

# **Coaching from Eight Perspectives**

## **A diagnostic tool for experienced coaches**

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### **1. Introduction**

Several approaches are in use as theories of practice for coaches who work with clients to improve their functioning in a professional role. The aim is to challenge the coachee to handle more competently the complexity or changes of her situation at work, to get a better grip on her vocational career, or to attain a more satisfying balance of career and life. (For the sake of clarity we are using the masculine for the coach and the feminine for the coachee, although of course this could have been very well the other way around).

In our experience of more than 15 years of training and supervising professional coaches, we have seen that most coaches are very competent in one or maybe two different styles of working with clients, not more. As a consequence it is mostly by accident that a coachee is getting the right approach for her situation. Also, we noticed that people who are acting as go-between or referrals inside corporations, such as HR-managers, or MD-officers, are looking for a sound reference to know what possibilities are on the market and how to make evidence based distinctions between coaches in terms of expertise and competence.

The most common criteria for a good coach is that a former client has expressed her satisfaction. Of course this could lead to pleasing behaviour and trying to be the nice guy or not upsetting too much the client or even to form a narcissistic fusion with the client on the one hand or to go into collusion with the referring party (Breuer, 2005/2007).

To be able to avoid contamination, a coach should reflect regularly together with colleagues (consultation between colleagues) or with an experienced senior coach (supervision) on his role performance and at the same time engage into a permanent education to broaden his field of knowledge, competence and ability.

In this article we will distinguish eight different approaches which have their own strong and weak points. We will give a short description of the characteristics and underlying assumptions of each approach and give some keys to see what will fit better under what circumstances. Our objective is to provide an inciting overview as a guideline for further development and to raise the interest for coaches to broaden their scope and repertoire. We will discuss the rational-cognitive approach, reframing, the supporting style, psychodynamics, system dynamics, the solution focused and appreciative approaches, the provocative style and the narrative approach.

### **2. Rational-cognitive approach.**

This is the approach most frequently used in coaching. It is at the same time the basic approach, taught in most coaching schools.

Assumptions of this approach are that people are rational, can learn how to handle their feelings and in general, are turning to a coach to learn how to improve their functioning in their role. A role is to be described in terms of competencies and behaviour which can be adopted or learned, if a person is willing to apply themselves.

Working methods of the coach are based on the principle that an appeal is made for the coachee to take responsibility for her behaviour, images and feelings. She is challenged to inquire into her ambitions, aspirations, hopes and dreams.

Negative feelings or emotions are explained as constructs of the mind. They can be altered, diminished, or stripped from their negative effects by will power and positive thinking. Alternative behaviours, courses for action, and attached feelings are explored and put into practice, first as experiments and later in reality.

The path to follow can be described in different ways, depending on the specific terminology and accentuation by the author.

Very popular is the model of GROW: Goal, Reality, Options, Will (Whitmore, 1992). When the coaching relationship is established, working objectives are formulated. Then follows a phase where inquiry is done into the facts and context with respect to the actual situation. Options for new behaviour, alternative actions and new initiatives are explored. Then a choice is made what actually to put into action. This is followed by feedback and possibly some adaptations.

Others recognize that in front of this sequence, the coach too has to do make some decisions. For example (Hargrove, 95): Develop your own mission and invest in relationships, then plan together with the concerned parties what ambitious goals are, bring these into action, and create possibilities for feedback and learning opportunities. A simpler model is: contracting, action planning, experimenting and debriefing (O'Neill, 2000).

In all these models can be seen that creating a good working relationship between the coach and the coachee is a matter of attention, as is the ending, since the results of the coaching have to be established in practice. Learning is based on the formulation of options, experimentation and feedback. The models are very much inspired by theories about action learning and learning by feedback.

The classical model of single loop learning (Argyris, 1985) prevails. The assumption is made that a person starts learning when they receive feedback that their action is not having the desired result. This means that the anticipated goals are not reached, or that there are undesirable effects, or that there are side effects that are not corresponding to their central values or conceptions.

Often this is the case when we are confronted with a new, unknown situation, or role, or when the context has changed, or new demands are made. If we are open to feedback and not inclined to look for external causes, maybe we are ready to change our own behaviour and to look for options different from how we are used to operating.

However, an important insight, according to this model, is that our options are restricted by how we think and feel. This is especially the case in terms of our convictions of who we are, what is appropriate under certain conditions (for example: our role), what is allowed and what not, how things should be done, what is attributed to me, how I am, and what qualities I have; but also, what I think about the expected reactions of others, how they will judge me or evaluate me. Most of these convictions are unconscious and certainly not debatable. So, according to the model of Argyris, a deeper form of learning exists, where the convictions which determine the range of alternatives that we have in our reach come under discussion: double loop learning.

Only when I am ready to take responsibility for the effect of my behaviour and willing to investigate if my conceptions are valid under the actual circumstances, it is possible to enlarge the range of accessible options for new behaviour.

### ***Conditions***

A coach can help to discover these possibilities. However, for this approach some conditions have to be considered:

The coachee must know what she wants to attain.

Valid and reliable feedback should be available.

Coachee must recognize that she has a part in the effect of her behaviour  
She must have the capability to reflect on underlying assumptions, willingness to change the situation and readiness to accept changes in the image of self, accordingly.

***Contra-indications are:***

When coachee is externalizing causes of ineffective behaviour: looking for scape goats, external offenders, mitigating circumstances, excuses; when she is not taking ownership.  
Lack of self reflecting capabilities: when coachee is closed off from her internal life, too anxious, or unconsciously blind.

When she has too much resistance to change: reacts with denial, with flight from reality, or into ineffective action, or into other defensive behaviour.

When coachee is not knowing what she wants, or stalling, has underdeveloped will power, lack of empowerment.

**3. Breaking of patterns: reframing.**

It will be clear, that in many instances, changing behaviour is not so easy for a coachee. She wants to learn (i.e. change), but at the same time she wants to stay herself (be the same). If a person, however, is prepared to look honestly at their own ineffectiveness, does not corner themselves with judgements, or does not project them onto others, there may be the possibility to go further in the coaching process and work with the patterns, a particular coachee has developed in her working life.

Often, the first couple of sessions with a coach are spent in finding short term solutions for immediate problems or urgent situations. This time is needed for the coach to get to know more about the behaviour patterns of the coachee, her way of thinking, her coping mechanisms, and her psychological strategies. Once the working relationship is consolidated, more anxiety causing issues may be tackled.

Is coachee interested in changing routines, does she feel uncomfortable with repeating difficulties, or does she realize that her old behaviour patterns and old feelings are barriers for new developments? Then reframing becomes an interesting approach.

***Working Methods***

Following this approach, the working method of a coach begins with establishing a strong working relationship. When coachee is ready, next step can be taken to find out more about what are obstructing convictions. These can be beliefs about self, others, how things are, what should be done, what appears to be necessary, what is considered as a mission, or a rule. These beliefs often have a long history. They have been established as a result of decisions by a person as reaction to dramatic experiences in the past, or have been repeatedly addressed by significant persons and have been confirmed over and over. That is why they have the form of an absolute truism.

For example: “I find it difficult to delegate, because I am a perfectionist and I can trust nobody to be as devoted as I am”.

When we consider this sentence more carefully, we see that it consists of

- a rule for behaviour: not delegate
- a firm conviction about self: I am a perfectionist
- a firm conviction about others: one cannot trust others.

These elements form together a system: a belief system. Important is to notice that a fixed conviction is linked to others and to a rule of conduct. Moreover behind these convictions are other elements: values or value systems: In the case of our example, values such as:

reliability, devotion (to what?), professional competence, and maybe: being of significance to others.

All these elements act together in the system as a filter: one is seeing reality as obeying to these conceptions; one wants these to be confirmed by what one encounters. And they act as a compass to make sense of the environment one is living in. They have strong points: they are responsible for strong qualities in a person. But at the same time they can act as barriers to new information, to new behaviour, or to new rules of conduct.

In the setting of a coaching relationship, there are several ways to work with belief systems. One is to make the coachee more aware of how the system works and what elements are driving forces behind certain behaviour patterns.

Another one is to attack the absolute character of the system, by discovering what elements are right under what circumstances, and when they are not. Questions are: “Are there no exceptions to this rule? Are there no people who do not correspond to what you are saying about others; are there no other explanations possible?”

Still another one is to explore whether one of the underlying values could not be gratified in a different way. For example: “If you want to be of significance to others, how would it be to show more confidence in the capability of others?”

One could also try to disclose, what is behind certain convictions: “At what moment in time did you decide that you have to be perfect? What has it cost you to keep to this rule, and what did you lose in the process? So how long do you think you are willing to make that sacrifice?”

A very strong way of dealing with swallowed messages that have been repeatedly sent to a person (injunctions) is to experiment with turning these messages around, and convert them into allowances: “How would it be for you to say to yourself: it is allowed to make mistakes; or: I may take it easy, sometimes?”

***A short guideline:***

Focus on patterns in terms of fixed convictions and codes of conduct.

Find out what are underlying values

Inquire if such a value can be gratified differently.

If necessary, challenge the coachee to provide some elasticity into her rules: are they always as valid? Are there no exceptions? Under what circumstances does this rule not hold?

Retrace, if necessary, swallowed negative thoughts about self or others. See if they can be reversed. What qualities are behinds this all?

Give different meaning to this behaviour: you could explain this also...

As a result of these interventions, the old pattern will not completely disappear; hopefully the absolute character of the system will be redressed. Also, the behaviour of the coachee will get a different meaning: it can be understood as coping behaviour with a specific function and as a capability that is very useful under certain conditions but less under others. For this reason a good label for this piece of methodology would be the term ‘reframing’.

Though all these interventions appeal to the rational thinking of the coachee, it is important to know that mostly such a belief system has also a non-rational side. One could say that the system is occupied by an old emotion. When a coachee gives herself permission to break her own rules, often she begins to experience emotional relief. The tears are connected with old feelings associated with the process of building the system, and with the new feelings of freedom and recognition of the until then hidden side of a person.

A more therapeutic approach would be to go directly to the old state of mind when the belief system was formed, and have the client to relive that process in order to be able to let go and find a new balance. But as discussed here, a coach will rather be authorized to use the more cognitive approach and will link the process more directly to future role behaviour. Reframing is often very helpful when a person is taking up new roles or discovers that old assumptions are no longer valid for their new circumstances (Brunning, 2006).

#### 4. A supporting style

An important issue can be raised with regard to how deep the impact of coaching should be. The dimension 'supporting or disclosing' can be considered as a basic axis for coaching. Very soon in the beginning of a coaching route, a coach must make a diagnosis of the bearing power of his coachee. The initial psychological strength determines how deep the process can go; whether it is advisable to dig into the psychological make-up of a person, or if it is better to adopt a more supporting style of coaching, which will allow the coachee to develop new behaviour and attitudes, step by step.

There can be several reasons *not* to go deeper into the emotional backgrounds of a person. Since a coach is not engaged as a psycho-therapist, he should be cautious when he will meet with the following symptoms of a potential coachee:

1. Burn-out
2. Strong disturbances of the personality, such as narcissism, paranoia, and compulsive need of control
3. Severe problems with attachment, such as lack of independence, no contact with feelings, and strong distance or chronic feelings of emptiness
4. Pathological defence mechanisms, such as fostering hostile images, denial or distortion of, and extreme aggressiveness
5. Weak personality traits, such as strong resistance to feedback, incapacity to reflect, false or weak images of self, and extreme need to experience or to act immediately.

#### ***Burn out***

Burn out is not the same as over-fatigue. A person who is exhausted because she has temporarily worked too hard, or has overstressed herself, can heal by taking a rest. But if a person has worn herself out for a long time, she takes a risk of becoming chronically tired in such a way that she is incapable to restoring herself in a short time. Than resting does not help and a long during structural recovery is needed. Indicators for burn-out are:

- abrupt breakdown of performance, forgetfulness, making mistakes
- cynism, depressiveness, feelings of senselessness, social isolation, anxiety
- chronically tiredness with no real recovery, problems with sleep, often sick, addiction.

In such a case a coach must be very directive in helping the coachee to make structural changes in her job, teach her self management and stress management. He should support her in letting go of ambitions, learning to delegate, to exercise less control, and to bring her work more in alignment with inner values.

Sometimes, a real shock is needed as a first step (a more confronting approach at the very beginning) in order to prepare the ground for more supporting continuation.

#### ***Personality***

One's personality does not change because of coaching. A person can learn to deal better with some of the inconvenient traits in their personality. But there is no sense in trying to dig

deeper for a fundamental change within the context of coaching, when the following traits are dominating one's behaviour.

A person with *narcissistic* traits has a constant need of applause from people around them and is looking again and again to new podiums where they can maintain the illusion of being the better person. Others are seen only as instrumental to their goals.

It is difficult to feel a real contact with such a person unless on the terms of the other. And one must be very much prepared to fall in disgrace, if the narcissistic person does not feel being admired enough.

For a coach it is difficult to confront such a person with her need to maintain this illusion. As long as one is answering the need of the narcissistic client you may be admitted into her circle of 'intimates'. But when the spell is broken, chance is that you will be dropped like a stone, and you are out. First you will feel charmed and then you start feeling to be used.

Since a coach may also in a relative way have some of these traits, he may experience such a client as a challenge and think he is the only person who will be able to break this pattern. His client will trigger his image of self as a mighty saviour and his illusion of being able to make a difference. But sooner or later, he will discover that the coachee will not really be open to him. Instead, what is needed, is some modesty from the side of the coach and interventions directed at challenging the coachee to come into contact with the values underlying her aspirations. A more appreciative approach (see further) would be helpful.

The subcategory of the *sensitive narcissistic* personality does need a similar approach. (see: Gablard 1989) This personality is characterized by the inexhaustible need for recognition and by the urge of doing everything to please others. This personality also avoids confrontation but for a different reason: she values harmony and abhors conflict. Here the pitfall is that a coachee will ask you to go deeper and go for underlying feelings and experiences but will only act on them as confirmation of her small self respect. Here again a more supporting and an appreciative style of coaching are needed.

It will be clear that the *paranoid* personality is afraid of a more confronting approach, since she will interpret all behaviour of others as hostile and as a threat to her self. She is the victim and others are the causes, because of their bad intentions. A person with these traits will be very suspicious and will externalise the reasons for their problems, but may react favourably to a more supporting style.

Sometimes the paranoia is mixed with *schizoid* traits; feelings are rationalised and the person has retired into isolation with 'buddies' but no real friends. They have a false image of reality, can talk about their 'feelings' but in a rational, distant way. The pitfall here is that a coach could feel to be challenged to nevertheless try to let the coachee make contact with her feelings. One could end in an interesting discussion, but the coachee will avoid experiencing what she feels. She is not able to do so.

Here again the narcissistic traits of a coach could induce him to continue on a path with a dead end. This is even a dangerous route, because in the unlikely case that the coach is successful, he will reach a domain, where very real and old anxieties are lurking. In the context of a coaching relation, one should steer away from that. A more supporting style will get much better results.

A very common trait, especially in successful clients, may be the *compulsive directive* need to be perfect and have complete and detailed control. Here too, one must be prepared to discover that behind these traits very early traumata may be hidden that have resulted in this defence mechanism. Positive reinforcement of underlying beliefs in contrast to prevailing beliefs (see above) may be a solution, but one has to be careful to stay in a supportive not judgemental mode.

### ***Lack of attachment, strong defences, and weak personality***

It is important to realise that behind all these traits deep feelings of anxiety are hidden that can be triggered if a coachee is forced into experiencing her emotions and into reflecting on the causes of her incapacities. Possibly there are links also with the above described disturbances of personality traits.

When a coachee shows some of these characteristics in a strong way, or in combination, one should consider therapy and not coaching. A combination of therapy with coaching is also a possibility, provided that the coaching follows a more supportive style.

### ***Working methods***

When circumstances have resulted in such a level of stress that it is understandable that a person becomes dependant on an outsider for recovery, a more supportive style of coaching is needed. This could be because the role is much too demanding at a certain moment of time, or because there is an accumulation of disturbing factors, for example both in a person's working life, as well as in their private life, such as a health issue maybe in combination with a person's loss, or a difficulty in handling a conflict. In such a case the coach must be ready to be much more directive and structured than normally would be the case; advising about first steps, trying to set priorities, and to stabilize the situation. In order to be supportive, a coach is required to demonstrate much more active involvement than when he acts from the assumption that the coachee has to take the lead herself, the whole time.

The first important condition is to create a safe and motivating setting, by working at a fixed pace, in a regular frequency, and in the same working environment; to make a clear agreement on these conditions, your role and expectations; to define attainable outcomes and to act in accordance to what you have promised.

Second: to work in a very structured way: focussing on concrete, attractive and useful results on short term; to make a structured plan of attainable results in time, ensuring direct small successes and controlling the setting.

Third: to provide emotional support: allowing for some emotional expression; giving insights in potential profits and costs; trying to make the other see her situation in perspective and facilitating support from other important people in her environment.

Fourth: to mobilize leverage points: validating her strong points; reconsidering success stories from the past; making an appeal on fundamental values, and above all, recognizing what already works.

## **5. Disclosing style**

The opposite of the supporting style is the disclosing style, developed from the psycho-dynamic framework. The intention of the coach here is to heal the more or less traumatic earlier experiences which have an influence on the actual behaviour. This creates a grey area where coaching and therapy overlap. The psycho-dynamic approach inquires into the unconscious meanings, desires and emotions of individuals with the purpose of them being able to feel more creative and lively (Kets de Vries, 2006).

Here, the underlying supposition is that all behaviour can be interpreted as defence to protect the ego. Of course there is nothing wrong with that. As long as a person does not feel restrained by patterns that are no longer functional, but have been developed earlier in their life or career.

A coach who works according to this model will be interested in reactions of the coachee to actual events which are coloured by her more or less dramatic experiences in the past. A person has learned to cope with all sorts of situations and is transferring their responses to new situations.

There is a positive side to this coping behaviour. A person is familiar with a whole range of conditions that could cause stress or difficulties. However, coping means also that one has learned to suppress some healthy, immediate reactions and has adapted a certain way of dealing with stressful situations, which are not adequate anymore. The negative side can be, that a person's behaviour may be triggered unconsciously by somebody or by certain conditions which remind them to people or situations who have put a mark on them in the past. One could say that a person may be occupied or 'possessed', in the sense of being not free in their reactions, because of certain events or significant people in their past.

For example, a dominant boss may automatically remind someone of an authoritarian father and may provoke a reaction of avoidance, passive aggressiveness, or irritation. Instead of continuously struggling with such a boss, it could be a good idea to discover that the ambivalence towards him has to do with undigested old feelings.

### ***Working methods***

The coach is helping his client to discover how, in the setting of the workplace, her less effective reactions to certain situations may be linked to old feelings. These associations may be hidden by standard behaviour patterns, which have the function to cover up what is unpleasant, threatening, or even harmful to the ego. By becoming conscious of this 'regressive' function and by coming into contact with the underlying feelings, a coachee can learn to be more free in their reactions that are triggered by certain 'transitional' objects: people or situations that remind them of dramatic experiences in their past.

Since a person will project old images into new situations that are stressful, typical regressive behaviour patterns will not only occur in the working place but also in the relationship between coach and coachee. A psycho-dynamically informed coach will be aware of the process of transference, which means that the coachee is projecting her hidden side, her shadow, onto the reactions of her coach, and of the process of counter-transference, the opposite movement of projecting by the coach (Breuer 2006-2). A coach has to be very careful to make a distinction between what comes from the coachee and what from himself. A coach also has a hidden or susceptible part which he may project on the coachee.

*For example a coachee may put herself in a dependent position. In her work she feels that she is not treated right and complains about this to her coach. People don't understand her and don't give the credits that she deserves. She does not know what to do about this and without so many words expects from her coach to get some tips how to deal with that situation. The coach let himself be seduced to give some advice, and notices that the coachee responds very thankful to his suggestions but does not put them into practice. Every time she has some 'lame' excuses why she was not able to follow up on the given tips. The coach remarks that he is getting irritated by the behaviour of his client, and that in his questions and responses he is more than normally trying to push her into action. He becomes aware of two opposite forces, on the one hand to take more care of his coachee, to give her compliments and to react positively on her call for compassion and on the other hand to become pushy, irritated and almost aggressive because of her lack of perseverance.*

*The question here is should the coach gratify the implicit need of the coachee for support, or follow his own need to be more demanding. A coach with some experience will recognize the appeal of the coachee, and the transference of the need for recognition projected on him, and will abstain from gratifying the need of the coachee.*



*The wish to come to terms with the resistance of the coachee could well be based on the need of the coach to make a difference, to make progress, and on his own values of being an autonomous, pro-active personality. The reaction of the coach could be influenced in the form of counterference by his own experience and by his repulsion from dependency, lack of initiative, loss of perseverance. The coach has to reflect, to discover where his own feelings of aggressiveness are originating from. Is what he feels the hidden aggression of his coachee against her environment or even against herself, or is it something which comes from his own past? In this case a third option for the coach is to discuss his ambiguous feelings with his coachee. But then he must be certain that he can do this without burdening his coachee with his own unresolved feelings of the past.*

### **Presumptions**

This approach has as an important supposition that the coachee is ready and interested in finding out more about what causes her own non-rational reactions. Understanding helps in giving meaning to one's own behaviour and in finding maybe more convenient ways of coping to what causes stress and difficulties. The coach will (re-)direct the attention of the coachee to her underlying feelings and hidden needs, by staying at what is happening here and now.

From the coach is asked to be able to make a distinction between his own reactions as counterference based on his own experiences and on his own hidden feelings, and what the coachee will inevitably transfer to him. A coach must also be able to stay with the resistance and to consider it as an important indicator and issue for discussion. He must be able to contain the sometimes negative feelings that will be projected on him and on others, and bring his own reactions, and those of others on the table, next to these of the coachee.

### **Conditions**

There are some conditions for a more disclosing approach in coaching.

We have already formulated the counter-indications, when talking about the need for the opposite approach, a more supporting style of coaching.

For a more disclosing style the coachee needs to be a person who possesses an observant ego and is capable of reflecting on her self. Although the coachee should not be too anxious or having too much resistance, a disclosing approach could work very well after a period of mourning, or for the purpose of working through traumata.

The coachee must be susceptible to containment of her projections, feelings and non-rational reactions by the coach. This will be putting also demands on the working relation between coach and coachee.

The setting must be safe enough, rather stable and based on a holding relationship, offered by the coach and experienced by the coachee.

## **6. System Dynamics**

While psychodynamics focuses on feelings, system-dynamics focuses on relationships. Especially in the contracting phase, this is a very helpful approach. By asking questions about the relationships of the coachee with significant others, the context of her situations will become much clearer. A first question will be about with whom to close a contract, whether to involve the boss of the coachee, or not.

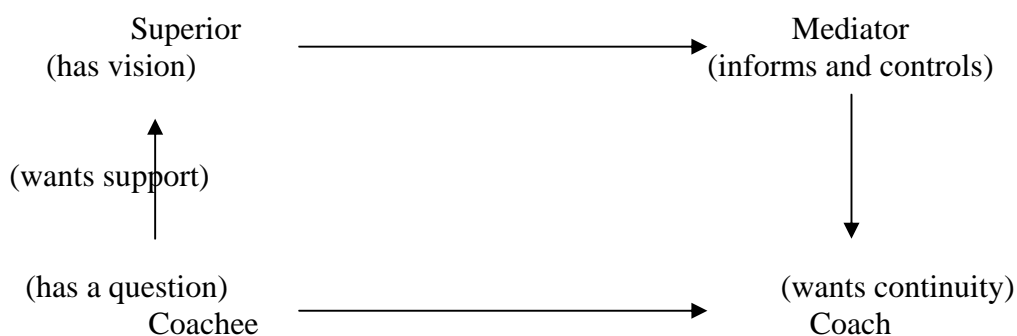
The person to whom the coachee is accountable, should at least be ready to give support and not frustrating the outcomes of the coaching process. The coachee has to be given the

opportunity to learn and to try out new behaviour and approaches without being corrected at every minor mistake. As coaching can be seen as an instrument of management to develop people in line with the overall needs of the organisation, the policy of management has to be taken into consideration too, above the needs of the coachee herself.

For these reasons the interest of the superior officer should be explored in the intake. We advise most of the times, to have at the beginning a tripartite contracting phase, before the individual sessions are started. And we try to make an agreement that at the end a closing of the coaching-relationship will be made in the same setting, where the coachee can explain to her superior what she has learned and how she wants to proceed afterwards in her developing process. The coach can, as a third party, add his comments, as long as he has short circuited this before with the coachee.

In many organisations there is still a fourth party involved, the person who has introduced the coachee to this particular coach (or the other way around). This party is mainly interested in the performance of the coach: has there been a good fit, are stated goals met, what can be learned from this particular coaching-process? This could be the MD-officer who controls the developing processes of individuals, or of the high potentials, in view of future opportunities both for the organisation and for the individuals involved. Coaching takes then place within a complex force field with not always parallel interests, wherein the coach self also has a (commercial) stake.

(see scheme 2)



If the superior does not become involved, for example when the coachee has a mandate to contract on her own, and expressively wants to block the contact between her coach and her superior, this does not mean that the influence of the superior on the outcomes of the coaching-process can be disregarded (Breuer, 2005)

During the coaching-process, other parties also will come into view: the colleagues of the coachee, her clients, her collaborators, and maybe also part of the circle of people in her private life. Is the partner involved or supporting? And in general, how strong is the personal support system of the coachee?

In a systems approach, one focuses on triads (relationships between three parties), on the dynamics of similarity and diversity, and on the interplay of different levels of aggregation (going from simple systems to more complex ones, and the other way around).

When there is too much similarity between two parties, jealousy, competition, or conflicts can prevail. The coachee can try to learn more to appreciate the differences. On the other hand when parties have grown too much apart, the challenge is to find a common ground, to look for shared values or other links.

However, often the dynamics are reigned by the influence of a third party. When one of a threesome has a disaccord with one of the others, a so called dynamic triad has come into existence which needs to be resolved.

When all three have good relations with each other, we have a stable triad. But when there is only one negative relationship, let us say between A and B, the whole triad is under pressure, according to the paradigm: a person cannot understand why his friend can be befriended with his enemy. This is true for A and his friend C. But at the same time also for B and his friend C. And C is caught in the middle.

Maybe C will try to stay out of the conflict, but both his friends will not accept that he is not taking a stand. Maybe he will try to mediate between the others; if he is successful a new balanced and stable triad will result.

But in case he is not successful, a new equilibrium will impose itself in the form of two parties rallying against the third. In that case, it is difficult to predict who will be the victim: any of the three parties is a candidate, even the one who originally was the friend of the two contesting parties. In many cases, that is sadly the most likely outcome, since both his friends can find that he is to blame, because he favoured the other one; a temporary coalition is formed between the former enemies in order to punish their common friend.

However, this new apparent equilibrium is also instable, because it will tend to dissolve by the expulsion of the victimized party.

A coach must be very attentive that he will not be put in the position of such a third party. His coachee will most probably not only have good relationships with others. Often, one of the reasons for coaching is a bad working relationship with a boss, with a colleague, with specific clients, or others. So by trying to stay neutral and at the same time building a warm empathic relationship with his client, the coach will, before he knows, be treated as a third party.

In general, what happens between people can also occur between groups or parties in an organization. By shifting between levels of aggregation one discovers how the context is influencing one's behaviour.

### ***Techniques***

An important guideline for a systems-oriented coach is to bring the context into question.

Alter the level of aggregation from less to more complex or the other way around. Often there is no sense in looking for linear causes and effects and for people who can be blamed. Try to find out how the coachee is entangled in all kinds of circular processes: find the self confirming and self defeating factors. What are accelerators and what the restraining factors? And put circular questions. By circular questions is meant, that one asks a person to put herself into the position of someone else, and to reason from that point of view: for example "what do you think your boss is expecting from you?" (see: for some working methods that use circular questions: Breuer, 2008)

Another important suggestion is to focus on differences when the coachee tends to compete with others, and to focus on (underlying) similarities when she is too agonized by the experienced variety in interests and points of view, or at least to try to let her understand what drives the other person.

### ***Conditions***

This approach is very helpful with clients who have to operate in a highly political environment. Also, when a coachee has strong identifications with the problem or behaves as a victim or as one who is turning around in circles and can't find an exit. Often this approach is advisable, when a coachee has problems in her working relationships with colleagues, a boss or collaborators. Or when she wants to improve her relationship with clients.

## 7. Solution focused and other appreciative approaches

A special branch of system dynamics merits a separate discussion: the solution focused approach. The basic assumption underlying this approach, is that the coachee is the expert when it comes to her problem; she knows best what the problem is and is the right person to find a solution (Berg and Szabo, 2005).

The coach makes an appeal to the strong points of the coachee and not her weaknesses. In this way, all attempts to find the originators or eventual culprits for the problems she experiences are discarded. Instead, questions are asked to find out what has been the active factor which had lead to the success of the coachee: ‘when were you not hindered by your problem?’ or what has made a difference: ‘tell me more about your successes; what did you do to make these happen?’ Circular questions are used to bring the appreciation of others into focus: ‘What does your boss know about you that he thinks that you will be able to make good use of this coaching session?’

The working method of the coach is based on the principle of positive reinforcement.

A variation on the solution focused approach is the appreciative coaching approach, derived from the school of appreciative inquiry (Orem, Binkert and Clancy, 2007).

Both approaches make use of some of the strong points from the school of neuro- linguistic programming, especially with respect to the formulation of objectives in terms of observable results or outcomes.

One can take the following steps as a guideline:

### ***Wording of objectives.***

Don’t take too big steps at once. Realize that a small step already can be the beginning of a systemic change and can have a deeper effect, if it means that a pattern has to be broken.

Make the problem operable: “What is it you want to work on first; what is most important, or urgent; where would you like to start?” Help to focus.

Try to work towards goal gratification on short term: “What would make this session for you worth while? Suppose this meeting has ended to your satisfaction, what would you have accomplished?”: desired outcomes in observable terms.

Explore objectives: “For what reason did you come to me? What do you want to go for?”

### ***Put coachee in the position that she knows the problem and can find the solution***

Act from the assumption that the coachee is the expert and knows – maybe subconsciously – how to improve her situation. The coach must do nothing that creates a barrier in the proces of the coachee. In stead he ‘is leading from behind’.

Ask questions how the coachee has handled her problems in the past (implying that she has been successful): questions about coping behaviour.

Asks about what other significant persons do know about her, which make them trust that she will find solutions: “What does your boss know about you that he thinks you will make good benefit of this coaching?”: circular questions about allies.

### ***Reinforce the positive***

Self confidence of coachee is systematically rebuilt. Realize that coachee has undoubtedly already tried things before turning to a coach. It is important to reinforce the positive energy.

Give compliments about what steps the coachee already has undertaken

Before asking what she wants to accomplish, create a ‘yes-set’ by asking closed questions that only can be answered by ‘yes’.

Ask about the pre-session change: “What has already improved since the moment you contacted me?”

Ask scaling questions to make progress measurable: “On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is the moment you decided to contact a coach and 10 the ideal situation where you have reached

what you are coming here for, where are you now? What have you done to reach this point, or to prevent yourself from getting lower?"

Ask what has been successful so far and give compliments.

***Inquire into differences and especially into what has helped***

Don't go into causes of the problem, or problematize.

Ask about situations where the problem did not (yet) occur: "What was helpful there and why?"

If something went wrong, ask for exceptions: "When were you successful?"

Ask about all the details that matter regarding steps the coachee has taken. Give compliments about what has pushed her forward.

Inquire into what coachee has as resources: "What qualities do you have and can you bring into the situation?"

Assume always that the coachee takes the initiative; ask what steps she will take.

Encourage; help to develop a vision on what will be successful.

Ask how others will notice that she is accomplishing what she wants: "How will your colleague see that you are successful in your efforts?": circular linking questions.

***Treat barriers as sources for information***

When coachee has tried something and did not fully succeed, ask what did go right and what she could do more, next time.

Ask what coachee thinks is needed next time, in order to do better.

Ask about successes in different contexts: what can be learned from that.

Ask what resources coachee has had when successful, and how to make more use of them.

***The wonder question***

***Literally:***

"Is it alright if I ask you a strange question?" (ask permission, commitment).

"After this session you will go on with the things you will have to do. And tonight after a quiet evening you are going to sleep" (induction: coachee follows your story).

"And while you are sleeping a wonder happens, but you don't know it happens because you are asleep. The wonder is that the problem you have come here to talk about is solved" (the wonder).

"Suppose you wake up and this wonder has happened, what is the first thing you notice that has changed because this wonder has happened?" (Ask for the difference).

"And what are other small things, other people will notice in your behaviour, attitude, the things you do, or say, that have changed?" (circular questions about change in the coachee).

"So, what could be the first small step you could take to get into the direction of this change?"

***Other as-if techniques***

"Suppose you are a half year from now and you are very content that you have solved your problems, how will the world look like to you?"

"And if you look from that moment in time backwards to what you have done to solve your problems, what has been the first small step to do that?"

***Explore realistic options***

Help coachee to develop an image of how she will feel, behave, and be seen by others, after she has solved her problems, and let her discover what would be the steps to go into that direction. Check if the steps she will take are realistic and feasible.

Confirm her intentions: "That would be great!". Ask what will be the effect: "When you will be doing that, what will be the result?"

Ask to put intentions in the form of outcomes, attainable results, concrete behaviour, visible acts, and audible speeches. Link to what others will notice (circular questions).

***Take small steps***

Explore what could be the next, small step.

Help to formulate assignments for in between sessions.  
Inquire afterwards, how this was done. Again in terms of observable results.  
Congratulate with successes and harvest the results. Use scaling questions.  
Take care that coachee leaves with clear intentions and a good feeling.  
Repeat the above strategy several times, and connect with the originally formulated desired results.

### ***Conditions***

This approach works very well with people who have massive resistance or are ‘proto-professionalised’ (meaning: having had all kind of non sequential relationships with other helping professionals). Important conditions could be: when the coachee does not want to explore deeper into her past, is not interested in finding out why she behaves as she does, or who hates psychologising.

Another potential category of clients which can be treated very well with this approach are people who are verbally restrained or not so eloquent in their expressions. Also people who have a tendency to externalize their problems, i.e. looking for others as the causes of their problems in stead of taking responsibility themselves. And at last, people who experience a big gap between what they want and what their actual situation is.

## **8. The provocative style**

Although the provocative approach, too, is based on the assumption that the coachee is perfectly capable of finding the right solutions to her problems, this respect for the wisdom of the client is shown in a completely different way.

The provocative approach is very direct and confrontational, uses a contradictory and equivocal communication style, and if done expertly, eschews professional dignity as the coach is playing the clown, if necessary, and deliberately uses a lot of mockery and humour (Farely and Brandsma, 1974).

As most of the discussed approaches, it was first developed as a therapeutic approach, but later on translated and adapted to the coaching setting. (Hollander, 2000)

Most important is the attitude of the coach. He does not make any effort to help the coachee, does not think up any serious solutions, and gives no advice.

In stead, he concentrates strongly on the coachee in the here and now, nonverbally mirroring the attitude of the coachee, often making physical contact in a jokingly manner, and using a lot of humour in his voice.

The goals of this provocative behaviour are to elicit as responses: assertive behaviour, self affirmative statements, appropriate self defence, reality testing of psycho-social responses, and real expressions of love, friendship, and affection.

Many means are appropriate to reach these goals: reacting strongly in a theatrical fashion to coachee’s behaviour towards others; interrupting when the coach is feeling bored or not touched by the expressions of the coachee; giving lame commentary on the explanations of progress by the coachee; creating confusion and deliberately misinterpreting the declarations of the coachee about her problems and causes, and undermining favourable feedback from others as reported by the coachee.

In general, the coach demonstrates that he is not under the impression by the explanations and projections of the coachee about what causes her problems, and how she wants to progress; he is also not easily satisfied by her plans or stories of success.

### ***Some key interventions of the provocative coach***

About the *problem* as formulated by coachee:

- ❖ Encourage coachee to act, think and demonstrate more of the problematic behaviour: “what is wrong with that?”
- ❖ Give absurd solutions: exaggerate ad absurdum.
- ❖ Offer absurd explanations, as if scientifically proven.
- ❖ Overemphasize a single aspect of coachee, to the total exclusion of the problem: “For a person like you, this cannot be in any way problematic”.

About coachee’s *real* traumatic *experiences*:

- ❖ Treat these seriously, but not the (emotional) reactions of the coachee on them
- ❖ Ask to tell in detail, but interrupt if tone of voice and content don’t match.
- ❖ Reflect loudly on coachee’s non-verbal behaviour.

About possible *solutions*:

- ❖ Make together long lists of possible actions
- ❖ Add more and more unlikely steps till the coachee gives up
- ❖ Demonstrate that you are getting bored by the planning process of the coachee, interrupt and ask distracting questions
- ❖ Let the coachee repeat her important insights and solutions; pretend that you don’t understand, or have misunderstood.

### ***Underlying assumptions***

The coach challenges the coachee, concentrating on what she wants and on what is real; he puts her to the test.

Paradoxically, the coach takes the opposite position or exaggerates the position of the coachee. On this way, a more grounded reaction of the coachee is triggered.

The coach plays the role of devil’s advocate. By enlarging one aspect of the situation, the other side comes into focus.

All psychological plays of coachee are exposed. The coach confronts coachee with evasive behaviour, her excuses and irrelevant emotionality; he gives direct feedback, both verbally and non-verbally.

Coachee will feel stripped from all her usual defences and coping mechanisms. What is left is a strong appeal to be authentic and to see one’s situation in perspective.

### ***Risks***

This approach is only possible when the working relationship between coach and coachee is very strong. Coachee must really choose to work with this particular person, knowing what to expect. By working in this fashion a coach puts his credibility at risk and must be able to maintain a warm, emotional state, with an intense interest in the strange, incongruent, absurd and humorous sides of the experiences and verbalisations of coachee.

It is not an attitude that every coach has naturally and at random at his disposal. Nevertheless, it is important that an experienced coach knows how to confront, how to be direct and how to provoke the strong, truthful and relativizing side of the coachee.

Sometimes, when all other approaches fail, the provocative style is the only approach that still has a chance to release something in the coachee.

It helps very much when the coachee too has a fine sense of humour

## 9. The narrative approach

The last approach we want to discuss is in our view the most important one. The narrative approach can be considered as one that exceeds all the others by its vision encompassing the whole process and at the same time incorporating many of the techniques that are used in the other approaches.

Essential for this approach is the vision that something is created between coach and coachee which we have called the narrative space. (Breuer, 2007a, 2008). This is a space in-between, where the worlds of the storyteller and the listener meet, and in which ideas, experiences, feelings, and other contents of consciousness are exchanged with deep interest and respect for each other's different experiences. This space is characterized by a certain degree of openness, intimacy, receptivity, and surprise, supported by a semi-trancelike state of consciousness that simultaneously allows an alertness toward the exterior as well as internal self-investigations (Breuer, 2007a, p.51).

The role of the coach is to prompt the coachee to tell, and then to listen with attention to her stories. The content of the story is important, but also the way this content is expressed in details, colours, words, and how it is accompanied by gestures, accentuations, moments of silence, interruptions, interjections, and sidesteps.

There are two important mechanisms involved: one is identification; the other dissociation. Coachee can be asked, while telling about events in the past, to identify with other parties involved in the story. By identifying not only with herself, the teller of the story, but also with significant others, she can discover different meanings in her story. At the same time by telling about what has happened, the teller can dissociate from herself and her role in the story by looking from a distant (third) position to what has happened.

The attention of the coach is directed at the different levels of meaning in the story: how is the protagonist interacting with her environment, what are underlying themes, what values come into play, what archetypal symbols are referring to more general issues, conflicts and solutions, what seems to be the dominant script...? In due time, the coachee may be confronted with these meanings and be asked about the significance of certain elements. Important also is that the coach is registering internally what emotions are triggered by the story and will be checking these with the reactions of the coachee.

### ***Reconstruction***

The coach who works with this approach is not interested in reconstructing how things really have happened in the past. More important is what significance these happenings have had, and maybe are still having for the coachee.

To be able to grasp the meaning of an event, the coachee is invited to tell the story about what has happened, in details, to switch maybe the punctuation to points of view, different from the teller herself. The same event can be told from the perspective of another concerned party, a bystander, or a person who is positioned against coachee, or, most important, from the perspective of a neutral point of view, or a third party.

Also the time-frame can be altered: tell a story that still has to happen or as an historical happening looking back from some point in the future.

By looking with the wisdom and experience of the 'now' to what has happened in the past, the teller of a story can attach new meaning and learn with hindsight.

A discovery could be, what has been meaningful for the coachee, or what resources she has developed in the past. When she was confronted with difficulties or obstructions, the patterns of her reactions become transparent as well as the repetition in typical ways of coping and of taking initiative. Depending on the kind of person, such discoveries can lead to further elaboration with a reframing or a more disclosing approach.



### ***Scripts***

Very much in accordance with the narrative approach, is to recognize specific forms of mini-scripts, as described in the framework of transactional analysis, with respect to the manner a coachee repeatedly has been coping with her ambitions.

Eight basic scripts can be distinguished:

- the postponed desire, characterised by the word 'before': "First I have to do this before I will be able to..."
- the uncontrolled desire; characterized by the word 'immediately' or 'now': "this can brook no delay"
- the prize of desire; characterized by the word 'after' and by a feeling of regret with the impossibility to enjoy what is: "But what about tomorrow? I will certainly be punished."
- the unattainable desire; characterized by the word 'never': "I don't even have to try. This is not for me."
- the obstructed desire; characterized by the word 'always', and an abundance of real excuses: "I have tried and done my utmost, but it is as if I always have to be the victim of circumstances."
- the anxious desire; characterized by the word 'almost', by doubts, and by failure at the last moment: "Just not", and "suppose I succeeded, what then?", "I don't know if I really will be happy with that".
- the limitless desire; characterized by the expression: 'and now still one more...', longing for next step, always better, still higher.
- the end of desire; characterized by the expression: "So, what? Is this all there is?"

One can see that most people are stuck in one or two of these modes. Underlying them are often firm beliefs about what is typical, possible, or necessary for me and about how the environment will be reacting on me. They act as self fulfilling prophesies.

### ***Belief systems***

Behind the scripts, one can look for the incentives and for the constraints which keep these patterns in existence. They can be expected to be organized in belief systems and often have an old origin. The composition of a belief system can be altered in several ways: we discussed some under the paragraph on reframing.

The original source of the coming into existence of underlying beliefs about self, the other, or how people will react on you, can be stripped of its emotional weight.

The underlying values can be seen to be served in alternative ways. And the resulting rules of conduct can be stretched depending on the circumstances.

For example: a coachee feels trapped in the script of the postponed desire, because she is convinced she is not allowed to make mistakes, must be perfect, and by consequence, be extremely prepared before she will endeavour into something new. One can try to discover how these beliefs originated, maybe, from a demanding mother or father. But this coachee has a lot gained by keeping to this script, by studying hard, by learning to be careful, and by being well prepared. So, maybe, it is important to find out how her internalized values about quality of work and perfect performance because of doing her best all the time, can be served in a different way. Maybe she can see that these values will also be gratified by innovation and by trusting one's intuition or by being more relaxed, or by being collaborative and trusting on others. That would make a big difference and cause a brake in her script!

A narrative coach would help her to imagine stories about different solutions, and will challenge her to compose a story about the nearby future which involves these new elements. When the coachee starts to give a different meaning to her behaviour or when she learns how

to transfer meaning from different moments in her past, or to see her path to the future in a different light, she will invent new patterns that are out of script. Her codes of conduct will change accordingly.

### *Listening at different levels*

In this approach, the most important intervention of the coach is to attach new meaning to the experiences of the coachee. To be able to do that, he has to listen on different levels to the stories of the coachee.

A story can be seen as an anecdote, which is more or less amusing. A story is also a puzzle; what are the important factors which will influence the outcome and how will it end?

On a more deeper level one can find all kind of references to other situations: what are underlying patterns, scripts, recurring traps or pitfalls and how can one avoid these or break the pattern?

Still deeper, a specific situation or event can be seen as a metaphor; it stands for something else, more profound and more significant. Especially when archetypical elements are woven into the story one can suspect that the more dramatic or more general human questions are at stake.

A narrative coach will ask the coachee to tell her story differently, changing the time frame (from the past to the future or the other way around or in the here and now), or will appeal to a varying point of view (changing the interpunction), or will look together for significance on different levels.

And last but not least, the coach will from time to time tell a story himself; on purpose to make a point, not by giving explanations or suggestions, but by telling about some event that has significance as a metaphor. An important condition is that the story should be true and should have some relevance for the situation of the coachee. Another condition is that the coachee can feel that the experience the coach is telling about, has a hidden key for his solution, which he can identify with.

## **10. Overview**

The basic approach in coaching seems to be rational-cognitive. It is based on the assumption that people who want to be coached, first of all, are looking for a logical explanation for the problems they may be encountering in their work situation and are helped with feedback they can understand and which motivates them to try out new behaviour. Emotions are important but can rationally be understood and altered by will power. Clearly, this approach works very well with rational people who are open for feedback and motivated to experiment with new behaviour.

When further searching is needed because the coachee is confronted with internal barriers due to fixed convictions about self, others, and what is possible or needed under actual (new) circumstances, a reframing approach is necessary. However, the coachee must be prepared to put her convictions under scrutiny. At least some reflective capability is an important condition. Although this approach, too, is very rational it will be helpful if the coachee has a healthy understanding of her emotions. When challenged, a change of the belief system can bring back undigested old feelings, which need clarification, to be worked through, or to be released.

The psycho-dynamic approach is very much suited to doing this kind of working through. However, not everybody has the psychological make up to be able to contain the emotions triggered by such an approach. Coachees who have some disturbing traits in their personality, or are temporarily in a weak position because of serious and complex disturbing

circumstances, are much better served with a more supporting style of coaching; more direct structuring, psycho-education and first rebuilding some strength.

For a psycho-dynamic approach, a healthy self reflecting attitude is needed; this approach is well suited for people who are interested in understanding better the unconscious and hidden parts of their personality.

In contrast, system dynamics does not focus on the internal (intra-psychic) dynamics but on the relational (inter-psychic) dynamics. Often the questions of a coachee have to be seen within the context of organisational, interpersonal, or inter-systems tensions. This approach helps to understand how the coachee is operating in the complex networks of her working environment. A coach working with this model, will not shy away from touching upon the home situation, work-life balance, and other aspects outside the direct sphere of the job situation.

In comparison to psycho-system dynamic approaches, the solution focused and other appreciative approaches are much safer. They bring out the strong points of the coachee's character and value very much even small steps taken in the right direction.

In this model, the coachee is very much in command; this helps a lot with overcoming resistance and building the motivation to change. Paradoxically, coachees who have a clear understanding of the gap between what they want and how their situation is, are very well helped by this kind of approach. Working with this approach, one is very much aware of the danger that the coachee externalizes the causes of her problems or is more attached to her problems than to a possible solution. Still, the coach working with this approach can seduce the coachee to completely turn the scales.

There are of course also people who are resistant to most of the techniques of the above mentioned approaches. They are the hard cases. A more confronting, direct approach is needed. The provocative style is a possibility, but demands a very paradoxical attitude from the coach: both warm and understanding, very much focused on the coachee and at the same time humorously teasing, allowing for no nonsense, or fantasizing, by mirroring and even over-emphasizing the reactions of the environment to the coachee.

This is only possible if there is a strong relationship between the coachee and her coach, a high motivation to work with this particular person and a favourable response to the teasing provocations by the coach.

The last approach which was discussed is a more encompassing one. Though the narrative approach is in itself embodied in a specific attitude, interventions, and a way of looking at the coachee, it uses several techniques which are developed in one or more of the above explained approaches. At the same time, it is more than that: it provides a framework which on a meta level makes it possible to find out what could be applied from other approaches.

By reflecting on the stories of the coachee, the way she is telling them, what themes are stressed and what is left out, the colouring of the story with or without feelings, the versatility of the coachee and her susceptibility, her capability to reflect on herself and take other positions, many indications are disclosed about how to proceed further.

And of course, what a coach must do, above all, is know how to listen, both to the stories of the coachee and to the hidden meaning. Last but not least, the most powerful intervention a coach has at his disposal is his own personality, his wisdom, his compassion, and his attention.

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