**Academic Paper**

# The Role of Goal Content in the Formation and Function of Trust in Workplace Coaching

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## Abstract

This grounded theory study investigated the difference that goal content makes in trust in one-to-one workplace coaching. It explored the experiences of Eleven participants (coaches=8, coachees=3), through Fourteen online semi-structured interviews. Three superordinate themes were identified: 1) "Different kinds of trust", 2) "The strange triangle of trust", and 3) "As I got to know them". Novel findings suggest that the formation and function of trust may vary depending on goal content, including in relation to time and context. Implications include improving coach training and recruitment as well as coaching research through the inclusion of goal content data.

## Introduction

In 2023 there was an estimated 54% increase in professional coaches compared to 2019, (International Coaching Federation [ICF], 2023). Research on coaching effectiveness is also growing (Henderson & Palmer, 2021; Jones, 2020) including a focus on the psycho-mechanics of coaching (Grant & O'Connor, 2019). The ICF (2022) defines coaching as partnering with others to support them to reach their potential. Building trust is a crucial factor in this partnering (Passmore & Lai, 2020). Workplace trust research has been summarised as three waves: i) understanding what trust is, ii) analysing and confirming those findings and iii) focussing on the function of trust (Dirks & de Jong, 2022). It has been suggested that current research is lacking a theoretical explanation of trust formation and function in coaching (Bozer & Jones, 2018). In line with the third wave of research, this study therefore aimed to explore a theoretical basis of the formation and function of trust in one-to-one workplace coaching. The research questions that emerged from gaps in the literature were:

- How is trust formed in one-to-one workplace coaching?
- How does trust function in one-to-one workplace coaching?
- What difference does goal content make?

# Literature Review

## Trust

Trust has been defined as accepting vulnerability because of the perceived benefits of an exchange (Farnese et al., 2022; Shapiro et al., 1992). This is distinct from the related, group construct of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018; Murphy & Turner, 2021; Clutterbuck & Khoosal, 2023). Dirks and de Jong (2022) highlight two dominant psychological models of workplace trust. Mayer et al.'s (1995) model emphasises contextual factors and proposes three antecedents for workplace trust: ability, benevolence and integrity. Although widely adopted in trust research, Mayer et al.'s (1995) model may lack objectivity (Schilke et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2020).

McAllister's (1995) model proposed cognitive and affective workplace trust. Tomlinson et al. (2020) argued this model failed to explain antecedents. They suggested a synthesised model, where benevolence and value congruence predict affective trust, whereas ability and integrity predict cognitive trust. Relative weights analysis (Tomlinson et al., 2020) on surveys of managers (n=205) and coworkers (n=186) supported their hypothesis, providing evidence of consistency but not a causal relationship between antecedents and trust types. None of the above models consider goal content.

Context matters in understanding trust (Mayer et al., 1995). Workplace coaching settings present unique challenges, including potential conflicts of interest, which may impact trust (Pliopas, 2018). Conflicts must be managed by coaches through clear agreements and communication (International Coaching Federation, 2021) such as transparency in the three-cornered contract between sponsor, supplier and end client (English, 1975). Organisational goals may conflict with those of the coachee (Milner et al., 2022; Pliopas, 2018). However, it is not clear how contextual factors which damage trust might negatively impact trust in one-to-one workplace coaching. How workplace coaching works has been widely explored empirically (Albizu et al., 2019; Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Beasley et al., 2017). Sonesh et al. (2015) propose a relationship between outcomes and coaching techniques. Others posit a central role of the working alliance (de Haan & Nilsson, 2023; de Haan et al., 2016; de Haan et al., 2020; Diller et al., 2022; Graßmann et al., 2020). Related research from counselling, psychotherapy and sports psychology may explain coaching phenomena (Bresser & Wilson, 2021; Grant & O'Connor, 2019), including elements of coaching relationships (Graßmann et al., 2020; Jowett et al., 2012; Lopez, 2017; O'Broin & Palmer, 2019) which are explored below and summarised in Appendix A.

Trust may mediate coachee satisfaction in sports coaching (Li et al., 2021) in similar ways to how it predicts positive workplace coaching outcomes (de Haan & Nilsson, 2023). Jowett (2007a, 2007b) proposed a 3+1Cs sports coaching relationship model, which has been applied to workplace coaching (Jowett et al., 2012), comprising Closeness, Commitment, Complementarity and Co-orientation. Closeness encompasses mutual trust and respect, which may relate to benevolence and integrity from Mayer et al.'s (1995) model. Conditions for the therapeutic alliance posited by Carl Rogers (1958, 1961), may inform our understanding of coaching (Passmore, 2021). Conditions include congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathy, which approximately echo benevolence and integrity from Mayer et al.'s (1995) model. This therapeutic alliance facilitates seven stages of deepening client understanding of self and experience (McLeod, 2013; Rogers, 1958), moving from cognitive appraisal of externalities to cognitive-affective apprehension of inner experiences. Others propose that trust denotes a level of intimacy which facilitates

listening and understanding (May, 1986/1994). They view trust as a product of congruence, unconditional positive regard and transparency (Mearns et al., 2013), and regard a sense of safety and trust in others as a prerequisite for growth (Maslow, 1968, 1970).

In a psychotherapeutic context, clients may feel unconfident about sharing sensitive matters (Kleiven et al., 2020). Sharing may be facilitated by therapists demonstrating benevolence, acceptance and sensitivity (Kleiven et al., 2023). A survey of psychotherapy service users (N=115) found that most participants did not share because of shame or embarrassment, and that the greatest factor in decisions to share was trusting the therapist (Baumann & Hill, 2016). Bordin (1979) has suggested that working alliance is crucial for making change through therapy, and that more trust is required for intrinsic goals. Still, coaching is not psychotherapy and it may be that a mutual focus on objectives is more significant than trust (Grant & O'Connor, 2019). Gessnitzer and Kauffeld (2015) found that bonding behaviours like trusting did not impact coaching outcomes. They cite Bordin (1979), and suggest trust was not significant due to extrinsic goal content. Others have questioned whether self-reflection is required at all in coaching (Grant & O'Connor, 2019; Joo, 2005). It is not clear how far perspectives in counselling and psychotherapy apply to coaching, perhaps because goal content is not often made explicit in coaching research.

Meta-analyses of quantitative and qualitative studies of coaching effectiveness have found trust to be an important factor (Bozer & Jones, 2018; de Haan, 2019). In qualitative research on executive coaching, Alvey and Barclay (2007) suggested that trust may arise in coaching due to a range of factors, from confidentiality, supportiveness and non-judgemental reaction to the disclosure of sensitive matters. They theorised that an interplay of situational, behavioural and relational factors impacted the formation of trust. Similarly, more recent qualitative (Cox, 2012) research found confidentiality, mutual confidence and emotional attachment were factors in trust formation. Like Alvey and Barclay (2007), mixed methods studies (Schiemann et al., 2019) also identified relational factors in trust formation (benevolence, which was emphasised more with experienced coaches) as well as behavioural factors (capability, emphasised more by inexperienced coaches). Moreover, team coaching research suggested that trust functions to facilitate change by allowing the coach to challenge team behaviour (Wotruba, 2016). Generalisability of these findings may be limited however, as even the quantitative studies by Schiemann et al. (2019) involved a small sample (N=95).

Contrary to Graßmann et al. (2020), the relationship (including trust) may not form over time, and it might be initial perception of coach trustworthiness that is crucial (de Haan, et al., 2020). Similarly, Terblanche and Heyns (2020) did not find trust in coaching to be predicted by coachee personality type or propensity to trust in general. Instead (and in keeping with findings of de Haan et al. [2020]) they found perceived coach trustworthiness was the only factor that predicted coachee trust. Relationship factors including trust have been found to be important in meta-analyses (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Sonesh et al., 2015) and large-scale randomised controlled trials (de Haan et al., 2020) of workplace coaching, but it is not clear how trust functions (de Haan et al., 2020). The above research may offer some insights into trust formation and function in coaching, but goal content is not specified, and no theory is proposed. Accordingly, some have called for more research to understand how trust impacts coaching effectiveness (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007) including in workplace coaching (Bozer & Jones, 2018).

## Theories of trust

Attention is shifting from whether coaching works, to how (Fillery-travis & Lane, 2006; Theeboom et al., 2014) and a scientific, theory-based investigation has been called for (Latham, 2007; Passmore & Gibbes, 2007; Spence & Oades, 2011). Spence and Oades (2011) proposed Self Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020, 2022; Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023) to facilitate such systematic investigation. SDT postulates factors which promote or impede self-regulation, motivation and wellbeing, depending on innate needs being met for autonomy,

competence and relatedness. Others have also theorised innate needs (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1958), but the structure of SDT better supports empirical testing (Vallerand, 2021). Some have rejected the inter-relation of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Locke & Schattke, 2019), whereas others claim they have been found to reliably co-exist in extensive empirical research (Ryan & Deci, 2019). A model of the antecedents of trust in coaching has been proposed based on SDT and Mayer et al.'s (1995) trust model (Markovic et al., 2014) but this does not include goal contents. Spence and Deci (2016) suggest SDT provides a useful theoretical basis for coaching, where coaching is conceptualised as coaches meeting coachee needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. Spence and Oades (2011) posited that trust in coaching was relevant to relatedness in SDT, but do not give a theoretical explanation of the formation or function of trust in coaching or consider goal contents.

Although there is a large body of research on goals, there is relatively little that links goals to coaching and even less that relates goal theory to executive coaching (Grant, 2020). Goal-focussed coaching (GFC) has been proposed (Ives & Cox, 2012) as a theoretical and practical approach to working with goals in coaching. GFC is collaborative and goal-oriented (Ives & Cox, 2012), emphasising performance over a therapeutic approach, and pursuit of solutions over development or learning goals (Grant, 2018). SDT includes a sub theory of Goal Contents Theory (GCT) (Kasser & Ryan,1993). GCT asserts that the content of goals is important in understanding psychological mechanisms. GCT distinguishes between extrinsic (e.g. wealth) and intrinsic (e.g. personal growth) goals (Bradshaw, 2023), predicting that intrinsic goals will enhance self-regulation, wellbeing and motivation more than extrinsic goals, by better meeting innate needs. Concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic goals have been found to be distinct in factor analysis across multiple samples in 15 countries (Bradshaw, 2023).

While SDT focuses on the individual, Social Exchange Theory (SET) was developed to explore mutual phenomena and interaction (Homans, 1958). With roots in operant conditioning theory, SET (Homans, 1958) asserts that social interactions are reinforced by benefits and inhibited by punishment (Ahmad et al., 2023; Davlembayeva & Alamino's, 2023). Blau (1964/2017) explained trust through SET as a deepening expectation of positive future exchange, based on past performance. Homans (1961) posited both material and non-material (e.g. affective), or economic and socio-emotional (Shore et al., 2006, 2009) products of exchange. This distinction is important, as trust may principally arise in the context of socio-emotional not economic exchange (Blu, 1964, Shore et al., 2006). In proposing Affective SET, Lawler (2001) emphasised emotional aspects of exchange. Within a managerial-coaching setting, Kim and Kuo (2015), found empirical support (N=280 dyads) for SET as the theoretical underpinnings of trust. They found trust to positively moderate managerial-coaching efficacy, leading to positive workplace outcomes. Predictive power of these results may be limited as exchanges were not defined (Cropanzano et al., 2017).

Neurobiology may also help to explain the formation and function of trust in coaching. An fMRI study (Engelmann et al., 2019) found that socio-cognitive neurocircuitry which facilitates trusting behaviour was suppressed by anxiety. Farolfi et al. (2021) also found that anxiety reduces trusting behaviour although they did not investigate if safety promotes trusting behaviour. These studies related to trust games, and therefore ecological validity may be limited, although Banerjee et al. (2021) found trust game findings closely matched standard trust scale results in a survey study (n=1052).

Neurobiological correlates of trust include increased release of the neuropeptide oxytocin and in some cases decreased levels of testosterone, which may encourage cooperative behaviour (Engelmann & Fehr, 2013; Eskander et al., 2020; Zak et al., 2005), even in trivial trust situations, (Baumgartner et al, 2008; Engelmann & Fehr, 2013). These findings have not been consistently replicated however, and it may be that social factors mediate this effect (Eskander et al., 2020; Shamay-Tsoory & Abu-Akel, 2016), possibly by oxytocin buffering against stressful social situations (Fang et al., 2020) or oxytocin reducing defensiveness in vulnerable social circumstances (Engelmann & Fehr, 2013).

According to Polyvagal Theory (PVT), neurological regulation (particularly of the autonomic nervous system) mediates psychological function, including communication (Porges, 2003, 2022). PVT is a model for understanding social engagement (Liem & Neuhuber, 2021) and has been offered as an explanation for the augmentation of the therapeutic alliance, through a person-centred (Rogers, 1958) approach (Ryland et al., 2021). PVT has been criticised for misrepresenting neurobiological functioning and lacking empirical evidence (Grossman, 2023). This may be a misunderstanding by Grossman (2023) of the mammalian scope of PVT (Porges, 2023), and significant evidence supports PVT, including in relation to psychological disorders (Mansoor, 2021) and contemplative practices (Poli et al., 2021). It has also been suggested that a sequence of engagement (starting with regulation, before focussing on relationship and, lastly, reasoning) may facilitate communication with trauma-experienced people (Winfrey & Perry, 2021), although the evidence base for this assertion is psychiatric case studies, and it is uncertain if these findings would translate to workplace coaching settings. Regulation of the autonomic nervous system (i.e. feeling safe) may play a role in facilitating social engagement and communication in coaching (Chapman, 2023; Lee, 2021) but research into neurobiological correlates of trust in coaching remains scarce. Nonetheless, perhaps these neurobiological research findings, seen through a positive psychology perspective such as Broaden and Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001) may one day offer insights into increased cognitive capacity, through the formation and function of trust in coaching.

# Method

## Research Design

This qualitative study used grounded theory methodology (GTM) (Charmaz, 2014, Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Flick, 2018) to explore the formation and function of trust in one-to-one workplace coaching. GTM has been widely used in workplace coaching research (Carden et al., 2022; Passmore, 2010) and prescribes investigation without a theoretical hypothesis, to permit exploration that is fully focused on emerging data, and not biased by theoretical preconceptions (Charmaz, 2014; Lyons & Coyle 2007). Accordingly, instead of taking a logico-deductive approach based on ex ante hypotheses, theory generation was based on a constant comparison of data, which was validated against and integrated with existing theory, post hoc (Dunne, 2011; Glasser & Strauss, 1967). GTM was used within a metatheoretical framework of critical realism (CR) (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016), which combines an ontology of realism with an interpretative epistemology (Hoddy, 2019; Willis, 2022). CR assumes that there is one reality, which can only be known through subjective accounts. GTM is effective in this framework, as it allows movement from data (lived experience) to theory development in an iterative manner (Looker et al., 2021). Abductive GTM permits literature review to inform inquiry and highlight gaps in theory, where theory generation is required (Gribble, 2021; Müller, 2021).

An initial literature review was conducted for ethics approval (Charmaz, 2014; Lyons & Coyle 2007). This was then disregarded when identifying emerging theory in the data, to minimise bias (Flick, 2018). A later literature review supported analysis in response to emerging data and theoretical findings, as part of an iterative approach (Charmaz, 2014, Flick, 2018). In this way, the literature became another source of data to be compared (Birks & Mills, 2022). The study was idiographic, focussing on individual cases and only gradually moving towards more generalisable claims (Smith, 2015). The research method was online, semi-structured interviews, which allowed the researcher to explore participants' sensemaking of phenomena (Roberts, 2020). In keeping with GTM, some participants were interviewed more than once which may have built trust and encouraged more detailed data (Seidman, 2006).

## Sampling

Theoretical sampling was employed, supporting the development of theory through targeted data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Corbin & Strauss, 2014; White & Cooper, 2022). Purposive sampling was used within theoretical sampling to seek a diverse sample (Brown, 2006). Eleven participants were recruited (Female=3), as shown in Table 1, with a mean age of 55 (SD=12 years). For coachees, the mean hours of coaching received was 30 hours (SD=8 hours). For coaches the mean years of coaching experience was 15 (SD=13 years). Sample size was determined by theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Coaches worked in diverse industries and countries. Inclusion criteria were English speaking and over 18 years old. Recruitment was via LinkedIn and email. No compensation was offered.

**Table 1: Demographic Data for Participants**

| Pseudonym | Age | Sex | Gender | Nationality | Industry | Country of coaching | Years of experience | Hours of experience | Coach or coachee | Interviews |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rachael | 51 | Female | Female | Austrian | Various | Various | 12 | | Coach | 2 |
| Paul | 64 | Male | Male | British | Public Sector | UK | 20 | | Coach | 2 |
| Peter | 48 | Male | Male | British | Auto-motive | UK | | 20 | Coachee | 2 |
| Craig | 51 | Male | Male | British | Public Sector | UK | 11 | | Coach | 1 |
| Abiola | 58 | Male | Male | Nigerian | Academic | Nigeria | | 40 | Coachee | 1 |
| Sheila | 35 | Female | Female | South African | Financial Services | UAE, Dubai | | 30 | Coachee | 1 |
| Veronika | 41 | Female | Female | Polish | Various | Various | 15 | | Coach | 1 |
| Steve | 55 | Male | Male | Irish/British | Various | Various | 6 | | Coach | 1 |
| Daniel | 76 | Male | Male | British | Various | Various | 45 | | Coach | 1 |
| Iain | 52 | Male | Male | British | Various | UK | 3 | | Coach | 1 |
| Tod | 69 | Male | Male | American | Various | US/UK & Canada | 5 | | Coach | 1 |

## Measures

Two interview schedules were used. In line with GTM, questions were modified between the first and second semi-structured interviews, based on data analysis and literature review. The first schedule started with general questions about coaching experience, designed to relax participants and introduce the topic (Roberts, 2020). Questions then focussed on the formation and function of trust in coaching. The final question invited participants to add anything the researcher had not asked about (Roberts, 2020). The second schedule explored goal content and the themes of "Different kinds of trust" and "The strange triangle of trust", which emerged from the first interviews.

## Procedure

After an initial literature review, initial interview questions and demographic questions were formulated, with subsequent questions increasing in detail to support axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; White & Cooper, 2022). Fourteen online interviews were conducted and recorded in Microsoft Teams or Zoom, with a mean duration of 42 minutes (SD=12 minutes). There was no requirement for deception so advert respondents were sent an email with full information about the study (British Psychological Society, 2018, 2021a). Informed, written consent was obtained (British Psychological Society, 2018, 2021a, 2021b). Researcher and supervisor contact details were

provided, in case participants had any questions or concerns. If participants consented, via email, then an initial interview was scheduled.

At the interview, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw and asked to confirm consent to participation and interview recording. The researcher ensured they and the participant had a private space for the interview, to ensure confidentiality (British Psychological Society, 2021a). After the interview, participants were verbally debriefed, which included reconfirmation of consent and a reminder about the right to withdraw. This was followed up in writing with the same information. Three participants attended one further semi-structured online interview, where the same procedures were applied. Interviewing ceased once code saturation was reached (i.e. no significant new theoretical constructs emerged) (Smith, 2015). Participants were asked their views on findings during the data analysis process, to improve quality (Flick, 2019). Seven participants responded that findings reflected their experiences.

Birks and Mills (2022) define quality characteristics of GTM research as researcher expertise, procedural precision and methodological congruence. Accordingly, the researcher endeavoured to learn GTM, to accurately follow GTM procedure, maintain a clear audit trail of decisions taken to maximise procedural precision and to make explicit their personal worldview in order to maintain methodological congruence. The researcher's history has potential to bias results through prejudice and assumptions (Castillo, 2018). They are a white, male, British heterosexual, employed as a coach in a workplace setting. Epoché or bracketing techniques are not employed in GTM (Castillo, 2018). Nonetheless, the researcher employed reflexive recording techniques such as memoing to capture their assumptions and reactions to the data, so that this could be considered during analysis (Birks & Mills, 2022; Flick 2018).

## Data Analysis

Interview recordings were automatically transcribed using Microsoft Word 365, then manually corrected by the researcher. Data was analysed in NVIVO R1. Transcripts were analysed with open coding, which formed categories from the raw data, axial coding, which was the result of theoretical analysis of the emerging phenomenon, and selective coding, which involved structuring and selecting the axial codes in order to form a coherent narrative (White & Cooper, 2022). Data was securely stored in Microsoft Office 365 (British Psychological Society, 2021a). 86 codes were generated from 625 quotes during open coding. From these, 27 axial codes were identified. Results of selective coding are given below. An example code mapping is given in Appendix B.

# Results

The study identified three superordinate themes: "Different kinds of trust", "The strange triangle of trust" and "As I got to know them". Superordinate and subordinate themes are shown below in Table 2.

**Table 2: Superordinate Themes and Subordinate Themes**

| Superordinate theme | Subordinate themes |
|---|---|
| "Different kinds of trust" | "Going deep and personal " |
| | "They don't even need to like me" |
| "The strange triangle of trust" | "The hierarchy of loyalty" |
| | "Backdoor dialogue" |
| "As I got to know them" | "The groundwork of trust" |
| | "Time as a canvas" |

# Theme 1: Different kinds of trust

The "Different kinds of trust" theme captures participants' sense that the word trust refers to two different, goal content-dependent phenomena in coaching. Coach "Iain" observed some coaching goals required "almost a slightly different use of the word trust, arguably" and "Rachael" described "Different kinds of trust" depending on the clients' goal contents, sometimes "a more personal relationship rather than just, you know, a task problem, challenge, goal focused approach." The two kinds of trust below were the only kinds mentioned.

**Going deep and personal**

This subordinate theme was the topic most discussed by participants. Every participant expressed one function of trust in coaching as supporting coachees to work at a deeper level on intrinsic goals. "Tod" described "trust and rapport with your client so that you can then do this deeper work because you won't, you can't do the deeper work until you have that". Going deep was often conceptualised as ocean exploration. Rachael described how "You're happy to dive deeper if you trust the person to hold you". Going deep was also defined as layers. "Steve" described how ldquo;We have to melt away those masks. Who's the real person beneath", and Iain described how a certain coachee "…never really lets you in through the second layer of the onion". Coachee "Peter" was explicit about needing to "open your brain up let people have a look at it and then you kind of jointly kind of examine it". This imagery connotes exploration of something that is not accessible and must be actively discovered and revealed. This theme suggests a joint journey of discovery, except for the onion and brain opening images, which suggested a coach being permitted by the coachee to reveal layers. Peter's description evokes vulnerability and risk taking. Coachees reported feeling "raw" and wanting to "tap out" ("Sheila"). Sheila's wrestling term, ("tap out", meaning quit) implies struggle, conflict and toil. Coachees also refer to depth, where understanding from coaching is "internalised" ("Abiola") or allowed to "sink in" (Sheila).

Going deep was for a purpose. It was sometimes needed to get to the core issue.

> Rachel: *Because often this the underlying issue, if you are going in the loop there is often some underlying issue that has absolutely nothing to do with the workplace or the career or a difficult colleague or whatever it may be.*

Participants described three benefits: firstly releasing emotion (Tod's gesture when speaking about this was of a volcano), resulting in relief, secondly exploring something that is "felt, but maybe not fully understood or articulated." ("Paul") leading to the clarity they require to change behaviour, and/or thirdly, to take one instance of an issue and explore beyond the "boundary" (Abiola) of that one issue, such that "problems are metaphors for bigger life issues" (Tod). Whether deepening or broadening, the sense from participants is of expansion of the comfort zone, for the purpose of greater self-awareness. "Daniel" summarises this deep trust as "enabling somebody to have…the conversation they need to have with themselves".

**They don't even need to like me**

This subordinate theme reflects the participants' view that some extrinsic goals don't require going deep and can be more transactional than transformational.

> Iain: *He might not like me [...] but he would need to trust me. That's a different type of trust. I think it's a 'trust me that I'm going to turn up and do the thing I said it was gonna do'.*

Participants described situations where the coachee has a "skill based" ("Veronika") or other extrinsic goal (e.g. "to sell more stuff" [Iain]), where the relationship with the coach was less important. In these cases, coachee trust in the coach was related to performance and results. Iain describes how "building trust there takes a longer constant conjunction of success". If trust was

rewarded by results, then trust increased, functioning to increase motivation to continue. There was an absence of affective language in describing transactional trust, with a focus instead on contractual or "cognitive aspects" (Rachael). Some participants described how transformational trust requires transactional trust. Tod depicted "little circles" and "big circles" where trust is built in small ways before value is demonstrated and the next session "maybe goes really deep". Transactional and transformational trust were not reported to be mutually exclusive or always in the same order.

## Theme 2: The strange triangle of trust

Nearly all participants discussed "a strange triangular relationship" (Rachael), made up of coach, coachee and sponsor, within which levels of trust could vary and lack of confidentiality could impact trust and ability to work on intrinsic goals. The triangle was reported as "strange" because it was not clearly defined. The coachee did not always know what the coach was sharing about them with the sponsor.

### The hierarchy of loyalty

This subordinate theme captures how coaches, in a three-way relationship with sponsors and coachees, had to make choices about prioritising coachee confidentiality or disclosure to the sponsor. Sometimes coaches reported that their first loyalty was with the coachee. Daniel reports "It's always a delicate balance, but clearly the relationship is primarily with the client." Paul stated, "I always privilege the relationship with the coachee" and "I'm not there as some kind of agent of the organisation". And other times coaches prioritised disclosure to the sponsor. Iain said, "if something was off, I would share it with the owner". When coachees were made aware of sharing with sponsors they reported decreasing trust.

### Backdoor dialogue

"Backdoor dialogue" captures participants' description of covert communication between coaches and sponsors, and the impact of that on coachee trust. Coachees conveyed being keenly aware of the flow of information when calculating how deeply to trust the coach. Iain described his coachee thinking "well I'm, I'm not telling you the truth, cause if I tell you the truth, you go straight to him". Likewise, Rachael described herself as a coachee: "I actually thought no way I'm going to talk to this guy about anything at work". Rachael's emphatic tone evokes a sense of outrage and disappointment, suggesting she felt the coach should not have shared with the sponsor, whereas Iain reported this in a more matter of fact tone, possibly reflecting his expectation. Both described a cognitive calculation as to what to trust the coach with.

Participants distinguished between confidentiality requirements for extrinsic goals vs intrinsic goals.

> Daniel: *In basic skills coaching they don't necessarily have to trust you that deeply. There's always a substrate of, if you're going to be telling somebody stuff, that they will maintain confidentiality.*

Coaches recounted being sensitive to this risk to trust, and managing engagement with sponsors intentionally. Some coaches took care to tell coachees about sharing with the sponsor, others did not. Participants viewed these risks as asymmetrical, since coachees risked more than coaches, who were often external and sharing less about themselves.

## Theme 3: As I got to know them

This superordinate theme describes participants' perception of how time impacted trust formation in two main ways. Antecedents to trust impacted how trust before coaching began, and time impacted

trust formation (positively and negatively) during coaching, with extrinsic goals requiring less investment in trust over time.

**The groundwork of trust**

Participants discussed common elements that were required "groundwork" (Sheila) for trust. Participants described the role of competence and commitment that helps coachees decide whether to trust. Paul stated "credibility is important. So in other words, I'm recommended by the Chief People Officer", while Veronika emphasised clarity in "ground rules" and "setting expectations" before beginning. Antecedents to trust seemed to be goal-content-dependent, with Iain expressing that for extrinsic goals, warm relationships were optional. Conversely, participants stressed benevolence in the context of intrinsic goals, as in being "warm", showing "care" and "liking" (Paul), "unconditional positive regard" (Rachael) and approaching the coachee "with an attitude of empathy" (Steve). Trust was described as a mutual phenomenon by coachee and coach participants and both described mutual commitment as vital for mutual trust from the outset and over time. Paul explained "I would suggest that trust is co-created. It's an experience, a feeling that both parties create together".

**Time as a canvas**

This final subordinate theme summarises how participants viewed the impact of time on trust, during coaching. Some described time as a canvas upon which the "story of the work" (Paul) could unfold. This included a sense of space for the deepening of the relationship, "establishing the rapport" or "getting to know each other" (Rachael) and taking time to create a "routine" (Sheila). Time also allowed participants to demonstrate a history of reliability and commitment, for example that they "always keep promises." (Veronika). However, the narrative that trust always takes time or grows over time was rejected by some participants. Paul explained "I think sometimes it can occur quite spontaneously. You know, there can be moments when trust like just like happens" and "Craig" describes that "trust isn't a static thing, and you can gain it or lose it with every single sentence and with every single kind of interaction you have with an individual".

For extrinsic goals "sufficient" (Craig) trust could be formed quickly to permit the work. Whereas for intrinsic goals: "you need typically more sessions and you need to dig a lot deeper and into much more personal stuff" (Rachael). Rachael explains "unless it is safe, you're not going to go there". She thinks "that takes time to develop".

# Discussion

This grounded theory study explored the experiences of coaches and coachees, with a view to proposing a theoretical explanation of the formation and function of trust in one-to-one workplace coaching. Data indicated three superordinate themes: 1) "Different kinds of trust"; 2) "The strange triangle of trust"; and 3) "As I got to know them". Results suggest the formation and function of trust in one-to-one workplace coaching is goal-content-dependent. Existing research might explain phenomena more consistently were goal content made explicit. Results echo previous qualitative studies (Alvey & Barclay, 2007; Cox, 2012; Schiemann et al., 2019; Wotruba, 2016), which suggest that trust develops through confidentiality, supportiveness and non-judgemental reaction to the disclosure of sensitive matters, and describe an interplay of contextual, behavioural and relational factors impacting the formation of trust (Alvey & Barclay, 2007).

Results suggest for extrinsic goals, trust may form iteratively, as each transaction is mutually evaluated. The function of this transactional trust may be motivation to continue. Conversely, where goals are intrinsic, a transformational trust may form in addition to transactional trust. Transformational trust may form from coaches showing benevolence and integrity over time and may function to allow coachees to vent emotion and explore areas where they feel vulnerable to

shame, resulting in new understanding and behaviours. These differing goal-content-dependent aspects of formation and function of trust in one-to-one workplace coaching are illustrated in Figure 1 and then discussed below.

**Figure 1: The Formation and Function of Trust in One-To-One Workplace Coaching**
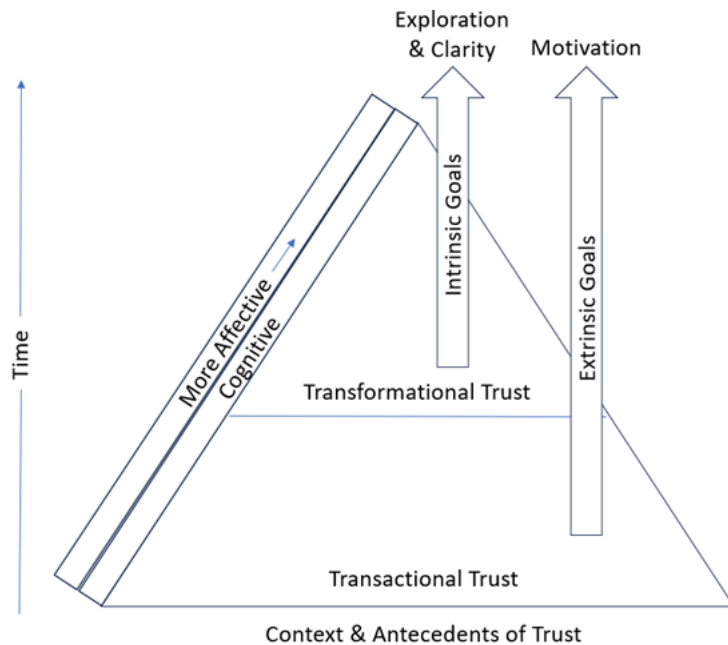


The theme "Different kinds of trust" suggests that both formation and function of trust in coaching (Bozer & Jones, 2018; de Haan, 2019) depend on goal content, as defined in the GCT mini-theory of SDT. Findings suggest developmental goals and transformational trust may build on performance goals and transactional trust cumulatively, rather than being mutually exclusive, as posited in GFC (Grant, 2018,2020; Ives & Cox, 2012). Results support a view of coaching where the coach is meeting unmet needs as defined in SDT (Spence & Oades, 2011; Spence & Deci, 2016). Autonomy and especially competence may be more salient for extrinsic goals and relatedness for intrinsic. As SDT primarily focusses on individuals, neither SDT or GCT may fully explain data describing mutual trust formation in coaching. Results relating to intrinsic goals and transformational trust suggest a mutual, socio-emotional exchange, as described by SET (Homans, 1961), (as expanded to consider affect [Blu, 1964; Lawler, 2001; Shore et al., 2006]), leading to increased expectation of future positive socio-emotional exchange (Blu, 1964).

"Going deep and personal" was the most commented upon aspect of participant experience. Findings support the existence of parallels between sports psychology, counselling and psychotherapy regarding facilitating trust in the therapeutic relationship (O'Broin & Palmer, 2019). For example, Jowett's (2007) 3C+1s model from sports psychology as it applies to coaching (Jowett et al., 2012; O'Broin & Palmer, 2019), in terms of the importance of mutual trust. However, participants emphasised different elements of the 3C+1s model for different goal content; commitment, for extrinsic goals and closeness and complementarity for intrinsic goals. Regarding counselling concepts, as with Mayer et al.'s (1995) benevolence, participants considered unconditional positive regard and empathy (Rogers, 1958, 1961) were required for transformational trust and intrinsic goals. Previous studies (Grant & O'Connor, 2019; Joo, 2005) may have focussed on extrinsic goal content, identifying less of a role for self-reflection, and less impact of bonding behaviour on coaching outcomes (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015). This may be why Bordin's (1979) therapeutic alliance was found to be less important than a joint focus on goals. Present results support Bordin's (1979) assertion that the greater the focus on exploring the inner experience, the greater the trust required, although findings suggest it is a different kind of trust (transformational),

rather than more trust. Results also support McLeod (2013) and Rogers (1958) assertion that a greater internal focus leads to moving from cognitive to cognitive-affective processing. For intrinsic goals, participants reported needing trust to share (Baumann & Hill, 2016) and trust being facilitated by coaches demonstrating benevolence, acceptance and sensitivity, in line with psychotherapy studies (Kleiven et al., 2020; Kleiven et al., 2023).

The importance of relation is posited in person-centred counselling (Rogers, 1958), SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and PVT (Porges, 2022). At a neurological level, results from the present study suggest that coachees may have been made to feel safe (regulation of the autonomic nervous system), through transparent contracting ("The strange triangle of trust") and positive socio-economic exchange with the coach over time ("As I got to know them"). This may explain their apparent increased ability to communicate about sensitive matters (Chapman, 2023; Lee, 2021). Results support PVT (Porges, 2003, 2022, 2023) and the neurological theory of the sequence of engagement (Winfrey & Perry, 2021), prediction that regulation of the autonomic nervous system reduces inhibition of the frontal cortex system, enabling higher-order thinking and communication. Results suggest that the deepening coaching relationship seems to facilitate sharing (or reduce defensiveness) in the same way as has been posited for the therapeutic alliance in counselling (Ryland et al., 2021). Although not tested in coaching populations, PVT and the theory of the sequence of engagement may explain findings of apparent increased ability to explore through transformational trust.

Results from "As I got to know them" indicate formation of trust over time, based on a goal-content-dependent social exchange during coaching. Formation of trust over time is contrary to findings of de Haan et al. (2020) (where goal-content was not stated), but in line with predictions by SET (Blau, 1964/2017). Evidence of progress towards extrinsic goals (mastery) from iterations of coaching were reported by participants to increase transactional trust, which increased motivation, as predicted by SDT. SET also explains motivation to continue with the exchange, based on experience of positive exchange over time. While SDT and SET may explain transactional trust and SET may describe the cognitive aspects of transformational trust (deciding to share about sensitive matters), PVT may better explain affective processes in the data.

Findings support that context and antecedents may influence trust formation (Mayer et al., 1995), depending on goal content. In "The strange triangle of trust" participants described workplace context issues including conflicts of interest (Milner et al., 2022; Pliopas, 2018), captured in the subordinate theme "The hierarchy of loyalty", and confidentiality and the need for clear, three-way agreements (English, 1975; International Coaching Federation, 2021) described in the subordinate theme "Backdoor dialogue". Results indicate covert sharing by coaches with sponsors damages coachee trust, disproportionately impacting intrinsic goals. As predicted by Mayer et al.'s (1995) and Markovic et al.'s (2014) models, participants also reported antecedents for trust in "The groundwork of trust". These echoed the concepts of ability, benevolence and integrity, albeit with slightly different language (e.g. "warmth" and "liking" vs "benevolence"). When discussing transactional trust and extrinsic goals, participants used cognitive and contractual terms, whereas descriptions of transformational trust and intrinsic goals included both cognitive and affective language. This cognitive-affective dichotomy echoes the trust models of McAllister (1995) and Tomlinson et al. (2020); however, present findings differ in that intrinsic goals appeared to require both cognitive and affective trust. Additionally, integrity seemed most important for intrinsic rather than extrinsic goals, in contrast to Tomlinson et al.'s (2020) model.

## Limitations of the study

This study did not examine commercial arrangements of coaching which may impact trust (de Haan et al., 2017). The sample diversity was limited. Cultural issues may significantly impact trust in coaching contexts (Carter, 2023) and results may reflect a British-biased conceptualisation of trust. Women were under-represented limiting options for exploring sex differences in willingness to

trust during coaching (de Haan et al., 2017). This study posits PVT to explain increased ability to share through transformational trust, but this has not been evidenced in a coaching population. Future research should develop and test theory in this area.

## Implications

Sponsors and coachees may benefit from assessing potential coaches on antecedents to trust (benevolence, ability and integrity) and be aware that any requirements on the coach to divulge information to sponsors may impair coachee trust and hence coaching outcomes. Coaches may improve outcomes by intentionally working with the "Different kinds of trust" (transactional or transactional plus transformational) and antecedents, depending on goal content. Future studies on trust in coaching should include goal content to facilitate analysis of formation and function of trust.

# Conclusion

This qualitative study sought to explore the formation and function of trust in one-to-one workplace coaching. It found that existing trust theory explains many aspects of trust in one-to-one workplace coaching, including conflict of interest and confidentiality in the workplace context, antecedents to trust, and the role of time in trust formation. However, research lacks goal content data, which might allow more consistent analysis. It found that the role of trust in one-to-one workplace coaching may be goal-content-dependent. Where goals are extrinsic, trust may be transactional, largely cognitive and built iteratively, as results from each cycle of coaching are evaluated. Mutual transactional trust may motivate both parties to continue. Where goals are intrinsic, mutual trust may be transformational. Building on transactional trust, transformational trust may be cognitive and affective, and allow coachees to vent emotion and explore areas where they feel vulnerable to shame, leading to new understanding and behaviour. It is recommended that coaches, coachees and sponsors intentionally optimise trust, depending on goal content. Future coaching research should include goal content. Quantitative research is required to explore if the theoretical contribution proposed is accurate and generalisable.

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# About the author

**James Gamgee** has consulted internationally in finance, technology, charity sector, telecoms, manufacturing, retail, transport and public sector for over 25 years. He is currently a civil servant at the Scottish Government, coach and guest lecturer at Heriot-Watt University. He has completed an MSc in Psychology, and an MSc in Business Psychology with Coaching.

# Appendix A - Comparison of Model Elements

**Table 3: Comparison of Model Elements**

| McAllister et al. (1995) | Mayer et al. (1995) | Tomlinson et al. (2020) | Jowett 3C+1 (2007) | Rogers (1958, 1961) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Affective | Benevolence | Benevolence | Closeness | Unconditional Positive Regard |
| | | | | Empathy |
| | | Value congruence* | Complementarity | Congruence* |
| Cognitive | Integrity | Integrity | | |
| | Ability | Ability | Commitment | |
| | | | Co-orientation | |

*Rogerian congruence means internal consistency and differs significantly from value congruence with the organisation discussed by Tomlinson et al. (2020), although both may impact affective trust.

# Appendix B – Code Mapping Example

The sub-ordinate theme Going deep and personal was identified during open coding and later emerged from 19 codes, based on 142 participant quotes during axial coding as best capturing the theoretical construct of transformational trust. During selective coding, it was selected as it captured the transformational trust construct of the super-ordinate theme Different kinds of trust. Detail is provided in Table 4.

**Table 4: Mapping for Going deep and personal**

| Different kinds of trust |
|---|
|    Going deep and personal |
|       Action words for going deep |
|       And she felt safe. |
|       Comfort zone, not danger zone |
|       Enabling somebody to have the conversation they need to have with themselves. |
|       Getting out of that loop |
|       He never really lets you in through the second layer of the onion. |
|       I can trust this person with things I don't say to other people. |
|       I just need space and someone to be there for me |
|       Insights through self-discovery from going deep |
|       It's how you use that vulnerability to good effect. |
|       Melt away those masks. |
|       Problems are metaphors for bigger life issues |
|       Reflection |
|       Self-determined direction |
|       Task talk as barrier to feelings talk |
|       The trust makes it possible for someone to be vulnerable. |
|       This is a space where you can feel comfortable with the uncomfortable |
|       Transformational coaching |
|       You now created range of different possibilities in how you think how you feel how you behave. |