiating the coaching

8.6   Sample of important memos of analysis

Memo following interview with a coach:

January 2017

Contrary to other coaches one of this coach admits doing a lot of work with NEDs. It is her main client group and she does not coach any leaders. This is quite unique as others just occasionally coach NEDs. She also tends to focus on the whole board as the client, not contracting for individual work. This is interesting. How come she has a different practice? Is it because she is often asked for board evaluation? Does this focus of her practice increase her acceptance with NEDs, or is the nature of the work so much different that it is hard to combine different client groups?

Memo based on first data collection

February 2017

Observation from the interviews with coaches - They are all very passionate about this work with NEDS and love talking about it. They don't need a lot of encouragement. On the contrary if I don't intervene with my questions, they are so eager to provide their reflections that we risk deviating quite a bit. Apparently, there is something about the coaching of NEDs which makes them quite enthused to talk about it. Or they may just be happy to finally share their experiences.

Memo following first interviews with NEDs

January 2017

It seems that somehow my questions to NEDs are too restrictive and may inhibit participants from truly reflecting on their experience and providing me with real personal accounts of how they perceive the phenomenon. If I am truly interested in their experience the questions should perhaps only be about the coaching process and not so much about other things. I will try some different styles in the next interviews.

Memo regarding attitudes of coaches

September 2017

I notice during the interviews that some of the coaches are conveying; this work is not for everyone. You have to be very, very senior, somewhat of an elite coach. (Which of course refers to themselves). It is not exactly in their words but how they position the challenges you may encounter as coach. I find it a bit intimidating in a way as opposite to inviting you into something that can be learnt. I wonder what is going on here? Is it really only for the elite coaches and why? Or is it important for themselves to position the coaching this way?

8.7 UREC Follow up questions

Franklin Vrede

Doctorate of Coaching & Mentoring

UREC Registration No: 150922

Coaching as a learning and development intervention for non-executive directors: experiences, meanings and practices in use

<u>Follow up on conditions requested by the University Research Ethics Committee</u>

Nr.	Condition	Action	Attachment?
1	Forward a copy of the letter form INSEAD permitting access to their alumni for the research.	Permission has been granted by INSEAD, a copy of the letter will be attached.	YES
2.A.	When recruiting stakeholders, CEOs and HR directors should not pass on names and contact details to you as a third party. Instead, they should distribute information about the research to those who may be interested, instructing them to contact you for further details or to take part.	This text has been changed in the contact message to stakeholders	YES
2.B.	It would also be useful to attach the relevant information sheet to the email invitations	The information sheet will be attached.	YES

3.	Please would you provide more detail about the arrangements for data storage during fieldwork?	Data will be stored in a cloud storage facility called "Drop Box" that will be password protected and only accessible by the researcher.	
4.	Clarification is required on whether Franklin Vrede has any commercial conflict of interests in this research.	The researcher will not receive any financial compensation for the research activities, nor will he exploit the contacts commercially.	
5a.	Request for involvement of non-Executive Directors and stakeholders Please reword the first sentence relating to the way in which non-executive directors have been identified to receive an invitation to take part. Names and contact details should not be passed to a third party.	This has been amended in the contact message to non-executive directors and in the one for stakeholders.	YES
	Please explain that the interview would be audio-recorded.	This has been amended in the contact message for all three participant groups	YES
5b.	In the information sheet for stakeholders, the purpose of interviews with this group should be clearer i.e.	This has been amended in the information sheet for stakeholders	YES
	It should be clearly stated that any clients with whom the researcher continues to have a professional are not eligible to take part.	This has been amended in all information sheets	YES
	Any risks of taking part should be clearly stated together with steps taken to reduce them.	This has been amended in all information sheets	YES
	It is important to advise participants that information supplied can remain confidential only within the limitations of the law.	This has been amended in all information sheets	YES

	Please explain what would happen to data already supplied if the participant were to withdraw from the research.	This has been amended in all information sheets	YES
	Participants need to know how they can access a summary of the findings.	This has been amended in all information sheets	YES
	Please remove your home address from the correspondence.	This has been amended in all information sheets	
5c.	Consent form; If audio-recording is necessary for the research, you may wish to amend the wording of clause 4 to 'I understand that the interview would be audio-recorded' and make this clause non-optional.	Clause 4 has been amended in the consent form	YES