


Academic Paper

# How Coaching Interactions Transform Leader Identity of Young Professionals Over Time

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## Abstract

This longitudinal qualitative study explores how social interactions between young professionals and their leadership coach develop leader identity. Examining eleven pairs of coaches and clients participating in a three-to-six-month leadership development programme, this exploratory research found five general interaction types that form the basis of leader identity development. We explain how coaching interaction types are combined to create a powerful adult learning process for navigating leadership transitions in an original leader identity transformation framework. The findings expand the understanding of coaching processes and leader identity transformation, providing insights for researchers and practitioners to help young professionals navigate leadership.

## Keywords

leadership coaching, leader identity, leadership development, young professionals, transformative learning

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## Introduction

Leadership coaching is one of the most widely used development practices in organizations today (Burt & Talati, 2017). Originating as a psychotherapeutic intervention to help top executives in increasingly globalized business environment of the 1980s and 1990s (Tobias, 1996; Sherman & Freas, 2004), contemporary coaching is now a multi-billion dollar industry (ICF, 2020) and profession (Lane et al., 2018).

The practice of coaching as a one-on-one developmental relationship has accelerated drastically over the previous twenty years (Kilburg, 1996; Hamlin et al., 2008; ICF, 2012; 2016; 2020). Estimated revenue from the practice in 2019 neared \$3 billion; an increase of 21% from 2015 estimates (International Coaching Federation, 2020). Coaching now occurs in more than 150

countries serving individuals, teams, and organizations across diverse sectors of business, government, sport, healthcare, and law aiming to “help improve lives, relationships and business performance” (International Coaching Federation, n.d.).

Research on leadership coaching has struggled to respond to its rapid expansion, especially studies that advance theory on coaching and has largely focused on describing practices and assessing outcomes separately (Joo 2005; Theeboom et al., 2014; Grover & Furman, 2016) leading to a paucity in conceptual foundations. Necessary to advance understanding of leadership coaching is greater theoretical development (Gray, 2006), rooted in empirical findings (Burt & Talati, 2017), in combination with observed process (Pandolfi, 2020).

Scholars suggest a well-documented, robust conceptual lens is needed in the field to more holistically examine the multi-faceted nature of how leadership coaching works (Cox et al., 2014). Examining leader identity transformation in coaching by observing interactional meaning-making processes sheds light on the “black box” (Feldman & Lankau, 2005, p. 845) of leadership coaching. A greater understanding of why and how these processes work provides ideas and suggestions for practitioners to incorporate into their work of coaching leaders and improving the success of organizations.

Our study, which explores the interactional processes during coaching to understand the emergence of leader identity among young professionals, addresses the call by using a process oriented theoretical lens (Gray, 2006; Cox et al., 2014), 2) to observe how interactions at the “waterline,” between the coach and the client (Fillery-Travis & Cox, 2018 p. 527) facilitate leader identity development (Ibarra et al., 2014). To do so, we first situate our study among the extant literature on leadership coaching focusing specifically on how it contributes to discussions on transformative learning, social interactions, and leader-identity development in coaching. We then outline the qualitative methodological framework for our study, present our findings in two sequentially related sections, and follow with discussion of theoretical and practical implications of our findings for leadership coaching.

## Literature Review

### Leadership Coaching

Leadership coaching is commonly referred to and used interchangeably with executive coaching (Ladegard & Gjerde, 2014). Confusion among scholars about what differentiates leadership coaching practice from counselling, consulting, mentoring, and advising has been evident since early in its growth (Joo, 2005) and the term has been used for a wide range of activities including skill development, promotion preparation, navigating organizational change, building self-awareness, skill remediation, cultivating high potentials, decision-making skill building, personal change agendas, and increasing performance (Bacon & Spear, 2003; Sherman & Freas, 2004; Stern, 2004; Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Joo, 2005; Du Toit, 2007). Even though consensus on the purposes and goals of leadership coaching remains “illusory” (Gray, 2006, p. 476), a more recent consensus definition on coaching consolidates it as a “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential” (ICF, 2020). Important in all definitions for the purpose of our study, leadership coaching involves a current or aspiring leader engaging in an ongoing process of interaction with a leadership coach for the purposes of leadership development (de Haan, Molyneux, & Nilsson, 2020).

Reviews on leadership coaching practice research demonstrate that the field has been largely focused on outcomes of coaching (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson’s 2001; Joo, 2005; Ely et al., 2010; Lai & Palmer, 2019). Systematic reviews of outcome studies have found multiple positive impacts from coaching ranging from personal development to behavioural change and improved work

performance (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Theeboom et al., 2014; Grover & Furnham, 2016; Athanasopoulou & Dopson 2018).

Despite findings supporting leadership coaching's efficacy, scholars have identified substantial flaws in leadership coaching research (Grant & Cavanaugh, 2007; Burt & Talati, 2017) including persistent problems with definition (Ives, 2008), lack of theoretical underpinnings (Gray, 2006; Cox et al, 2014), diversified outcomes (Grover & Furnham, 2016), and questionable methodologies (Burt & Talati, 2017; Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018). Grover and Furnham (2016, p. 2) suggest the state of coaching research is troubling, lending support to critics that either think there is "evidence of absence" or "absence of evidence" of coaching practice effectiveness. Likewise, Seligmann (2007, p. 266) offered the similar critique that: "Coaching is a practice in search of a backbone, two backbones actually: a scientific, evidence-based backbone and a theoretical backbone."

Considering the multi-faceted, dynamic social interactional and multifaceted nature of leadership coaching, it is not surprising researchers struggle to evaluate it (Grover & Furnham 2016; Burt & Talati 2017). Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018) suggests that a way forward is to focus on the "journey" of EC [executive coaching], that is, the 'how' and 'why's of the intervention rather than the 'what'" (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018, p. 84). Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018) suggest the formulation of well-thought-out research questions combined with the application of appropriate research methods to observe the processes behind coaching practices. Similarly, several reviews echo this call to study the coaching process (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Joo, 2005; Feldman & Lankau, 2005). Grover and Furnham (2016) acknowledged that studying this gap will help by "specifically addressing mechanisms underlying the impact of coaching" (p. 27).

Psychological frameworks currently dominate the theoretical landscape of leadership coaching. Psychological science traditionally focuses on individuals and psychological structures that drive behaviour (Adhikari, 2016). Yet, to adequately explore 'how' complex coaching processes unfold, theoretical frameworks more focused on social interaction are needed (Cox et al., 2014). We suggest an interactionist and adult learning theory paradigm complements existing theoretical frameworks in coaching because they further progress our understanding of coaching processes.

## **Transformative Learning and Interactions in Coaching**

Fillery-Travis and Cox (2018 p.527) present an iceberg metaphor to describe coaching and document how current coaching research is focused both above and below the "waterline." They argue that future studies need to focus on the "waterline" which they describe as the interaction in coaching. To respond to this call, our study examines the leader identity development of young professionals within leadership coaching interactions by integrating symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1966) and Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning as a theoretical orientation. Symbolic interactionism recognizes the importance of interactions between people for how they make meaning (Blumer, 1966). Cox et al. (2014) argue (and we agree) that the field of adult learning and development can serve as an encouraging theoretical foundation for coaching research and practice. They posit that change is essential to learning, and therefore, one's development by way of coaching represents learning (Cox et al., 2014). We build on Cox et al.'s (2014) framework by also drawing on Mezirow's (1991; 2000) theory of adult learning. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) posits adult learning as a meaning-making process to transform one's world view and "generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (Mezirow, 2009, p.92). Integrating what these theories offer to use in understanding meaning making and self-identification shows promise for explaining the role coaching interactions play leadership identity development.

One such important theoretical concept in meaning making is what Mezirow calls "autonomous thinking." Mezirow (1997) argues that each of us has a frame of reference or world view to which

we orient our understanding of the world. Transformative learning is the process of effecting change in this frame of reference. Mezirow (1997) states that our worldview consists of both cognitive and emotional components and that only through critical reflection and discourse can one's frame of reference change. To be an autonomous thinker then is to "become critically aware of the cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced the way we see ourselves and our relationships and the way we pattern our lives" (Mezirow, 1978, p. 101). Our world views are learned and constructed from our interaction with the culture around us to help us understand ourselves, our roles, and our relationships. In many respects, we may not even be aware of our world views. Nevertheless, we navigate our lives based on the way we see the world, adjusting ourselves and our interactions to reinforce our expectations and perspectives (Mezirow, 1991a). Mezirow (1981, p. 11) argues that adult learning presents the opportunity to develop autonomous thinking because "it is only in late adolescence and in adulthood that a person can come to recognize being caught in his/her own history and reliving it." How we come to recognize that trap and transform the way we see the world is what Mezirow's learning theory seeks to explain. Although Mezirow's (2000) theory is said to still be evolving (Taylor & Cranston, 2013), we argue it offers a firm theoretical foundation to explore leadership coaching.

## **Leader identity Development in Transformative Learning and Coaching**

Leader identity has emerged as an essential component to the development of a leader (Miscenko, Guenter, & Day, 2017; Yeager & Callahan, 2016). Day and Harrison (2007) defined leader identity as "the sub-component of one's identity that relates to being a leader or how one thinks of oneself as a leader" (p. 365). Scholars argue a developed leader identity helps with greater self-awareness, clearer direction, and knowledge of personal talents (Day & Harrison, 2007). This aspect of leadership development is relevant for young professionals since studies infer that leader identity evolves over the life span (Murphy & Johnson, 2011). Therefore, the earlier potential leaders gain a better sense of their identity as leaders, the more prepared they will be for leadership positions (Miscenko, Guenter, & Day, 2017). In this section, we review the literature on leader-identity connecting it to adult learning and coaching.

For the purposes of this study, we focus on how leader-identities are formed through a multi-level set meaning-making "identity work" one ascribes to the self and verified through coaching interactions (Snow & Anderson, 1987; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Interactions that include identity claims and conferment occur in verbal and non-verbal exchange, direct and indirect interaction, and extended interactions that take place over time, and result in either positive or negative reinforcing spirals. Hammond, Palanski, and Clapp-Smith's (2016) work describes an identity-work process in coaching interaction across four stages: 1) cue noticing, 2) interpreting cues, 3) authoring identities, and 4) enacting identity towards competence. Both DeRue and Ashford (2010) and Hammond et al.'s (2016) work share similarities relevant to our understanding of leader identity development, and therefore are pertinent to this study. The assumptions, beliefs, or meanings of leadership by the leader, the follower or group are an important factor for how leader identity develops. Also, both models reference the multi-level nature of leader identity referring to three categories: 1) individual, 2) relational, and 3) collective. Finally, the relationship between leader identity strength and time is suggested in both conceptual frameworks. This temporal dimension of leader identity construction is also evident in the literature (Day & Harrison, 2007; Miscenko, Guenter, & Day, 2017).

In their examination of "workspaces" in which leader identity development occurs, Ibarra et al., (2014) suggest the need for creating space for identity work. These spaces should include features that reduce disturbances, enable sensemaking, and provide smooth transitions between identity stages (Ibarra et al., 2014). Shoukry and Cox (2018) suggested that coach education programmes make space to help coaches explore their own issues of identity to benefit the leadership

development process. We argue similarly that the coaching context is one such space for leader identity transformation.

Few studies focus on leader-identity development of young professionals (Tofade, 2010; Rose, 2015; & Taconis, 2018), but nonetheless suggests leader identity transformation is an important facet of leadership development, and that leadership coaching serves as a powerful vehicle for transformative learning. Most notably, Taconis (2018) found three themes in how coaching facilitates leader-identity development among young professionals: 1) by increasing self-knowledge and self-awareness, 2) helping clients choose how to lead, and 3) learning how to manage stakeholders. Further, Taconis (2018) found four key success factors for developing leadership identity in the coaching process: 1) facilitating an openness to coaching, 2) getting to the core of client issues, 3) facilitating discipline in clients, and 4) embedding practices in their context. Beyond this, very little is known about how the coaching process transforms the leader identity of young professional which is alarming since first-time managers directly manage a majority of the workforce (Gentry et al, 2015), and organizations will increasingly look to emerging talent for leadership positions (Avolio et al., 2011). Our study contributes by filling gaps of understanding along these lines.

## Methodology

Our research employed a multimethod, ethnographic based, study of a three-to-six-month young-professional leadership programme for college alumni. In total, we regularly observed, tracked progress, and interviewed on multiple occasions eleven clients, five coaches, and six coaching partnerships participating in the young-professional leadership programme at Central Pennsylvania College (CPC); a highly selective four-year residential liberal arts college in a small rural town in the Mid-Atlantic which also includes an endowed co-curricular leadership development office for students and young alumni. Detailed information about the study clients and coaches is given in Table 1.

The leadership coaching programme facilitated by the institution provides the population for this study. The programme is a personalized coaching service that connects young alumni to trained leadership coaches. Over a three-to-sixth month engagement, the coaches help their clients to achieve a specific, and timely, leadership development goal. Clients meet with their coaches every two to three weeks for about an hour.

**Table 1: Client and Coach Demographics**

Client	Year	Residence	Profession	Gender	Race
Pam	2000	Philadelphia, PA	Insurance, Agency Manager	Woman	White
Tara	2005	Upstate NY	Higher Education, Administrator	Woman	Asian-American
Kevin	2005	New York, NY	Finance, Manager/Partner	Man	White
Aaron	2006	Washington, D.C.	Education Management, Senior Director	Man	African-American
Mandy	2008	Central PA	Digital Marketing, Vice President	Woman	White
Ella	2009	Atlanta, GA	Law, Senior Assistant District Attorney	Woman	White
Phil	2014	Northern VA	Insurance, Health and Benefits Consultant	Man	White
Kasey	2017	Washington, D.C.	Finance, Investor Relations Manager	Woman	White
Carrie	2019	Washington, D.C.	Hospitality, Restaurant Server	Woman	White
Dan	1965	Ithaca, NY	Retired Sales & Marketing Executive	Man	White
Simon	1976	Harrisburg, PA	Attorney	Man	White
Nate	1982	Philadelphia, PA	Leadership & Sales Vice President	Man	White
Emma	1983	Atlanta, GA	Managing Partner, Coaching Firm	Woman	White
Pete	1989	Philadelphia, PA	Principal and Organizational Consultant	Man	White
Sasha	2001	Central PA	Federal Government Ombuds and Programme Specialist	Woman	White
Brad	2001	Harrisburg, PA	Employee Benefits Leader	Man	White
Angie	2005	York, PA	Nonprofit Executive Assistant	Woman	White

## Data Collection

We used three distinct but complementary data collection methods: systematic observations, repeated and longitudinal semi-structured interviews, and programme document analysis. In total, we conducted 21 hour-long, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These interviews included five past coaching clients, six current coach clients, and five current coaches. We interviewed the six current coaching clients on multiple occasions; first, during their coaching engagement, and second, towards the end of their coach relationship. This longitudinal approach was necessary because of the temporal nature of leader identity development (Murphy & Johnson, 2011). Day (2011) suggests that longitudinal research in leadership development must include at least three waves of data which is why we chose to analyze the participants before, during, and after their coaching experience. The semi-structured interviews provided personal accounts of the coaching experience from multiple perspectives and captured at multiple points of time. Participant interviews allowed us to explore the unique stories and experiences related to leadership coaching.

We also captured and coded video files of programme intake and coaching relationships each recorded via the videoconferencing platform Zoom. The recorded observations captured a detailed firsthand view of the coaching interactions, which is data consistent with our constructivist framework (symbolic interactionism) assumption of where meaning is created. Therefore, direct observation of the interactions within a coaching partnership allowed us to identify and delineate the meaning processes as they developed.

The third method of data collection we used was content analysis. We collected and analyzed 109 emails and 101 programme documents which are also forms of interaction that provide greater context to our study. This information lends additional insight into the settings of the coaching engagement and revealed ways that the coaching programme created points of interaction between the coach and the client.

Overall, data collection involved several phases over approximately 15 months following the pattern of 1) semi-structured interviews of five past coaching clients, 2) interviews with current coaches, 3) interviews with current clients, 4) observations of coaching sessions and 5) organized programme documentation and content. All study participants completed and signed an informed consent form to ensure they are aware of the study's goals, methods, etc.

The study's research methods and recruitment design were reviewed and approved in advance by Indiana University of Pennsylvania's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects as part of our ethical research practice.

## Data Analysis

An inductive analysis was necessary to ascertain and subsequently describe how coaches and clients interact. Inductive analysis is an iterative process which involves three primary steps: 1) coding, 2) analysis and synthesis, and 3) narration. Systematic coding of text data, starting with open coding then moving to closed coding and finally to axial coding, is then analyzed and synthesized into specific thematic categories which are then narrated together to give insight to specific research questions (Charmaz, 2015).

We conducted the analysis of our data in three distinct phases. First, we analyzed our data corpus, primarily focused on document analysis to accurately describe the implementation of the coaching programme. We also conducted reflective memoing after each interview and observation. In doing this we outlined the contours of coaching programme, its history, programme theory, and timeline of activities. This helped us situate what we observed in relation to the stated programme objectives and desired outcomes.

Second, we focused on the observational data of coaching sessions to examine coaching interactions. We used a descriptive approach at first to code the interactions, labelling the general processes unfolding in the coaching interactions. We documented both the language and gestures of the research subjects, as well as our reflective thinking in the observations. We drew upon sensitizing concepts from both symbolic interactionism and transformative learning theory to make sense of findings. As we continued coding and synthesizing, patterns emerged providing greater clarity on the primary themes of interaction relevant to the research question.

Finally, we primarily drew upon interview data from both coaches and clients to understand leader-identity transformation, linking experiences to our observational data. In this phase, we used narrative inquiry to “explore, discover, understand and construct stories based on the participants’ recounting of their experiences” (Bhattacharya, 2017; Loseke, 2019; Patton, 2015). Through telling the stories of participants, narrative inquiry provides what is referred to as a ‘thick’ illustration of experience, identity, and interactions (Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Monette, 2014). The reflective stories three years removed for past participants, the in-depth accounts shared at three different points in time over a five-month period by current clients engaged in a coaching relationship, and additional programme content data provide a rich data set for this type of analysis.

During our analysis, we determined that the sensitizing concepts for leader identity development were not adequate for an in-depth examination of transformation. We found it challenging to explore the impact of coaching interactions on transformation without a detailed framework for leader identity which included elements of transformative learning theory. Ultimately, we concluded from this step in the analysis that an integration of transformative theory with leader identity development concepts was necessary to answer the research question. Therefore, as we interacted with the participant stories, we created a scaffold to describe the facets of leader identity in relation to transformative learning. The dimensions and facets of this framework emerged directly from our narrative analysis.

## Findings

Our study resulted in two primary findings, which we present in two sections. In our first section, we enumerate five general social interactions that emerged as the key components of a coaching engagement: 1) probing, 2) spotlighting, 3) affirming, 4) challenging, and 5) intention setting. This section provides descriptions, examples, and general sequencing for each coaching interaction. In the second section, we explain via an original leader identity transformation framework how coaching interactions are combined to transition an individual to thinking as a leader in a powerful process of adult learning. This section explains the leader-identity framework in detail, and documents how the coaching interactions found in this study assist the facilitation of the transformation to leader-identity.

We couch our analysis in these sections as interactional processes related to a higher-order social process that encapsulates the purpose and activity of the coaching relationship which we term *Reflecting at the “waterline”* (Fillery-Travis & Cox, 2018, p.527). We define reflecting, in a broad sense, as the process by which the coach and the client interactively analyze a question, a scenario, a thought, a belief, a symbol, a goal, an emotion, a need, a challenge, a person, etc. through autonomous thinking (Mezirow 1997). The reflective process of autonomous thinking is the primary way clients and their coaches created meaning together (Blumer 1966). *Reflecting at the waterline* generally results in new insights, new perspectives, or new decisions related to what is important to the client, or their coaching exigence – and over a prolonged time leads to identity changes. *Reflecting at the waterline* in the coaching engagement was most often initiated through the client identifying or beginning to identify a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1991) about their managerial work to examine during the coaching conversation.

This interactive process that transpires allows the client and coach to see their initial problem in a different, clearer, and deeper way. Almost always, the client's articulation of their disorienting dilemma is transformed through the reflection process.

Taken together as a higher-order social process, the social interactions we uncovered worked together to ensure powerful and meaningful transformation among the clients into thinking of themselves as leaders. A client spoke directly to the transformative nature of the reflective process in our final interview:

*There's a lot more existential thinking...probably more so than I anticipated...You know I probably expected more of the like 'fix under the hood or the roof' kind of stuff. But I probably have thought more about myself through this (2022, June 25).*

## Description of Coaching Interactions

Coaching provides an opportunity for a client and their coach to make meaning together through *reflecting at the waterline*. All clients in our research shared stories and demonstrated observable examples of distinct yet complimentary interactional components which define the process. These interactional components between coach and client, defined in Table 2, include: 1) probing, 2) spotlighting, 3) affirming, 4) challenging, and 5) intention setting. Most conversations observed contained most if not all interactional components, and their order and frequency of appearance was highly dependent on the context but a general pattern was present which is described in greater detail below.

**Table 2: Five General Social Interactions between Client and Coach**

Interaction Type	Definition
Probing	Probing is the primary method of engagement the coach uses to interact with the client. Probing with questions invites client reflection through dialogue. Types include descriptive, insight, and affective.
Spotlighting	Spotlighting is naming the client's sentiments clearly, confirming their meaning with the client, and then pointing to the reality or the future impact of the viewpoint.
Affirming	Affirming is the process of coaches initiating positive comments, gestures, and actions to acknowledge and uplift their clients.
Challenging	Challenging is the effort by the coach to contest a client's point of view, or to encourage them to think differently, or go beyond what is comfortable.
Intention Setting	Intention Setting is the exercise through which coaches guide their clients to voice the steps they intend to take as a result of their conversation.

First, the action of *probing* was the primary interactional cue the coach used to initiate their client to a reflection at the waterline. During six observations of coaching conversations, five coaches asked more than 180 *probing* questions. When differentiating coaching from other helping relationships such as mentoring, advising, counseling, questions asking is identified by coaches as an important distinguishing behaviour. To empower the client to direct the conversation, and to encourage the client to control the subject matter of the dialogue, probing provided the client with the opportunity to respond on their terms. These *probing* questions were further categorized into five types: descriptive questioning, insight questioning, challenge through question, affective questioning, and action questioning which are defined further in Table 3.



**Table 3: Five Sub-Types of Probing**

Type	Description	Example
Descriptive	Ask the client to report basic details about their situation or a previous coaching conversation topic	"How are you doing?" "What are you most proud of?" "What is new or different since we last spoke?"
Affective	Ask the client to reveal their emotions and how they feel	"How does it feel when you say that out loud?" "How are you feeling in your body, kinesthetically?" "Tell me where your head is right now. What, what are you thinking and feeling right now?"
Insight	Ask the client to generate meaning or understanding for a thought or action	"What do you make of that?" "So what is that telling you?" "What impact would that have?"
Challenge	Ask the client to test their assumptions, to think more deeply, or challenge themselves	"What do you want?" "What's important to you?" "What are you stepping towards?"
Action	Ask the client to identify specific goals or steps to act upon	"What now must you do?" "Yes. So when is the perfect time?" "What commitment do you want to make?"

Descriptive questions were powerful tools for coaches to gather information, clarify facts, guide reflection, generate ideas, and inspire action. Coaches typically asked descriptive questions at the beginning of an engagement as a discovery mechanism to better understand the client's situation, as Nate explained:

*So, it's kind of like excavating, you know? You have to keep brushing away this layer, brushing that away...maybe scoot over to the side and clear some dirt over here, and, and sooner or later, you start to get a picture of what's happening (Nate, 2022, March 30).*

Coaches asked insight question to help clients understand the reasons behind thoughts or action, as Pete explained:

*What, we also do together is, you know, ask the question behind the question, you know? Just keep...stay on things...not really accepting answers the first time, you know? But saying you know, like you do sometimes...I guess all coaches do, like 'So tell me more about that?' Or you know, 'What else?' Or 'Is there a there there?' kind of thing, you know, 'Why that? Why just start with that?' Those kinds of things, you know, like, 'Your socks are on inside-out...why? Why is that something that I need to know?' (2022, April 18)*

No *probing* conversations were the same, but we found a general flow of these interactions in each client coaching engagement. *Probing* typically began with *descriptive* type questions from the coaches to better understand the clients' situation and self. The coaches then used a combination of *insight*, *challenging*, and *affective* questions to explore further and deeper into the clients' exigence and view of themselves and their situation. Finally, coaches used *action* questions to direct clients towards the next step. This sequence of *probing* initially stands alone as an independent interaction at the outset of a conversation, but then subsequently becomes nested within the interaction sequences of spotlighting, affirming, challenging, and intention setting.

The next interaction we distinguish is *spotlighting*. This was when coaches named or paraphrased the client's sentiments clearly, confirmed their meaning with the client, and then pointed to the reality or the future impact of that viewpoint. Spotlighting requires an immense amount of active listening. This listening is displayed by the coach to the client in very tangible ways such as in eye contact, gasps, leaning toward the camera, head nodding, smiling, laughing, words of affirmation, and paraphrasing. The spotlighting process typically began with the coach paraphrasing the client's response to ensure they have properly heard the client's message. Carefully, the coach ensures they have achieved understanding of what the client revealed. Coach Nate demonstrates the naming component of *spotlighting* here when paraphrasing his client's goal:

*Let me tell you what I heard, and you can smack me around if I wasn't listening well. What I thought I heard, is that you actually felt at the end of that conversation, that you helped at that deeper level. You could sense that it occurred in the exchange, yeah? Whereas there may be other conversations, where you finish the call, and you don't have that same sensation. Is that that a valid observation? I don't want to put words in your mouth (2022, May 1).*

*Spotlighting* is characterized by direct and brief language. Coaches used paraphrasing beginning with 'What I hear you saying...' and 'it sounds like...' to initiate the *spotlighting* process and confirm they understood the message. Coaches asked further descriptive questions to ensure they adequately understood the client's response. For example, Emma (coach) started her *spotlighting* by succinctly paraphrasing Tara's (client) insight: "It sounds like intellectually you understood your need to set boundaries and being comfortable saying 'no.'" Coaches also used metaphors, quotes, and research to spotlight a client's insight and make it more visible. For example, coaches used the following analogies to spotlight what they heard from clients: "the first page of a chapter," "a toolkit and its tools," and "peeling back the onion" to put the spotlight on a particular thought or situation the client mentioned.

Coaches also construe the client's response adding their own reading of the client's insight or situation rather than simply paraphrasing, speaking directly, or using descriptive metaphors. Through *spotlighting*, the coach used their positional power to validate the client's response and its insight. For example, Emma adds commentary to an insight shared by her client: "So it sounds like you have, you returned to something that has worked for you in the past. So that's great, right? Because that's what works for you, right? So that's easier to readopt than start something new." Here, Emma added her opinion to Tara's insight and celebrated it as progress. This additional component confirms the coach's understanding of the insight, points to its significance, and affirms the account Tara shared. *Spotlighting* provided coaches with an additional narration level to the client's story from a credible point of view. This aspect of *spotlighting* helped the client to see their situation more clearly and comprehensively, while also subtly influencing the client's thinking in a positive direction.

Accurate *spotlighting* requires experimentation and perceptive adjustment by the coach. One coach commented on the perceptive skills deployed in *spotlighting* clients:

*Are the words matching what you're seeing? Right, is the tone of voice suddenly different than it was 10 minutes ago? Giving the client what they need is being extremely present and not, not worrying about what questions you're going to ask. It's about being in the moment and...making an observation or saying nothing. Sometimes it's silence, yeah, and to me that's why coaching is an art and not a science (2021, March 30).*

Coaches use their power in the relationship to help a client see through 'new eyes' and begin to normalize the new insight to allow for transformation. Emma's following comment is another example of sharing an interpretation with an understated influence. Emma said: "Yes, because that's what I see...is, is confidence, and a developing strength, which I think is self-belief" (2022, May 13).

The third interaction type we found was *affirming*: which was marked by coaches initiating positive comments, gestures, and actions in response to their client's accounts. This interaction was intended to develop and deepen the coaching relationship, build the clients' confidence, and assist in their transformation. *Affirming* also built the interactional margin of trust to challenge their clients', when necessary, later on.

In our observations, we noticed that clients often initially judged themselves and their leadership capacity negatively. To counterbalance this, especially early in the programme, coaches used affirming language and gestures to encourage clients to move towards a more productive viewpoint. Simple affirmations spoken while a client is responding had a significant impact on the

atmosphere of the coaching conversation. We observed an abundance of one-word affirmations including: “Absolutely!” “awesome!” “yes!” “right!” “okay!” “wow!” “exactly!” “totally!” “cool!” Coaches regularly interspersed phrases while a client accounted like: “I love that!” “That’s good!” “Brilliantly said!” “I agree!” “I think that’s great!” “That’s the thing!” and “There you go!” After a client accounted, coaches would reinforce their *affirming* with comments like: “You deserve to feel like that!” “I think you’ve been very courageous over the past month. Congratulations.” “You’ll do it. I’ll be great. It’ll be awesome.” “Because that’s the type of leader that you are.” “I couldn’t say it more eloquently or succinctly, myself. The end.” “You’re in a really good place.” “I appreciate what you’re doing.”

*Affirming* also included laughter which we observed consistently. Laughter helped diffuse difficult or challenging conversations and to add lightness to heavy topics. Coaches also used it to smooth over their recognition of client’s inconsistencies or mistakes in their accounting.

*Affirming* is different from gestures of active listening because it was a tool specifically used to acknowledge a client’s response but then also focuses attention and praise on clients potential strengths. *Affirming* praise was nearly always received positively by clients and often accompanied smiles and gestures of pride. Coaches also used paralinguistic cues in *affirming* clients such as head-nodding, leaning towards the camera, and eliciting reinforcing gasps to demonstrate their support of and engagement.

*Challenging*, the fourth interaction type we identified, was marked by coach’s contestation of a client’s point of view and followed by encouragement to extend beyond comfortable thinking patterns. *Challenging* was used less often than *affirming* but was required for transforming client’s distorted views of themselves and their situations. When a client provided an account in response to probing, the coach sometimes would start by providing a counterpoint or alternate viewpoint to help the client see more broadly and explore further. *Challenging* was rarely abrasive or combative. Instead, coaches intentionally engaged their clients carefully in the *challenging* process ensuring they feel safe and supported. Additionally, *challenging* rarely occurred before the coach built trust and demonstrated their own vulnerabilities in leadership. *Challenging* included several subtypes we regularly observed: Sharing different opinions, empathizing with an alternative perspective, direct feedback, suggesting specific intentions or actions, instructing not to worry, and recommending staying in the discomfort. *Challenging* often started as an extension of questioning but generally included a shift to include potential directives. One example involved Emma challenging Tara: “Yep, so I’m going to challenge you again, though, Tara, because that sounds like that is in your comfort zone. Because you’ve already done that.” Tara responded quickly and firmly, disagreeing with her coach. She tried to justify her response by saying she doesn’t like taking a different leadership strategy. Emma responded: “Okay, so why not?” Tara responded saying it is not something she loves to do. Emma challenged Tara further and asked: “And is so what’s in it for you to do that? Because this also isn’t about picking something that won’t be fulfilling, right? This is about, you know, you continuing to challenge yourself with how you want to show up as a leader.”

*Challenging* is distinct from other processes and plays an important role in solidifying the meaning and significance of the client’s situation. In most interactions observed, *Challenging* is the final type of interaction to occur before a course of action is negotiated. This process assesses the client’s way of thinking differently from spotlighting or affirming. Challenging provides an important counterbalance to other interactions, serving as an additional guardrail helping the client to explore the boundaries on all sides of their field of play.

Finally, *Intention Setting* is the interaction type where coaches guided their clients to actions they intended to take in response to the coaching session. Coaching is designed to have practical results, so most sessions ended with the client telling their coach what intended to do before their next session. These intentions were plentiful and were typically framed as “homework assignments” for further reflection or experimentation. *Intention setting* included planning steps, values clarification exercises, conversations with direct reports, journaling, or other efforts to test new insights and habits. The goal of the interaction is to achieve shared understanding between

the coach and client of the explicit actions the client intends to complete prior to the next coaching conversation. Emma and Tara's conversation demonstrates the transition from challenging to intention setting. Emma asks: "...what does your action look like? What commitment do you want to make?" Tara thought for a few moments:

*I think my first action is to speak up more. You know, we have with this particular project, we have weekly meetings where there's a lot of different participants from various campus areas that are involved, you know, and I think I need to speak up more and ask questions. You know, I'm that student that had questions, but was too shy to ask. And I still have that in me. And so, I speak up more than, you know, my voice is recognized...that I am an active participant and not just somebody who got roped into doing a zoom meeting on Monday or something like that. And so definitely talking more, asking questions...sharing ideas... (2022, May 13).*

Additionally, coaches often give their clients reflective "homework assignments" to complete before their next session. Dan asks his client to prepare how he would handle a leadership scenario in advance of their next call. Dan frames the assignment:

*Okay. Now I'm going to, I'm going to give you...it's not a hypothetical question. It's just a, a question and then I'll follow this up today with a, with an email that explains this question in little more detail and I want you think about it for our next time...the best engineers don't necessarily make the best engineer managers and leaders. The best salespeople don't necessarily make the best sales managers. The best insurance face-to-face guys, who have a great track record in closing deals don't necessarily become the best sales leaders. So Phil, for our next get-together, you are going to give me a little dissertation on why does that happen? What are we missing and that's the ingredient the two of us are going to inject into you. (2022, July 17)*

Phil responds: "Perfect. I love it." These action-oriented statements solidify the learning for clients, make clear future actions, and inspire them to explore a new idea or experiment with a new leadership behaviour.

To summarize, the common interactional trajectory of the reflecting at the waterline process involved a common sequence of five interactions that facilitate autonomous thinking (Mezirow 1997) and meaning making (Blumer 1966). First, the client makes initial statements about their problem and goal and the coach shows curiosity about what the client is saying, how they are saying it, and encourages reflection on why they are saying it that way by *probing*. Second, the coach spotlights aspects of the conversation that are important to the discussion which encourages the client on directions to explore. Third, coach deeply listens in an *affirming* manner as the client responds with additional context and background. Fourth, the coach begins *challenging* beliefs, lenses, or frames of reference that exist 'beneath the surface' of the client's statements and the client explores those challenges typically by reflectively affirming, disaffirming, clarifying, and expanding the areas of exploration further. This continues until the coach and client agree upon the elements beneath the surface that are guiding the client's thoughts and actions. Finally, the client and the coach negotiate together on *setting intentions* on the problem or goal with this new information, and then begin to identify and action to address it.

## **How Interactions Combine to Create a Leader Identity Transformational Framework**

Day et al. (2021) suggest that further theorizing is needed on leader identity transformation. To explore 'how' leader identity transformation occurs, we first had to describe the 'what' is involved in the transformation. By comparing sensitizing concepts from transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) and leader identity development theory (Day, D., & Harrison, M., 2007; Derue, D., & Ashford, S., 2010) to participant stories, we identify how leadership identity transformation is resultant from the interactional process described in the prior section.

We examined how clients talked about themselves and their beliefs about leadership transformation as they moved through the coaching programme. To do this, we directly asked clients variations of the question in interviews: What transforms in people when they come to see themselves as a leader? We also examined spontaneous descriptions of coaching clients' leadership transformation in interviews and observations. Both data sources confirmed that clients began to self-identify as leaders once they could (1) confidently articulate a *self-oriented vision* of how they want to lead, and (2) they develop knowledge about their *leadership perspective*.

In development of a self-oriented vision and leadership perspective, clients explored the following questions with their coaches: "What type of leader am I?" "Am I able to lead?" "How do I want to lead?" "Do I know how to lead how I want to?" "Who can lead?" "What do leaders do?" "What is leadership?" "What is the best way to lead?" These questions helped explore how the client defines leadership. Using these questions as guideposts for our analysis on identity transformation, we categorized three components of self-discovery for their *self-oriented vision*: 1) leader type, 2) leader capacity, and 3) leadership enactment. We also categorized three critical components of knowledge building for the client's *leadership perspective*: 1) leadership norms, 2) leadership behaviours, and 3) leadership definitions.

From our analysis, we documented clients' transformation in these two areas and six components while working with their coach, which mapped into two holistic schemas: distorted and transformed. The distorted schemas are the set of beliefs or mindsets held by the client as they entered the coaching programme. We use the term "distorted" because the leadership concepts – although common – are generally useless for navigating leadership transition. "Transformed" schemas represent how the clients talked about their new or evolved ways of thinking about themselves as leaders and their beliefs about leadership. We illustrate these schemas and their corresponding dimensions and facets in Table 4.

**Table 4: Facets of Leader identity Transformation**

Self-oriented Vision	Client Question	Distorted schema	Transformed schema
Leader type	What type of leader am I?	I am an individual performer. I am a leader by example. I am a team member. I am an executor.	I empower others to lead.
Leader capacity	Am I able to lead?	I am not confident that I can lead.	I am confident that I can lead.
Leadership enactment	How do I want to lead?	I am unsure how I want to lead.	I have a clearer sense of how I want to lead.
Leadership Perspective	Client Question	Distorted schema	Transformed schema
Leadership definitions	What is leadership?	Leadership is one person telling a group what to do.	Leadership is a empowering followers to work together.
Leadership norms	Who can lead?	Only formal leaders lead.	Everyone can lead.
Leadership behaviours	What do leaders do?	Leaders tell others what to do.	Leaders empower others to take action together.

The questions and statements listed in Table 4 are paraphrased representations of common themes explored through the interactions between coach and client. The distorted schema in the self-orienting beliefs dimension characterizes client perspectives about themselves as leaders. Early in coaching, clients saw themselves as individual performers concerned primarily with their responsibilities and work output rather than their engagement with others involved in a leadership process. They also expressed a lack of confidence issues in their new leadership roles which generated feelings of self-doubt and anxiety. Further, clients had unclear definitions of how they wanted to lead and a lack of understanding of how to lead. When reflecting on how their views of themselves had changed through the coaching process, they described themselves as more follower-focused, more confident, and clearer about how they wanted to lead, and with more belief in how to lead in that way. These responses defined the transformed schema of the self-orienting dimension of leader identity transformation. The distorted schema for the second dimension was generated from client descriptions of how they more generally perceived leaders and leadership early in the coaching process. At this point, they typically described leadership in traditional, formal

ways during which there is one leader who directs others in a standard form. Reflecting on how their leadership perspectives had changed, clients described leadership as a shared, empowering process in which more than one leader can participate, and that leadership can look differently based on the person. We included these themes to characterize the transformed schema in Table 4. The creation of the draft framework enabled us to effectively move to the next step in our analysis which was to describe how coaching interactions transformed leader identity over time.

Coaching is a reflection process at the Waterline. Using different means and methods of interaction throughout the programme, coaches help clients reflect upon their leadership situations and themselves. These interactions play different roles, but all serve the same purpose: to enable a type of deep thinking which is uncommon in daily thought. The output of this profound reflecting is not only for insight's sake; it is then used to help a client move from paralysis to mobility.

Interactions between the coach and client provided the opportunity to explore their beliefs, opinions, ideas, and assumptions about themselves as leaders and their perceptions of leadership. This process helped the client to first become aware of these perceptions and then to name them. Before a self-schema related to leader identity can change, a leader must first see the schema itself. Only then can the set of beliefs be tested for its validity, and then be determined if it is helpful to the leader moving forward. The careful probing from the coach helped the client to label their thoughts, emotions, and beliefs so they could then determine if those newly revealed assumptions were useful in their new context. Spotlighting from coaches helped the client to claim the identity of a leader by pointing to examples of where the client led or practiced leadership. It also helps the client cut through the noise and brings focus to beliefs, behaviours, actions, etc. that are more important or significant to the way they see themselves.

Affirming also assisted in transforming leader identity. Affirming interactions created the safe and secure dialogue necessary for honest and challenging conversations to occur. To transform how they saw themselves as leaders, clients had to accept new perspectives which were not always easy to adopt through positive comments, gestures, and actions to acknowledge and uplift their clients. Affirming by coaches built the confidence that the clients desperately need to accept and enact their new leader-identities.

Finally, we found the interactions of challenging and intention setting help leader identity transformation also. When a client is not able or willing to see how their viewpoint may be problematic for them, the coach provides a different perspective to challenge the client's view. Challenging a client's comment about their lack of leadership potential tests their assumptions about themselves, laying the groundwork for a possible transformation.

Setting intentions, the process of clearly articulating intended future steps by the client, also plays a role in leader identity transformation. This interaction helps clients to create plans to move forward, and to experiment with new ideas and actions for leadership. This process begins to solidify a new leader identity for the client. The actions generated through this interaction employed between coaching sessions can also build confidence and provide productive dialogue topics for the next session. Setting intentions also provides a structure for action that may not exist without a formal coaching relationship. Finally, it provides the accountability busy professionals need to maintain focus and follow through on their learning.

In our study, we categorized five general social interactions between coaches and their clients, which combined facilitate the transformation of young professional leader-identities.

The interactions of probing, spotlighting, affirming, challenging, and intention setting facilitate a client's leader identity by providing the time, space, structure, and accountability for reflection. They facilitated naming and navigating the problematic emotions and thoughts overwhelming them and their situations. They also generated greater awareness of the self-schemas related to leader

identity. As clients engaged in these processes, they shifted self-schemas, and experimented with new possibilities for being, and built confidence as leaders.

## Discussion

Although our study finds that, when decontextualized, components of coaching share multiple commonalities with other forms of human relations. It is their combination in the coaching context “at the waterline” that creates the unique and dynamic context of social interaction for self-oriented leadership identity to develop in clients. With a few exceptions, contexts of formalized social interaction focused on developing the professional and personal needs of a client to self-actualize as a leader like those in leadership coaching are rare type. Pete acknowledges this as he describes his efforts in creating the coaching context:

*A coaching interaction is walled off from all the excess noise that typically happens in communication, so you can concentrate. And if, if done well, or if done in an ideal setting, you give the gift of just one voice at a time, and that's pretty rare... I'm just talking to you...like as a human being. (2022, April 18).*

Although the interactions in coaching are primarily driven by the coach, they are informed by the needs and wants of the client. This is how they make meaning together (Blumer 1966). As the path of the exchange unfolds the coach intentionally uses the five aforementioned types of interaction to help the client uncover what lies beneath the way they see themselves and their situation. Referring to what her coach Emma does in their conversations, Tara responds: “She keeps asking the question ‘why’, you know, and I, and I mean this in the most respectful way, but she's like, a little kid constantly asking you, ‘well, why?’ ‘Well, why?’ ‘Well, why?’” (2022, April 1).

Our findings also suggest the interactions occurring within the “waterline” serve as the vehicle for leader identity transformation that parallel facets from Mezirow’s (2000) transformative learning theory. Participant stories revealed a bi-dimensional and multi-faceted picture of leader identity which builds on and expands existing conceptual definitions of this sub-identity. These stories also exposed how the way young professionals see themselves as leaders and their beliefs about leadership changed during their coaching engagements. These findings suggest that this leader identity is a part of what transforms in an adult learner in perspective transformation (Illeris, 2014). We suggest potential for more detailed research in this area for future coaching research and practice.

The five general social interactions observed between emerging leaders and their coaches in this study illuminate what occurs more generally within the coaching engagement at the “waterline” (Fillery-Travis & Cox 2018 p.527). Coaching scholars have called for a shift in research focus from outcomes to process (Pandolfi, 2020; Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018) and to move beyond the individual level of analysis (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018). This study’s in-depth examination of interactions between clients and their coaches answers this call in the scholarly analysis of coaching. Our observational study paves the way for future studies of coaching interactions that are more expansive, experimentally designed, and more longitudinal to explore these developmental relationships more holistically.

For practitioners, our study provides useful concepts to consider when constructing leadership coaching experiences that support emerging leader development. For example, our study suggests a focus on identity development and “maturation in leadership mindsets” (Wallace et al., 2021, p. 2) is just as important as leadership development programmes favouring skill-building approaches. Additionally, this study provides a compelling case for more integration of adult learning theories like Mezirow’s (2000) into programmes logic. Moreover, the coaching interactions and question types that emerged from our analysis can be used to train coaches. Finally, the arrangement of

coaching relationships for young professionals in the coaching programme we studied could become a model for future coaching programmes.

The final set of implications from this study relate to the leadership experiences of young professionals. Little is known about this population, yet they serve as the current and future leaders of organizations. The stories we narrated in this study bring greater awareness to the thoughts, emotions, challenges, and experiences of young professionals. Organization leaders invest billions of dollars in leader development programmes (Wallace et al., 2021) so knowing more about the private thoughts of this demographic helps design more customized and effective retention and development strategies.

In summary, the thick descriptions of coaching interactions, the novel framework for leader identity transformation, and the young professional stories presented in this dissertation aid researchers and practitioners alike in their pursuit of understanding and challenging young professionals.

## Conclusion

The challenges and changes faced by young professionals are immense. This moment in the lifespan includes many firsts: a marriage, a new home, a new job, a new promotion, or a new child; all these changes evolve their identity. Within the workforce, many young professionals are tasked to transition from individual performers to managers. Organizations today expect these new leaders to perform while navigating significant personal and professional change, yet the support they need to succeed is lacking. Young professionals need to evolve their leader identity to navigate these new roles. As they transition from high-achieving team *members* to responsible team *leaders*, the way they see themselves and their beliefs about leadership requires transformation. Their existing self-views leave them stuck in rumination and indecision. The leader identity they initially hold must change for them to learn how to lead differently, efficiently and effectively. This article suggests the leader identity development of young professionals is a form of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 2000). This transformation shifts their view of themselves towards a leader who is more empowering, confident, clear, and certain, and towards leadership beliefs that are more accessible, human-centric, collective, and nuanced in nature.

Limitations are inevitable in empirical investigations, and this study is not immune. For example, the exploratory, qualitative nature of my study involving a small number of individuals engaged in unique coaching programme at a selective Mid-Atlantic higher education institution constrains the generalizability of my findings. Further, there are many aspects of leadership development processes which were not addressed in this study. Leader-identity is only one feature of leadership development and is not easily segmented from other components of how leaders learn.

Despite its limitations, the implications of our study's findings are noteworthy. The detailed descriptions of coaching interactions, the novel framework for leader-identity transformation, and the short stories of young professional transformation presented in this article aid researchers and practitioners alike in their pursuit of understanding how coaching works. The descriptions and framework present provide methodologists the opportunity to build upon and apply in future studies of coaching and leader-identity development. Further, the findings provide useful ideas and models for coaches, leadership educators, and organization leaders to consider when constructing leadership learning experiences.

This transformation young professional leaders experience is not easy. The process requires reflection, dialogue, and practice. And it requires help. Leadership coaching is a potent method for leader identity transformation. The reflective, affirming, and forward-thinking interactions in coaching work together to guide the client through their transition and empower them to transform. As the waves of change batter the lives of young professionals, coaches support and challenge



their clients to navigate these rough waters of leadership. We are hopeful the insights from this study inspire scholars and practitioners to expand access to coaching for more young professionals to come. I know it has inspired us to do so.

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