Academic Paper

Coaching with the heart in mind: The varying levels of emotional engagement

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Abstract

Utilising constructivist grounded theory (CGT), this research explored how coaches engage with leader emotions in the context of organisational relationships. Four levels of emotional engagement emerged: emotionally engaged, emotionally curious, emotionally misaligned, and emotionally avoidant. Creating the conditions, emotional contracting and engaging with the leader emotional ecosystem was fundamental to emotional engagement. Emotional misalignment disengaged leaders from the coaching relationship. This article highlights why this research matters. Importantly, the findings are synthesised into a new theoretical emotional engagement framework, The ACE Model, which explores and explains findings relating to attunement, adaptation, creating conditions, engagement and evaluation. The ACE Model supports a practical application of the research findings for coach education and development.

Introduction

This article highlights why coaching research related to emotional engagement matters and how the findings, synthesised into an emotional engagement framework - The ACE Model, can aid the practical application of this research in coaching education, development and practice.

Managing relationships at work, including relationships with line managers, is among the most common objectives for leaders seeking coaching (Mann, 2016; ICF, 2017) as they cause intense emotions (Waldron, 2000; Health and Safety Executive, 2020). Despite coaches working with this phenomenon, there is very little evidence of how coaches engage with leader emotions (Cox, 2016). This setting provided an appropriate and important environment to investigate this. This research goes further than the extant literature by exploring emotional engagement from both leader and coach perspectives.

The article includes a summary of literature reviewed before and during analysis, in line with CGT methodology. The methodology covers how CGT was applied and the emergence of theoretical codes and concepts. Key findings relating to emotional engagement and a discussion incorporating the synthesis of findings into The ACE Model emotional engagement framework follows. The article concludes with final remarks, limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

More empirical evidence is required to inform coaching education and practice (Bachkirova, 2024). Extant literature pertaining to emotional engagement focuses on coach experiences, beliefs, confidence, skills and attitudes towards working with emotions in coaching (Bachkirova and Cox, 2007; Cox and Bachkirova, 2007; Cremona, 2010; Cox, 2016). Significant variation is identified in all these aspects (Bachkirova and Cox, 2007; Cox and Bachkirova, 2007; Cremona, 2010; Cox, 2016). As such, these researchers called for more research to be undertaken. Limited studies explore the influence of coaching on emotional intelligence (Schaap and Dippenaar, 2017), but do not explore how coaches engage with leader emotions, leaving a significant gap in the literature.

There is also limited empirical evidence that considers coaching in the context of global expansion, and remote team working (Bachkirova, 2024; Bharwaney et al, 2019). Team coaching research tends to focus on team dynamics, overlooking the role of emotion. Team coaching is considered far more complex than individual coaching because of constantly shifting group dynamics (Jones, Woods and Guillaume, 2016). Researchers highlight groups are composed of 'individuals with their own aptitudes, attitudes, needs [and] different ways of expressing emotions and ideas' (Jones et al, 2016, p. 70). I would argue that emotions are at the root of team dynamics, and coaching researchers need to be cognisant of their presence in team dynamics. This opinion is supported by Bharwaney et al (2019), who attempt to address the void of evidence-based strategies for emotional engagement in coaching. Whilst their suggestions are not empirical, they advocate 'when emotions are engaged in teams and concerns are heard, emotional energy has an outlet and disruptive behaviours dissipate' (Bharwaney et al, 2019, p. 187/198).

Widdowson, Rochester, Barbour and Hullinger (2020) found the limited team coaching research to date focused on defining the term and investigates the efficacy of team coaching. They suggest development of team coaching skills is somewhat behind (Widdowson et al, 2020, p. 35). Graves (2020, p.116) discovered coaches feel less comfortable delivering team coaching due to *'coaches themselves experiencing more intense emotions.'* Graves identified working with teams requires coaches to go beyond how teams present themselves and coaches should pay attention to *'specific words and emotions that may have deeper meaning and feeding these back',* emphasising coaches need to be skilled and confident to engage with emotions (Graves, 2020, p. 174).

In a review of team coaching literature (Widdowson et al, 2020), 'emotion' only appears once relating to ethical maturity and coach mastery. Carroll (2012) defines ethical maturity as 'having reflective, rational, emotional and intuitive capacity to decide whether actions are right and wrong, or good and better' in coaching (Carroll, 2012, p. 106). Bachkirova and Cox (2007) suggested an unconscious and unexamined attitude towards emotion devalues the role of coaching in developing effective leadership.

Significant gaps in coaching literature persist (Bachkirova, 2024). A fundamental gap is empirical evidence representing perspectives of leaders in how coaches engage with their emotions and the influence this has. Coaches face a challenge in discerning the appropriateness or effectiveness of emotional engagement without adequate research from the perspective of those being coached, highlighting the need for a more balanced understanding. This lack of diverse perspectives not only hinders coaching development but is potentially failing to meet the needs of leaders and teams who turn to coaching to support them with the emotive nature of their organisational relationships.

While the literature review precedes the methodology and findings in this article, it was not conducted in isolation of the analysis. The literature was used to guide and narrow down the focus of research to avoid unnecessary duplication (Charmaz, 2008) and address critical gaps in coaching research. It also grounded the study in existing knowledge and the broader academic context (Charmaz, 2008).

Methodology

An objective approach to coaching research is needed to advance the profession and evidence base which underpins it (Bachkirova, 2024, Passmore and Tee, 2020). Qualitative research provides the opportunity to obtain rich data - in particular, emotions experienced by coaches and clients (De Haan, 2019) and the complexities involved in exploring phenomena (Charmaz, 2014; Bachkirova and Noon, 2020). Emotions should also be studied in their given context (Greenaway, Kalokerinos and Williams, 2018).

This research was undertaken through the lens of social constructionism ontology and constructivist epistemology. Social constructionism has merit for exploring emotions in both coaching and relationships as emotions are constructed and co-constructed by those involved (Wormwood, Siegel, Kopec, Quigley and Barrett, 2019; Feldman Barrett, 2020). Emotions are profoundly real (Waldron, 2000; Fineman, 2003) and experienced subjectively (Hoemann, Khan, Feldman, Nielson, Devlin, Dy, Barrett, Wormwood and Quigley, 2020). In constructivism, knowledge and understanding are built through entering, interacting and gaining multiple views of phenomena in its context (Charmaz, 2006). This was done from the perspectives of leaders, coaches, coach supervisors, coach educators and coaches involved in accreditation, and my own, in alignment with CGT (Charmaz, 2006).

The Grounded Theory process is set out in Figure 1 and indicates the stages of data collection and analysis. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews using Zoom video conferencing. Recruitment involved purposive sampling of participants with the required emotional experience (Willig, 2013), followed by theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014) until theoretical saturation and no new insights emerged (Willig, 2013).

Participants were leaders, coaches, coach supervisors, educators and those involved in accreditation who had experienced individual team or group coaching with a focus on organisational relationships within the last three years. 22 participants were recruited, 12 leaders and 10 coaches providing insights into 31 different coaching experiences. A good standard for CGT (Creswell, 1998). Participant demographics are displayed in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 1: Grounded Theory Process (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007)
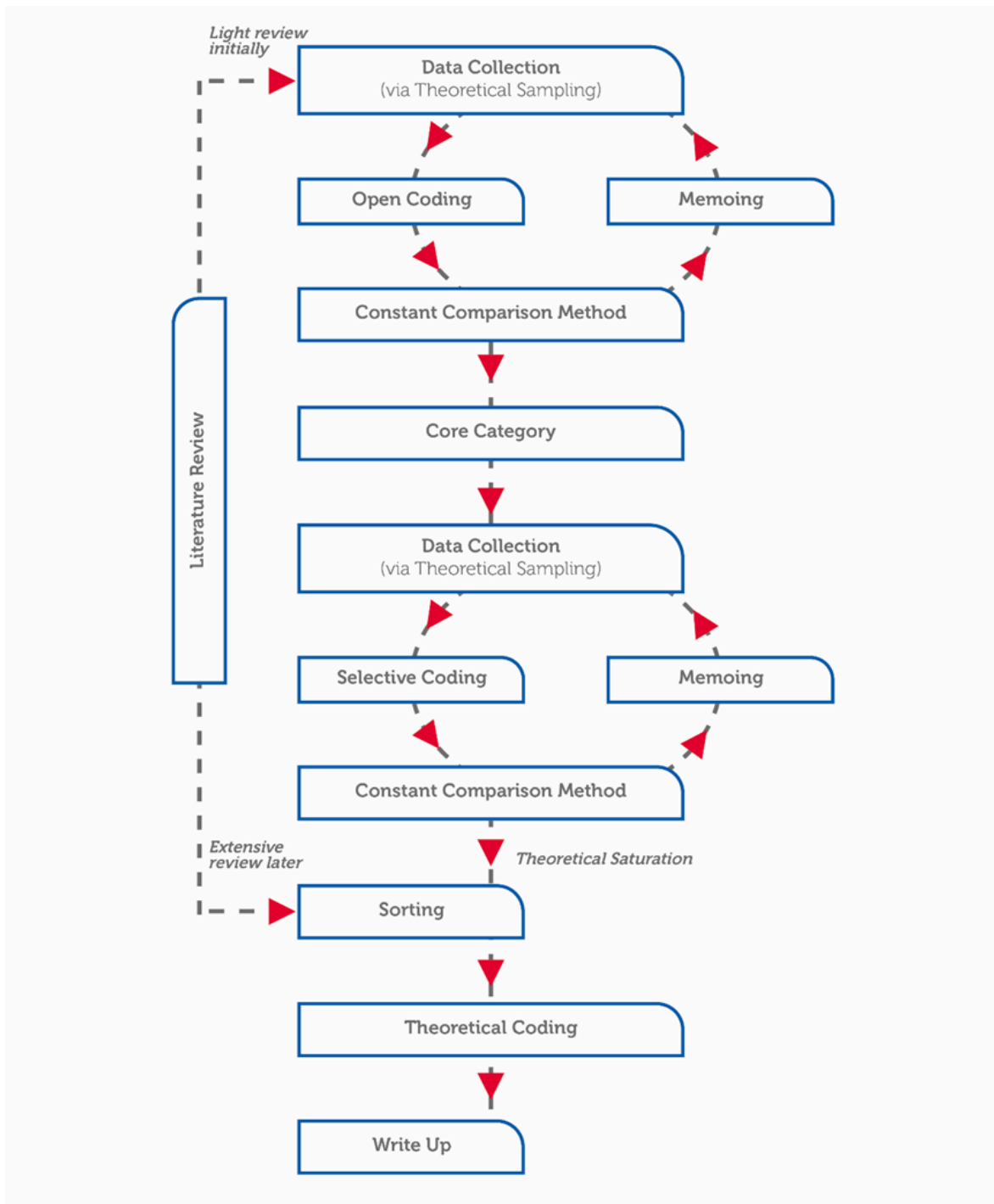
Figure 2: Participant demographics

Demographic details	Leaders Interviewed (N=12) Leaders Coaching Experiences (E=15)	Coaches Interviewed (N=10) Coaching Experiences (E=16)	Total Participants Interviewed (N=22) Total Coaching Experiences (E=31)
Gender			
Female	6	4	10
Male	6	6	12
Total	12	10	22
Age range			
40-59	11	5	16
60+	1	5	6
Ethnicity			
Black British	1		1
Asian British		1	1
White British	10	7	17
White European		1	1
White Other	1	1	2
Leaders Positions	**Leader interview**	**Coach interview**	
Chief Executive or Managing Director	3	6	9
Vice President (Global)	2	1	3
Executive Director	5	8	13
Director	1	1	2
Senior leader	1	2	3
Coaching experience, qualifications and accreditations			
Experience			
<12 months		2	
10+ years		1	
15+ years		4	
20+ years		2	
33 years		1	
Coaching qualifications			
Post Graduate Certificate or Diploma		10	
Masters		5	
Doctorate		2	
Coaching accreditation			
Yes		6	
No		4	
Coaching specialism			
Executive		9	
Leadership		10	
Business		9	
Sports and performance psychology		2	
Team coaching		7	
Coaching supervision		1	
Coaching education		1	
Accreditation board member		3	
Internal coach		3	

Figure 3: Participant sectors and industries

Companies Sectors and Industries
Aviation (Airports)
Biomedical Science Industry, Global
Business Development
Car Park Industry
Charity Sector
Computing & Software (Video Games)
Financial
Food and Beverage, Global
Government, Local Authority (Social Care)
Government, National (Non-Departmental Government Body)
Healthcare (NHS)
Healthcare (Non NHS)
Higher Education
Housing Association
Large Consultancy
Law Firm (Legal)
Medical Nutrition, Global
Property
Pharmaceutical
Sports and Athletics (Elite & Professional)
Start-up – Technical, Global
Technical Engineering

The research explored how the coach is engaging and working with leader emotions and what influence this has. Commencing in cycles of three to five participants, analysis, coding and memo writing with constant comparison across all data happened concurrently (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). Codes such as 'creating a safe space', 'emotionally engaged', and 'emotional contracting' emerged. Utilising theoretical sampling, data from new participants was integrated.

Modifications to the questions facilitated further exploration into codes and categories (Charmaz, 2014). NVIVO was used to sort data. Relationships and patterns emerged forming theoretical codes (higher order categories) and concepts developing new theories grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2014). The theoretical codes are: creates the conditions; emotionally attuned; systemically attuned; and contextualises. The levels of emotional engagement to emerge from the data were: emotionally engaged; evokes emotional curiosity; emotionally misaligned; and emotionally avoidant. Criteria (rules) were developed to include data in each of these categories.

Focused coding and categorising highlighted interdependencies (Saldaña, 2021). For example, emotional attunement became entwined with emotional engagement. Data showed coaches engaging at an emotional level were attuned to the leader's emotional state. Integrating the coach data with the leader data provided deeper insights into the leader experience of the coaching process and shed light on how coaches intentionally (or didn't) engage with leader emotions.

Bringing the data from two different perspectives of coaching experiences together provided a richer and more subjective view of how coaches engaged with leader emotions. Taking analysis into a deeper level of interpretation and theorisation (Charmaz, 2014), the following theoretical concepts emerged: 'creates the conditions for emotional engagement'; 'fosters varying levels of emotional engagement'; and 'highlights the significance of the leader's emotional ecosystem' (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Theoretical concepts, categories, codes and subcodes

Theoretical Concepts	Theoretical Categories	Codes (Bold) & Subcodes (Italics)
Creates the conditions for authentic emotional engagement.	Create the conditions for authentic emotional expression	***Coach creates a safe space*** *Empathic, kind, non-judgemental, person-centred, builds trust* ***Leaders feel safe being authentic, emotional and vulnerable*** *Feel safe, no judgement, sounding board, felt heard/listened to, focus on self/needs, authentic, vulnerable, emotional expression.*
	Emotional attunement	**Describe feeling emotionally attuned to self and others.** ***Emotion is important & information. Emotional contracting. Power and control with the client. Develop own emotionality. Self as a tool (Coach). Finds real issue. Enmeshment***
	Systemic attunement	**Attuned to leaders' – System dynamics. Relationship dynamics. Culture and climate.**
	Contextualises	**Identifies & contextualises** *Congruence, dynamics, thinking styles, behaviours, patterns, calls it out, contribution & co-creation.*
Fosters, varying levels of emotional engagement.	Emotionally engaged	**Engages emotions. Develops emotional literacy** – labels **Normalises and validates emotions. Works with emotional concepts. Identifies leaders' needs. Holds the space & contains emotions. Regulates. Mediates.**
	Emotionally curious	**Explores emotions curiously** – *Beliefs, perspectives, metaphors, images, powerful questions.* **Evokes emotional awareness. Experimental thinking and options. Psychometric and feedback tools.**
	Emotionally misaligned	**Emotions secondary. Emotional leakage. Leader self-regulates. Too hypothetical. Deference. Doesn't create a safe space. Doesn't contract. Leader self-coach. Inappropriate** – *Abrasive & forthright. On the coach's agenda. Mentors.* **Emotionally disengages leader** – *disappointment, disengages, disconnects.*
	Emotionally avoidant	**Functional. Tools and process-focused. Solution, performance and outcome-focused. Coach problem, not person. Limited influence on emotions.**

Findings

Two distinct approaches that coaches and leaders brought to coaching were identified: emotionally engaged and emotionally avoidant. The dynamic integration of these approaches resulted in four levels of engagement: emotionally engaged; emotionally curious; emotionally misaligned; and emotionally avoidant. Creating the conditions and being attuned to leader emotions and their emotional ecosystem influenced the level of emotional engagement coaches attained. Levels of engagement were also influenced by leader inclination to engage emotionally, highlighting the importance of the emotional contract. Describing leaders and coaches as emotionally avoidant does not imply a diagnosis; it is my subjective interpretation of data to describe how they approach and engage with emotions in the coaching process.

Creating the conditions for emotional engagement

It appeared that where coaches attained emotional engagement, they intentionally and skilfully created a psychologically safe space, wherein leaders could feel comfortable being their authentic selves and felt free to display emotions and vulnerabilities without fear of judgement or criticism. Coaches developed rapport and built a trusting relationship with a non-judgmental approach:

"I would build rapport [...] to try and get her to trust me."

"Coaching is a unique space; you have to remove all judgement."

Strategies such as this helped to create an environment where leaders felt safe to express themselves and to explore their emotions.

"It's massively important for leaders to bring their emotions into coaching. [To do that] there has to genuinely be a real sense of trust. Something we've got [my coach and I], real trust."

Coaches that attained emotional engagement emphasised that they view every leader as a human being first and foremost, regardless of seniority or scale of their leadership role. No matter the size of organisation or salary, their focus remains on the individual and their unique needs and experiences.

Incorporating the key elements building rapport, trust and being non-judgemental coaches created the conditions for emotional engagement. This provided a valued and much-needed safe space for leaders to focus on their own needs and explore their emotions and emotional challenges:

"*Having a safe space to focus on your own needs and vulnerabilities was invaluable."*

Emotional Attunement

Being attuned to leader emotions was evident in how coaches described listening, observing and paying close attention to what leaders were saying, how they were saying it and the emotions that leaders were experiencing. Furthermore, coaches and leaders described how coaches would pick up on subtle cues, also recognising what their client was not expressing. Coaches described emotions as subsets of behaviours. Choosing to work with emotions or not was dependent on how or if emotions were showing up, and how emotions were getting in the way of what the leader wanted to achieve. Coaches who demonstrated being emotionally attuned described using their intuition and emotional antennae to listen beyond the spoken word to establish where the focus may need to be. Coaches used leader emotions as information, focusing on emotional responses and unpacking them:

"I work with everything the client brings and help them unpack it."

"You may have a client quite anxious and concerned about what they're doing, others massively self-confident, hugely capable. They [both] need something different. There are different emotions in play."

Coaches describe being emotionally attuned and engaging leaders emotionally, not in a therapeutic, psychodynamic sense, but in a practical, engaging way that can help to evoke awareness about what might be going on for the leader.

Emotional contract

Emotional contracting emerged as a strategy where coaches keep power and control of the coaching conversation with the leader. Coaches who described being attuned to leader emotions recognised when they were stepping into emotional territory. At that moment, they invited and contracted with the leader where they wanted to go with their emotions:

"They became emotional. I asked what had come up for them and whether they wanted to explore that."

Emotional contracting is an incredibly subtle and symbiotic process. Coaches move between attunement and contracting harmoniously. It isn't an overt transaction. The symbiotic process of attunement and emotional contracting is what provides coach and leader with the co-constructed road map for where the leader needs and wants to go in the coaching conversation at any given moment:

"I can see this is distressing for you and I hear your anger… would it be useful to explore what lies beneath it?"

"I can see this is really emotional for you, would you like to spend some time working through this?"

If leaders wanted to engage emotionally, coaches would engage at this level. However, if leaders didn't want to go there and wanted to avoid discussing their emotions and feelings, the coaches did not push it unless they had established both the conditions and the contract to go there and simply met the leader where they were at.

Systemic and emotional attunement

In complex relationship dynamics, leaders often found themselves deeply immersed in their emotions, making it challenging to view their situation objectively. When coaches demonstrated both systemic and emotional attunement, they skillfully identified and brought attention to patterns, connections, and dynamics within the relationships and leader behaviours. By doing so, they evoked greater self-awareness in leaders.

"I wanted somebody to challenge me, because I'm really conscious of how I can behave and act. He [the coach] helped me to look at how I contribute to it [the dynamic]."

When the coach interventions involved calling out specific dynamics or behaviours, this helped leaders to recognise what was happening and to contextualise the emotions and behaviours experienced. Coaches would metaphorically hold up a mirror and call out leader behaviours:

"My coach said, 'Oi! I'm rescuing!' It was really good for me to realise."

Leaders valued having an objective view from a coach who was attuned to organisational behaviours and dynamics, particularly during emotive leadership challenges.

Emotionally engaged

Many experiences were shared where coaches and leaders directly engaged on an emotional level. Emotions were used as a catalyst to inquire further into leader experiences and their significance. Coaches engaged with leaders in a way emotions were expressed, a key factor providing emotional containment and regulation. Coaches acknowledged, normalised and validated emotions experienced as a result of relationship dynamics. Emotions were explored, contextualised, challenged and put in place in relation to what was going on, enabling leaders to make useful and informative connections. Coaches and leaders worked together in such a way that not only are emotions explored curiously, but they are also fully engaged, utilised and explored:

"We would talk about what their emotions were, where they came from and what they brought up for us both. What we know about ourselves in relation to those emotions, where those emotions show up in other places, and our tendencies to go to a certain emotional place."

Engaging with emotions was valued by leaders. It also provided leaders with the opportunity to identify their own needs. A recurring theme in many leader narratives was neglecting their own physical, emotional, and sometimes financial needs:

"I can say things that I can't say anywhere else. I can't say them with my family because they're relying on my income. I can't say them to my boss because they don't understand me. I can't really even be as honest with my co-workers. There is no safe space for me. So, there were a lot of emotions that were released through the coaching."

"It's really good to have a discussion around emotions as [coaching] can sometimes be quite cold and functional."

Emotionally curious

At this level leaders may be emotionally engaged or initially display emotional avoidance. Coaches adeptly create the conditions for emotional engagement encouraging leaders to explore emotions with curiosity and evoke emotional awareness. Coaches use a range of coaching tools or process-focused strategies whilst being cognisant of leader emotions in a holistic way. Strategies included: exploring emotions, beliefs, assumptions and perspectives of others with curiosity:

"There was something about the power of his questions and that sense of 'how does that make you feel now?' that stayed with me. It changed me slightly and it gave me pause for thought."

"The coach really helped me understand what he was going through, the empathy I needed to give him."

In exploring curiously, coaches also employed metaphors, images, quotes and case studies to explore parallels and to evoke emotional insight. Experimental thinking was also used to engender a sense of agency:

"He said, 'what might get in the way of you doing an experiment?' […]. That was the beauty of it, he couched it as an experiment."

Emotionally Misaligned

When the coach approach was emotionally avoidant, their emotional engagement strategies were described by leaders and coaches as functional, process and problem or outcome focused. If the coach remained emotionally avoidant while the leader was seeking emotional engagement, misalignment occurred:

"Sometimes the coaching can be too hypothetical, not implementable […] it never really lands."

Experiences such as this diminished the value of coaching for leaders and resulted in leaders disengaging from the coaching relationship.   Negative coaching experiences stemmed from the inappropriate use and/or application of models, lack of contextualisation, lack of emotional sensitivity and delving into inappropriate emotional territory without contracting:

"This coach was quite forthright. It was a lot of models, heavy on [...] personality testing, almost prescriptive. It felt like a never-ending diagnosis of 'let's talk about this. Let's delve into your childhood'. It was quite a hard-hitting approach."

As a consequence, there was a lack of alignment, emotional disconnection. In these cases, the focus shifted solely towards problem-solving, neglecting a more holistic and emotionally engaging coaching approach. Misalignment also occurred when coaches adopted a mentoring role, providing advice, solutions or guidance to the leader without contracting for it:

"I didn't recognise the problem. My mentor watched the coaching recordings and told me I was mentoring. I did fall into that trap."

"He said, 'I've been in a similar situation to you, and this is what I might do and might not do'. I thought, 'well, you've not really been in a similar situation. You've not been an exec director in a big X organisation'. I got nothing out of the mentoring."

'Emotional leakage' occurs when leaders arrived with intense emotions and were emotionally engaged, but the coach was emotionally avoidant or process focused:

"I was distressed hugely. '[Coaching] wasn't done in terms of looking at my emotions specifically, it was much more about the immediate burning issue for me. Emotions came out of it rather than approaching it from 'what are you feeling?'."

If there is emotional tension, emotions can and do surface whether coaches avoid them or not. Coaches who would engage emotions described it as being fundamental to release and contain emotional pressure leaders were experiencing, not dealing with them didn't stop them coming out:

"If there's tension and emotion, it's like squeezing a semi-inflated balloon, as you squeeze it, it pops out through your fingers. If you push it back it pops out elsewhere. What you've got to do is you've got to undo the balloon and let the air [emotions] out, at which point you can then have a conversation."

Failure of the coach to actively engage with leader emotions led to emotional misalignment and disengagement between the coach and the leader.

Emotionally avoidant

Some leaders don't engage at an emotional level. Coaches described experiences where they felt the leader's preference was to stay task, performance or solution-focused:

"They're very measured and controlled, there wasn't any expression of feelings. They were quite self-assured. Their feelings were completely in keeping and completely in control. There was no hint of failure to cope or stress, anxiety."

Coaches would still create the conditions for emotional engagement but wouldn't proceed into emotional territory unless they had contracted it and met leaders where they were.

"It's important to meet leaders where they are at."

If a leader chose to stay in the functional process space, that's where coaches who were attuned to leaders worked with them. When coaches were tools, models or process focused this led to what participants referred to as coaching the problem and not the person. The models that leaders referred to included: psychometrics; leadership assessments (including 360 Degree Feedback); performance or solution-focused approaches; and very basic coaching models. Some leaders found performance and/or outcome-focused coaching as being helpful:

"It was performance focused, it helped us."

"They gave us a formula in terms of how you have conversations with people, so you get the outcome you want to have. What is the goal? Where are you now? What are your options? What are you going to do to get there?"

However, some leaders found coaches with an overreliance on models to be cold and functional:

"It becomes very functional and cold, and you skip through the letters [GROW] one by one and it's like, well, we're dealing with people here and how people feel. Having discussions [about emotions], I get more from."

Coaching at this level was still valued by some leaders but the influence on leader emotions was limited.

The dynamic nature of emotional engagement

For the coach to be attuned to the level at which a leader wanted to engage was important, otherwise it would lead to misalignment. Emotional engagement levels are not static. In many experiences leaders were initially emotionally avoidant. However, coaches who created the conditions for emotional engagement were able to evoke emotional curiosity, leading in many instances to emotional engagement. This dynamic movement between levels was evident across several participant experiences:

> *"When we first started, she was very guarded. Now she really digs into relationships, she'll talk about the emotions she experienced in meetings."*

Likewise, leaders may start sessions emotionally engaged but once regulated and contained move into a more outcome focused aspect of the coaching process. These findings exemplify the dynamic and varying levels of emotional engagement in the coaching process.

Discussion

This section discusses key concepts informing coaching fundamentals for optimal emotional engagement. The findings have been synthesised into a new theoretical emotional framework - The ACE Model to aid practical application of the research findings in coaching education and development. The ACE model captures findings around: attunement, adaptation; creating conditions; engagement and evaluation and will be further explored and explained in this section.

Coaching Fundamentals for Optimal Emotional Engagement

The approach of coaches and leaders to the coaching process unfolds important considerations that influence how emotional engagement can be attained. Findings indicate coaches need to create the conditions that foster emotional engagement for them to engage in profound emotional work within the coaching process (Hawkins, 2014).

Emotional misalignment emphasises the vital role of attunement and the coach as the 'instrument' in the coaching process (Bachkirova, 2011; Bachkirova, 2016; Bachkirova, 2020). Emotional attunement, empathy, and establishing a trusted and authentic connection between coach and leader are essential for effectively working with emotional experiences (Heron, 2001).

The emotional contract is an integral counterpart to attunement, which informs the strategy of the coach and the level at which the coach engages with leader emotions. Notably, the emotional contract diverges from conventional concepts linked to contracting in coaching.

Contracting historically describes the process, responsibilities, expectations, purpose and scope of the coaching engagement (Lee, Passmore, Peterson and Freire, 2013) as well as providing a framework for setting specific, measurable, achievable goals (Garvey, Garvey and Stokes, 2021). Contracting lays the foundation for coaching relationships, sets clear expectations and boundaries between coach and client, what they explore and how they work together (Bluckert, 2005b). It is also used to distinguish between the boundaries of coaching, therapy, mentoring and other disciplines (Bachkirova and Baker, 2018). Bachkirova and Baker (2018) emphasise the coaching relationship is co-created: what takes place is dynamic, the contract is in constant negotiation through open dialogue that both parties agree to (Bachkirova and Baker, 2018). The contract should reflect and respect the autonomy and control of the client, allowing the coach expertise to be utilised in alignment with their ethical responsibilities (De Haan, 2008; De Haan and Stewart, 2008).

The 'leader emotional ecosystem' alludes to the emotions generated and experienced at an organisational, system and relationship level at work. Coaches that applied systems thinking considered the broader system in which behaviours and relationships occur. They recognised individual behaviours, interactions and dynamics are influenced by organisational hierarchy, policies, culture, emotional climate and display rules. Applying systems thinking to behaviours and relationships at work, coaches gained a deeper understanding of the complexity of dynamics being experienced by leaders (Lawrence, 2021a) and provided a holistic and contextual approach to coaching leaders (Fatien Diochon, Otter, Stokes and Van Hove, 2021; Stokes, Fatien Diochon and Otter, 2021). This enabled the leader and coach to work at a much deeper level (Lawrence, 2021b; Lawrence, 2021a) to understand what was going on in relationship dynamics and how they are behaving and contributing to it. Working at this depth helped leaders to unlock their thinking and behave differently. Understanding the wider systemic context assists in recognising connections and dynamics among individuals, groups, teams, and organisations (Fatien Diochon et al, 2021; Stokes et al, 2021).

Exploring emotions and/or challenges experienced by leaders in isolation from their emotional ecosystem creates misalignment. In this research, it resulted in coaches being too hypothetical, or following their own agenda by adhering rigidly to a functional coaching model. The latter leads to situations where the real coaching issue isn't properly addressed, misidentifying the actual problem, and diminishing the effectiveness of the coaching intervention (Fatien Diochon et al, 2021).

The Emergence of an Emotional Engagement Framework

The theoretical framework brings together fundamental dependencies, variables, relationships and concepts grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2014). Coach and leader initial approaches to the coaching process are categorised as emotionally engaged or emotionally avoidant. When the coach and leader engage, co-creating the coaching process (Bachkirova and Baker, 2018), four levels of emotional engagement are attained: emotionally engaged, emotionally curious, emotionally misaligned and emotionally avoidant. The combination of how both coach and leader approach coaching, and the varying levels of emotional engagement attained, led me to think of emotional engagement levels in a dynamic way. For demonstrative purposes, this is displayed as a two-by-two matrix demonstrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Emotional engagement levels – participant positions
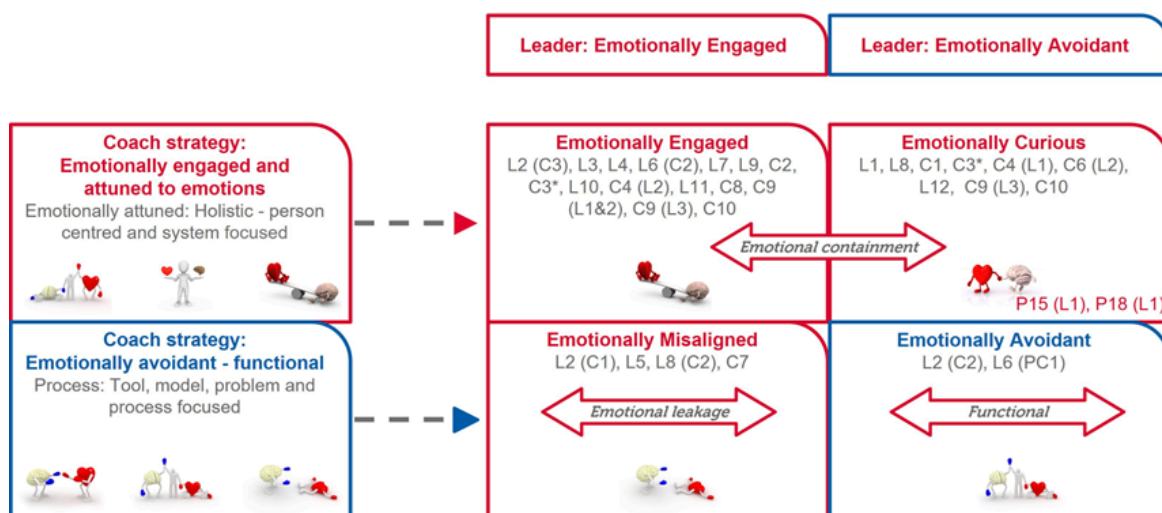
In top-left position, coach and leader are emotionally engaged, working with emotions. Emotions are explored, contained, normalised, validated, regulated and contextualised. Top-right, leaders may approach coaching emotionally avoidant; however, conditions are created for coach and leader to explore emotions curiously. Bottom-left position, coach adopts a functional and process-focused approach avoiding emotional engagement. However, the leader is emotionally engaged and there is emotional leakage and misalignment. Bottom right, leader and coach are emotionally avoidant and coaching is described as functional. The varying levels of emotional engagement, and the ability to dynamically move between them, are based on the coach ability to create the necessary conditions for emotional engagement and the leader inclination to engage emotionally.

From the findings, I have derived and developed coaching fundamentals for optimal emotional engagement. These fundamentals are organised around the acronym ACE, serving as reminders of key principles, which include:

A: Attuned - Being attuned to a leader's emotional state. Approach - Coaches need to consider and respect the leader's approach and their inclination towards emotional engagement. Adapt - Coaches need to adapt their approach and strategies to meet the leader where they are at.

C: Create the conditions – Coaches need to create a psychologically safe environment, fostering emotional engagement and enabling leaders to express their authentic emotions and vulnerabilities. To achieve this, the coach contracts with the leader in terms of how they work with, use and explore the emotions. The coach provides emotional containment and holds the space for leaders to be authentic, emotional and vulnerable. The coach adopts systemic thinking and contextualises leader emotions and relationship dynamics within their wider emotional ecosystem.

E: Engage and evaluate – Coach and leader engage at an emotional level and explore leader emotions. The coach continuously evaluates leader inclination and contracts with them throughout the coaching process, ensuring the leader is always in control of the level at which they choose to engage.

The coaching fundamentals are not a linear process; they are iterative and dynamic in response to what is presented and how the co-created coaching process progresses. The emotional engagement framework in Figure 6 does not propose a rigid either/or approach to emotional engagement in coaching. Instead, the emotional engagement framework in Figure 6 highlights the dynamic and co-creative nature of the coaching engagement (Bachkirova and Baker, 2018).

Figure 6: 'The ACE Model'
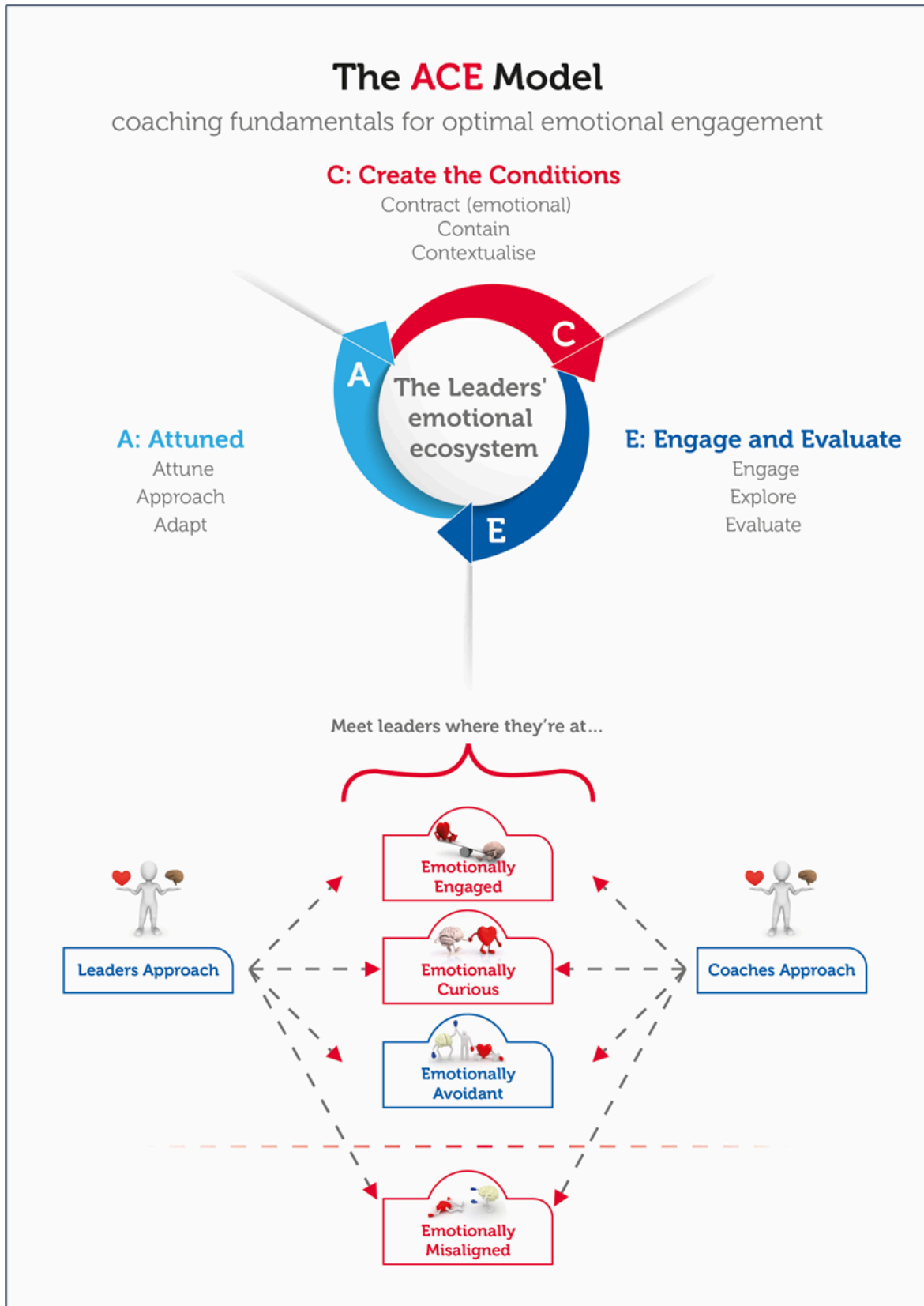
Researchers have explored levels of engagement (Bluckert, 2005a; De Haan, 2008; Haan and Stewart, 2008) and focused on working with emotions in coaching (Bachkirova and Cox, 2007; Cox

and Bachkirova, 2007; Cremona, 2010; Cox, 2016). However, this research stands as one of few studies examining emotional engagement from leader and coach perspectives within the context of organisational relationships. Existing frameworks do not encompass leader and coach perspectives, positions, emotional engagement strategies, and the emotional contract. In the ACE framework, these elements are integrated to provide a more comprehensive and contextually rich understanding of emotional engagement. This framework builds upon and extends existing empirical theories relating to emotional engagement. Moreover, it situates the framework within the context of the leader emotional ecosystem.

Conclusion

The synthesis of the findings into The ACE Model emotional engagement framework offers a theoretical and practical contribution to coaching, explaining varying levels of emotional engagement and how they are attained. It highlights the value of engaging with leader emotions and introduces new and fundamental concepts, the importance of the emotional contract and the significance of the leader emotional ecosystem.

Limitations are inherent in all research methods (Tracy, 2010). Whilst there was variation in the sectors leaders were from, the leaders do not represent them. Despite aspirations to be inclusive and for a diverse participant base, eighty percent of the participants were white, and all participants were over the age of 40.

Future research is recommended to investigate emotional attunement in coaching from the client perspective. The framework may help to validate perceived mastery of emotional engagement through real-time feedback from coaching clients using the emotional engagement framework.

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