April 2025
For counsellor-coaches and other coaching professionals

Coaching Today

The ethics of integration

What this means for our profession

Contents

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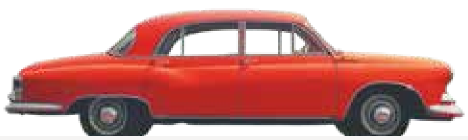

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Editorial

Diane Parker
Editor, Coaching Today

The power of the peer group

I've been reminded lately of the value of peer support when navigating transition and turbulence. I'm seeing it online, on social media, in response to current global and political upheaval, and at the same time experiencing it in my own life, on a personal and professional level.

Five years ago, we were all in the thick of an unprecedented global pandemic and experiencing our first national lockdown. I had just joined a team of coaches working for a charity, and for my first two years, my only contact with my peers, in team meetings and group supervision, was virtual, conducted over video conference.

I recall my nervousness and trepidation as I prepared to meet my colleagues in person for the very first time since the start of the pandemic. I know that I wasn't alone in experiencing such feelings, and I recall walking away at the end of the day, feeling exhausted and also something else that I can only describe as approaching euphoria.

For me, there is nothing like being in the company of a group of committed, caring and determined human beings, who recognise that they are working in the service of a higher purpose. Reflecting the thoughts of our Chair in her regular column on p4, I have found conversing with my peers, whether in a formal setting such as group supervision, or informally, like getting together over lunch or drinks, to be enlightening, inspirational, educational and informative. I would go so far as to say that I am a more skilled and effective practitioner now than I was five years ago, because of my peers. Our peers can challenge as well as support us, be a source of inspiration, or simply a listening ear. I have direct experience in my own life of witnessing how many life-changing projects or transformations within organisations or communities have begun as a simple conversation between a couple of passionate individuals; who start by sharing their curiosity and asking: 'What if…?'

So, when **Dr Trish Turner** and former Chair of BACP, **Professor Andrew Reeves** offered up their article about the ethical issues around integrated coach-therapy practice as they experience them, it was like being given a direct window into their thought processes. *Ethical Integrated Practice* on p8 takes the form of a dialogue between two experienced practitioners and educators, each with considerable experience in coaching and therapy, and their collegial communication is representative of their own experiences, perspectives and ideas. It's exciting to imagine what might emerge from this and other such conversations in the future. If their dialogue inspires, provokes or invites your curiosity, do get in touch and let us know.

One key area of focus for these authors is that of supervision. As we have explored in previous issues, the provision of effective supervision for dual practitioners is of increasing ethical importance as the field of integrated practice grows and develops. I'm happy to launch our new dedicated series on supervision in this issue, led by BACP Coaching's Supervision Special Interest Lead, **Ioannes Alexiades**. You can read the first instalment of this series on p14.

Finally, as part of our continued commitment to bridging the gap between practice and research, *Coaching Today* is looking for a new columnist who can take the lead on our regular research digest. If you are interested in contributing to the conversation around evidence-based practice and have the availability to contribute four times a year, please get in touch with me at the address below.

Until next time… ■

Diane Parker
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REGULARS

We welcome feedback and comments from our readers. If you have a response to any of the articles published in *Coaching Today*, please contact the Editor at **coachingtoday.editorial@bacp.co.uk**. Please note that your letter may be edited for length.

Interested in contributing to *Coaching Today*?

Copy deadlines for the next two issues are **5 August** and **4 November 2025** respectively. Contact the Editor at the email above with your ideas.

OUR ROUND-UP OF THE LATEST EVENTS, NEWS AND RESEARCH

BACP Coaching News

Message from the Chair

Community and connection

Gemma Levitas
Chair, BACP Coaching

As well as meeting online every quarter and maintaining regular contact in between (mostly via phone and email), the BACP Coaching Executive ensure that we meet face to face at least once per year. Since the era of online working, the use of Zoom and other online platforms have become ubiquitous in our everyday working lives and, though a welcome and practical method of connecting, surprisingly there are still many of us on the Executive who have yet to meet in person.

This has led me to thinking about our clients' experience of the ways in which people are connecting with each other on a daily basis, and how both socialising and working online have quickly become normalised since the COVID-19 pandemic. I often wonder how this affects our clients' sense of themselves and their experience of others. Most significantly, for me, it has raised the issue of connection and the loneliness borne of not having enough in-person face-to-face interaction with others.

A topic of exploration that frequently arises in my practice centres around social anxiety, the steep increase in social media use as a replacement for interpersonal interaction, and how this has influenced my clients' ability to navigate relationships. I've noticed that the ability to connect and read social cues, and also the impact on making and maintaining personal relationships has been damaged by the use of social media as a substitute for human interaction. It stands to reason that the less accustomed we become to interacting with each other face to face, the more social anxiety increases.

It also highlights how important in-person interaction is for us practitioners, as client work is increasingly conducted remotely or online. Therapy and coaching can be lonely work, especially for practitioners who are in private practice and tend to work one to one with clients. Although our work is interactive, safeguarding is essential, and we are required to adhere to stringent clinical and ethical frameworks. We are not friends with our clients and that is as it should be, so it's essential for us to get that all-important social interaction outside our client work.

Speaking for myself, I can say how helpful it is for me be able to connect with others working in this dual practitioner space. Shared experience goes a long way towards reminding us that there is so much we can learn from our fellow practitioners. I am reminded of the importance of social connection, even for those who consider themselves content with their own company. Deep down, most of us want to feel connected, kept in mind, considered and listened to.

Therapy and coaching can be lonely work, especially for practitioners who are in private practice

Working with Coaching event

With all this in my mind, at the time of writing, I'm very much looking forward to meeting with the Executive in March, where we will be debating all manner of subjects, including how we identify as dual-qualified practitioners. We'll also be addressing other matters, such as our forthcoming annual Working with Coaching event, in which members are invited to take a deeper dive with us into the work of dual-qualified practitioners.

We are also open to hearing more from our divisional members so that we can tailor an offering that is most helpful to you. I am always keen to hear from practitioners who are interested in integrating therapeutic and coaching work. We are currently exploring different themes and areas for our Working with Coaching event that we feel may be of benefit to members. These include: how to position ourselves as dual-qualified practitioners in the marketplace, how we identify ourselves, and how to formulate a brand that feels authentic to our practice and way of working. These are just a couple of areas we are exploring, and once we have decided upon a theme for the next event, I will share more details in a subsequent column.

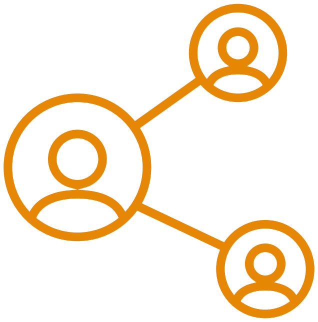
Connect with us

If you wish to know more about the work of the Executive, there are ways in which you can share your thoughts and ideas and connect with us, and learn more about how we support the membership and advocate for our work both within BACP and beyond, by checking out our dedicated Facebook page at: https://tinyurl.com/yzy9e87x

You will also find some insightful videos created by the Executive as a helpful resource to learn more about the world of dual coach-therapy practice, so if you are on Facebook, do take a moment to stop by and connect with us there.

As is our mission, the Coaching division is always focused on tackling wider issues that affect dual-qualified practitioners everywhere, creating a space that is safe and reliable for clients. And doing it together, as a collective – well, that is the best part. ■

BACP Coaching Update



Introducing a new member of the Executive

As we emerge from the cocoon of winter and welcome the warmer weather of spring, the BACP Coaching Executive is delighted to welcome a new member. Our latest recruit, Tracey Hartshorn, joined us for her first Executive meeting earlier this year, and it is with open arms that we embrace the fresh perspective a new member brings to our team.

You can read more about Tracey in our *Meet the Member* column on p6.

Research columnist wanted for *Coaching Today*

Do you enjoy exploring the latest coaching research? Are you committed to bridging the gap between academia and practice? Do you have capacity to contribute a column four times a year? If so, you could be the new regular research columnist we are looking for.

After three years, our regular research columnist, Xeni Kontogianni, is stepping back from the role. Since launching our research digest series in our October 2021 issue, Xeni has consistently applied her knowledge and skill as practitioner, writer and researcher to making the latest research in the fields of coaching and dual coach-therapy practice accessible to our readers.

We wish Xeni well, and if you are inspired to take up the mantle, please contact the Editor at **coachingtoday.editorial@bacp.co.uk**

Meet the member

Tracey Hartshorn

is a multi-qualified practitioner, as psychotherapist, executive coach, interpersonal mediator, clinical supervisor and management accountant. She enjoyed a 30-year career in the public and not-for-profit sectors before leaving to start her own business, and she now draws on her many qualifications and diverse experience in her long-standing private practice as a therapeutic coach and supervisor. Tracey lives on the Nottinghamshire/Derbyshire border and spends her spare time writing, gardening and enjoying the beautiful countryside of the Peak District.

www.traceyhartshorn.co.uk

How would you describe your journey from therapist to coach?

I initially trained as a coach 20 years ago in the NHS as part of a leadership transformation programme. I loved the one-to-one work and the change I witnessed in the people I coached. I noticed that the deeper the work became, the more I connected with my coachees. This prompted me to explore transpersonal coaching, which led to me becoming curious about person-centred psychotherapy, and doing a subsequent master's degree.

Over the last 10 years, I've been moving ever more towards a combined coach-therapy approach and have recently launched my own model of therapeutic coaching: 'The Blended Approach'. This feels like the culmination of my journey as I bring all of my training and experience together for the benefit of those I support.

Do you have a coaching niche?

I don't describe my coaching approach as a niche but I find I am at my best when working with those who have a social conscience. This is generally those working in the public or not-for-profit sectors but has also included senior leaders in the private sector who want to make a difference to society.

It can be challenging to lead for the greater good while maintaining self-care at the same time, so I suppose my 'niche' is working with those who want to support themselves so they can continue to work for the benefit of society.

How has becoming a coach changed you as a person?

That's a long list! It's hard for me to differentiate between the changes that have occurred through becoming a coach and those from being a therapist.

I suppose the key is in the word 'being'. Like many others who have come to coaching, I spent a number of years 'doing things'; constantly busy ticking boxes and driving forward. I thought that becoming a coach was just another box to tick but it's so much more than that. As I've learned to sit with my clients, I've also learned to sit with myself. That's not always in deep reflection, by the way: sometimes 'sitting with' involves a warm smile and a fair bit of laughter.

Where do you practise?

I work virtually and in-person. I have an office in a Victorian building in the centre of a town on the border of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. It's decorated like a sitting room but with a quirky style that includes plenty of colour and items of interest. My clients describe it as a sanctuary.

In recent years, I have found more clients are choosing to work virtually, and I have even worked with people from as far afield as Mexico City. It offers some great variety, for sure.

Do you have a typical client?

For my therapeutic coaching work, clients are generally in leadership positions and are 'problem aware' and 'solution curious'. This means they know there is something they need to work on but they are unsure whether they need therapy or coaching. My blended approach means they don't have to choose and, in my experience, they often need a mixture of both approaches.

A typical client is feeling high levels of discomfort, and the stresses of their role are often spilling over into their personal life. My clients therefore bring many aspects of their work and life to process and are keen to explore these to achieve change.

How would you describe your particular approach to coaching/therapy?

I am very much non-directive, and I believe that my clients have the answers; they just can't access them yet. In my approach, this means I act as 'guide', rather than 'expert'. I have a head full of theories, tools and models but sometimes there is benefit in working with the simplicity of the process and what is present in the space.

I commonly work with clients' values, the labels they give themselves and those given by others, and the challenges they are carrying with them through life. It can be empowering to put things down and feel the lightness.

Clients know instinctively whether they want to work on something holding them back or something to move them forward. This means I have to be quite agile in the work and follow them wherever they lead. That's the joy of a blended approach: you never quite know where it's going to lead. I hold onto curiosity and the process of discovery rather than a prescribed destination.

> **As I've learned to sit with my clients, I've also learned to sit with myself**

What's your biggest challenge currently?

The volatility of life, for sure. I've noticed I am working more with conflict in my clients' lives, in work and in society as a whole: it all comes into the coaching space in the form of distress and discomfort. Working with this, means exploring someone's conflict history, their default/habitual responses, using conflict management tools and physical work such as breathing and grounding techniques.

This may be a sign of our increasingly polarised society but I am seeing more leaders getting stuck in conflict situations without the training or knowledge to find a way to resolution.

What do you feel most proud of having achieved?

At the end of March 2025, I celebrated 12 years in private practice. Starting my own business was something I never planned to do and I didn't appreciate how hard it would be but I am proud of the successful business I've built. I've deliberately kept it small and it's still just me, doing what I love and doing it my way.

I've had support along the way, which I'm appreciative of, and I've experienced setbacks, which made me wonder why I ever started it in the first place, but I'm still going strong so I must be doing something right.

I can't not mention my first book here, *The Should Stick*.[1] I've been writing since I was a child and my lifelong dream was to get a book published. That happened in 2022 and my next book is now on its way.

How do you resource yourself? What do you enjoy in your spare time?

Digging holes and moving plants, writing, writing and more writing (especially with coffee and a scone), reading (or just buying books), music and singing, power tools and making things, cooking, eating outdoors, looking at the sky and the stars, bare feet and a warm breeze. Anything that works my creative brain, moves my body and gets me outdoors.

What advice would you give therapists interested in coaching?

Don't forget what brought you into therapy. I have stayed true to my person-centred roots, and the principle of non-directivity and the core conditions are still present in my coaching work. I have added to them along the way with other theories and approaches such as appreciative inquiry, Adlerian theory and somatic coaching, among others. They all fit with my philosophy; however, it's not an eclectic mix but a mindful blend.

I also advise you to do your research. There are so many different approaches in coaching so whether you want to integrate or keep them separate, it's helpful to do some thorough research before signing up for what might be another expensive course.

What does being a member of the Coaching division give you?

I've been a member of BACP Coaching for quite some time, and the integration of psychotherapy and coaching is a growing area. Engaging with other like-minded practitioners, all of whom are working to build an approach that offers value to clients, enriches my practice. It's an opportunity to be part of, and build, the community. Whether you prefer to spectate or get actively involved, there is something of value here for everyone.

What do you hope to bring to your role on the BACP Coaching Executive?

I'm hoping to engage with those working in an integrated way, and who see the growing benefits of bringing coaching and therapy together. I'd love to increase the collaboration between membership bodies in both fields of practice and gain a mutual understanding of the work. There are so many opportunities for partnership working in this area, and I hope to support the creation of a greater sense of community for all dual-trained practitioners. ■

REFERENCE

1 Hartshorn T. The should stick: stop being a people pleaser, it's time to be you. Ashby-de-la-Zouch: IW Press Ltd.; 2022.

Get in touch
If you are a BACP Coaching member and would like to feature in this column, please contact the Editor at:
coachingtoday.editorial@bacp.co.uk

Ethical integrated practice:

two practitioners in dialogue

Dr Trish Turner and **Professor Andrew Reeves** share their perspectives on the ethical considerations of integrating coaching and therapy

We have both been involved in the worlds of therapy and coaching for many years: Trish, long-established as a coach but also therapy trained, and Andrew, long-established as a therapist, but now coach trained. Trish has been delivering her own programme – Therapist to Coach – training qualified psychotherapists, counsellors and psychologists to become professional coaches for many years, Andrew graduating from that programme in 2023. We both have a passion for excellence in ethical practice. From our different positions, we have been wrestling with the integration of therapy and coaching and what this means for the professions, in theory and practice and, ultimately, for those who use our services. This dialogue took place over several weeks and represents our perspectives and responses to each other as they were shared in the moment.

Andrew (AR): Similarities and differences

I've been a therapist for a long time – nearly 35 years – and I was a social worker before that. As such, I think 'coaching' has always been part of my work, albeit informally, though I didn't call it coaching then. I always had a sense that therapy had much to offer people, but something more active, forward-focused and directional naturally spoke to how I preferred to work with clients. It was only comparatively recently that I decided to really engage with the world of coaching and to bring it more consciously and ethically into my practice, supported by training and a qualification, through your 'Therapist to Coach' programme.

What has struck me though, since becoming a dual-qualified practitioner, is both the similarity and difference that exists between the worlds of therapy and coaching: much that overlaps but also, so much that is different in terms of contracting, supervision, fees and who 'walks through the door' (literally and metaphorically). To be honest, in many ways, the two approaches feel complementary to me, but in other ways, it has been a steep learning curve in making sense of my own position in all this as a practitioner: who am I and what do I offer?

Trish (TT): Emerging identities

The question of identity is important. What is a therapeutic coach? How does a dual-qualified coach differ from a therapeutic coach? What do clients and commissioners think they are buying? What are they actually getting?

After over 30 years of leadership and coaching, I noticed that I offered more psychological and therapeutic depth than most executive coaches. My approach made me curious about the overlap of coaching with therapy and I recognised the ethical need for proper training. I subsequently qualified as a UKCP-accredited integrative psychotherapeutic counsellor and a clinical supervisor.

For me, the key difference lies in the contract, expectations, energy and collaboration. My clients benefit from my blend of leadership knowledge, extensive training, and capacity to work at relational depth in an adult-to-adult, pluralistic partnership. My passion is to ensure therapists are offered a professional pathway into coaching – not as continuing professional development or an 'add-on', but as a qualification formally honouring and accrediting the unique expertise that therapists bring.

Particularly since the days of the COVID-19 pandemic, coaching has shifted from a performance focus to a more holistic view of leaders as humans with a life outside work and a personal history. Demand for dual-skilled coaches has risen sharply as a result, evidenced by training programmes for coaches seeking to integrate therapeutic approaches.

However, this growing trend brings risks. No amount of trauma-informed or trauma-responsive CPD can substitute for the depth of study and experience required to safely address therapeutic issues.

AR: A new identity

Those are interesting thoughts, Trish, about the impact of COVID-19 and that performance-to-holistic development shift you mention. I wonder what this means for the future of the two disciplines – psychotherapy and coaching – and whether this integration leads to a best of both worlds or, rather, we end up mixing up ingredients in a way that is insufficiently thought-through and balanced; where the outcome is not a better cake, but one that is dense, flat and over-worked?

For me, I believe there is real potential here for something to develop that really does begin to move away from dogmatic positions around modalities. One thing I have struggled with in the therapy world is the '*my approach is better than yours*' position that I think has held the profession back considerably over the decades. Coaching does not seem to fall into this trap and seems to take a more inclusive position around concepts and ideas. Therefore, maybe there is scope for integrated practice to contribute to an existing pluralistic position, acknowledging that different people need different things at different times; where therapy and coaching become a transdisciplinary integration where something new emerges, rather than simply a combination of what we already have. Wouldn't that be exciting?

If we position ourselves in collaboration with our clients, they can make an important contribution to how therapy and coaching either sit alongside each other and then, at a more macro level, the experiences of those people who have actually worked with a dual- or tri-qualified practitioner can further inform a new, emerging identity of practice. The integration becomes shaped by, and because of, client experience, rather than only by how practitioners think it should be shaped. Research will be vital here.

TT: Professional developments

Should we advocate for collaboration across the coaching and therapy professional standards bodies, rather than separation? It has taken three decades for the two main international professional coaching standards bodies, European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) Global and International Coach Federation (ICF), to fully establish themselves. Today, their standards serve as benchmarks for commissioners, particularly organisations, when purchasing coaching services from reputable providers and practitioners.

EMCC Global, for instance, has an evidence-based coaching and mentoring competency framework[1] presented across four indicative levels of skills for each of its eight core standards, from 'foundation' capability to 'master practitioner' capability. On the other hand, BACP's coaching competence framework[2] includes minimum expected coaching competences for (a) trained therapists seeking to include coaching into their practice; and (b) practitioners trained separately in therapy and coaching and wishing to integrate both into a single form of practice. Both frameworks are underpinned by a rigorously developed evidence base. My course participants and I have discussed similarities between the more nuanced EMCC competency framework and the Scope of Practice and Education (SCoPEd) framework, and I wonder if there is value there worth considering.

BACP has also introduced its own coach training curriculum. Its value to therapists seeking training to become dual-qualified professional coaches is yet to be seen in terms of industry competition, particularly when looking to work in corporate settings where organisations usually commission coaches qualified and accredited with the two main professional standards bodies, EMCC Global or ICF (at level 7 or above: Senior/Master Practitioner with EMCC Global or Professional/Master Certified Coach with ICF); even more so if looking to work beyond the UK.

Given my past experience of six years as an EMCC Global accreditation assessor of coach training providers around the world, structurally, it resembles the EMCC Global criteria for accredited coach training providers, but I'd argue it operates more at a level 5 standard, with less nuance. Having said that, through the knowledge I gained from my EMCC Global work, I know participants are predominantly leaders and managers rather than therapists, and needing to learn deep listening skills and self-reflection – something in which qualified therapists already have significant training and experience. I often hear them say they do not want to be told 'how to suck eggs'.

Instead of developing independent pathways, I wonder if BACP could potentially work with EMCC Global and ICF to adapt their well-established qualification and accreditation

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Should we advocate for collaboration across the coaching and therapy professional standards bodies, rather than separation?

routes to support dual- and multi-skilled practitioners? Without such collaboration, therapists pursuing BACP-accredited coaching qualifications may find themselves at a disadvantage in the broader coaching market.

Compounding this challenge is the proliferation of 'therapeutic coaching' programmes, which often create confusion. These programmes may imply a therapy qualification, but are for non-therapists wanting to learn aspects of therapy, such as transactional analysis or 'trauma-informed' practices. For therapists who are also professional coaches, this raises critical questions about professional identity. Can they call themselves 'therapeutic coaches' with clarity and confidence? Furthermore, what does this mean for the availability of suitably credentialed, dual-qualified supervisors to support their practice?

We must then consider, is the risk of harm equal or different in coaching versus therapy?

In therapy ethical frameworks, there's both an explicit and implicit message about risk of harm to clients such as 'alleviating symptoms of distress and suffering', 'protecting the safety of clients', and 'protecting clients or others from harm.' There's an intimation that therapy clients are more fragile and vulnerable *and* that by working with them on that, we have the potential to harm them. These are less obvious in coaching ethical frameworks (though both are clear on not having sexual relationships with clients).

So, with the blurring of therapeutic coaching, trauma-informed and trauma-responsive coaching etc., do the codes of ethics for coaches need an overhaul? Are they still fit for purpose?

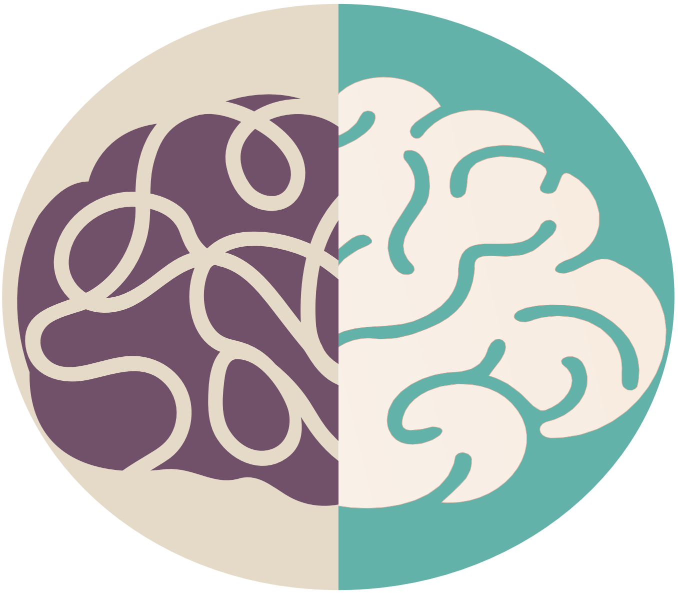
AR: Opportunities for change

Wow, you've set some real challenges there, Trish. I love how you unpack the different directions and approaches professional bodies are involved in as they find their way through this uncertain ground. For the coaching bodies, it seems to me that coach-only trained professionals are seeing a greater mental health profile in their work, even in traditional 'leadership-focused' coaching. I was part of a recent conference by the Association of Coaching (AC) on mental health and wellbeing, which raised some important areas for discussion. It included discussion about a compelling need for supervision for coaches; of course, the therapy world has had this embedded into ethical practice for several decades. Also, how coaches navigate that continuum where 'mental health' (and what does that mean anyway?) emerges more into focus: when do we refer on, how do we refer and, to whom?

On the other hand, therapy professional bodies, such as BACP, are walking a bit of a dichotomous pathway: as you say, on one hand producing training curricula and a competency framework but, on the other, allowing anyone to simply tick a box for an entry onto their directory saying they offer coaching without having to demonstrate any qualification or training at all in coaching – this latter point worries me a great deal. After all, we rightly have to jump through important hoops to demonstrate competency as a therapist to get onto the PSA-accredited register but there is currently no corresponding requirement for coaches. This is something that BACP Coaching has been actively campaigning for for many years and hopefully this will change soon.

But the core question you raise that really set the hares running in my mind, and links back to my earlier thoughts, is the extent to which we integrate two allied disciplines, or what opportunities exist to create something new of the two; still retaining the disciplines of 'therapy' and 'coaching', but instead shifting some paradigms in the process.

What I am really struck by is your question about professional bodies working together, as opposed to separately, in trying to figure this out. This is possible and very doable with the will, but it demands that any notions of 'land grab' are set aside for the greater good. There was a time when BACP, UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) and British Psychological Society (BPS) for example, struggled to find common ground to work together. When I was Chair of BACP, we created a 'Chairs' Forum' where the three Chairs and CEOs of those bodies began to meet to look at synergies; this is now of course much broader in the context of initiatives such as SCoPEd. Not everyone might like what emerges from such collaborative discussion, but it demonstrates an important principle: where there's a will there's a way...



TT: Supervision

Absolutely, Andrew. I think the coaching bodies have also found it hard to work together when they're potentially competing for membership and associated fees.

A natural progression from this discussion is the role of supervision. Within the therapeutic profession, it's standard practice for therapists to have a trusted supervisor overseeing their clinical work. Similarly, maintaining coaching accreditation with EMCC Global (renewable every five years) requires supervision from an accredited coach supervisor. However, this raises important questions: does this mean practitioners will need two separate supervisors? Could this double requirement make supervision prohibitively expensive – not only due to twice the number of sessions but also because coaching and coaching supervision often command significantly higher fees than their therapy counterparts?

This situation creates a growing demand for dual-qualified supervisors who can provide comprehensive oversight across both domains. Reflecting on my own experience, I completed a rigorous 12-month coach supervision training programme (with Professor Peter Hawkins). Surprisingly, it wasn't recognised by therapy bodies. By contrast, my accredited clinical supervision course – despite being far shorter at just four weekends over three months – met the standards required in the therapy field. This disparity raises questions about the quality, depth, and expectations of supervision training across disciplines. Could this be another area where coaching and therapy bodies could collaborate to align standards?

In the meantime, I'm encouraging dual qualifying, and my teachings – as you know – have a focus on ethics, boundaries and contracting. One of the strengths of coaching lies in its collaborative, adult-to-adult framework. When in doubt, I encourage coaches to share the dilemma with their client and trust in their joint ability to navigate their way through this.

Executive coaching

Unlike therapists, coaches often identify themselves by their target audience rather than their modality. So rather than a gestalt or person-centred coach, they might be an executive coach, life, career, leadership, menopause or performance coach, for example. It's the competences and capabilities that unite the coach, regardless of theoretical underpinning.

Despite this, when therapists join my programme, they often shy away from the idea of doing 'executive coaching'. This is coaching very senior leaders at board level with responsibility for setting the direction of their company, making strategic decisions and directing their action. This begs the question for therapists: do you need to have done their job to be an executive coach?

If we haven't held a senior executive role ourselves, do we lack credibility as executive coaches? I wonder if coaching has evolved beyond that definition. Modern executive coaching isn't just about business acumen – it's about developing the whole person. To suggest that only those who've been in the club can coach at this level risks sounding a bit 'old boys' network.' Besides, even if we were executives, doesn't our own experience eventually become outdated? The challenges that today's leaders face are evolving rapidly, and past experience doesn't always translate to present-day relevance.

When I coach executives, they bring human challenges. A conflict with the CEO or Chair often comes down to communication and relational dynamics. Strategy discussions frequently revolve around confidence, resilience, and decision making, not just technical expertise.

Luckily, I've got the executive T-shirt. But I'm not convinced it's a prerequisite.

AR: Building on the 'executive T-shirt'

That's a great point, Trish, and I quite fancy an executive T-shirt myself; I wonder if I would suit it? I have sat on various boards and so had line management responsibility for CEOs and senior leadership teams, yet I still wonder if I would 'have what it takes' to step into that world as a coach. I suspect I am one of those people from your training programme who questions what they might have to bring.

That said, I think you make an excellent point too: as dual-trained practitioners, we have a huge amount to bring. I am currently supervising executive coaches because they are looking for that dual training, mental health-confident perspective. There is also a recognition, having worked with many big financial institutions around mental health, that the development of the person – or the leader – is as much about their own capacity for reflexivity and personal growth as it is for leadership theory and concepts. In that sense therefore, executive coaching has much to gain from the input of dual-trained practitioners, as do senior leaders likewise.

TT: Three-way contracting

Executive coaching – or any coaching within a business, does need specific skills in managing three-way contracting. These contracting meetings are a powerful process for encouraging transparency and open communication. It often requires the skills of mediation between our client and their boss, and sometimes even a fourth stakeholder from the company.

They can be delicate, requiring us to navigate power dynamics, unspoken expectations, and sometimes even conflicting agendas. Our role is to create a space where both parties feel heard, surfacing hidden tensions, clarifying assumptions, and aligning on goals. When done well, these conversations strengthen trust and a shared commitment to the coaching process.

But how much should we step into the role of mediator? Do we simply facilitate the dialogue, or do we take a more active role in managing dynamics and resolving conflict?

And when tensions run high, how do we ensure we remain neutral while still being impactful? These need to be addressed in coach training.

AR: Working with systems

This reminds me of working with couples, or with groups, in therapy: while we rightly focus on the internal and relational dynamics of those involved, we also need to think systemically. We have to think 'outside the room' if you like. In my personal opinion, I am not entirely sure that some of the UK therapy training actually enables their trainees to do that. That is, I often suspect that, because so much time is spent thinking about intra- and interpersonal processes in the room, less attention is given to the context, or system, in which the work is taking place.

This strikes me as sitting at the very heart of your point: three-way, or multi-level contracting demands a systemic way of thinking to ensure that all stakeholders in the process are appropriately included, accounted for and boundaries set. Adding coaching into the qualification portfolio of a therapist can often help them achieve this, or build confidence in doing it successfully. Likewise, coaching can learn much from how therapists contract routinely with their clients and the importance of where supervision sits in that whole process.

TT: Supervision – again!

...and this brings us back to supervision and ensuring that dual-qualified coaches have a supervisor who can suitably support them through all the complexities of both therapy and coaching. This work is so exciting, and I'm passionate about ensuring that therapists and coaches are properly equipped to support our clients.

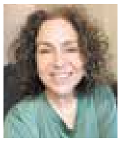
Bringing it together: a time of change

We've so enjoyed this dialogue and, while raising lots of thoughts and areas for consideration, we perhaps leave it at this stage with just as many unanswered questions. This is certainly an exciting time in coaching, with an exponential growth in interest and training, together with different perspectives on how therapy and coaching can complement, or integrate with, each other.

There are key points here though: that professional bodies have a critically important role in ensuring good practice and that might be achieved by them working in collaboration, instead of independently reinventing the wheel (while mindful of differing member services' priorities); the importance of supervision; the importance of the highest standards in training; and that there is perhaps an opportunity to not simply bolt two things together, but instead craft something new, drawing on the power and potency of each. ■

> **This is certainly an exciting time in coaching... with different perspectives on how therapy and coaching can complement, or integrate with, each other**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Dr Trish Turner is the managing director of Therapist to Coach Ltd, providing accredited professional coaching training for qualified therapists. She is also a master accredited executive coach, psychotherapeutic counsellor and a supervisor of both coaching and counselling. With an extensive background in senior leadership, Trish also spent six years volunteering for EMCC Global, accrediting coaches, supervisors and coach training providers around the world.

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Supervision digest

In this first instalment of our new series, Chair of BACP Coaching's Supervision Special Interest Group (SIG), **Ioannes Alexiades**, presents the case for group supervision with specific focus on the student experience

Ioannes Alexiades

is a dual practising coach-therapist who also works as a clinical supervisor, facilitator and lecturer in an academic setting at two London-based universities. Ioannes has achieved accreditation status with BACP and is a senior practitioner with the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC). He is also an Executive member of BACP Coaching and current Chair of the Supervision Special Interest Group (SIG).

If you would like to join the Supervision SIG, please contact Ioannes at **info@mindhauscounselling.com**

The Supervision Special Interest Group (SIG) was launched by BACP's Coaching division Executive back in 2020. The Supervision SIG aims to promote the role of supervision by:

- Increasing visibility for dual coach-therapist practitioner supervisors within BACP
- Supporting the creation of a dual practitioner register of supervisors in BACP online directories to ensure that our members have access to experienced supervisors who integrate therapy and coaching
- Promoting the role of supervision and creating a network of dual practising supervisors within BACP
- Hosting regular meetings as a means of demonstrating best practice in supervision and raising awareness of the challenges faced by dual practising supervisors.

The Supervision SIG meets every two months, and our membership comprises experienced dual practitioners who seek to expand our understanding of supervision theory and practice. We also regularly invite accomplished authors and practitioners as guest speakers to join us and share the latest developments in the field.

The Supervision SIG is currently collaborating with other coaching-related bodies and organisations such as the European Mentoring & Coaching Council (EMCC) on supervision-related initiatives.

Themes for this new *Coaching Today* series are inspired by feedback from our members who attended BACP's 2024 Supervisors' Conference. Future topics may include and are not limited to – effective safeguarding strategies in supervision; ethical dilemmas and challenges of dual practice; exploring different theoretical models in supervision; and promoting equality, diversity and inclusion in supervision.

The case for group supervision

Although supervision for qualified therapists and other helping professionals tends to be conducted on a one-to-one basis, supervision for trainees is often delivered in small groups. But how does this differ from one-to-one supervision? What are some of the challenges and advantages of group supervision? In this launch article of our new series, I make the case for group supervision by outlining my own experience to date in my capacity as supervisor in an academic setting, working with groups typically comprising six students.

Unlike supervision conducted on a one-to-one basis, in this context, supervision allows trainees to form small groups and collaborate for the purposes of improving their therapeutic skills and knowledge while undertaking their training, including clinical placements. This generally takes the form of having roughly half the group presenting their case material on a weekly basis to ensure that all can participate during the 90-minute sessions.

> **[Group] supervision allows trainees to… collaborate for the purposes of improving their therapeutic skills and knowledge while undertaking their training**

To be effective in this setting, the supervisor must not only have significant experience in their field but also be able to work with groups successfully. The ability to adequately 'read the room' can be challenging as each member of the group may have different requirements, expectations and goals for the work ahead. However, an understanding of what each member of the group wants to achieve from the sessions allows the supervisor to devise a plan that goes beyond the individual goals of each group member. This process includes identifying and promoting common goals and learning outcomes for the group, and addressing any specific concerns about individual supervisees and their clinical placements, should this arise.

Leading practitioners in the field of psychotherapy have even suggested that the formation of groups in this capacity is a developmental process that goes through several distinct stages, which may require specific focus.[1,2] Even though I believe that there may be some merit in looking at these stages of development in more detail, I will simplify this by focusing on the three parts of the process; namely, contracting, collaboration and endings. This will hopefully illustrate some of the challenges of group supervision and highlight the advantages of this approach.

Stage 1: contracting

To begin with, the process starts with contracting. Members are introduced to one another, the group's purpose is determined, and the rules of engagement are established. This also includes understanding any concerns that group members may have and addressing these accordingly. This is the stage where creating the right conditions can contribute towards a shared sense of purpose and the formation of an effective working alliance. The role of the supervisor at this stage is to facilitate the effective functioning of the group, while adhering to the common goals and learning outcomes agreed for the work ahead.

However, this stage may bring up specific challenges faced by the members as they adjust to working with one another as the group is forming. In my experience, these can include, but are not limited to, behaviours such as arriving consistently late, boredom, disinterest, withdrawal, digressions, anxiety, competitiveness, and inappropriate comments to other members of the group or even the supervisor. It is at this stage that the supervisor shows leadership by addressing these issues as they arise. This includes modelling best practice behaviours, such as how to communicate respectfully and encouraging members to support one another in sessions. This allows the group to function within the professional boundaries agreed.

Stage 2: collaboration, participation and process

Having set these parameters paves the way for the middle stage, which allows the group to collaborate even more closely and effectively. It is at this stage that I will focus the work using the chosen theoretical model, and may include both counselling and coaching related interventions. I also encourage the assignment and formation of roles and responsibilities for the group. These include determining who will take the role of presenter, while enabling others in the group to act as contributors and myself as the facilitator. This aspect includes the formulation of one key question for the presenter to focus on as they share their case-related material.

During this stage, the role of the supervisor is to attend to the needs of the individual presenting, while enabling all members of the group to participate and feel part of the process. This includes encouraging group members to openly discuss their individual challenges and dilemmas during the work. This process can instil a level of trust where all feel supported and as a result are more comfortable contributing to the group by sharing their own experiences and insights. Ultimately, collaborating and learning from one another allows individuals to develop new ways of relating to each other which helps reinforce group cohesion.

Stage 3: endings

Once a healthy group dynamic has been established, members are further encouraged to reflect on their overall experience of supervision and to consider endings. To ensure all members have had the time to process any feelings around endings, we start discussing this about a month before the end of the supervision process. This provides further opportunities to give and receive feedback from each other. It is at this point in the work, where members of the group can reflect on their experience in supervision by assessing their own professional development and considering additional areas for further growth. At my current academic institution, supervisors are also rotated every term to ensure that participants experience different supervisors and their respective theoretical approaches and styles.

Overall, I believe my experience of providing supervision in group settings has enabled me to add a more tangible sense of depth to my work. This is done by striving to create a supportive environment where all supervisees feel valued and able to share their thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, the ability to gain a wealth of insights and experience from others in the group really does make group supervision stand out from other forms such as one-to-one supervision. Moreover, this form of supervision, albeit challenging at times due to the behaviours mentioned earlier, can also facilitate the acquisition and development of communication and interpersonal skills that can be invaluable for all parties involved. ■

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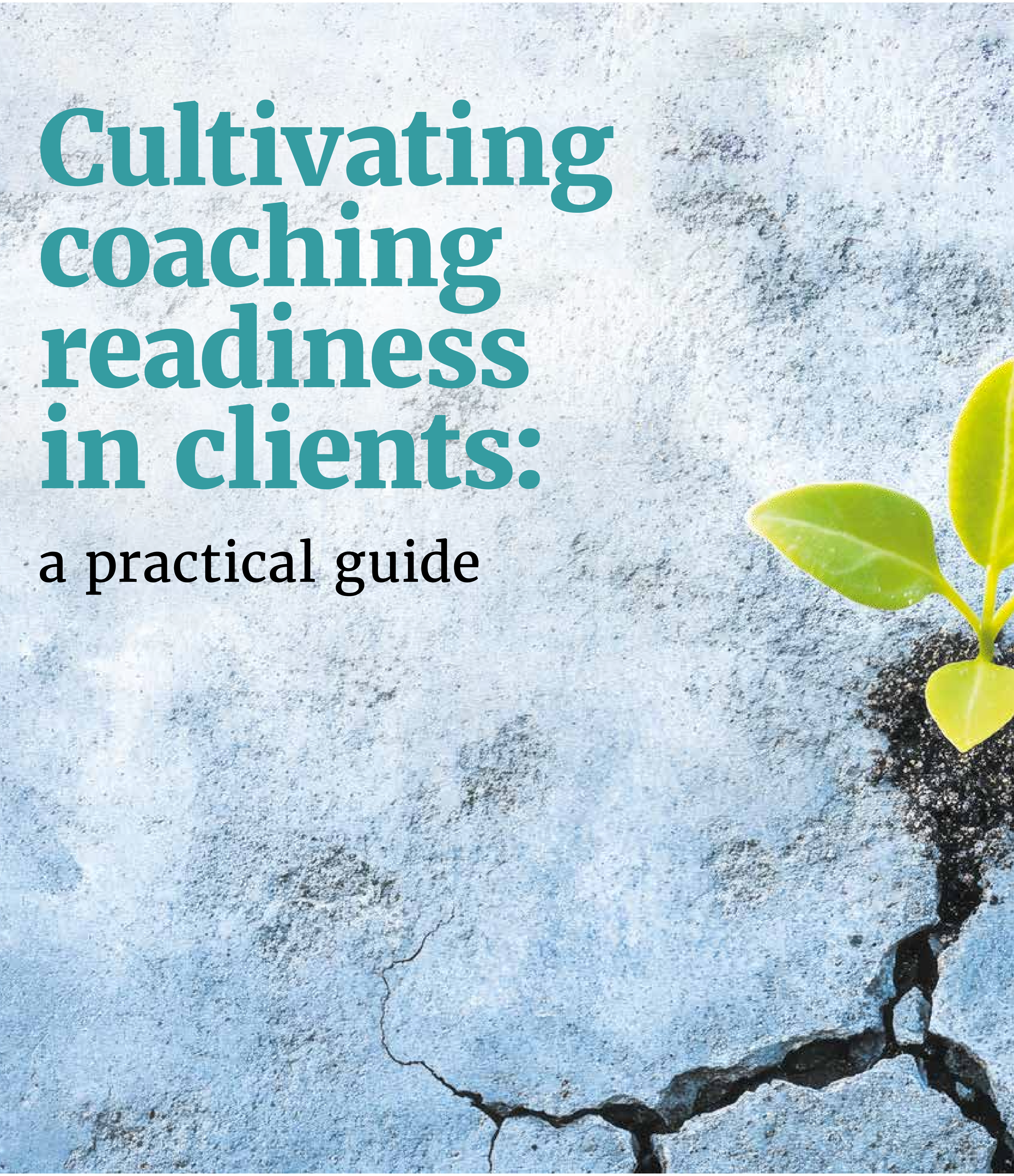
Cultivating coaching readiness in clients:

a practical guide



Is coaching being used in the right way, with the right people? **Clare Norman** and **Dr Sam Humphrey** offer a guide for therapeutic coaches working in organisations

The growth of coaching in organisations for a broad range of developmental and performance purposes illustrates the positive progress that coaching has made in a relatively short space of time.

We suggest that there is, however, a dark side to this, which involves coaching potentially being used for the wrong reasons, in the wrong scenarios and with the wrong people. This may have come about due to a general lack of understanding of what coaching is and is not, the 'respectability' and desirability of coaching compared to other options, or the increased availability and subsequent ease of finding coaches. Either way, we argue, these can all lead to coaching potentially being 'wrongly' used.

The impact of this is that what is labelled as 'coaching' does not always create a return on investment/expectations for the organisations that commission it, nor a 'return on humanity',[1] meaning enabling the individual to flourish and thrive in the context in which they choose to live and work. That flourishing will naturally lead to better results for all, including the ripple effect on society as a whole.

For coaches who work in the therapeutic as well as the coaching space, there are some systemic 'watch-points' that we would encourage you to consider, should you choose to work within organisations, that you may not typically manage in the delivery of your therapeutic work. We suggest that it is ethical practice for coaches to use our influence with coaching custodians within organisations to pay more attention as to whether coaching is the optimal intervention at the right time with the appropriate support.

To start, we'll focus on the sorts of actions we would hope and expect a coaching custodian would take before introducing a coach to a potential client. We'll start with what can be considered at the 'macro level' coaching set-up and then work towards what can be done to increase/improve individual coaching readiness. Finally, we'll look at how to build coachability over time.

The coaching custodian

First, a word about the term 'coaching custodian'. We consider these to be the people who are responsible for the success of coaching in their organisation. This may be a full-time role or part of a broader remit. You might know them variously as heads of coaching, human resources (HR) leads, talent development leads, learning and development (L&D) managers, or organisational development (OD) leads. Whatever their formal role, the organisation will expect this person to understand (though not necessarily offer them training in) how to manage coaching in their organisation.

In reality, this may involve a whole spectrum that ranges from 'squeezing the most juice' out of coaching to simply managing the spreadsheet of coaches' names. We know, from conversations with coaching custodians, that they do not always know what the full extent of their role could be, let alone how to do this, and this can provide an opportunity for you as coach to influence how coaching, and in particular coaching readiness, can be set up for success.

Macro set-up of organisational coaching

At a macro level, we would expect a coaching custodian to have:

- articulated the business rationale for coaching in their organisation;
- outlined the purpose of coaching specific to their organisation, and the types of coaching that will be used;
- established overarching measures of success;
- got 'buy-in' from relevant stakeholders to the investment, based on the above;
- decided whether and when to use internal and/or external coaches;
- secured the technology to support the coaching programmes.

You won't necessarily be involved at this stage, but any briefing that the coaching custodian will give you will be reliant on these having been carried out. We know from our recent research, to be published in 2025, that these business briefings to coaches are rare (at least from the coaches' perspective).[2] It may be possible to conduct coaching within an organisation without understanding the overall business strategy, but wouldn't the coaching be more fertile if you and your client were aligned with the expectations of the business?

Therefore, we encourage you to ask about the first three items above, at the very least. If the answers are vague and woolly, keep asking. After all, as a coach, you are trained in asking good questions, so ask – politely, supportively – and explain how this is ultimately for the organisation's benefit.

As coaching is a means to an end, not an end in itself, success will be measured differently, depending on the organisation. Success is certainly not a tick-box to say that coaching has been delivered. As an experienced coach, you have the opportunity to give the coaching custodian the benefit of your knowledge about what makes coaching most successful. You have more experience of what a successful coaching set-up looks like. To not do this, we suggest, is somehow out of integrity, as you would be colluding with the organisation to sell a service that isn't fit for the business purpose (if indeed the business purpose is clear) and not provide a valuable return.

> **"As an experienced coach, you have the opportunity to give the coaching custodian the benefit of your knowledge about what makes coaching most successful**

Micro set-up of coaching: improving coaching readiness

Clearly, the individual client must be coaching ready, and this readiness includes the whole system of which they are part. Ascertaining coaching readiness also involves determining whether coaching is even the 'right' intervention before establishing if the client is in a good place to be coached. 'Coachability' here relates to how engaged, open and willing the client is to work with their coach to deliver value after coaching readiness has been determined; and it can be strengthened over time in partnership with the coach.

We know from our experience that not every topic is coachable and not every client is coaching ready. How, then, can a coaching custodian ascertain coaching readiness?

Here, we would expect a coaching custodian to be robust in determining the following:

What is the best fit development for the needs of this individual?
As we stated earlier, coaching within organisations has become *de rigeur*, but perhaps other interventions might be a better fit – or a concurrent fit. This might be, for example, training (according to a recent report by the Chartered Management Institute, 82% of leaders have received little to no training in how to manage and lead[3]); on-the-job stretch assignments with feedback; more frequent one-to-one conversations with their manager; therapy (which you may also be positioned to deliver, but does the organisation want to pay for this?); or it may be something more systemic that the organisation could provide for more employees. This requires an assessment of the individual's needs in the first place, to be able to match intervention to need.

How has the line manager contributed to the issue?
Sometimes, it's the line manager who needs development in people management skills, not the individual themselves; or it may be both.

Is this the right timing for the individual and the organisation?
Timing can be tricky to gauge because coaching can really help people in times of major change to navigate their own transition through that change; but sometimes the change can be such a distraction as to fragment the individual's focus and their ability to engage in the coaching.

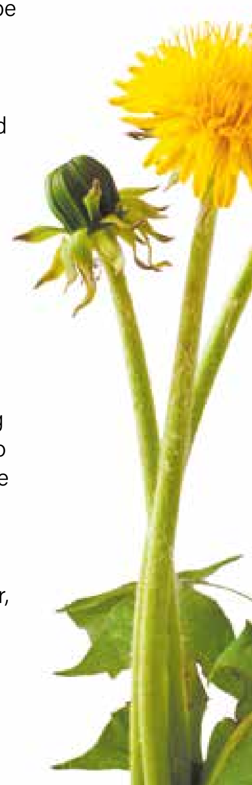
Is the individual willing and motivated to do the hard work of thinking and changing?
This is a significant time and energy investment on the part of the individual, and it will only work if they have not been coerced (well meant or not) into coaching when they don't want it or see a need for it.

If you coach within an organisation (as an internal or external coach), these aspects need to be screened by the coaching custodian, such that when you agree to a compatibility call, coaching is already deemed to be the right intervention at the right time for the right person. You should also expect the coaching custodian to have explained to the individual how coaching works and how to make the most of it.

This means that your compatibility meeting has a clear purpose rather than a meeting to explore 'everything but what really matters'. If you have been identified as the best coach to fit the brief, then the compatibility meeting can focus on exploring how well you can work together and on identifying any reasons you can't work together. This is very different from a biased 'beauty parade' that uses first impressions of rapport as its gauge of potential, with an overloaded agenda covering all the items that should have been addressed beforehand. There are two main reasons we suggest that matching be carried out in this way:

1) According to research by coach psychologists Scoular and Linley, when coach and coachee differed on temperament, outcome scores were higher, and this was statistically significant.[4]
2) Being too alike can lead to collusion (or what executive coaches Wycherley and Cox describe as 'an echo chamber'[5]) with a dearth of challenge, and therefore coach and client remain stuck in comfortable places that don't stretch the individual to grow as much as they might.[6]

Collectively, we can take a stand in influencing coaching custodians to take all of these measures *before* we get to the compatibility meeting. This represents a step change for us as a profession to expect effective (as opposed to efficient) coaching set up from the coaching custodian. It will ensure that every party extracts value from the coaching assignment – the individual, their line manager, the organisation as a whole, and the coach.



You might think that you should be able to just show up to a coaching assignment, without having to cajole the coaching custodian to fulfil their part of the bargain. It might feel like free consultancy, but coaches are generally attempting (and probably only skimming the surface) to do all this anyway in what is currently called the chemistry or discovery meeting! Asking for this to be in place upfront means that the coaching assignment will be well set up to deliver real value for all – including you as coach. Offering a conversation that walks the coaching custodian through best practices that they can take responsibility for will almost certainly lead to you being seen as knowledgeable about coaching and how best to get the most from it for all parties. Differentiating yourself in this way could be a form of business development, building awareness and relationship as you go.

Now to the aspects that you can influence more directly once you agree to work with the individual – and this is a two-way agreement. Both of you have a say in whether you want to work with each other, so ensuring you have clarity on what criteria will enable you to make this judgment will ensure you approach this decision clearly and without biased judgment. Whatever criteria you pay attention to, don't be driven to proceed, purely by a need for more hours of coaching towards a credential, as working with a person who is not coaching ready will likely undermine your belief in yourself.

Building coachability over time

Once coaching readiness has been addressed, you can focus attention on building coachability – one email, one conversation, one session at a time. Use every step as an opportunity to increase coachability.

Many dictionary definitions define 'coachability' as being receptive to feedback and instruction, being malleable, responsive, obliging, conformable – all of which are reactive responses. These descriptions are almost the polar opposite of this coachability as we see it, which is much more proactive and comes from within the client: a willingness to think for themselves, having or being willing to build a sense of agency, of self-efficacy, taking the initiative, leaning in.[7]

Your role as coach is to pull coachability out of the client, rather than attempting to pour something in through teaching and telling. Coachability and agency can wax and wane, so you need to bring it into your own and the client's awareness, and discuss how to nurture it at any given time in the coaching process.

Final thoughts

Now that we have defined coaching readiness and coachability, we invite you to look at your whole coaching process through a coaching readiness and coachability lens. This is an end-to-end experience you are co-creating, with these two elements at the core, building agency and self-efficacy one stimulus at a time. What more could you do to prompt that growth – both directly with your clients but also through the coaching custodians with whom you contract?

Our invitation to you at the start of this article was to reflect on your own work, to assess how you screen for coaching readiness. How does this translate for you? ■

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Clare Norman is the author of *Cultivating Coachability* (2024) and the founder of Clare Norman Coaching Associates. A master certified coach with the International Coaching Federation, she's also a master mentor coach and certified coach supervisor. With over 25 years focused on maximising effectiveness at individual, team and organisational levels, Clare helps people express their needs to create a more caring world. Her previous books include *The Transformational Coach* (2022) and *Mentor Coaching: A Practical Guide* (2020).

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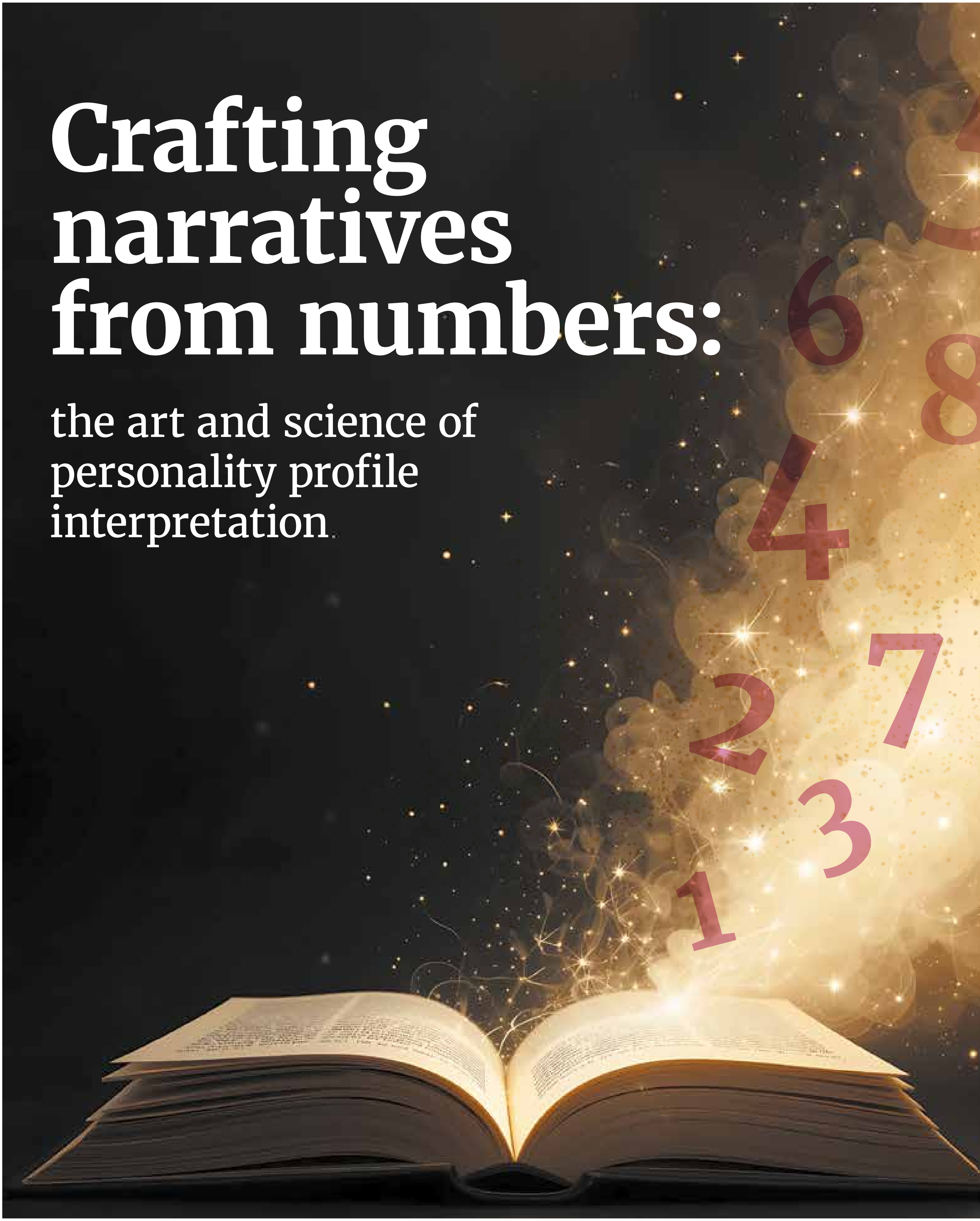
Crafting narratives from numbers:

the art and science of personality profile interpretation



Organisational coach **Carine Metselaar** explores the various ways coaches can interpret the results of psychometric tools and the potential impact of this on our clients

There are many reasons why coaches might use personality profiles and related instruments in their work. The most common justification for using these tools in a personal and professional development context, such as coaching, is that feedback based on a personality inventory helps people to increase their self-awareness.[1]

In my experience, most coaches prefer to use personality models at the start of their work with clients, as it enables them to get a better sense of who their client is, and to tentatively frame their client's initial presenting issue. For instance, feeling uncomfortable with the chaotic leadership style of a manager can mean something different to someone who scores high on 'conscientiousness' and 'need for stability', than for someone who scores lower on these traits. The feedback the coach provides on the basis of the results of a personality questionnaire can help the client better understand who they are and why they experience certain situations as problematic.

This kind of feedback assumes unambiguous knowledge about how a personality profile, brought into being by means of a psychometric tool, relates to behaviour and potential problem areas. However, the relationship between the results of a personality questionnaire and potential mental challenges are not as straightforward as in the above example. Most people would expect a volatile environment to be challenging for someone with a high need for stability, but how a combination of scores relates to being a bad listener, as in the example A given below, is less obvious. Scientific research in the area of personality psychology aims to also reveal less obvious, more complex connections between personality traits and behaviour in large populations. The algorithms used to produce a personality profile report are often based on this kind of research. However, we can never be sure that a link between a trait and behaviour exists for a particular client. The intuitive conclusion – that a strong correlation between a trait and certain behaviour most probably applies to an individual with this trait – cannot be justified. Correlations tell us something about trends in large populations, but don't allow for meaningful statements about individuals.[2] That statements about an individual, based on correlation studies, do not always apply to an individual person, is usually taken into account by means of disclaimers mentioned in the introduction section of a personality report. For instance, in an Insights Discovery® report, it is suggested that the reader may change or delete statements about themselves that they do not recognise, assuming this can happen occasionally. Other personality reports encourage people to invite feedback from others should they be unable to relate to a statement. But this creates a dilemma for the coach who provides the feedback: should a client not recognising a statement be accepted at face value or treated with suspicion?

Example A: Meredith is a 50-year-old independent trainer and facilitator who wishes to achieve certification in a particular psychometric instrument, as this is frequently used by the companies she works for. A requirement of her certification training is that she takes part in a personality assessment using this instrument. When reading her profile reports, she agrees with the statements about her 'energy capacities' for various competences, but it upsets her to read that 'listening' is outside her comfort zone. The report states that her overall estimated capacity for this competency is low. This is based on the combination of her scores on three of the five traits, one of them being 'neuroticism'. According to the report: '*Listening is optimally supported when the listener has a more optimistic outlook, as more pessimistic listeners tend to cloud the message with doubt, guilt, or a sense of failure. You appear to be moderately pessimistic*'. Being a good listener is a very important competency in Meredith's job and she has never received any feedback that would indicate the opposite. Therefore, she is shocked by this conclusion and hopes the personal feedback session with the certification trainer will clarify this.

Translating a text or writing a novel?

Therefore, coaches cannot rely on the written text in a profile report to interpret the test scores, but might also question a client's negative response to a statement, especially when this is unfavourable. Such a situation leaves coaches with several options: to go with their gut feeling whether or not to believe the client; to look for evidence that the statement may hold some truth about the client's behaviour; or simply to encourage the client to elicit feedback from others about this particular piece of feedback. The latter may be the safest option, but this might also leave the client feeling unsatisfied if they truly believe this does not make any sense.

In this way, we can draw a comparison with the act of translating a text versus writing a novel. When translating a text, there is usually *one best option*, and a good translator finds that option. When writing a novel, however, there are *many* options to choose from. So, does interpreting a personality profile resemble the work of a literary translator or is it closer to the creative work of a writer? And if the latter, what does this imply about the uniqueness of personality profile interpretations?

Explaining the personality tool

A personality feedback session consists of several phases, where the first phase encompasses an explanation of theories, models and concepts. Usually, there is one best way for doing this, which is taught in certification training. Most coaches start by explaining what the personality instrument is about, ie, what the concepts used represent, based on a psychological model or theory. For example, a coach who uses an instrument based on the HEXACO model could tell their client how the six traits of Honesty/Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience were originally empirically established by means of how people tend to describe others and what differentiates them, in everyday language.[3] They then might clarify these traits by defining them more precisely. On the other hand, a coach who works with the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) would explain the concept of *preferences* and describe why and how two non-psychologists developed this instrument many decades ago. For an explanation of a concept as *drives*, often the basis of many colour-coded personality instruments, a coach might refer to the work of Carl Jung. This explanatory part corresponds to the work of the translator, as they try to stay close to the original conceptualisation but translate it into the language of the reader. This may also require a translation beyond the literal, as long as what was originally meant by the developer of the instrument is not compromised (for instance, if we stick to the literal translation of the concept Mischievous, as used in the Hogan Development Survey, this might confuse or even upset some people).

Explaining the meaning of a score position

Subsequently, a coach would want to explain in more detail what a particular score on a dimension entails. For example, a person who scores high on Sensing on the MBTI® prefers information that is real and tangible. All this would still count as an 'interpretation' as close as possible to how it was originally meant by the developers of that particular personality instrument. However, in practice, in this phase of the feedback session, coaches often also rely on their own preferences regarding how they interpret the results of a personality questionnaire, eg by emphasising either the positive aspects of a score or the developmental aspects (see example B).

> "Does interpreting a personality profile resemble the work of a literary translator or is it closer to the creative work of a writer? And if the latter, what does this imply about the uniqueness of personality profile interpretations?

Example B: Many leadership assessment instruments claim to measure a person's strengths or talents, as well as potential dysfunctional behaviour when in stressful circumstances or under pressure, which can be negative manifestations of otherwise positive traits. For instance, 'being decisive and pressing ahead' can convert into 'pushy behaviour'. Other instruments separately assess unfavourable traits. However, some 'dark side' traits are also positively associated with success in certain jobs.[4]

Anne and Barry are two senior leadership coaches, certified to use some of the commonly used leadership assessment instruments. They each hold a degree in psychology. However, their general client approach differs significantly. Anne prefers to emphasise people's potential and mostly approaches a 'moderate risk' score on a dysfunctional dimension from a positive perspective, unless there are other indications that the client is at risk for derailment. Barry, on the other hand is convinced that in order to learn and develop, people need to be challenged. For Barry, a 'moderate risk' is usually a reason to explore with his client how and when these unproductive behaviours manifest.

A coach's personal choice to approach a score from a positive, talent oriented or constructive, developmental perspective, can obviously be informed by contextual factors. Using an instrument with the objective of exploring a person's strengths might, for instance, motivate a coach to interpret average scores more positively than the context of a conflict at work. This aspect can be dealt with in certification training and lead to a 'best choice' in the given context. However, in example B, Anne's and Barry's approaches seem to be predominantly informed by their coaching style. Anne favours a supportive style, while Barry prefers a confronting style. Both choices can be justified in their own way. Hence, there is no real 'best option' here. However, this is still far from a creative process such as writing a novel.

Making sense of scores and score patterns

In addition to clarifying the individual assessment scores, coaches also want to make sense of the scores and score patterns, and *provide meaning* to a client, related to a specific coaching question, the current context or their lives and careers in general. With sensemaking, I refer here to how it is broadly used in everyday language: finding plausible understandings of novel and/or complex experiences by making *connections*. This includes interpreting something in its wider context, linking it to prior experiences, or looking for causal relations. In a business context, this can mean looking for patterns to explain professional behaviour or experiences, or predict future performance or performance risks.

Making sense of a score or score pattern can be done by suggesting *causal relations* to a client. Depending on the professional background and the theoretical framework that a coach adheres to, they may explore a variety of potential causal relations, for instance, grounded in early life encounters, personal relationships or meaningful experiences. Coaches can also assign a personal attribute, that in their view emerges from the scores, as the cause of another score, as in example C.

Example C: Caroline takes part in a leadership development programme in her company that is intended to prepare her for the next step in her career. As part of this programme, she is required to complete a leadership personality questionnaire and receive a personal feedback session with an external coach. The coach highlights some of her areas for development, one of which is that she tends to respond to innovations in a predominantly negative way. In the conversation, Caroline's lack of self-esteem is also discussed. The coach suggests that this might cause Caroline to avoid being involved in new projects that could make her feel less competent. Caroline has never before considered that her insecurity could manifest in this way but finds this an interesting idea to reflect upon.

The coach's hypothesis about the cause of Caroline's aversion to innovations could be grounded in a formal theory or based upon their professional experience. For some of their clients, personal insecurity may have caused a client to avoid new experiences and distrust innovative projects. But obviously that does not mean this was also the case for Caroline. Another coach could have attributed her aversion to innovations to, for instance, her general conservatism. Again, someone else could have explored whether Caroline had previously had some negative experiences with innovation programmes. Obviously, in this case there are many options and no best way of connecting scores with observations and experiences to make sense of Caroline's low score on innovation.

Apart from differences in coaching approaches and professional experience, as illustrated above, coaches also differ in what they judge to be relevant additional information in relation to a personality profile interpretation. For one coach, the personal impression of a person during the feedback session or the way they respond to a statement may play a major role in how scores are interpreted, but for another coach this may be far less important. By the same token, third-party feedback and the real-life examples the client brings to the table may count as a confirmation for one coach, as a counter-indication for another coach, and may be considered irrelevant by yet another coach. Finally, a feedback conversation may sometimes evolve in unexpected ways, leading to narratives about the person that otherwise would never have been constructed. Chances that two interpretations of a personality profile differ from each other may be a lot greater than we might guess. Following explaining and interpreting, thus *sensemaking* of personality profiles seems to have more in common with writing a novel than translating a manuscript: there rarely is one best option and the narrative about the person, constructed during the feedback process, may vary to a large extent with the individual coach who drives this process.

Creatively constructed narratives: curse or blessing?

A recently conducted autoethnographic study conducted by me and my colleagues, aimed at describing the sensemaking process of an individual who receives a psychometric profile, illuminates the idiosyncrasy of sensemaking of personality profiles and shows that interpretations can even contradict each other. We concluded that providing different perspectives with regard to a personality profile should not necessarily be a problem, and we suggest we can even benefit from the different ways coaches help clients to find meaning in their profiles.[5] To contemplate interpreting a personality profile as creatively co-constructing a narrative about a person, instead of unilaterally providing explanation and sense, may be obvious to some and challenging to others.

Finally, where *sensemaking* is about the perception of patterns and order, *meaning-making* is about the perception of the *consequences* of pattern and order as they affect us personally.[6] Most coaches would agree that how a client eventually makes sense of things is the essence of coaching. Consequently, they spend time exploring how their ideas and suggestions resonate with their clients. This includes asking how this plays out in their lives, soliciting examples and finding out what a client would like to do differently or experience differently. However, it's important to keep in mind that this is often based on the *sensemaking framework of the coach*, who has 'set the stage' for the client. While for most coaches, it is obvious to inform clients about the theoretical basis they work from, their coaching style, or the way they approach the coaching process, the personality tools that are used are often presented as 'objective measurements'. I have tried to argue that we might need to look at this differently and illustrated this with examples, grounded in the stories that I encountered during my research. I hope that at least this encourages further reflection on this topic. ■

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'My car is red':

the power of language and metaphor in coaching

Coach and trainer **Nick Wright** demonstrates how exploring our use of language in coaching can offer new perspectives and fresh possibilities for our clients

It can be hard to stand outside ourselves; to view ourselves and the situations in which we find ourselves through fresh eyes. When training coaches, I often notice that they too feel stuck. How can we think outside our own coaching models and our learned practices, to open up fresh paradigms and possibilities with and for a client?[1] One way is through language and metaphor.

To demonstrate this, I may simply write 'My car is red' on a whiteboard. It's a metaphor that illustrates the power of language and culture. At first, coach trainees may look at me blankly. As we unpack it together, however, all kinds of insights and 'aha' moments arise. It's about deconstructing the unquestioned, the obvious, the apparently self-evident, in order to recreate something new.

Constructs

'My car is red.' 'Big deal,' you may say, 'my car is blue/green/silver.'

On the face of it, 'my car is red' simply sounds like a point for information, principally about the colour of the car. But is that really all it conveys? The relationship between language, culture and personal-social constructs is complex and profound. 'My car is red' conveys all kinds of hidden messages.

'My' relates to 'I'. It says something about how I see myself in relation to others, my 'self' as separate and distinct from others. It's a culturally constructed 'I'. 'My' says something about possession. I consider the car in some way 'belongs' to me. This notion of possession, of belonging, is a cultural construct. It's about the relationship between 'me' and 'other'.

It points beyond my personal beliefs, my personal constructs, to a wider cultural context, and how the relationship between people and objects is perceived and organised in my cultural environment.[2] It has political and economic implications, touches on issues of rights and legality, shared implicit values, rules and behaviours that the culture I live within accepts and endorses.

'Car'. At a literal level, I picture the car and I see an object that has a particular function, a mode of transport. As I explore my 'car' phenomenologically, I realise it evokes feelings of comfort, convenience, freedom and enjoyment for me. Culturally, it also represents something about relative wealth, social status and mobility. It's an object and a personal cultural symbol.

If I had never seen or heard of 'car' before, or any such vehicle, and encountered one out of context, I could only guess what it is and what it is designed for. I would have no idea how to operate it, what its capabilities are or what significance it carries in my actual cultural environment.[3] In other words, the whole idea of 'car' and what it means is culturally constructed.

'Is red'. This attributes properties to the car, as if 'redness' is inherent to the car, an actual colour of the car. It's about the car, it's not about me. It's a metaphysical view, how I believe things are in the world. To be more accurate, I could say that I experience the car as 'red', where 'red' is the colour that I experience in the brain when I see the car in white light. (For example, is the car still red when it's dark?)[4]

But 'red' is a social construct too. We use red to denote a colour, a label that distinguishes one colour, or a group of similar colours that fall broadly into 'red' within my culture, from other colours. I don't simply see and categorise colours at a personal level. I live within a culture that distinguishes between and organises colour categories in very specific ways.[5]

Applications

If that all sounds a bit abstract, allow me now to share a couple of illustrations of what this could look like in actual coaching conversations.

Sarah is frustrated and tells me that her team colleague, Alan, is 'an underperformer'. At the same time, she feels stuck in terms of how to address this. I offer to help her unpack it using the approach outlined above. She agrees.

N: So… 'My team colleague, Alan, is an underperformer.'
S: Yes, that's the crux of the issue I'm facing.
N: Can you say a bit more about 'my'…?
S: We work in the same team.
N: How else might you frame that?
S: Hmm…we belong to the same team.
N: What is the 'team' that you belong to?
S: It's us, along with the other team members.
N: So, who belongs to whom in the team?
S: We all belong to each other, I guess.
N: Alan belongs to you…and you belong to Alan?
S: Insofar as the team is concerned, yes.
N: What does it mean to belong to each other in the team?
S: We rely on each other to perform well.
N: So… for you to perform well, you need Alan to perform well?
S: Yes, exactly, and he doesn't.
N: What does Alan need to perform well?
S: (Pause) Hmm. Can we come back to that?
N: OK. Say a bit more about 'is'…?
S: It means that's what Alan is. An underperformer.
N: That sounds very definitive.
S: Yes indeed. That's the problem.
N: Alan's performance, or the definitive description?
S: (Pause) Hmm…that feels challenging…but keep going.
N: What else is Alan?
S: What do you mean?
N: What might others notice about him?
S: (Pause) He's a caring person, looks out for others.
N: Anything else?
S: He's reliable. He always turns up on time.
N: How important are those qualities to the team?
S: Very. But he's still underperforming in other areas.
N: What are you noticing, here and now?
S: (Pause) That I'm making sweeping generalisations?
N: What else are you aware of?
S: That I'm focusing on aspects of Alan that frustrate me.
N: So, what does 'underperformer' mean to you?
S: That he's not doing his job.
N: Say a bit more…?
S: He's not meeting the required standards.
N: All the standards?
S: OK, some of the standards.
N: Who is requiring the standards?
S: The organisation. It's his job description.
N: Is anyone else requiring the standards?
S: (Pause). OK, me.
N: What does Alan need to meet those standards?
S: (Long pause). Yes, me.
N: What does he need from you?
S: I guess I will need to ask him that.
N: Where are you at in your own thinking now?
S: I've been focusing on Alan's performance, not my own.
N: Go on…?
S: I hadn't considered how I might be affecting his performance.
N: Say more…?
S: I need to remember that I need to be a team player too.
N: Do you know what you need to do now?
S: Yes.

Dan faces a different challenge. He has been working for many years in a social sector organisation and unexpectedly receives news that he is to be made redundant. This comes as a shock. When I ask him how he is feeling, Dan replies, 'As if the rug has been pulled out from under my feet'. I invite him to explore the meaning of the metaphor as a possible way through this.[6] He agrees.

N: So… 'The rug has been pulled out from under my feet.'
D: Yes, that's how it feels.
N: The rug – what is that for you?
D: My job.
N: And..?
D: (Pause) My sense of security, I guess.
N: Something has shifted in your sense of security?
D: I think so, yes.
N: What has given you security until now?
D: Hmm… my job, my salary.
N: And what does a shift in those things mean for you?
D: I'm worried about losing my income.
N: Anything else?
D: And my home, and my car, if I can't pay the bills.

N: Anything else?
D: That I might not be able to find another job.
N: What feelings does that evoke for you?[7]
D: Hmm… hurt, fear, disappointment, betrayal.
N: Say more?
D: I've given my best to this job. It feels so unfair.
N: It touches on issues of fairness for you.
D: Yes. I can't believe they're treating me like this.
N: It's different to what you had expected.
D: Yes, that's it.
N: Do you have a sense of who or what has pulled the rug?
D: My boss. The senior management team.
N: And 'pulled' – it sounds like something that's happened to you.
D: Yes, it was their decision. I'm powerless to change it.
N: You feel powerlessness in this.
D: Yes, and I hate that feeling.
N: What would give you a greater sense of power?
D: (Pause) I need to get back on my own feet.
N: Go on…
D: I could step off the rug rather than have it pulled.
N: What would that look like in practice?
D: I could update my CV and start job hunting.
N: Anything else?
D: I could try to negotiate my leaving terms.
N: What else?
D: I could talk to a career coach to broaden my options.
N: How are you feeling as you list these things?
D: Much better in myself.
N: Much better?
D: Less anxious, more powerful.
N: What about your earlier feelings?
D: I guess the managers have a right to make these decisions.
N: Go on...?
D: But I'm still very disappointed.
N: So, stepping off the rug, what do you want to do with that?
D: I will arrange to meet my boss and tell him how I feel.
N: How does that feel, as you say it?
D: A bit nervous, but at least I will have got it off my chest.
N: Do you know what you need to do now?
D: Yes.

Reflections

As we have seen here, the language and metaphors that we and our coaching clients use are saturated with personal and cultural assumptions. Take an example from your own work – any phrase, conversation or document – and spend a moment reflecting on the underlying assumptions it reveals. Here are some everyday examples that we may commonly hear in organisations:

- I am a leader
- We work as a team
- Our goal is to delight the customer
- Change is here to stay.

According to social constructionism, language and metaphors both convey and create meaning.[2] In that sense, they can both help us and constrain us. If we enable a client to explore or change the language or the metaphor, we can alter the 'reality' they perceive, create new ideas and open up fresh possibilities.[8] Our gift to our client is to enable them to do this for themselves.

- What underlying beliefs and values does your language reveal?
- How is your language constraining you and others with whom you work?
- What do you discover if you play with different words and metaphors?
- What metaphor would be most motivating and life-giving for you?

In conclusion, the ways in which clients describe their situations is not merely reflective of reality but actively constructs it. Language and metaphor are powerful tools that shape their perceptions, assumptions and possibilities. As coaches, by helping clients deconstruct their language and explore alternative ways of framing their experiences, we can open the door to fresh insights and transformative change.

By examining and reshaping the words and metaphors that clients use, they can uncover hidden beliefs, challenge limiting assumptions and create new pathways for growth. Ultimately, our role is to empower clients to see beyond their current narratives, unlock their untapped potential and foster meaningful change. ■

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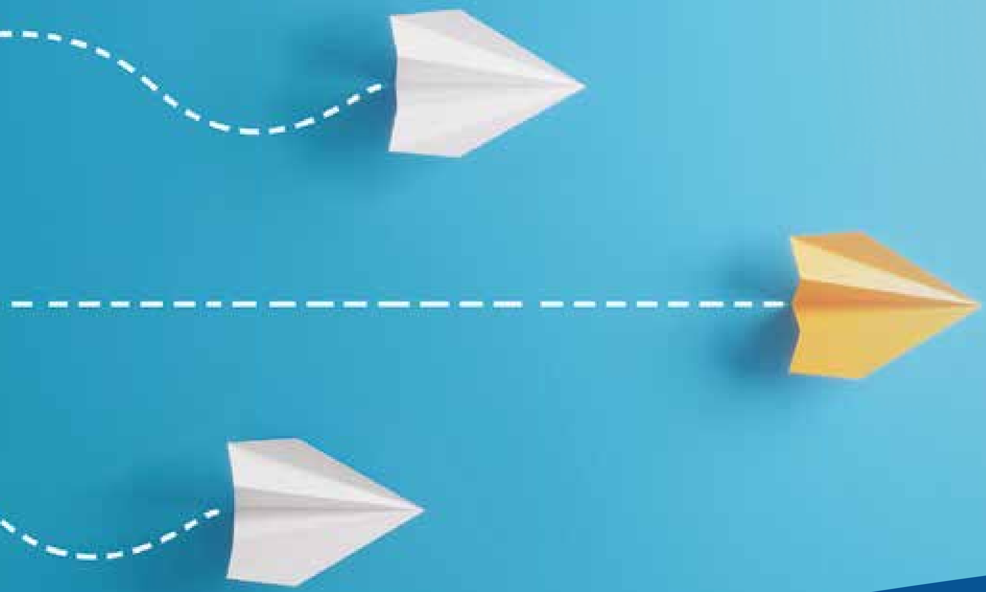

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