

Academic Paper

The purpose of organisational coaching: Time to explore and commit

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Abstract

In the fast-growing field of organisational coaching many issues identified in research and practice can be traced back to the fact that the purpose of this intervention continues to be merely assumed. This paper undertakes a critical examination of the main conundrums in practice and research that arise from the lack of appropriately considered purpose of organisational coaching. In order to generate a conceptual foundation for the necessary debates on these issues, a new framework is introduced that helps to identify and structure the essential layers of consideration concerned with the purpose of coaching. The proposed framework, together with a set of underlying principles, is designed to support meaningful integrations of coaching research studies as well as resolving some challenging issues for practitioners, educators and sponsors of coaching. As an example of using the framework I offer a way of defining the purpose of organisational coaching which should allow the practice to be better placed for responding to current and future challenges.

Keywords

organisational coaching, purpose of service, conceptual framework, layers of consideration

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Introduction

What might come as a surprise to many stakeholders of coaching is that the answer to what should be considered as the most important question 'what is the purpose of this practice?', is not as clear as might be assumed. Some constituents of this question that give rise to its complexity include:

- Who is the *main* client of coaches: individual client or organisation?
- What is the purpose of coaching engagements as conceived by the coach?
- How the quality of organisational coaching engagements should be assessed?
- Who is the ultimate judge of the quality of a coaching session?

As these questions remain largely unanswered, multiple problems associated with this situation continue to be manifested in tensions and challenges for coaches, clients, professional bodies,

researchers and coaching sponsors. I list some of these, indicating examples of publications that identify these challenges:

- Accepted definition of coaching (e.g., Passmore et al., 2018; Cavanagh, 2009)
- Is coaching a profession? (e.g., Lane et al., 2017)
- If yes, how unique is its contribution? (e.g., Cox et al., 2014; Fillery-Travis and Collins, 2017)
- Ethical issue caused by lack of clarity about the purpose of coaching (e.g., Iordanou and Williams, 2017; Bachkirova, 2023)
- Neutrality of coaches (e.g., Fatien et al., 2022)
- Criteria of coaching effectiveness (e.g., Bozer and Jones, 2018; Grief, 2017)
- Coaches' fitness for purpose (e.g., Garvey, 2017; Lane, 2017)
- Competences and capabilities of coaches (e.g., Bachkirova and Lawton-Smith, 2015)

The conceptual issues inherent in each of the above questions and tensions have been discussed only in a limited way (e.g., Grant, 2013; Garvey, 2017; Myers and Bachkirova, 2020). Typically, some of these discussions arise in response to particular research or practical challenges, such as identifying criteria of effectiveness of coaching, designing assessment centres for coaches or developing competence frameworks for coaches. One of the explanations for this situation is that the discipline of coaching is lagging behind practice (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019; Fatien et al., 2022) and the needs of the fast-developing industry often have been taking priority. As the result, the debates that are required for addressing difficult questions, remain patchy and non-influential.

Another explanation can be identified by viewing it through the lens of Krishnamurti's metaphorical problematisation of the human predicament in addressing many existential questions. He said: *We open this door, but keep that one closed, for we want the fresh breeze only through a particular opening. We never go outside or open all the doors and windows at the same time* (1956: 165). In applying this challenge to coaching we could see that there might be self-serving interests not to 'open all doors' to the central difficult question of what the purpose of organisational coaching is. However, without attending to it we will only be tinkering with various ideas considering the future of coaching and, as researchers, will continue collecting marginal evidence and developing localised theories.

It is important, however, to acknowledge that such a task is not an easy undertaking. Coaching is not the only professional activity that faces the challenge of multiple stakeholders' considerations and competing ideas about their purposes (e.g., Egan, 1997). In some fields these competing ideas remain irreconcilable, for example, punishment vs rehabilitation as the purposes of prisons (e.g., Dennett and Caruso, 2021). In education, there still exists a clash of ideas between socialisation vs introduction to the world of knowledge vs development of unique individuality as the purposes of education (Egan, 1997). Even the presumed clarity of the purpose of businesses and corporations has been recently challenged (e.g., Mayer, 2021).

Admittedly though, while struggling to find a golden mean between incompatible purposes, these professions do not shy away from exploring such thorny questions. However, the debates of the purpose of organisational coaching are glaringly missing in the coaching literature. It is important to recognise, at the same time, that the magnitude of this issue requires an appropriate conceptual scaffolding for the conversations to be held. To support such scaffolding, this paper introduces a framework based on an academically informed, pluralistic and critical stance.

The paper will start with a discussion of why addressing the question of the purpose of coaching is important in principle and why it is critical now. The framework for scaffolding the discussion on this topic is introduced next, with implications for various stakeholders of coaching. Finally, I will provide an example of using the proposed framework by advocating a purpose of organisational coaching that is justified in the current state of the world.

What is purpose and why it is needed?

To begin, we need to consider why it is important to reconceptualise the purpose of coaching, thinking about purpose as the reason for being 'not what you do, but who you are' (Leider, 1998; Mayer, 2021). As such, it is not the same as goals set by clients. Cavanagh (2013: 171) tells us that "purpose denotes the pattern of commitments (i.e., desires, higher order values, hopes, fears and responsibilities) that give meaning to human activity. Rather than a clear end state, purpose can be thought of as the set of criteria by which one judges, in hindsight, the degree to which something of value has been achieved". This implies that coaches should be aware of their pattern of commitments from the start of coaching. For each coach this often requires negotiating between competing values and desires - a task of tall order.

However, when considering such commitments for the entirety of a legitimate professional service such as organisational coaching, this task becomes even more difficult. In this case, the purpose should not be mundane (just what we do), nor aspirational (something unrealistic like a mission statement, e.g., to solve the world) (Mayer, 2021). It requires careful analysis of what problems we aim to solve by the means available to us and who are the main recipients of our service, without damaging other legitimate parties or causes involved.

The level of analysis required for such a task implies a serious commitment which often stems from the recognition of the importance of the task. As this has not been done so far in relation to organisational coaching, to generate such commitment, some important reasons should be recognised as to why it deserves our attention. It makes sense to start from recognising where this task sits in the cycle of emerging professions in principle, and then to see why critical timing for this conversation in organisational coaching is now.

Significance of professional services

New businesses and professional services often begin from responding to the emerging needs of potential recipients (Alvesson, 2001; von Nordenflight, 2010; Breakey, 2016). Solutions are found with the following sophistication of methodologies for providing such solutions in respond to market demands. Only later is appropriate consideration of their significance undertaken, which includes a proper discussion about the purpose of the service and implications of its existence for *all* relevant parties, including societies and environment. The questions to be asked are:

- What is this solution good for?
- What might it damage?
- How can we evaluate the degree of its influence?
- Who should be involved in such evaluation?

Without consideration of these questions some services or technological advances can lead to devastating consequences (Breakey, 2016). For example, those creating the atom bomb, were clearly focusing on the process of finding a technological solution rather than the properly identified purpose of their inventions. However, this stage in the development of innovations and professional services, that emerge according to 'demand-supply' principle, is often missed and has to be addressed later to avoid various issues.

Coaching as a service is not unusual in terms of the demand-supply pattern of development. We can situate coaching within a chronological sequence of evolving professional practices that emerged to meet changing societal demands by looking at the history of psychotherapy, counselling and, ultimately, coaching. In each case certain *demand* issues can be recognised (e.g., loosened tribal and family structures that increase social isolation and mental health concerns) that were responded to with efforts to create a *supply* to meet such needs (i.e., practitioners with relevant skills). Although not explicitly presented as a demand-supply analysis, Engel (2008) for

example, describes a detailed history of American therapy that accords with such an analytic frame.

As individuals recognized that the 'helping by talking' approach need not be limited to healing dysfunction or coping with challenges (as with psychotherapy and counselling), the utility of using such methods for facilitating human growth and development became prevalent. The emergence of coaching is the next step in this trajectory, with organisations utilizing such services for improving e.g., performance and leadership skills of individuals. At the same time, just following the 'demand-supply' drive has been conducive to missing the stage of considering the significance of coaching practice and its purpose.

In other disciplines that connect organisational coaching interventions to their host, some attempts are made to rectify the missing stage of considering significance of service. For example, in Human Resource Development (HRD) practice, Bates and Chen (2004) drew on three paradigms to identify often conflicting aims: to encourage learning, to increase performance and to enhance meaning in work. By this, they attempted to bring together the values of organizations and the values of individuals, a task fulfilled in only a limited way.

A more recent example of relevant conceptual work (Mayer, 2021) is remarkable in many ways, but particularly in relation to deeper understanding of activities that have existed for a long time without full conceptual understanding of the implications of their existence. Mayer's analysis includes consideration of businesses as solving problems with the purpose 'to produce profitable solutions to the problems of people and planet' and 'not to profit from producing problems for people or planet' (British Academy, 2018; Mayer, 2018). The nuance of offering such overarching purposes includes "finding ways of solving problems profitably where profits are defined as net of the costs of avoiding and remedying problems" (Mayer, 2021: 889). By defining purpose and profits in this way, Mayer (2021) argues that businesses may have whatever purposes they seem appropriate without disadvantaging any party. Profits become only legitimate if they are not earned at the expense of other parties and the purpose statement includes that they are not profiting from producing problems. Mayer's paper is a great example of addressing the missing stage of professional purpose that organisational coaching can take on board for dealing with many problems that are identifiable in relation governing, ethics, knowledge development and other practical issues.

Staying in touch with reality

Timing is another reason to address the purpose of organisational coaching and to reconsider the values that have been assumed in the absence of clarity. It prompts revisiting the history of this field, current challenges and what is looming in the future. When coaching was introduced and began to flourish some three decades ago, the progress was evident and celebrated in political, economic and social arenas worldwide. Coaching was part of the stream that could be described as 'growth'. The idea of ever continuous economic growth 30 years ago was expected to trickle down to quality of life and was reflected in the organisational and individual aspirations for development and even transformation that coaching was offering (Brock, 2009). The offer of coaching is still based on the same values, implies the same philosophical positions, and continues to support the same theoretical orthodoxy.

However, we live now in the world that is significantly different (Jones, 2023; Mayer, 2021). To illustrate such difference, a report issued by the United Nations recorded that human development declined in 90% of countries for two years in a row, a fall without precedent for more than three decades (UN, 2022). In addition to deterioration of living standards, security and wellbeing in nearly every part of the world, we also observe far-reaching social and economic shifts, dangerous environmental changes and increases in political and social polarisation (Jones, 2023). In the UK, life expectancy declined from 79 to 76 years even before the Covid pandemic. In the US, the suicide rate increased by 30% in the first 20 years of the 21st century (Garnett et al., 2022). Globally, instances of depression are increased by almost a fifth between 2005 and 2015. Although

it was obvious for a while that technological advancement does not automatically translate into improvement in human conditions, another sobering message comes from the authors of the *Limits to Growth* (1972) – a bible of the environmental movement. Fifty years after its publication, the modelling shows that with the growing world's population, the rate of increase in pollution levels and depletion of natural resources are fundamentally exponential. However, our technological capacity to remediate these problems appears to be confined to a linear trajectory (Herrington, 2021).

As the world is changing, organisations are now called to reassess their purpose in order to not profit from producing problems (Mayer, 2021). This means that in the world of now, the 'movement for more' that coaching used to serve, is not consensually seen as the main priority. A clear sign of current concerns in the world is that humanity is reassessing individual needs and wants and adjusting ambitious expectations. This means that such process has to be reflected in the purpose of coaching.

Another challenge associated with 'timing' comes from a potential future that is actively discussed in nearly all areas of life in light of the new developments in artificial intelligence (AI). Some in the coaching community respond to this challenge with excitement, foreseeing opportunity of technological advancements in their practice and updating their marketing materials (e.g., Barney, 2018; Kellogg and Hadley, 2023). Others are apprehensive (e.g., Wright and O'Connor, 2021) even without considering potential threats of being 'replaced' by AI coaches – a topic of high relevance for professions based on information processing and offering knowledge-based solutions. Others carefully consider potential issues specific to the coaching field and gathering data of the tangible impact of AI with technology that is currently available (Graßmann and Schermuly, 2021; Terblanche et al. 2022). Without minimising these genuine anticipations and concerns, I would argue that the best thing about AI disruption in the coaching field so far, is the realisation that in order for us to compare human coaching and AI coaching we need to become much clearer what it is that we actually do and what is unique in what we offer. In other words, the concerns generated by AI give added impetus to the question of the purpose of organisational coaching.

Problems that the lack of purpose creates

In this section I will highlight three main problems that the field of organisational coaching encounters because its purpose is not being explicitly stated. These problems are often created by the very first unresolved constituent question of who the main client of coaches is, individual or organisation. In comparison to consulting, which clearly operates in order to benefit organisations, and psychotherapy that functions with the aim of helping individuals, organisational coaching generally tends to 'sit on the fence' (e.g., Segers et al., 2011; Hawkins and Smith, 2013; Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018). As the result of this 'fence-sitting' at the level of the profession, coaches often face difficult choices and learn to resolve these in various ways.

In coaching communities, most often one can hear that coaches put the individual client first, especially when confidentiality of coaching content is concerned (Louis and Fatien, 2019; Korotov et al., 2012). However, when commissioned, nearly all coaches are briefed by the organizational sponsor and/or line manager about why coaching is needed, often without the individual client being present. To live with this tension, some coaches, simply avoid resolving it - they proclaim allegiance to the 'no agenda' rule for the coach (Louis and Fatien, 2019), which is also demanded by the typical competences-based guides for practice. Often, coaches' training does not encourage them to consider what the purpose of *their* offer is apart from helping clients to achieve their goals. In this case, the process becomes an expression of 'value-neutral instrumentalism', which means "a professional service provided to clients in order for them to achieve their goals, *whatever these goals might be*" (Bachkirova et al. 2017: 36).

There are, of course, 'lucky' circumstances in which the individual client *is* fully in charge of the coaching agenda. This reduces the tension of 'sitting on the fence' but not without other challenges. In this case, this service explicitly privileges the individual context in terms of determining and evaluating potential outcomes, i.e., to help achieve outcomes which coachees value (Bozer and Jones, 2018). This may lead to coaching being in service to narrow utilitarian needs and perhaps justifies accusations aimed at the coaching industry concerning disastrous decisions leaders sometimes make while being coached (Hawkins and Turner, 2020).

Some coaches choose to commit to individuals as part of their own identified purpose of coaching. However, without recognised formal acknowledgement of such purpose on the level of the profession, this decision comes with the need to keep the organisation happy by creating sufficiently vague contracts into which any of the individual goals, initial or emerging, can fit. This is often a challenge to individual integrity, and coaches opt to live with such compromises and cope with the emotional labour this creates (Kemp, 2022). Some, however, do not want to compromise and choose to be open about such purpose, aiming to educate the commissioning client about what they believe is a realistic nature of coaching. This is a risky approach that often leaves coaches out of the preference lists of organisations, creating limitations to their practice (Kemp, 2022).

Another way of not 'sitting on the fence' is to side up with other stakeholders, often under the umbrella of systemic approaches. There are well-known figures in the field who advocate the role of coaches in expanding the client's responsibility for wider organizational and societal needs (Hawkins and Smith, 2013; Hawkins and Turner, 2020) or influencing leaders in becoming, for example, more spiritually oriented (Whitmore, 2008). These theoretically consistent but ideologically driven positions clash with the cherished principles of autonomy and self-determination of the client and therefore minimize the effectiveness of coaching. They might also present a problem when organizational needs are strongly prioritized in the multi-stakeholder contracting by shaping individuals according to the organization's short-term and self-serving needs thereby stifling those who might otherwise be able to challenge the status quo and bring new ideas with wider and long-term consequences (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019; Garvey, 2011; Shoukry, 2017; Meier and Carroll, 2020).

To summarise, the choices that organisational coaches have in the absence of a clearly identified purpose of the profession lead to the profession being in a dire state as vividly described by Kemp (2022: 194) on the basis of the research on emotional labour of coaching. Answering the question of 'Who are we as a profession?' he named it as:

...eclectic, diverse, largely undefined, largely unfettered, operating in a grey context of rules and governance, in an unclear and undesirable commercial exchange – but still labouring, in and out of the coaching room towards our personal perceptions of what 'good looks like' in coaching practice.

In order to change this situation, we need to discuss what we all can openly commit to, which, at the same time, makes organisational coaching different from other professional services. It would also help us to solve some of the problems we face, a selection of which are the following:

- a viable definition of organisational coaching
- how the quality of coaching engagements in organisation should be assessed
- how to resolve multiple ethical issues.

Defining coaching

In contrast to many other problems, the complexity of defining coaching is discussed at length in the coaching literature, admittedly with limited success (e.g., Lane et al. 2017; Passmore, 2021; Bachkirova and Kauffman, 2009). Some authors argue that the lack of clear definitions may well

diminish the field in the eyes of members of other professions and clients. For example, it is quite common to hear that coaching lacking an identity, merely blends different approaches that use theory eclectically and creates uncertainty mixed with unnecessary mystique (Peltier, 2009; Ellinger, Hamlin and Beattie, 2008). The identity argument is often associated with it being underdeveloped empirically and theoretically, which makes it difficult to judge the value of coaching (Fillery-Travis and Collins, 2017). As an extension of these arguments, there is the view that the absence of a clear definitions makes research findings less transferable and, ultimately, less impactful (Bachkirova, Spence and Drake, 2017). At the same time, other authors argue against any precision in defining coaching suggesting that this might limit our creativity (Cavanagh, 2009).

It is not surprising then that the task of defining 'organisational coaching' becomes even more challenging. The most recent and well-known definitions of coaching do not mention organisational context as far as the purpose is concerned (e.g., Grant, 2019; Bozer and Jones, 2018; Woudstra, 2021). Where other stakeholders are mentioned, the degree of their benefit is identified as 'potential' (Bachkirova, Cox and Clutterbuck, 2018: 1). Even in explicitly organisational context, e.g., 'executive coaching' or 'organisational coaching' some authors propose quite specific aims, which could be seen as too modest: "to create awareness as a catalyst for learning and growth" (Woudstra, 2021: 39) or following Dewey (1916: 54), "an added capacity for growth" (in Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019). There are, however, those who tend to define coaching in highly ambitious terms. For example, Hannafey and Vitulano (2012: 599) start with the purpose of coaching formulated in terms of the benefits for people: "to improve professional human functioning and flourishing in organisations". However, this is followed by a huge claim: "to transform executives and make them more effective in their life and work in the organization".

In addition, the problem with the lack of common definitions of coaching stems not only from underdeveloped conceptual understanding of the purpose of coaching in organisations, but also from them being treated as a marketing and sales product - an "elevator pitch" (Passmore, 2021: 3). With lack of the former and the needs of the latter, organisational coaches are left on their own in terms of this task. Similarly, organisations are free to interpret and use this service as they see fit, hence the warning issued by the Dublin Declaration on Coaching (2008: 9): "In the absence of us defining ourselves the market will do it for us".

On the whole, what makes definitions of organisational coaching inadequate:

- Lack of clarity about who the main recipient of coaching is and how the organisation can benefit
- Lack of specificity in terms of how the means of influences that are available to coaches match the desirable outcomes
- Insufficient differentiation from other professional services, e.g., training, consultancy, therapy.

Evaluating the quality of coaching

If we are not clear about what we offer, we cannot be clear about how to evaluate the quality of our work. This is a very serious problem affecting every aspect of our field. It affects the reputation of coaching as one of the main criteria for the professional service to be recognised amongst others and for potential clients, is how effective this intervention is. Although a good number of outcomes studies have been conducted demonstrating the effectiveness of coaching (e.g., Grief, 2017; Theeboom, Beersma and van Vianen, 2014; de Haan and Nilsson, 2023), what is meant by 'effectiveness' and how it is assessed are still open questions. This issue equally affects the ambition of coaching to be evidence-based, as the notion of evidence is supposed to be closely connected to the purpose of practice and the way this purpose is achieved (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006; Grant, 2012).

According to Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006), before we can ask whether coaching works we must ask what it is being used for, and this is where the problems begin. Grant (2012, 2013), providing

many examples from the vast range of issues addressed in coaching, concludes that there is an almost endless list of applications. For example, in therapy there are general indicators of the quality of service such as subjective well-being, symptom reduction and life functioning (e.g., Howard et al, 1996), each useful as outcome measures. In coaching, however, it is difficult to identify the outcome measures which are applicable to the whole range of coaching interventions (Greif, 2017). The majority of these outcomes are also difficult to quantify and integrate in order to ascertain the effectiveness of coaching interventions, making it difficult to standardise any outcome evaluation methods (McDowall and Lai, 2018).

To add to the above challenges, let us consider two alternatives. If coaching is mainly a *performance-enhancing organisational intervention*, there would have to be an expectation that those receiving coaching would demonstrate measurably improved performance. However, assuming that such evaluation could be simple is naïve even if it is attractive in a complex and confusing world (Cavanagh, 2013). Performance is not a function of the individual; it is a property of the whole system, that includes the team they work with, the nature of the situation, task in hand, etc. The desire to simplify in these circumstances can lead to researchers selecting outcomes only because they can be measured (Easton and Van Laar, 2013). Furthermore, if coaching is sponsored by an organisation, it is difficult to establish who the main provider of information about the effectiveness of coaching should be: the client, the coach, the purchaser of the service or those on the receiving end of the changes that are made by the client?

If coaching is an intervention in service of an individual client in the context of organisations, a high degree of complexity in evaluating the results remains, because coaching is an intervention influenced by many different factors such as the client's attitude, their personal situation, the coaches' skills, the quality of coach/client relationship, etc. It is very difficult to tease these apart. Making the individual client the major judge of the coaching outcomes, by, for example, the degree of goal attainment and satisfaction with coaching being major criteria (Grant, 2013; Grief, 2017), is uninformative and leaves coaching open to misuse. We should not delegate the important task of considering what service we offer, in its full extent to our clients, whoever they are.

The issue of quality of coaching is also very important for assessment of coaches and requires a seriously considered view of the purpose of coaching particularly in its organisational context. Without this we do not even have criteria of what a good coaching session is. For example, the International Coaching Federation (ICF) and the Association of Coaching (AC), as part of the assessment process require candidates to submit audio recordings of coaching sessions (ICF, 2019; AC, 2019). These sessions are assessed by observers who use their professional judgement to evaluate coaching sessions according to an expected set of competences indicators. However useful each set of indicators can be, it might provide only a superficial view on the quality of the session if there is no meaningful outcome to be considered as a criterion. This process also prioritises the viewpoint of an independent expert observer, who, by definition, is outside of the relationship between the coach and client, which has been considered fundamental to the success of coaching (De Haan and Gannon, 2017; Myers and Bachkirova, 2020).

A final concern relates to potential obstacles for developing the knowledge base of coaching. Until a reasonable way of conceptualising coaching is proposed, the onus continues to fall upon researchers to provide clear descriptions of the coaching interventions they study, in order for their findings to be comparable to others (Bachkirova et al. 2017). This transparency is needed for the integrity of the evidence-based approach to the development of the discipline resulting in a rich multidimensional picture of the way coaching is conceived and practiced in the real world. However pragmatic this appears under the circumstances, the question remains if describing such reality is the only value that researchers can add to this discipline.

To summarise, this group of problems triggering the need to discuss the purpose of organisational coaching include:

- Lack of understanding on what we mean by the effectiveness of coaching and what we take as the evidence of quality of coaching
- Arbitrary choices of the judges of coaching effectiveness
- Lack of clarity even about the quality of a single coaching session.

Ethical concerns

A third group of problems associated with the purpose of coaching are those of an *ethical nature*. To understand how we end up with a growing number of various ethical dilemmas and serious issues (Iordanou and Williams, 2017; Louis and Fatien, 2019; Fatien et al., 2022), we need, first of all, to revisit the uniqueness of coaching in comparison to other professional services. Organisational coaching is probably the only professional service that is a) based on high degree of trust and even intimacy in the relationship between the individual client and the coach, as the condition of the quality of coaching, and b) at the same time, financially fully dependent on another party that has an invested interest in the outcomes of such relationship. Dealing with this ethically complex arrangement is a highly sensitive task. This is possibly why we avoid committing to a clear purpose of our service as this could undermine one or the other of the conditions for its existence.

Although all professional bodies are keen to offer ethical guidance, the lack of clarity about who we serve as coaches: individual clients, or sponsoring organisations or other parties, leads to the ethical codes being extremely vague or making unrealistic demands on coaches (GCoE, 2021; Bachkirova, 2023). This is not surprising, as one of the important conditions for an ethical code to be viable for a particular group of people is that this group should share core values in relation to the area of life or work in question. However, this is only possible when that particular group have established that they have an agreed upon *common purpose*. With this purpose and these values, they are in a position to define common strategies and so constitute an ethical code of practice (Marks, 2013).

Without such an ethical code, coaches have to manoeuvre around multiple issues with negative consequences for themselves and their clients, as evidenced in research on coaching (e.g., Fatien et al., 2022; Schermuly, 2014; Kemp, 2022) and supervision (e.g., Graßmann and Schermuly, 2018; Muller, Kotte and Moller, 2020). This means that coaches are left to their own devices in terms of doing a good job and maintaining their own integrity. This is why to be ready to deal with such dilemmas they benefit from developing their own philosophy and purpose of coaching - an approach advocated in some coach development programmes and publications (e.g., Jackson and Bachkirova, 2018).

To illustrate the complexity of ethical issues as described, we can consider what options coaches in organisations have. If they decide that organisational coaching is mainly a *performance-enhancing organisational intervention*, the coach and the client become a 'means to the organisation's ends'. The organisation takes priority in the process of negotiating the goals of coaching, can claim the rights to monitor the process and often even specifies tools and interventions that the coach should use. Although the goals are supposed to be negotiated, the organisation is a much more powerful party. It is often impossible to ascertain to what degree the client succumbs to the priorities of organisation. Under these conditions, coaches concerned with working ethically, need to be very open about their degree of dependence on the organisation and its priorities, so that clients themselves can decide what degree of their self-disclosure such conditions allow, which might, as a result, limit the effectiveness of coaching.

If organisational coaches are fully committed to individual clients' priorities and interests, as they emerge, it is the organisation and its financial investment in coaching that could become the means for the clients' and coach's ends. On the one hand, the choice of these coaches would be in line with recent publications and studies suggesting that coaching is more effective if goals are emerging rather than fixed at the start (Clutterbuck and Spence, 2017). A trusting relationship with clients becomes possible, which is an important factor for effective coaching (de Haan and

Gannon, 2017). On the other hand, it becomes a task of the coach to communicate with the commissioning client and defend the value of their work when it might only be 'visible' to the individual client. This is a difficult task, particularly for those less experienced and less confident coaches, as they run the risk of not being a coach of choice for future work in this organisation. This often leads to declining enthusiasm and increased emotional labour of the practitioners (Kemp, 2022) along with growing disillusionment and even cynicism about coaching practice within organisations (Schermully, 2014; Kemp, 2022).

To add to these ethical issues, more recently growing awareness and legitimate concerns about the state of the world give rise to progressive movements supporting activism, e.g., in relation to saving environment or fighting for equality. Coaches may find themselves sympathetically aligning with these movements (e.g., Whybrow et al., 2023). This brings a much wider group of coaching stakeholders to the table of ethical discussions and makes consideration of the purpose of organisational coaching even more challenging. With these agendas in mind, coaches might assume to be outside the power structures of the organisations they work for, when in fact they might be an instrument of power by the nature of their contract. These situations desperately need some decisions about the purpose of organisational coaching that we can hold in common.

To summarise the problems related to the ethics of organisational coaching, the following concerns can be indicated:

- Absence of agreed common purpose of organisational coaching as a condition for viable codes of ethics
- Lack of clear guidance for less experienced coaches in terms of positioning their service in organisations in ethical ways
- Lack of educational material for coaching sponsors about the conditions for ethical coaching.

To end this section, which is about problems, I would like to conclude with a note of hope. I believe that the task of appropriately defining the purpose of organisational coaching is achievable. When done it will help to promote better functioning of this field, including education, governance, knowledge development and ethical practice in the changing organisational environments. Here are more specific benefits we can look forward to:

- A better sense of contribution to the wider problems in the world
- Clearer boundaries with other professional services/activities
- Opportunities for more effective governance of the profession (e.g., gate keeping)
- More meaningful criteria for outcome research
- A solid foundation for ethical guidance
- A more informed curricular for coaching education.

Introducing the framework

In this section, I will offer a framework that should serve as the conceptual scaffolding for the discussions about the purpose of coaching in a structured and coherent way. To start with, this framework suggests the kinds of problems that we face in relation to purpose of organisational coaching, which are grouped in five categories or layers. After a description of the problems in each group, some of which are summarised from the previous section of this paper, the framework identifies the main stakeholders affected by these problems and therefore being the interested parties in discussions. The following columns of the framework describe the role that the purpose can play in addressing these problems and how success can be evaluated. In the final column I name each group capturing their conceptual nature and calling these as layers of consideration. They are seen as layers not to imply a hierarchy of importance or multiple perspectives for analysis, but rather different areas of interests in the process of understanding and developing

professional services and corresponding disciplines of knowledge. These layers are named as Meta/Philosophical, Socio-psychological, Ethical, Empirical and Instrumental (Table 1).

Table 1: Conceptual framework for consideration of the purpose of organisational coaching

Problem(s) to address	Stakeholders affected	The roles of coaching purpose	Evaluation measures	Layers of consideration
Lack of integration of multiple priorities of clients, teams, organisations and societies; lack of clarity as to the uniqueness of coaching	Wider societies; the future of the profession; governance of coaching; education and development of coaches	Purpose as an overarching and unique role of organisational coaching as a profession in complex and changing contexts and times with consideration of potentials and constraints of the methods available to coaches	Clarity of messages about what coaching can offer; rational curricular of educational programmes and accreditation	Meta/Philosophical
Lack of appreciation of the client as a free agent; lack of vision about their long-term professional strategies beneficial for organisations	Individual clients; coaching educators; organisations in the long run; societies in the long run	Purpose as a trajectory of the individual client's professional life, in light of their social positions, psychological needs, as well as demands of current social situations and long-term intentions, available to explore under condition of trust	Recognition of new capabilities by the client and relevant parties; appropriate actions undertaken	Socio-psychological
Multiple ethical dilemmas; vagueness in the codes of ethics	Coaches; supervisors; educators; professional bodies; immediate societies	Purpose as a guide for ethical practice in complex contexts, particularly when conflicts of interests between stakeholders of coaching are involved	Progress in resolving ethical dilemmas; clarity of ethical guidance	Ethical
Lack of rationale for choosing criteria of coaching effectiveness; difficulties with integration of studies	All researchers; all users of research	Purpose as a centralising anchor for multiple coaching outcomes relevant to different stakeholders, against which coaching interventions can be evaluated and appropriate measures identified	Justified rationales for chosen methods and evaluation criteria; meaningful meta-analyses of coaching studies	Empirical
Aiming for the unachievable by means of coaching; unclear markers of progress; misalignments with sponsors	Clients; coaches; coaching educators; organisational sponsors; commissioning clients	Purpose as narrowed down to the specific goals (initial and emerging) of coaching engagement and negotiated between an individual/team client and organisation representatives, if appropriate	Progress markers; achievement of goals aligned with a meaningful overarching purpose	Instrumental

Purpose in the Meta/Philosophical layer of consideration

Consideration of purpose in this layer indicates what organisational coaching as a professional activity has to offer to organisations and societies in complex and changing contexts and times with attention to the implications of this offer. For example, it is with this focus of attention that the most important questions should be addressed, such as who the deciding party of the specific aims of organisational coaching is and to whom the coach is accountable. It does not imply exclusivity of the rights of individual or organisational client but has to indicate which commitments take priority where there are situations of conflicts of interests. As this layer includes the widest group of stakeholders, in order to provide the most comprehensive guidance to the field it requires a high level of forum for discussions, representing professional bodies, educational institutions, organisations and, potentially, wider public. In the absence of such forum, coaching providers should engage in the highest level of conceptual thinking in order to identify a coherent and value-based service they can offer. Here are the principles that are suggested to be adhered to in this layer of consideration

- The purpose of professional coaching should be considered and aligned with organisational purposes and strategies which are not being designed to profit from creating problems for the wider world (Mayer, 2021).

- The professional offer should be commensurable with the methods available to organisational coaches without overstating the power of these methods.
- The purpose of the organisational coaching should be explicit when professional service to organisations is introduced.

Purpose in the Socio-psychological layer of consideration

In this case, consideration of purpose should start from the recognition of the actual recipients of the service and the nature of coaching as a joint and active inquiry based on the dialogue and trusting relationship between the coach and individual clients (Cox, 2013; Bennett and Campone, 2017). To initiate a viable relationship, the coach should care about the trajectory of the individual clients' professional life with recognition of their current psychological needs and long-term aspiration. The key principles of this layer are:

- The purpose in relation to the recipients of organisational coaching should be established in the condition of respect for self-determination and autonomy of the clients as far as their professional development and career aspirations are concerned (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Joseph, 2014; Jackson and Cox, 2018).
- As quality of coaching relationship is a necessary condition of coaching, coaches should be trustworthy and not conceal from clients any information that is necessary for clients to make decisions about their developmental intentions.
- Coaching providers should inform organisations about the potentials and limitations of their role in light of the nature of coaching both in their marketing materials and negotiation of contracts.

Purpose in the layer of Ethics

In this layer, we recognize that current and long-term needs of both, individual clients and organisations can be in conflict. Conflicts force us to articulate under what conditions a compromise is possible and what values cannot be overrun. Therefore, even when a pragmatic approach is required, I would argue that the key principles of this layer should be based on the following values:

- Human dignity is the right of a person to be valued and respected for their own sake, which implies treating both ourselves and others, not just as a means, but as an end in themselves (Kant, 1959).
- The actions of the coach are moral if they believe it would be right for everybody else to undertake them on the same principle in similar circumstances (Levine, 2016).

Purpose in the Empirical layer

A challenge of this layer is that outcomes of organisational coaching are not the product of coaches' skills and methodologies exclusively, even if these play a role. They are the product of multiple factors that include the effort and commitment of the client, the quality of relationship between the client and the coach, the organisational context and time of the intervention. At the same time, coaching interventions can contribute to different valuable outcomes even if they were not specified by the goals of coaching. The value can also be different for different stakeholders of coaching. Therefore, there could be many indicators according to which the value and effectiveness of coaching can be judged and, if possible, measured. Researchers have rights to explore coaching interventions and to use outcomes against different criteria that might be valued by different stakeholders. However, in addition to applying any other criteria of research quality, in choosing their outcomes researchers need to demonstrate how these outcomes relate to an overarching purpose of organisational coaching. If, for example, the cost-effectiveness is not part of the purpose of coaching, return on investment becomes an irrelevant measure (Grant, 2013). If the

purpose of coaching includes fulfilment of the clients' experience of coaching, then it is justified that clients become the judges of the effectiveness of coaching. The key principles of this layer are:

- Researchers must be explicit about how their chosen evaluation criteria relate to the overarching purpose of organisational coaching.
- Researchers should avoid generalized statements about effectiveness of coaching.
- Evaluation of the quality of a single coaching session should include consideration of the overarching purpose of coaching in addition to evaluation of the coach competences.

Purpose in the Instrumental layer

In the instrumental layer, purpose provides the scope within which the specific goals of organisational coaching are identified as desirable by the client and negotiated, if appropriate, with organisational sponsors. Goals can be identified at the initial stages of contracting as has been practised traditionally. They can also emerge after a thorough analysis of the client's environment, situation and individual developmental challenges and aspirations (Clutterbuck and Spence, 2017). It would be sensible to interpret a typical phrase that is used in contracting 'begin with an end in mind' as referring not to the specific goals, but to the overarching purpose of coaching as in 'what it offers as a service'. The key principles of this layer are:

- Coaching goals should be aligned with the purpose of organisational coaching.
- The purpose of organisational coaching as a service should be made known to the individual and commissioning clients before specific goals are discussed.

Relationship between the layers of consideration

All layers in exploration of the purpose of organisational coaching are important and naturally interconnected. However, the role of the meta/philosophical layer is special as all others are in various degrees dependent on it. This means that engaging first with this layer becomes the prime condition for meaningful coaching work with individuals in the socio-psychological terms or for more effective strategies to ensure ethical coaching. Although the empirical layer seems open to many different ways of evaluating coaching outcomes, the meta level becomes very important for integration purposes of research studies and meta-analyses, especially as far as the claims about effectiveness of coaching in general are concerned. There might be an argument that at the instrumental level the overarching purpose of organisational coaching might be less significant as there is a huge variety of specific goals in coaching engagements. I would argue, however, that recognition of such purpose would minimise the anxiety of new coaches about appropriateness of specific coaching goals and legitimise more freedom and creativity in determining the focus of coaching for all others. More importantly, this will make contracting in organisations more honest and realistic for all parties involved (Fatien et al., 2022; Kemp, 2022).

Using the framework

The framework for exploring coaching purpose can be used to indicate the order of conceptual work required in examining potential purposes with addition of applying the relevant principles for exploration of each layer. The order of exploration suggests meta/philosophical layer to be the first as a demonstration of its crucial role. Then the following layers can be considered by relevant stakeholders for their practical purposes with an expectation that the expressions of the coaching purpose in each layer are aligned with the central purpose identified at the meta layer.

To demonstrate the conceptual work according this framework and the relationship between each layer I will describe an example of a purpose of organisational coaching that I personally advocate (Table 2). I recognize, of course, that any brief justification that I can provide in this example, mainly

for the meta layer, with some implications of adapting such purpose in other layers, would only be the beginning of the conceptual work that would be required to adapt such a purpose.

Table 2: Example of conceptual work according to proposed framework to introduce a purpose of organisational coaching

Steps of conceptual work	Content of conceptual work
Meta/Philosophical layer of consideration	<p><i>First</i>, I believe it is important to consider what is more influential in the desirable social changes? Does this happen through change in individuals or through socio-economic and political structures and reforms? Contrary to those who believe that social existence fully determines human consciousness, I am inclined to agree with philosophers such as Unger (2007), who see human beings as those who live in contexts whilst not being entirely bound by those contexts. There is a mutual influence in these processes. For example, while institutions shape our beings and interactions, we can change their structure and the way they affect us. Therefore, in considering the most important changes in the world we wish to bring about, I am inclined to believe that although environment can change a person, it is 'the inner' of the individual (attitudes, beliefs, levels of maturity) that is more influential than the 'outer', e.g., social reforms. As the history shows again and again, even the most progressive ideas and reforms can take root or be sustained only if individuals are psychologically ready for them.</p> <p>This means that thinking about the purpose of coaching and recognising what means are available to coaching practitioners, we need to get our priorities right and accept unapologetically the <i>centrality of our work being focused on the individual</i>. This applies even to team coaching in which we help individuals to be better team members, rather than claiming wider scale influence. This position should not be seen as being in opposition to coaching being systemic. It is interesting that discussion about systems approaches to coaching often become about the issues of leadership or team performance instead of coaching. They become about the content rather than the process and purpose of coaching, e.g., what exactly leaders should learn and in what way. Unfortunately, coaches with increased interest in systems and complexity theories can develop a 'grandiosity complex', assuming that their role is to be increasingly influential to the extent of 'transforming' as wide a system as possible. However, recognition of interconnectedness and complexity of the systems and our embeddedness in such systems does not imply that our role and focus is now to do with these systems on a wider scale rather than with individual clients. Such understanding does not free us from specifying what is it that we can productively do with the client in front of us. In fact, system theorists, such as Stacey (2012), are much more modest in terms of our role: thinking together with the client how we think. Such an attitude together with appreciation of the nuances of the coaching context in which the client is to act, becomes a vision of coaching as a joint inquiry into action.</p> <p><i>Second</i>, I believe that the intended purpose of organisational coaching should be in line with more progressive and recent debates about the purpose of organisations in the complex time we live (Mayer, 2021). These debates, for example, include an argument about changing the way organisations' performance are measured, i.e., that "profits should be measured net of the costs of maintaining human, social and natural as well as physical assets" (Mayer, 2021: 896). It is proposed that maintenance of their productive potential is as important to the firm as its physical assets (Eccles and Laurent, 2020) and that any organisation should not profit from creating problems for others.</p> <p>Mayer (2021) argues that more generally, performance should be measured in relation to the company's success in fulfilling its purpose, which should be seen as producing profitable solutions and providing others with the capacity and capabilities to fulfil their purposes. This implies that "the notion of a 'right' level of income or profit does not, therefore, derive simply from seeking to achieve greater utility for oneself or shareholders but from what is required to allow each person and organization to achieve their purposes" (2021: 897). This, of course, is a profound reconceptualization of the nature of economic activity, with businesses playing a major role because of their capacity to mobilize substantial resources. In line with such purposes of organisations, building capacities and capabilities of everyone involved to achieve <i>their own purpose</i> becomes a deserving purpose of coaching in its own right.</p> <p><i>Third</i>, I believe that the purpose of organisational coaching should be in line with what is important to individuals themselves as the actual recipients of coaching. A highly relevant perspective on this is self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000), which is an empirically based, organismic theory of human nature that focuses on motivation, personality development, and wellness. One of its sub-theories postulates basic psychological needs theory that identifies three psychological needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – the satisfaction or thwarting of which significantly influences human growth and wellness (Martela et al., 2021). According to this it is the client who should determine the focus of inquiry (Deci and Ryan, 2000) in order to be taking responsibility for resulting action (Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018).</p>

Table 2 continued: Example of conceptual work according to proposed framework to introduce a purpose of organisational coaching

Steps of conceptual work	Content of conceptual work
<i>The proposed purpose of organisational coaching</i>	<p>On the basis of examining meta/philosophical layer of consideration, I propose the purpose of organisational coaching as <i>supporting clients' engagement with and completion of meaningful projects</i>. Projects are seen in existential philosophy terms as the result of being thrown into the world and exercising inevitable freedom to engage with it towards a certain end (Sartre, 1948). In simpler terms, this means that one of the important conditions of being human is being engaged in purposeful activities. For example, in the work context, such activities are determined by the expectations of the role. However, they can be seen by individuals as their own projects, in which case these individuals become authentically involved in the work they do. Projects can be of small and large scale. They can also be self-focused, other-focused or object-focused. They can be successful or not and considered as positive or negative from various perspectives.</p> <p>I would argue that in organisations coaches should support <i>meaningful</i> projects of their individual clients and that meaningfulness of their projects should be one of criteria in evaluating the quality of this work, probably before anything else, e.g., effectiveness or wellbeing. This is a deserving purpose of coaching because projects become meaningful not through simple cognitive or linguistic exercises. This requires careful analysis of the situation and context clients engage with, their immediate and long-term needs and values, networks of other people involved on the level of teams, organisations or wider communities.</p> <p>Meaningfulness of the projects in its broadest sense is connected to the overall work significance as regards whether it is intrinsically valuable and worth doing" (Martela and Pessi, 2018: 363). It should be recognized that the meaning of projects is never enduring or fixed because the situations are complex and dynamic. This meaning is highly individual and revealing of who the individual actually is because meaningful projects involve doing and acting. Taking responsibility for own actions and the way they might enhance or diminish the freedom of other to pursue their projects is another important consideration to be engaged with in organisational coaching.</p> <p>As far as individuals are concerned, various studies have shown the value of this purpose and criteria (see overview in Martela et al., 2021: Martela and Pessi, 2018) which suggest fostering meaningfulness in the workplace through cultivating autonomy and beneficence. For organisations that define their purpose in a way discussed by Mayer (2021), organisational coaching with a focus on meaningful individual projects, is also well placed. I believe that many coaches would be ideologically aligned with this purpose of coaching and the coaching methodologies at our disposal are suitable instruments for this work.</p> <p>Amongst other capabilities that organisational coaches would aim to develop in their clients I would add a very important one that helps clients to identify their meaningful projects in the first place. This is the capacity for criticality or what Unger (2007) calls 'negative capability' to enable individuals to recognize the constraints of the external structure/contexts and their influence in order to be able to resist, deny and transcend these contexts.</p>
Socio-psychological layer	The proposed purpose allows coaches to focus confidently on their clients' development and completion of individual projects which are meaningful and beneficial for organisations in the long run. This clearly benefits the relationship between the coach and client as commitment to the client does not create any division of loyalty.
Ethical layer	This purpose removes the concerns of confidentiality and dividing commitments, with an understanding that organisations will benefit in the long run for their meaningful purpose.
Empirical layer	With this purpose any outcomes can be used, even the cost-effectiveness of coaching, depending on the research question and without unjustified generalisations. The view of clients need not be criticised as a measure of coaching effectiveness if criteria of effectiveness included clients' satisfaction with work or changes in the meaningfulness of their work.
Instrumental layer	With this purpose concrete goals can remain diverse as long as they are seen as meaningful for an individual and useful for organisations in the long run, under the condition that organisations do not profit from creating problems for others. Identification of goals would start from the clients' views on their meaningful projects and capabilities required. If necessary, an organisational sponsor would be in the position to approve these goals as being realistic in terms of investment in coaching.

Anticipating potential critique of this purpose, it is important to say that I am not proposing one universal purpose for individual coaches in the socio-psychological and instrumental layers concerned with developing specific capabilities of clients. Seeing the coach as the main instrument of coaching (Bachkirova, 2016), I believe it is important that each coach works in a way congruent with their values and theories of learning. These theories could be very different, e.g., person-centred, existential, cognitive-behavioural, which in various ways explain the nature of change and how it can be influenced. This would affect the coaches' style of work and choices of methods in the instrumental layer. In this example, I only suggest a logically and ethically justified way of seeing the purpose of organisational coaching as a credible profession *in the meta and ethical layers*. If accepted, this purpose may be useful for consideration of coaches' philosophy of practice.

Moreover, I believe this could give them more freedom in the choices they make in terms of their own purpose in socio-psychological and instrumental layers.

Conclusions

Advocating the importance of discussions about the purpose of organisational coaching I suggested using a proposed framework to serve as a scaffolding structure for such discussions. Of course, to identify the purpose of organisational coaching and recognize its importance is only the beginning. Further work should follow to explore the questions of what each purpose means for the field, how it can be implemented, and how it gains legitimacy and credibility. For research purposes, it requires further conceptual work for generating research questions that are worth asking and identifying ways for integrating the results of research in a meaningful way. All of these are not easy, but they are necessary tasks as the problems we currently face and will continue to face are too challenging to ignore.

On a more positive note, engaging with such tasks we will demonstrate the strength of the coaching as a profession that is open and serious about such challenges. This is a much better way to increase its credibility than pretending that problems do not exist. I believe, we owe it now to the future coaching professionals who will follow us. In drawing on the social philosophy of Richard Rorty (2016:1), we would be in a position to say that rather than closing any conversation down we opened up more grounds for imagination and for better ways of being useful.

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