

# Providing safe passage into a larger life: supporting clients' transformational change through coaching

Elke Hanssmann, Global Staff Development, Operation Mobilisation, UK

Contact email: [elke.hanssmann@om.org](mailto:elke.hanssmann@om.org)

## Abstract

This paper reports coaches' experiences of supporting clients undergoing transformational change. Qualitative research was carried out using semi-structured interviews with six coaches and these were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The findings suggest clearly identifiable ingredients for creating a transformational space and reveal how coaches can open up a larger life for clients while helping them overcome their fears. New insights were identified into the role of coaches' spirituality and client readiness blended with the ability to take a long term view for retrospectively emerging transformations.

**Keywords:** Transformation; long-term view; spirituality; client readiness; coaching.

## Introduction

Coaching can transform your life. This is the message of a flourishing new profession, promising fast and convenient life change (Gaskell, 2003). But does coaching really live up to its promise? While coaching is often associated with deep personal change (Kimsey-House *et al.*, 2011; Zeus and Skiffington, 2000), little empirical research has examined how coaching facilitates clients' transformational change. As a coach who seeks to intentionally support clients undergoing personal transformation I found myself intrigued to learn more about the "magic ingredients" that - blended together - bring about transformational change in clients. Transformational change is evident when a client's perspective has undergone a 'fundamental shift' (Cranton and Kasl, 2012, p.394) to themselves or their paradigm. It goes beyond purely intellectual insight and is substantiated by a change in clients' behavioural choices and an enlarged internal and/or external capacity to engage with their world and pursue their goals.

As I was reflecting on my own life journey I could pinpoint specific coaches who had enabled deep personal changes in me; however, I found it difficult to identify the specific things that had made them successful. Equally I found myself working with clients who at times clearly confirmed that our working together had resulted in a personal transformation; yet at other times the hoped-for transformation did not occur. I was at a loss as to what was missing. Was it the client? Was it me? Was it circumstances?

I decided to make this quest the focus of my MA research by exploring expert coach-mentors' descriptions of their experiences of supporting clients who had undergone a personal transformation. My desire was that my research would contribute to illuminate the "black box of coaching" (Drake, 2009, p.1) and enable practitioners to more purposefully assist clients to transform. Additionally I hoped that the research findings would have valuable implications for future training and supervision of coaches.

This article is a summary of the research findings and resulting recommendations. The next sections briefly describe the literature and methodology, before introducing the main themes that emerged from the data analysis. Three main themes, each with three subsequent themes, were identified as follows:

- Coaching as Hospitality
- Inviting Clients into their Future
- The Mystery of Metamorphosis

A discussion of the findings in which I include implications for coaches, supervisors and coaching bodies as well as suggestions for further research concludes this article.

## Literature Review

Literature from the field of developmental/transformational coaching identifies the importance of a holistic approach that engages all domains of learning and aspires to a high level of client engagement and ownership of the agenda for transformational change to occur (Brockbank and McGill, 2006). Such “holistic and client-centred” interventions require the coach to be able to hold the significant turmoil and discomfort that clients are likely to experience when undergoing significant personal change, thus requiring the coach to be a safe place in lieu of utilising tools and techniques (Cox and Jackson, 2010, p. 220). This is echoed by Daloz (1999) who found the reassuring presence of mentors as trusted travel companions key to enable learner to venture out into the unknown.

While Daloz (1999) and Cox and Jackson (2010) subscribe to transformational change as an evolutionary process, Hawkins and Smith (2010, p.232 and p.241) portray transformation as a moment of epiphany of an “embodied” holistic change in perspective, evidenced by a clear “shift in the room” that encompasses various levels of the person. Hawkins and Smith (2006, p. 5) see a key role for the coach to create the “conditions and experiences that create a transformational shift in the relationship and in the individual”.

Adult learning theory offers additional insights into the facilitation of personal transformation. Mezirow (1997, p. 11) highlights the importance of “critical reflection, awareness of frames of reference and participation in discourse” as key elements necessary for transformation. Further empirical research applying Mezirow’s (1997) transformative learning theory identified belief in learners’ abilities and a caring relationship (Cranton and Wright, 2008), positive expectations and genuine relationships with learners (Groen and Hyland-Russel, 2010), the ability to refrain from prematurely rescuing learners from discomfort during change periods (Hicks *et al.*, 2005) and “good company at the edge” (Berger, 2004) of transformational learning to be key enablers for personal transformation.

De Haan’s research (2008a; 2008b, examining critical moments in coaching, found a coach’s ability to not only tolerate tension but deliberately enquire into tense moments to be pivotal for facilitating transformation.

While the literature review brought some insight, it seemed limited in regards to the research question. Much of the literature found was either from the field of adult education or conceptual, rather than empirical. Additionally, findings from the context of executive coaching had only limited application to the research context of a faith-based international Non-government organisation.

## **Methodology**

The research design was influenced by an interpretivist epistemological stance that ontologically understands reality as socially constructed (Bryman, 2012). To allow for the richness and complexity of individual experiences, a qualitative approach which celebrates “richness, depth, nuance...and complexity” (Mason, 2002, p.1) was chosen.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith *et al.*, 2009) emerged as the most suitable approach to meet the aim of capturing the individual meaning-making of the six coaches’ experiences, allowing for the idiosyncrasies of each coach’s unique perspective. IPA realistically recognises that it is impossible for a researcher to gain unbiased access to another person’s “life-world” without bringing personal bias and interpretation to what is being heard. IPA makes the most of this bias by employing a “double hermeneutic” that permits the researcher to “make sense of... [how] participants make sense of their world” (Clarke, 2009, p.38). This approach best matched my own philosophy and values.

### ***Research participant selection***

In line with IPA’s philosophy a small homogeneous sample was selected representing a “perspective rather than a population” and to whom the research question was personally meaningful (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p.49). In addition, a mixture of genders and nationalities was included to explore potential differences relating to gender and culture (Table 1). Participants were identified through my professional network, following up on personal recommendations and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) and were all members of an international faith-based Non-governmental Organisation (NGO).

Nationality	Age	Pseudonym and gender	8 + years with OM	Leadership development	Religion	Years working cross-culturally
Malaysia	38	Joy, F	8	Yes	Christian	8 years
Xhosa/Namibia	41	Thabo, M	14	Yes	Christian	13 years
South Africa	56	Pat, M	24	Yes	Christian	23 years
South Africa	50	Preety, F	21	Yes	Christian	25 years
UK	61	Ian, M	27	Yes	Christian	34 years
USA	61	Al, M	17	Yes	Christian	17 years

**Table 1: Research participants:**

### ***Data collection***

While semi-structured interviews are the most common and preferred method of data collection for IPA, I agree with Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p.86) who describe interviewing as an art involving “creativity...and breaking the rules”. Therefore visual elements were included that according to Smith (April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013, personal correspondence) can access and unlock insights that might not be as easily within reach by just using lexical prompts. Participants were asked to select three pictures from a picture collection to capture how they understood transformational change. After the interview questions they were given two 2 meter long ropes and asked to arrange them in a shape representative of a transformational journey they had taken with a client. They then shared the experience and the meaning the experience had held for them as coaches. Figure 1 shows one of the selected pictures and one of the rope arrangements.

**Figure 1: Visual elements used during interviews**



### **Data analysis**

All interviews were audio recorded and I transcribed them myself. Each transcript was placed in the middle of a three-column paper, repeatedly read and listened to. I added notes and observations in the left hand column and emerging themes in the right hand column. After completing the process for each individual transcript, I clustered interrelated themes and supporting quotes for each theme, thus producing a "table of subordinate themes" with subthemes for each transcript (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p.97). Once all themes had been identified, they were clustered together, using paper slips on the floor, to produce a master-theme list. The master themes and subthemes were transferred into a mind-map, interpreted and presented in a narrative report.

### **Findings**

Three master-themes, each with three sub-themes, emerged from the data analysis. Due to space limitations not all sub-themes will be explored in depth.

#### ***Master theme one: coaching as hospitality***

Included in this master-theme are the sub-themes of preparing a transformational space, hosting generously, and meeting the host.

##### *Preparing a transformational space and hosting generously*

All six coaches described their experience of supporting clients undergoing transformation change as an act of hospitality. Ian sees his work as "*an act of hospitality where you invite somebody to come in and share your life*" and emphasises how "*that act of hospitality is so important in transformational change, because... you get transformed in the sharing of life to life*".

An invitation communicates being welcomed, wanted, can be accepted or rejected, always leaving the choice to the client. Sharing implies generosity, but any gift can be received or politely be refused. The coach offers, does not impose, thus communicating respect to the client.

Pat speaks of the importance of giving "*space*" which allows for the "*freedom to investigate*". This confirms Snowber's (2005, p.346) view, who sees the role of the mentor as opening up "*a hospitable space*" where the client can be completely himself. Protective layers can be removed under the warm welcome and the invitation of the coach as host.

For these six coaches hosting generously included the intentional creation of a transformational space by deep attentive listening to uncover the more vulnerable components of a client. Pat describes his listening: “*I’m listening beyond the words which are the rational, logical...I listen with my heart...screening for what is said and unsaid*”, thus creating what Ian calls “*a relationship in which you can trust, that gives... a place to stand*”.

This trust builds a bridge that allows the coach to challenge more robustly and in Al’s words “*bring up the blind spots in their life*”. Thabo’s experience echoes the importance of caring for clients by being willing to challenge them. He describes a client’s expressed appreciation for wanting “*to kick my butt at times*” as a sign that “*you’re serious*”. Support needs to include challenge to lead to change.

Another key ingredient that emerged was the ability to navigate the equilibrium of being fully engaged with clients while avoiding over-identification with coaching outcomes or dependence on the client. Ian explains:

*It about getting into a position of kind of loving disinterest...you do love this person, but in one sense you’re disinterested in them... You can walk away and give your life to others. You’re not dependent on this person.*

This seeming paradox, to “*love this person*” and “*give your life*” which express dedication and generosity in sharp contrast with “*loving disinterest*” and “*walk away*”, emerged as tandem features that blend together to create the freedom for clients to choose their own change.

For these coaches hosting generously meant a willingness to give of themselves beyond what would be considered ‘normal professional’ boundaries. Thabo observes that his clients want “*not just your knowledge. It’s your life. It’s your stories*”. In his experience “*a lot of trust comes in being willing to share your life with people*” and he sees his investment in clients as “*doing life together*”. Pretty is adamant that to see clients transform it requires her to be *deeply professional...in an informal and highly relational way*”. She muses:

*Hospitality is probably a key word... It’s not an hour in the lounge every now and again...it’s actually in the messiness and grittiness of our lives...all these have been genuine relationships. Not professionalised relationships.*

Hosting generously also includes appropriate self-disclosure. For Joy being “*willing to share of yourself*” is crucial “*for them to open up and not feel it’s a one-sided thing*” and Pat insists that “*inquiry without a willingness to be inquired of is not genuine inquiry...it is curiosity*”.

All this can be both counter-cultural and costly at times, particularly in non-Western cultures where the coach is still expected to be the knowledgeable (faultless) expert (Sood, 2009). It also calls into question prevalent paradigms of professionalism that assume clearly marked boundaries between professional and personal relationships in coaching. However, the findings robustly supported coaches’ generosity with all aspects of their lives as a pivotal enabler for transformational change in clients.

While creating an effective transformational space and hosting generously has its price, it also was found to yield prodigious rewards for the coaches themselves, fuelling their motivation. Pat describes his experience as “*it’s emotional. I get a kick out of it. Thrilled. Fulfilled in just being*

*allowed to support them*”. Preety describes “*a huge enjoyment factor*” through the meaning her work has for others. Embedded in their experience appears to be another paradox of a giver who in the end is enriched, not impoverished, after giving of himself. Pat insists: “*They can take it from me and I’m not gonna feel any poorer*”.

The findings also indicate that clients are not unaffected by their coaches’ genuine delight in their success. There appears to be as yet untapped synergy resulting from coaches’ joy and pride in clients’ achievements. Further research could explore this effect more deeply.

### ***Master theme two: Inviting clients into their future***

Included in this master theme are three sub-themes: cultivating a treasure-hunting view of clients - the power of “yes-you-can!”; befriending the future and the promise of presence and opening up and living the larger life.

The ability to see potential in clients, believing in them and articulating that belief emerged as a strong theme from all six interviews. Pat explains how he sees his clients:

*You see the potential in the person. Not the present! And you approach them on basis of their potential not on their present situational condition.*

Preety is convinced that believing in clients is crucial to transformational change, calling forth their potential. She explains:

*When you see a person with whom you’re working towards transformational change, there is something. An embryo or something that you can see developing, and the person may not even see it themselves yet... You’ve gotta be able to see what the future might look like... Believing that it can happen, and you transferring your own faith...your deep conviction that this is possible... and being able to put that into words*

This image of “an embryo” suggests the beginnings and promise of new life that as yet is unable to live without being supported. This is where the coach draws alongside, and by transferring her belief calling forth the latent potential. The findings suggest a key role for the coach in communicating their insights into who they believe the client can be, promoting hope and optimism of a possible transformational change in the client.

This belief in and ‘treasure hunting view’ of clients helped these coaches to persevere during times where seemingly little changed and served as an incentive to engage. While the findings showed how this contributed to motivating both clients and coach towards the desired change, there are also inherent dangers where a coach might see potential that cannot be realised, thus awakening false hopes in clients. Equally the coach might be drawn to develop the potential he sees and subtly hijacking the client’s agenda where a client might desire to pursue a very different potential to what the coach sees. The findings also raise questions as to whether coaches’ ability to see potential in clients is innate to them or can be trained.

Change and fear, the findings confirmed, go hand in hand. This seems even more potent in transformational change that might affect fundamental aspects of a client’s identity. Joy noticed how clients shied away from even desired changes because “*it’s scary or they can’t imagine...because it’s so much a part of them*”. Pat describes the fear he sees in clients: “*The eyes are the gateway to the soul...you can see the fear in their eyes*”. Resistance appears to grow stronger where clients encounter a deep existential angst of not just having to learn something new, but of losing their very self.

Coaches need to understand the depth of threat this kind of change can pose to clients – fear over what they might become (Berger, 2004; Markus and Nurius, 1986) or the fear over a loss of sense of self which they may battle (Cranton and Wright, 2008). This holds particularly true for collectivist cultures where a change in self has wider ramifications for one's sense of belonging and therefore poses an even greater threat (Markus and Kitayama, 2003). Coaching with its at times uncritical infatuation with change has as yet insufficiently explored some of the ethical dilemmas surrounding transformational change. Coaches need to be aware of and maybe alert clients to the significant ramifications that the change they pursue might have.

The findings give evidence that helping clients overcome restrictive fears and blockages can be achieved by reframing their perspective. Ian explains this shift of perspective:

*People have often got the image that the...safe place is the static place... The future is scary or...an enemy to be slaughtered... A really important thing for me... is inviting people into their future... This is your life now, but there is a future life... to get them into liminal space... to get them into the safety of movement*

Here the shift is made from perceiving the future as an “*an enemy to be slaughtered*” to a perspective where the future becomes “*life*”, and where movement towards the change becomes the new safety zone, thus transforming the future from enemy to friend.

Another important factor in combating fear was found in the promise of presence. Not having to make the leap alone, but having meaningful companionship enabled clients to dare to move against their fear. Al reflects his observations of walking alongside clients:

*If they know...they're not alone... You're not just sending people out there alone to do it. You're there when they say 'No I don't think I can continue this'... I think the aloneness is one of the chief oppositions to transformation and courage! To go alone...I don't know... But if somebody's there with me... That can bring...courage. The fact that you're there...you're encouraging them...*

In Ian’s experience, being honest about the risks and clear about the duration of that supportive accompaniment, give the safe framework that is vital in helping clients transform:

*Some of this is not safe .The thing I can provide is the promise of a relationship, which won't go on forever, but I'll walk with them through this space.*

This raises essential considerations for coaches to weigh up. Strong support, while helping clients make the leap into the unknown, carries within the danger of dependence. Coaches may need to take into account the sustainability of the transformational change once their support is removed and the contract comes to an end.

### ***Master theme three: the mystery of metamorphosis***

Included in the master theme of metamorphosis are the three sub-themes of: recognising readiness and the “aha” moment, enduring chrysalis – coaching with a long-term view and the role of spirituality.

### *Recognising readiness and the “Aha” moment*

The findings affirm that numerous catalysts serve to set off transformational change. The coaches listed personal crises, dissatisfaction with the status quo, insufficient capacity and cross-cultural exposure as natural door-openers for clients to accelerate change-readiness.

*Being out of your comfort zone and out of your cultural norm I think is a tremendous speeder-upper...of transformational change (Preety)*

While transformational change often takes longer, the findings indicate that there are natural openings (Flaherty, 1999) that serve to speed up the process. In the absence of a client's readiness to change, very little is likely to move. Recognising and capitalising on client's readiness for change seems to significantly affect coaching success. Pat explained that his desire for clients to change failed to yield the desired results where, despite skilful coaching, his clients were not intrinsically motivated and ready for change:

*There have been a significant number of times where a person has not gone through the door where I think they should have gone through it... But that is just how it is... You cannot take people where they are not willing to go and even if you drag them, it's not gonna help – they will go back.*

Familiarity with natural openings and indicators of change readiness can help both coaches and clients to realistically assess from the onset whether the time is right to start working towards a desired change. The study found that once clients were ready to change, there were distinct observable indicators that showed that an ‘aha’- moment of transformation was happening. Pat observed how “*there’s something that clicked...suddenly a way they are engaging*” whereas Ian notes both verbal and facial expressions that show that something significant has just taken place:

*It can be an inquisitive face. Or a shocked face. Or a word of exclamation. Damn. Damn...I never realised that. Those sorts of things. Sometimes physical flinches.*

To Al the aha-moment that indicates the transformation means a shift from a life-negating stance to a life-embracing outlook. He describes one experience:

*Literally...just literally her smile, the brightness of her eyes, her posture, you know...[from] just that kind of Eeyore-approach to life...and then she moved from from Eeyore to being Tigger.*

These findings affirm what Hawkins and Smith (2010, p.241) describe as “a shift in the room”, a physical embodiment that evidences a break-through moment. This is significant for coaches who at times can focus so strongly on the verbal messages that they might miss a key moment of non-verbal communication.

### *Enduring Chrysalis - Coaching with a long-term view*

In contrast to transformational “moments” stands another strong finding. All six coaches testified to finding themselves at times surprised when they heard about the long-term impact of their interventions long after completing their work with clients. This informs their outlook and expectation as they enter new coaching contracts. Pat and Joy both see their immediate work with clients as “*planting a seed*” (Pat). Joy’s selection of a picture of a hand planting seedlings captures her clear expectation that those “*seeds become plants*” over time and beyond the coaching contract.

Ian uses the dynamic metaphor of “*a time bomb*” which also inherently assumes that when the time is right this bomb will explode and lead to some dramatic change. Like the other coaches in the study, the apparent absence of clear outcomes does not seem to disturb him. He understands himself as “*always seed-planting*” and allowing for organic change processes to take place. This enables him to give clients freedom instead of pushing them beyond what they are ready for:

*Sometimes people get the invitation to their future, have a good look at it, and then go “No...let’s just go back”. And that’s fine. Because our lives are often three steps forward, two steps back. You lay down stuff...and then you don’t see this person and you think it’s all over. And suddenly... later on, they ride back into what happened in that relationship. And they’re equipped...and tooled and ready to go with these new sets of circumstances (Ian)*

The metaphors these coaches use juxtapose patience, slow organic growth and dynamic potential. This links strongly to understanding clients’ readiness for change, yet adds a different dimension of laying a foundation for later changes even if clients are not yet ready to fully change. Having this longer-term view of coaching outcomes enables the coaches in the study to step back without giving up:

*What I don’t want to do is over-interfere... The art...is knowing how to get out of the way. So, it’s both there, the invitation to...but also a freedom in... Sometimes people...are like chrysalis that are gonna become butterflies...and it’s important you don’t interfere... So sometimes I step back. (Ian)*

The findings indicate a significant time-lag (Ragins and Cotton, 1999) with changes becoming only manifest after the coaching is over. This means that coaching can easily be misjudged as less effective than it really is. Boyatzis (2006, p.611) observed that due to its apparent disconnectedness to the time of the intervention the real outcome can “easily be overlooked or attributed to other factors”. Very little research has looked at coaching with a long-term view and examined retrospectively emerging results. Here the findings shed new light on coaching effectiveness.

#### *Spirituality*

The final sub-theme – the role of spirituality – provides further insight into what enabled these coaches to step back, allow for organic processes to occur naturally and relinquish outcomes, yet without feeling they failed their clients or were ineffective coaches. All six coaches in the study were Christians and their faith influenced their approach to working with clients. It helped them recognise that while they could help and support, it was not in their power to transform clients, no matter how good they were professionally. Joy understands herself as an instrument in God’s hand and a co-worker of God.

*It is God who transforms life and he uses people to facilitate some of that transformation, but it’s really him who does the work... The gardener doesn’t really do anything to make the transformation happen, but the hands are there to facilitate and help things along... I could have a lot of my own...insights about someone, but I think there is a different dimension when God gives insight.*

While this could lead to a fatalistic lack of taking responsibility the context of the interview makes it very clear that this by no means diminishes Joy’s commitment to giving her best; however there is a certain humility to accept her limitations and a sense of connection with God which serves as a direct resource, giving insight and strength.

Preety describes her work with clients as “*an act of worship*” which enhances her commitment to give her best and fuels her sense of vocation with which she serves clients. For Ian, the act of supporting clients to transform is linked with his sense of vocation to help clients align with what he considers their creation design and purpose:

*God's always calling us from the future. God's always pulling us towards the future... We're all shadows of our future selves... The more God calls us towards the future, the more real our lives become.*

He looks at clients with a view to helping them become all that God intended them to be and sees his role as a collaborator of this creator God. Yet it is not him and his aspirations but a sense of bringing out what God has lain inside a person, thus treating them with respect and leaving the ownership for the desired change completely with the client. Al differs slightly, in that the impact of his spirituality serves as both a resource and a burden. He feels his gifts that he uses in supporting clients have been entrusted to him by God, and there is a perceived pressure to serve clients and display good stewardship:

*I can help them because God helps me help them... First of all, it humbles me... Secondly, it frightens me. Because if I have such a gift I really wanna be careful that I don't use it for wrong thing.*

While this pressure might at times be unpleasant, it drives him to high professional standards and increases his commitment to give his clients his best. Pat however, experiences his own spirituality as freeing and finds his security anchored in feeling his “*being is rooted in mercy and grace*” which reduces the pressure to perform. He pragmatically states that he has “*nothing to prove*”. This in turn helps him to offer what he has to give, but then entrust the clients and the outcomes to God:

*It's not mine. I'm simply a messenger; I simply come alongside for a season... I can't cling on to this person or lay any claim to who they are, what they are doing or whatever- that's not up to me... I've stepped back, I mean, it's their choice, it's their life, God does it for me... Who am I to do it differently for them?*

The findings suggest that these coaches’ spirituality results in a deep sense of vocation, coupled with humility. Accepting their own human limitations aids them to give their best in supporting clients, yet enables them to then step back and relinquish the end results.

Research pertaining to the impact of coaches’ spirituality on their approaches and coaching outcomes is still scarce (Duncan, 2012) and the findings have added valuable insights to a profession where the ability to connect with clients not just on a rational but on a more holistic and in particular spiritual level is gaining increasing significance (Kauffman and Bachkirova, 2008).

## **Discussion**

The findings of the study are consistent with Groen and Hyland Russel’s (2010) research which attributes a pivotal role in any deep change process to the person of the instructor. They found that instructors’ authentic engagement through genuine relationships helped learners overcome their fears. Only embedded into the context of a genuine relationship the skills of facilitating dialogue and coaching learners came into full fruition. Much training of coaches to date still focuses on helping

coaches develop knowledge and skills without directing attention to developing the person of the coach him/herself and equipping them to build deep relationships.

The trust necessary for robust challenge can only come from a strong relationship that according to the findings presented here may have to exceed the contractual relationships that at times can be almost sterile. Ian's observation that real life change occurs in the sharing of "*life to life*" poses a challenging question to coaches - whether they are willing to not only give of their skills and professional expertise, but serve clients by opening up the whole of their lives to bring about transformational change in clients. This challenges O'Briain and Palmer's (2010, p.6) view where they caution coaches not to engage at a "friendship" level and allow mutual access to all areas of life but to adhere to a professional distance which is "specified by the contract according to the client's goal". The findings thus confirm Daouk-Öyry and Rosinski's (2010, p.133) observation that it may be time to rethink (Western) artificial boundaries between personal and professional lives, in order for clients who "seek closeness and intimacy" to be able to transform.

The delicate balance between challenge and support in creating a transformational space has been evidenced in the literature (Daloz, 1999; Kegan and Laskow-Lahey, 2009). The findings however have raised further questions around cultural assumptions of the nature and appropriateness of applying challenge. Al's assumption that trust implies an invitation to directness in challenge could be attributed to his North-American preference for direct communication (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005) while clients from less direct cultures might perceive this directness as a breach of trust and a way of losing face (Ng, 2009, Peterson, 2007). More research needs to explore how challenge and support can best bring about transformation in different cultural contexts. The findings indicated that additionally there might be gender differences pertaining to the nature of an effective transformational space.

The findings further indicated the powerful impact of coaches seeing clients' potential, articulating what they see and transferring their faith in clients' possibilities onto them. The significance of seeing clients as resourceful is well established (Rogers, 2008; Kimsey-House *et al.*, 2011); however the findings raise important ethical questions, where coaches might see potential in clients that is out of line with what clients want to develop, or where coaches raise false hopes in clients of what might be possible, based on what they see. The dangers of spotting potential in clients deserves more research since the findings showed how seeing the potential served as a great incentive for coaches to engage and also as a powerful pull for clients to venture into the unknown. If, as the findings indicate, the ability to believe in clients and see what lies within a client, is one of the pivotal components in transformational change, further research also needs to help identify whether this ability is innate to coaches, or can be developed and if so how. Coach training can then focus on equipping coaches with this skill.

The need to help clients combat their fears associated with transformational change has emerged clearly as another key ingredient and confirms De Haan's (2008b) findings. This requires of coaches to be well versed in dealing with highly emotive material, able to refrain from rescuing clients in the midst of what might be very uncomfortable for both of clients and coach. De Haan (2008b) found the critical moments to be indicative of breakthrough and turning points, yet still too little emphasis is placed on training coaches to endure productive discomfort and work at higher levels of complexity. More holistic and psychologically minded training and good supervision are required for coaches working at this level (Drake, 2011, Williams *et al.*, 2002).

The findings uncovered surprising new insights on the retrospectively emerging impact of coaching interventions, thus calling into question current assessments of the effectiveness of

coaching. The findings suggest that evaluating coaching interventions right after completing an intervention is not enough to appraise the results, for much further impact might only become evident in hindsight. This not only warrants further longitudinal research, but also may help both coaches and clients to combat doubts as to whether their working together has been successful even if not all desired results have been achieved.

Tied in with this are the discoveries around client readiness: the findings show that change readiness cannot be imposed beyond clients' intrinsic ownership. Approaching coaching with a longer-term view can bring about a paradigm shift for organisations, coaches and clients alike, where coaching is understood as planting seeds instead of pushing for instant results, thus creating the climate of freedom and allowing for change to occur organically.

Enduring chrysalis – the seeing plateau of apparent unproductivity – will come far more easily for coaches and clients with a better understanding of longer-term effects of coaching outcomes. The findings also demonstrate how coaches' spirituality can act as a resource to relinquish coaching outcomes, anchoring identity not in the results achieved, but in knowing themselves to be "*rooted in mercy and grace*", which allows coaches to allow clients the freedom to transform at their own pace and takes away from the pressure to perform and prove themselves. More attention needs to be given to research that examines the impact of coaches and clients' spirituality as a source of motivation and strength to accept human limitations thus accelerating desired change processes.

## Conclusion

The study set out to identify the "magic ingredients" required to successfully support clients undergoing transformational change through coaching. It identified the pivotal role of a genuine, authentic coach whose skills included the ability to listen holistically, balance the tandem features of challenge and support while generously putting the whole of their lives at clients' disposal. Successful transformational coaches know how to provide meaningful companionship to clients while they combat the fears surrounding personal change processes. Such coaches are comfortable in holding emotional turmoil and firmly believe in clients' potential, at times using their own hope and faith with clients to pull them into their desired future. These coaches are skilled in recognising change readiness, and capitalising on natural openings for change, while able to endure apparent plateaus of chrysalis, because they understand the longer-term impact that coaching is likely to have beyond immediate results. Their spirituality aids them to relinquish emphasis on results and assume a position of "non-possessive caring" (Johnson and Ridley, 2004, p.48) which in turn frees their clients to transform in their own time, at their own pace.

The findings from the data suggest a strong interplay of the themes identified. Coaches' spirituality impacted their value system, which in turn affected how they went about creating a transformational space and their view of clients' potential. The findings highlighted the importance of coaches being secure in themselves, and the need to continuously develop themselves as key instruments of change. They displayed generosity in sharing all of their resources and their lives, courage in "care-fronting" clients (Augsburger, 2009, p.83), patience in accompanying clients through fear and chrysalis while releasing outcomes with an attitude of "loving disinterest" fuelled by the hope of long-term results.

None of this can be achieved by going it alone. Regular supervision, a firm commitment to ongoing professional development and a solid dose of humility are required. This conclusion endorses what Rogers (2011, p.344) so aptly posits as a challenge before coaches who want to excel in their profession:

Working at this level requires psychological sophistication, courage, confidence, an ability to ask wise rather than clever questions, and a willingness to suspend judgement and create impeccable rapport. Easy to say, much harder to do; but when we can, the rewards – for us and for our clients – are immense.

What has been found both challenges and motivates me, as both researcher and coach, to reach higher, dig deeper, to do the coaching profession proud.

### **Limitations**

The research was conducted within the constraints of a master's programme which resulted in a number of limitations. This was a small-scale study and all participants came from the same NGO. The time restraints made pursuing valuable avenues for further research, which opened up through the findings, impossible. A clear need for further research to substantiate what has been found is evident. Comparative research giving clients a voice to supplement and contrast what has been found from coaches perspectives would enrich the research findings. Some findings merit longitudinal research as suggested above. A larger sample from different contexts could add richness and depth.

### **References**

- Augsburger, D. (2009). *Caring enough to confront: How to understand and express your deepest feelings towards others* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), Ventura, CA: Regal.
- Berger, J. G. (2004). Dancing on the threshold of meaning: Recognising and understanding the growing edge. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 2 (4), 336-351.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (2006). An overview of intentional change from a complexity perspective. *Journal of Management Development*, 25 (7), 607-623.
- Brockbank, A. & McGill, I. (2006). *Facilitating reflective learning through mentoring and coaching*, London: Kogan Page.
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), New York: Oxford University Press.
- Clarke, C. (2009). An introduction to interpretative phenomenological analysis: A useful approach for occupational therapy research. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 72 (1), 37-39.
- Cox, E. & Jackson, P. (2010). Developmental coaching. In: E. Cox, T. Bachkirova & D. Clutterbuck (eds.) *The Complete Handbook of Coaching*. pp. 217-230. London: Sage.
- Cranton, P. & Kasl, E. (2012). A response to Michael Newman's "Calling Transformative Learning into Question: Some mutinous thoughts", *Adult Education Quarterly*, 62(4), pp. 393-398.
- Cranton, P. & Wright, B. (2008). The transformative educator as learning companion. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 6(1), 33-47.
- Daloz, L. (1999) *Mentor: guiding the journey of adult learners*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Daouk-Öyry, L. & Rosinski, P. (2010). Coaching across cultures. In: S. Palmer & A. McDowall (eds.) *The Coaching Relationship: Putting people first*. Hove: Routledge. pp. 121-138.
- De Haan, E. (2008a). I struggle and emerge: Critical moments of experienced coaches. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, 60 (1), 106-131.
- De Haan, E (2008b). *Relational coaching: Journey's towards mastering one-to-one learning*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.
- Drake, D. B. (2009). Evidence in action: A relational view of knowledge and mastery in coaching. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*. 7(1), 1-12.
- Drake, D. B. (2011). What do coaches need to know? Using the mastery window to assess and develop expertise. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 4(2), 138-155.

- Duncan, P. (2012). Examining how the beliefs of Christian coaches impact their coaching practice. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, Special Issue 6, 30-45.
- Flaherty, J. (1999). *Coaching: Evoking excellence in others*. Burlington, MA: Elsevier.
- Gaskell, C. (2003). *Your pocket life coach: Take ten minutes a day to transform your life and your work*. London: Element.
- Groen, J. & Hyland-Russell, T. (2010). Humanities professors on the margins: Creating the possibility for transformative learning. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 8(4), 223-245.
- Hawkins, P. & Smith, N. (2006). *Coaching, mentoring and organizational consultancy: Supervision and development*. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Hawkins P. & Smith, N. (2010). Transformational coaching. In: E. Cox, T. Bachkirova & D. Clutterbuck (eds.). *The complete handbook of coaching*. pp. 231-244. London: Sage.
- Hicks, M. A., Berger, J. G. & Givens-Generett, G. (2005). From hope to action: Creating spaces to sustain transformative habits of mind and heart. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 3(1), 57-75.
- Hofstede, G. & Hofstede, G.J. (2005). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill
- Johnson, W.B. & Ridley, C.R. (2004). *The elements of mentoring*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Kauffman, C. & Bachkirova, T. (2008). The evolution of coaching: An interview with Sir John Whitmore. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 1(1), 11-15.
- Kegan, R. & Laskow-Lahey, L. (2009). *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School.
- Kimsey-House, H., Kimsey-House, K., Sandahl, P. & Whitworth, L. (2011). *Co-active coaching: Changing business, transforming lives* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey.
- Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2009) Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing, Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Markus, H.R. and Kitayama, S. (2003). Culture, self and the reality of the social. *Psychological Inquiry*. 14 (3&4), 277-283.
- Markus, H. & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41 (9), 954-969.
- Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) London: Sage.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. 74, 5-12.
- Ng, C. (2009). Coaching in china'. In: J. Passmore (ed.). *Diversity in coaching: Working with gender, culture, race and age*. pp. 96-109. London: Kogan Page.
- O'Briain, A. & Palmer, S. (2010). Introducing an interpersonal perspective on the coaching relationship. In: S. Palmer and A. McDowall (eds.) *The coaching relationship: Putting people first*. pp. 9-33. Hove: Routledge.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Peterson, D.B. (2007). Executive coaching in a cross-cultural context. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*. 59(4), 261-271.
- Ragins, B. R. & Cotton, J. L. (1999). Mentor functions and outcomes: A comparison of men and women in formal and informal mentoring relationships. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. 84, (4), 529-550.
- Rogers, J. (2008). *Coaching skills: A handbook*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Rogers, J. (2011). 'Afterword – Challenges Ahead'. In: L. Wildflower and D. Brennan (eds.) *Handbook of knowledge-based coaching: From theory to practice*. pp. 341-344. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, method and research..* London: Sage.
- Snowber, C. (2005). The mentor as artist: A poetic exploration of listening, creating, and mentoring. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*. 13(3), 345-353.
- Sood, Y. (2009). Coaching in India. In: J. Passmore (ed.). *Diversity in coaching: Working with gender, culture, race and age*. pp. 127-133. London: Kogan Page.
- Williams, K., Kiel, F., Doyle, M. & Sinagra, L. (2002). Breaking the boundaries: Leveraging the person in executive coaching. In: C. Fitzgerald and J. G. Berger (eds.). *Executive Coaching: Practices and perspectives*. pp. 119-133. Mountain View, CA: Davies-Black.
- Zeus, P. & Skiffington, S. (2000). *The complete guide to coaching at work*. Australia: McGraw-Hill.

Elke Hanssmann is a free-lance trainer, coach and consultant with vast experience in the NGO sector. She has worked as a trainer in more than 45 countries on all continents and is involved in global leadership development for Operation Mobilisation International. Contact:  
[elke.hanssmann@om.org](mailto:elke.hanssmann@om.org) or phone: 0044-(0)7810680364