Can coaching strategies help experts share expertise?

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Abstract

Knowledge is the life-blood of organisations, but the larger they grow the more difficult it becomes to share that knowledge and expertise. The purpose of this qualitative study was to try to establish whether coaching strategies have a part to play in the exploration and transmission of expertise. The study was carried out with a group of nineteen experts and coaches. For the analysis I used a qualitative phenomenological methodology. The results indicated that not only would experts value someone to help them explore the nature of their intuitive understanding, they also thought that coaches could help them to think through the political implications of their work in order to get their ideas championed by others and thus implemented. Furthermore, experts also tend to use words that have both a limited technical meaning and different popular associations: an example is 'tacit knowledge'. The coach therefore also has a potential interpretive role, helping the expert to use language that will be understood beyond his or her immediate field. The conclusion of the study was that coaching strategies would indeed seem to have a part to play in helping experts share their expertise.

Key words: coaching, intuition, tacit knowledge, knowledge management

Introduction

One of the greatest challenges that any organisation faces is how to manage its information. If experienced people find it hard to pass on their specialist knowledge, then that slows decision-making: others have to 'rediscover' knowledge that already exists but which is not easily accessible. Much information can be captured and built into document retrieval systems. Such information could be described as the 'brain' of the organisation. However, there is another sort of knowledge: the intuitive 'know how' that is the accumulation of the long experience and practice of individuals. Such intuition and insight is often the basis of rapid decision-making but can be hard to explain. It is precisely that sort of knowledge and those sorts of decision making approaches that are notoriously difficult to capture, but are the heart and soul of corporate expertise.

Three themes provided the impetus for the research: knowledge loss, knowledge sharing and the relationship between intuition and decision-making.

The study began from the premise that much of what experts do and how they do it stems from their unconscious competence (Whitmore, J. 2002, p103; Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986). If their expertise has become so deeply internalised to the extent that

they no longer find it easy to explain what they do, how they do it, or how they make decisions based on it, the risk is that the 'know-how' will remain with those individuals alone.

If learning is most effective and lasting as a social process (Stacey, 2001) then the interaction with a skilled coach should enable knowledge sharing in a way that is more effective, efficient and enjoyable than wrestling with it alone: 'Knowledge is not a 'thing' or a system, but an ephemeral process of relating' (Stacey, 2001, p2).

My involvement, as researcher and coach

Most of my work as a coach is with senior people in organisations. Part of my role is to help them to make better business decisions and to work more effectively with others. In order to be able to do those things well they need to have a good understanding of the way they make decisions. Often, they find this hard to explain. They use words and phrases such as 'gut feel', 'intuition', 'I just know, I don't have to think' or 'I suppose it's all down to experience'. Yet such expert knowing is of little value unless it can be passed on to others.

I began working in this area because I wanted to achieve three objectives:

1. to change people's ideas about coaching: many still consider it to be essentially a process of skills transfer from knowledgeable coach to learner;
2. to find out if a coaching approach can help experts understand their own intuition better;
3. to improve both my own coaching practice and that of other coaches with whom I work: the learning transfer element.

Methodology

Scoping the research question was comparatively easy: finding the appropriate methodology became a challenge, and the search for the exact research methods in combination in order to collect and analyse data became a study in its own right. The overarching methodology is qualitative and phenomenological. I worked with a small study population of nineteen, divided into three groups: seven experts, six coaches and six coachees. I used semi-structured interviews and questionnaires to collect the data, and the analysis was carried out using tape transcript analysis, mapping techniques, and the phenomenological method detailed by Moustakas (1994). I revised the process and recorded my journey as researcher using Action Research as my 'shadow methodology'. This is a term that I coined to describe my use of this method to give me a framework for reflection and learning; in effect I became my own 'client' when reporting progress in my learning diary and project plan.

Every journey begins with the first step and the direction of that step determines the destination. Turn one way, towards quantitative methodologies and the journey will

involve statistical analysis, objectivity and reproducibility. Turn the other way, towards qualitative methodologies, and there will be different challenges: of interpretation, involvement and subjectivity (Collis and Hussey, 2003, p47, table 3.1). This crucial first choice affects research method, process, and the way in which results are interpreted: different scenery, different destination. The choice of methodology was a process not an event; I made many false starts. However, those false starts were an essential element in my learning. Words, their meaning and interpretation, were also an essential element of the study.

The research data came from three sources: from highly experienced coaches, used to working with senior people and those with great expertise in their fields; from senior executives who have received coaching in the past, and from 'key informants'; subject specialists at the leading edges of their fields but who have never been formally 'coached' as part of their work. I also varied the data gathering approach to enable me to collect information from the respondents in the way that each preferred. Table 1 below illustrates how data was collected and from whom.

Respondent group	Number in each group	Data collection method	Data collection process
Experts	7	Semi-structured interview	2 face to face interview 5 telephone interview
Coaches	6	Semi-structured interview	2 face to face interview 4 telephone interview
Coachees	6	e-mail questionnaire	

Table 1: Data Collection Methods

These three sources of data: coach, coachee and key informant, were the planned elements of triangulation. But an unplanned fourth element emerged: my own perspective as researcher. This was formalised through the 'shadow methodology' of Action Research. Structuring thoughts as Action Research in my journal and using it to plan the evolving approach gave an extra dimension to triangulation. It also helped me to develop as 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983).

Data analysis

The data was explored using the process described by Moustakas (1994). This comprised the following elements:
♦ Epoche (bracketing)
♦ Phenomenological reduction
♦ Imaginative variation
♦ Synthesis

The detailed analysis followed the sequence described by van Kramm (1986) and adapted by Moustakas (1994 p 120). It involved analysing each set of responses in depth and without prejudice *in isolation,* It is this attention to each individual's unique

experience and ways of expressing that that gives the phenomenological approach its unique blend of respect for the spirit and academic rigour.

The experts were selected from the following areas of specialist knowledge: music and maths; software and juggling; natural science writing and broadcasting; manufacturing consultancy; engineering consultancy; sales and marketing; and government defence advice and comparative religion.

The coaches were all extremely experienced. All work with senior management and all but one have at least five years' experience of working at board level in multi-national companies and financial institutions.

The coachees all hold board positions or report directly to those who do.

In order to ensure confidentiality all respondent transcripts were coded. The code is different for each of the three respondent groups and is summarised in the table below

Experts	Coded according to their field of expertise: MM = Music and Maths NH = Natural Historian and explorer CE = Civil Engineer TS = Technical Sales GA = Government Advisor MC = Mechanical engineering Consultant ST = Software and Juggling
Coaches	Coded alphabetically A - F
Coachees	Coded numerically and anonymously in the order in which their responses were received: C1-C6

Table 2: Confidentiality Code

Analysing the data

Each interview tape was transcribed in full including all repetition, pauses, and hesitation phenomena (ums and errs). This meant I had not only the words but also the patterns of speech to explore and interpret. Each transcript was analysed using the following sequence of steps:

♦ The epoche: a psychological separation from external influences. This involved examining each transcript in isolation, coming to it afresh, free from prejudgement, supposition or external influence. Each transcript became 'the world in the bracket (which) has been cleared of ordinary thought and is present before us as a phenomenon to be gazed upon, to be known naively and freshly through a 'purified' consciousness' (Moustakas 1994 p85).

- ♦ Phenomenological reduction via
    - o Bracketing
    - o Horizonalising
    - o Clustering the horizons into themes
    - o Organising the themes into a coherent textural description of the phenomena
- ♦ Imaginative variation
- ♦ Synthesis of meaning and essence (Moustakas 1994 pgs 84 – 103).

The analytic process in practice

The epoche is defined as a psychological separation from external influence. Circumstances meant that for the duration of the analysis, the epoche became a physical reality as well. Scheduled to be travelling during the time committed to data analysis challenged timescales and imposed stress. To address this, I re-framed the problem as an opportunity (OU Techniques Library, 1999 No.106) specifically to remove subconscious preconceptions or associations with my usual study environments: office, home study or library. Each tape transcription was analysed in a different location with no distractions. Each received between two and four hours dedicated attention.

The noetic analysis was challenging but exceptionally revealing. The concept of the noesis and noema comes from Husserl (1931). Together, they 'awaken us to the meaning or sense of whatever is in perception, memory, judgement, thinking or feeling' (Moustakas 1994 p69). I used the concept of the noema (that which is experienced: the object correlate) and the noesis (the act of perceiving, judging, feeling: the subject-correlate) to try to reach the essence of the meaning of each transcript. Trusting to the process, continually asking 'how is this person seeing, thinking, feeling, reflecting; what is the nature of that experience; what, for this person lies beneath these words and phrases', was profound. I had not expected that divorcing the act of perceiving from the 'perceived as such' (Husserl 1931, p260) could reveal so much.

The noeses 'bring into being the consciousness of something' (Moustakas, 1994 p69). This 'bringing into consciousness' occurred on several levels: that which had not been perceived before by interviewees ('I hadn't thought of it like that before!'); that which I had not fully appreciated (the subtle and shifting meaning of words and the differences they have for different people); and the gradual extraction of meaning from text by the continual re-reading, reflecting, waiting and searching for the intentionality and the ascription of meaning within each transcript (Moustakas, 1994, p69). Such close and repeated textual and textural exploration of documents was new to me: beachcombing for pretty pebbles and finding a diamond.

Bracketing was made easier by the physical element of the epoche and by deliberately removing myself from all books and fellow researchers. 'The world in the bracket has been cleared of ordinary thought and is present before us as a phenomenon to be gazed upon, to be known naively and freshly' (Moustakas, 1994, p85).

Horizon statements were identified using coloured pencils. Different colours also indicated different themes; this facilitated the clustering process. The final step in the phenomenological reduction stage was to write a textural description of the phenomena – the nature and meaning of each individual's experience of the questions and topics we were exploring.

Imaginative variation was the most difficult stage. On one hand it was exciting to dream and speculate about what might underlie the textural descriptions. I am used to 'varying frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomena from divergent perspectives' (Moustakas, 1994, p97) through my work with creative problem solving. However, I wrestled with the dilemma of influencing, biasing, what my respondents said, with what I hoped, feared or imagined they'd said. There is a paradox here: on one hand it was a continual surprise to discover just how much richness and depth of insight this stage produced. On the other, I felt it important to remind myself which were their words and which my 'imaginative variation'. To resolve this paradox I completed this part of the process using a different colour pen.

The final stage, synthesis of meaning and essence, was unfailingly exciting; I was continually amazed at how much it revealed.

The e-mail questionnaires were analysed differently, using matrix transcripts, word analysis and mind and cognitive mapping techniques (OU Techniques library Nos. 76 and 21). These are methods I have used extensively in the past. However, these texts were analysed after the coach and expert transcripts and I was surprised at the way the concept of the noeses, intentionality, time, structure, texture and the meaning of language informed and challenged my reading of them in a way that would not have been possible had I analysed the questionnaires first.

The experience of intuition

Underpinning the research question 'can working with a coach help experts share expertise' was the concept that such expertise is based to a great extent on unconscious competence. The word intuition was used in both interviews and questionnaire as the one most likely to be meaningful to a non-specialist audience and that most accurately captures the concept of unconscious competence. In the event, it turned out to have a broader spectrum of associations than I had anticipated. Words used by respondents as synonyms for intuition included experience, reactions, patterns, knowledge, instinct and expertise:

> 'That's a great deal to make one word mean', said Alice in a thoughtful tone. 'When I make a word do a lot of work like that', said Humpty Dumpty, I always pay it extra (Carroll, [1929] p246).

In the context of expert knowledge, intuition is definitely a word that deserves to be paid extra: it works extremely hard. Trying to define intuition is as difficult as it is to pin down 'tacit': frequently they are used interchangeably, or within the same sentence, as in this example:

> 'Tacit knowledge, based on the cumulative experience of the manager, is equivalent to the intuitive feel and 'softer' ways of knowing that all humans experience' (Bennett, 1998: abstract).

Rather than use 'tacit' and 'intuitive' interchangeably, as Bennett does, Sternberg and Horvath (1999) distinguish between the way such words are used in professional practice and in academic literature:

> 'Professionals often speak of "learning by doing", "using professional instinct" or "intuition". Social scientists use the concepts "implicit learning" and "tacit knowledge" to describe these activities that are part of professional practice'.

I find this distinction between word use in professional practice and academic literature helpful. From the perspective of coaching practice it is more productive to explore with coachees what the word means for them, what it feels like and what the implications are for subsequent action, than to engage in a semantic debate about precise definition.

Data presentation and analysis

In terms of coaching practice, the data indicate that there is indeed a role for coaches to help experts describe their intuitive understanding. That role has two aspects: to help experts understand the nature of *their own* intuitive insight and to think through the implications of how to communicate that insight to others.

The respondents were divided on their feelings towards intuition. Some viewed it with trust and respect, others with apprehension. Several respondents linked intuition with trust, built over time. This comment by coach F is typical:

> 'A lot of what, I guess what most coaches do, is to enable people to understand and trust themselves more and realise what their own strengths are and learn to trust them and I think that's part of trusting their own intuition'.

Although acknowledging the reality and value of their intuition, several respondents seemed to view the word with apprehension and preferred to call it something else: experience, pattern recognition, intuition or gut feel. If that intuitive insight is to be communicated to others it must be rationalised and substantiated by hard facts, otherwise it may simply be discounted.

One surprising finding, and one that has implications for coaching practice, was that two experts out of the seven were aware that they used intuition differently in different areas of their expertise. For MM, the nature of his intuition is different when playing classical music from the intuition he experiences with modern music or maths. SJ described a reliable intuition he can improve, and another that 'just happens'. The coaching implication here is that it is dangerous to assume, so to take the word 'intuition' at face value would be insufficient. Isenberg (1987) for example, argues that intuition can be used in five distinct ways. The inference is that coaches would need to probe for examples and illustrations to be sure that they understand what 'intuition' means for coachees, how they use it in practice and what the implications are for making decisions and communicating those to others.

The evidence from the study data implies that many people value their intuition and have learnt to place increasing trust in it over time. Others value it equally provided they can call it something else, or find hard data to explain it. However, there is another dimension and that is risk. It is insufficient to have an intuitive insight: that insight must be framed in words and language that the *other* person understands and feels comfortable with. If experts cannot effect that translation themselves then they run the risk of tarnishing their specialist credibility.

There would seem to be a useful role for a coach here: to help the expert think through the 'politics of acceptance'. By this I mean the strategies, tactics and language of communication in order to ensure that intuitive insights are framed in a way the receiver can hear and understand.

It is clear from the data that coaches can also play a part in helping experts to challenge their own thinking. By providing a forum where thoughts and ideas are *spoken*, they can help experts explore whether or not their intuitive ideas and decisions are valid.

Coachees also appreciated having someone to help them validate their thinking: software engineers in one organisation refer to this as asking for a 'shoulder monkey'. When they have a problem they ask a colleague to stand behind them (i.e. be the 'monkey' at their shoulder) while they explain aloud the problem they have on screen. The very act of explaining to someone else usually isolates the source of the problem: the shoulder monkey rarely has to say a word. This is the point at which coaching for breakthrough and creative problem solving become indistinguishable. The coaching role is reduced to minimalist promptings and 'why' questions: the coachee solves the issue by talking. I believe this social element of the coaching relationship to be something of a missing link in knowledge sharing.

The social element of knowledge acquisition was emphasised by one expert who said he had learnt key elements of his programming expertise from older boys at school: they were enthusiastic, fun to be with and still remembered how difficult learning can be in the early stages. He also liked the fact that, unlike his teachers, the senior boys were 'not too far above me'. There is a strong theme here of learning in a social context: we seek

people from whom we think we can learn, and we get lonely if we are deprived of that social element.

Another thread in the intuitive theme is pattern recognition. Several of the respondents use pattern recognition as an intellectual short cut, which they recognise but don't always find easy to explain. However, pattern recognition also comes with health warnings: patterns, and assumed patterns, can be misleading. This is exactly the point that Sibley (2002, p39) makes:

> 'Once you have mastered common patterns, the real trick is to educate yourself about where the discrepancies are likely to appear – and concentrate your attention to those areas'.

Advanced pattern recognition is about *absence* of fit with a known pattern as much as familiarity with it:

> 'Sometimes new experiences just don't fit the patterns you thought you observed before. But you can't be defensive and cling to the identification you made in the past because that will only obscure the newer patterns that are turning up as you learn more…mistakes are an opportunity for learning' (Sibley, 2002 p49).

Simon (1987) argues that intuition '… is the by-product of training and experience which enables speedy pattern recognition and decision-making'. However, Eraut (1984, p123-157) warns that unthinking reliance on unconscious competence may blind us to new information or skill acquisition and the result may be unconscious *in*competence. One expert made this point very clearly when he linked his own failure to practise his skills to the eventual failure of his intuitive ability. It isn't enough to have been expert at something once upon a time – you must maintain that skill. And this may be one of the unacknowledged reasons why so many technical managers hang on to their 'hands dirty' skill base when as managers it is no longer appropriate for them to do so: they fear their *intuitive* feel for their specialism slipping away. Many scientists and engineers find this transition difficult. This is where effective coaches can enormously helpful, working with technical specialists to support them through the 'letting go' process and enabling them to move on.

Babel Fish

In 1977 the BBC commissioned Douglas Adams to write 'The Hitch-hikers' Guide to The Galaxy' (Adams, 1977). One of his creations from that series was the Babel Fish. The Babel Fish is small, yellow, and simultaneously translates from one spoken language to another. When inserted into the ear, its nutrition processes convert sound waves to brain waves, enabling the user to understand any language in the Galaxy. It enables translation.

The Babel Fish theme was unexpected; it emerged from the data analysis. The theme deals with the ways in which a coach can help experts to translate their deep, specialist knowledge, and alien jargon, into something others can recognise and work with. There are four sub-themes:

- translating from unconscious competence to conscious competence
- translating from expert to others
- how expert learning took place and became internalised
- translating expert learning into learning for others.

Translating from unconscious competence to conscious competence
All the experts in the study need to hand on their knowledge and all were aware that this was a translation process; that in order to do it well they had first to get things straight in their own minds before they could communicate effectively:

> CE: '…the biggest single problem is verbalising the solution'
> NH: 'I am a translator from the scientific to the popular'
> TS: 'it's like knowing how to read..'
> SJ: 'it's deeply ingrained….you don't have to think….

Such deeply internalised knowing is at the heart of expertise but as one expert observes, can be hard to verbalise. A coach, acting as 'translator' for these experts, would pick up on and explore key phrases such as 'deeply ingrained'. The aim of such a translation process is to distinguish between those actions and patterns of behaviour that are indeed unconsciously competent and those that have inadvertently become unconsciously *in*competent.

Translating from expert to others
Three of the experts in the study saw the prime purpose of their role being to translate their expertise so others can use it in some way. All three learnt the hard way that it could not be passed on directly without skilled interpretation.

None of these experts had considered working with a coach to help them think through some of the translation issues they faced, yet once the idea had been raised, there was great enthusiasm for it:

> MC: 'help me think through the politics…'
> GA: 'useful to explore scenarios first…'
> NH: 'I am solitary…but it is nicer to talk to people about things

The data suggests that there could be a most useful role here for coaches, to help experts think through ways to structure messages so that they are more likely to be understood and accepted.

How expert learning took place and became internalised
Although there were no questions directly aimed at finding out how experts or coachees had acquired their expertise, several respondents volunteered that information. The phrases they used were revealing: 'helping me think through'; 'principally experience', 'wouldn't have been able to do it if …'. Learners who go on to be experts make the transition from needing to be taught to wanting to learn. It isn't easy to learn from experience by solitary reflection: people need others to help them think through the reflection process and draw out the learning. Coaches can help learners to understand more about the context within which they are operating and to integrate what they have just learnt into what they already know (Daley, 1998 p4).

Translating expert learning into learning for others.
Respondents in all three groups - experts, coaches and coachees - needed to pass on their knowledge so that others could learn from them and follow in their footsteps. Their success at this is measured and that measure is often the success of the learner. This places stress on the expert, since he or she may not be by nature either an effective communicator or a good teacher. The requirement to hand knowledge down goes with the job yet many experts find that hard to do well:

> SJ: 'there are people who I have tried to explain things to in multiple different ways repeatedly and they never, ever, get it, and these people are not unintelligent, it's just something that doesn't click between me and them'

This is typical of the sense of frustration that was evident in several responses: of a genuine desire to impart or share knowledge and an equally genuine puzzlement when it didn't work.

From this evidence, these respondents would value having someone to help them translate their expertise, in a way that others can understand. Even if in reality the knowledge step is not huge, if it is *perceived* as such by either side that will slow real knowledge transfer.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995, p61) refer not to translation, but *conversion* of knowledge:

> human knowledge is created and expanded through social action between tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge. We shall call this interaction "knowledge conversion".

This would seem to support my hypothesis that skilful coaching can help experts to 'surface' their deeply buried expertise to make it explicit. It can then be 'translated' in a way that others can understand.

Because someone is expert in a particular area it does not follow that he or she is necessarily a good teacher, trainer, coach or role model. If knowledge and expertise

does need to be handed on then the data from the respondents in this study indicates that there may well be a role for skilled coaches to help experts identify what elements of their skill set need to be transferred, in what order, and to what depth. Sometimes, expertise cannot be handed on directly: it needs the help of a Babel Fish to enable the process.

The Humpty Dumpty Principle

> 'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone' 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.'
> 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.'
> The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be Master? – that's all'.
> Alice was much too puzzled to say anything.   (Carroll, [1929], p246)

The essence of a phenomenological study is meaning, and meaning is communicated by words. And words, with all their attendant associations, assumptions and implications, need to be considered as an important element in good coaching practice.

The words and phrases that gave the most trouble were those that have both a precise, technical, academic or professional meaning, and a popular everyday one (Sternberg and Horvath, 1999). Key examples are tacit knowledge, intuition, and coaching. The inference is that it is necessary both for researchers and coaching practitioners to define the terms that are to be used. The researcher should stay alert throughout the research process for misconceptions to do with meaning that could affect the results of the study, and the coach should be sensitive to the way in which the coachee is using language.

The dilemma here for the researcher is this: by redefining a key word are you in some way affecting the results? The answer is yes, but with justification. A great benefit of the interview as opposed to the questionnaire is that you *can* clarify and explain if there is misunderstanding. And by very virtue of agreeing to take part in my study my expert interviewees have already been affected in some measure by it. 'Their understandings of themselves may already have been altered at the moment we approach them to participate in the research process' (Russell and Kelly, 2002, p7-8).

Tacit knowledge: the continuum of meaning and its implications for coaching practice
At a superficial level, the word 'tacit' is used loosely and as a synonym for words and phrases such as intuition, 'hard to explain', unconscious competence, embedded expertise or 'skilled action in practice': for example, (Bennett,1998; Sternberg and Horvath,1999; Stacey,2001; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). The implication here for coaching practice is that if a coach thinks that his or her coachee is using the word in this looser sense, then he or she should probe for practical examples in order to explore the way in which the word is being used and the associations it holds for the user.

However, if the word 'tacit' is understood in the way that Polanyi (1958; 1967) and Tsoukas (1997; 2002) define it, as something ineffable, essentially unknowable, then paradoxically I suggest that the role of the coach should be precisely the opposite: to help the expert think about what they *shouldn't* be consciously thinking about. Tsoukas explains this with a clear example:

> If we switch our focal attention to particulars of which we had only subsidiary awareness before, their meaning is lost and the corresponding action becomes clumsy. If a pianist shifts her attention from the piece she is playing to how she moves her fingers; if a speaker focuses his attention to the grammar he is using instead of the act of speaking; or if a carpenter shifts his attention from hitting the nail to holding the hammer they will be confused   (Tsoukas 2002. p6).

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Such tacit knowledge should not be explored or explained.   Here, expertise is 'knowledge-in-action' which is more easily observed or experienced than described (Platts and Yeung, 2000; Stacey, 2001). However, my research data suggest that there are circumstances where the expert *values* the chance to re-examine some of the roots of his or her expertise, which have become lost to the conscious mind.

This issue of the difficulties associated with reflecting on expertise are discussed by Eraut (1984 p127):

> Hence a major problem for all professionals is making sufficient time to engage in deliberative as well as rapid and intuitive modes of thought and action.

 One of the strengths of coaching is that time is set aside for it to take place. If experts do need explore the nature of their expertise in order to pick up on errors, check their understanding or recognise and discuss development needs, then coaching provides the defended time and the skilful questioning to enable that to take place.

As well as discussing the difficulty of setting aside time to reflect Eraut also explores the time at which that reflection is best done. He argues that Schön's (1983) concept of reflection-in-action 'only carries a clear meaning when the action is fairly rapid; because once the pace becomes slower there can be no distinction between when reflection is in action and when it is on action' (Eraut, 1984 p127). Reflection-in–action can only be done in the heat of the moment: coaching could offer an invaluable support mechanism for helping experts reflect *on* action, in time set aside for that specific purpose. The evidence from this study is that this is something that many experts would appreciate and derive benefit from.

The Humpty Dumpty Principle – how words are defined and how they are used in practice - proved to be both complex and challenging. It highlighted the need for both

researchers and coaches to define their terms, to clarify assumptions and to identify where issues with terminology could lie.

The implications for coaching practice are that, as part of knowledge transfer within organisations, coaches could indeed have a part to play in helping those with expertise explain and communicate their knowledge and 'know how'. However, there are further implications: if that process is to be fully effective a coach would have to be keenly aware of when to probe for illustrations and examples, when to encourage the expert to 'deconstruct' his or her expertise and to examine the component elements, and when to do the *opposite* – to pull back, to help the coachee think strategically and to interpret and evaluate the implications of his or her 'knowledge in action' (Platts and Yeung, 2000; Eraut, 1984).

Conclusion

The organisational context for this study has been the transfer of knowledge. One of the greatest challenges that any organisation faces is how to manage its information. If experienced people find it hard to pass on their specialist knowledge, then that slows decision-making: others have to 'rediscover' knowledge that already exists but which is not easily accessible. Expert intuition and insight can be hard to explain. The commercial context for the study is that much of an organisation's value can be vested in its Intellectual Property. If organisational knowledge is lost, locked away in silos of expertise or forms the basis of a style of decision-making, which cannot be explained to others, then the organisation itself loses value (Ridderstråle and Nordström, 2002).

However, the study demonstrated that there is also a human context. Coaching is a social activity. Two people, coach and coachee, together schedule a series of meetings over time with the purpose of addressing issues of concern to the coachee, in order to improve performance. Performance improvement occurs on a continuum, from operational, skills-based activities to dealing effectively with abstract, complex and ambiguous issues. Whatever the nature or scope of that performance improvement, talking it through with a skilled helper gives focus and purpose.

My hypothesis was that many experts find sharing expertise difficult. They may have forgotten just how much they do know, may be unable to share their knowledge in the ways that they would wish, or make decisions so intuitively that the underpinning analysis and rationale is tedious, or impossible, to explain. Some may even feel quite isolated and would value the social aspect of working with another person to help them think issues through from a fresh perspective.

Reflection-in-action, an immediate response to an event, is something that most of us experience. However, reflection-*on*-action (Eraut, 1984) is more problematic. By deliberately setting time aside and offering a particular form of support based on insightful questioning, coaching can provide credibility and authority for this reflective process. Whether that coaching is done by a peer, a manager or an external consultant

would depend on the individual context but the two essential elements would be defended time and skilled support.

If that same process were extended to help experts reflect on, and explore, the nature of their expertise, then the evidence from this study is that this would help these respondents to:

- reduce their feeling of loneliness;
- re-evaluate past practice for improvement or reinforcement;
- consider how best to communicate their decisions to others;
- work out how best to teach others;
- think more clearly about the nature of the language they use to describe their deepest understanding of their own knowledge in action, whether they call it experience, intuition, gut reaction or tacit knowledge.

Knowledge transfer in organisations is a social process. Coaching is a supportive, social activity. This study has shown that not all experts find getting in touch with their own deep understanding easy, nor are they all sociable, or easy communicators. It would not seem unreasonable then to suggest that coaching strategies could indeed help some experts to think more clearly about their own intuitive knowing and unconscious competence. The result could well be improved knowledge transfer in organisations and the re-invention of fewer organisational wheels.

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