

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 the 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.

In this article we will distinguish eight different approaches which have their own strong and weak points. Our objective is to raise the interest for coaches to broaden their scope and repertoire and to provide a comprehensive overview as a guideline for further development. 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 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 behaviours which can be adopted or learned, if a person is willing to apply themselves (Hargrove).

Working methods 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 of action, and attached feelings are explored and put into practice, first as experiments and later in reality (Whitmore).

The classical model of single loop learning prevails (Argyris). 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 being reached, or that there are undesirable effects, or that there are side effects that are not corresponding to a person's 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 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 is 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, is it possible to enlarge the range of accessible options for new behaviour.

3. Breaking of patterns: reframing

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.

If the coachee is interested in changing routines and realizes that her old behaviour patterns and old feelings are barriers for new developments, then reframing becomes an interesting approach. Reframing is often very helpful when a person is taking up new roles or has discovered that old assumptions are no longer valid for her new circumstances (Brunning). There are several ways to work with belief systems which are at the root of undesirable behaviour patterns. One is to make the coachee more aware of how the system works and what elements are driving forces behind certain behaviour patterns. Other ways are directed at changing certain elements and reorganizing the belief system as a whole.

Though these interventions appeal to the rational thinking of the coachee, it is important to see that mostly such a belief system has also a non-rational side. One could say that the system is occupied by old emotions. When a coachee gives herself permission to break her own rules, often she begins to experience emotional relief.

4. A supporting style

An important issue can be raised with regards to how deep the impact of coaching should be. The dimension of 'supporting or disclosing' can be considered as a basic axis for coaching. The initial psychological strength of a coachee 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 background of a person. 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 point in 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, and maybe through this, some loss of ability, or difficulty in handling conflict. In such a case, the coach must be ready to be much more directive, structured, and advising about first steps, - prioritising and stabilizing

the situation - than normally would be the case. Being supportive demands much more active involvement than when a coach acts from the assumption that the coachee has to take the lead herself the whole time.

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 influences of earlier experiences which have an effect on actual behaviour. This creates a grey area where coaching overlaps with therapy. The psycho-dynamic approach inquires into the unconscious meanings, desires, and emotions of individuals with the purpose of them feeling more creative and lively (Kets de Vries).

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 learns to cope with all sorts of situations and transfers their responses to new situations. However, coping means also that one has learned to suppress some healthy reactions and has adapted a way of dealing with stressful situations which is not adequate anymore.

A person's behaviour may be triggered unconsciously by somebody or by certain conditions which remind them of people or situations in the past that have put a mark on them. 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.

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 (O'Neil). A first question will be about with whom to close the contract, whether to involve the boss of the coachee or not.

During the coaching-process, other parties will also 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.

An important guideline for a systems-oriented coach is to bring the context into question. Another 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 variety in interests and points of view, or at least to try to let her understand what drives the other person.

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).

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 led to the success of the coachee.

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).

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.

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 aspect 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, even playing the clown if necessary, and is characterized by the deliberate use of mockery and humour (Farely and Brandsma).

This kind of coach does not make any effort to help the coachee, does not think up any serious solutions, and gives no advice. Instead, he concentrates strongly on the coachee in the here and now, nonverbally mirroring the attitude of the coachee, using a lot of humour in his voice.

In general, the coach demonstrates that he is not impressed by the explanations and projections of the coachee, about what causes her problems and how she wants to progress.

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, in other words, he plays the devil's advocate. In this way, a more founded reaction by the coachee is triggered (Hollander a.o.).

The coach makes a strong appeal to the coachee to be authentic and to see her situation in perspective.

This approach is only possible when there is a strong working relationship between the coach and coachee. It is not an attitude that every coach naturally has 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.

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, 2007 / 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.

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.

The coach who works with this approach is not interested in reconstructing how things have really happened in the past. More important is what significance these happenings have had, and maybe are still having, for the coachee. He has to listen on different levels to the stories of the coachee. A narrative oriented 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 interjection, so telling the story from another actor's point of view), or will look together for significance on a different level.

And last but not least, the coach will from time to time tell a story himself, by telling about some event that has significance as a metaphor.

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, a reframing approach is necessary. However, the coachee must be prepared to put her convictions under scrutiny. 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, systems-dynamics does not focus on the internal (intra-psyche) dynamics but on the relational (inter-psyche) 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- and 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.

The coachee in this model, 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 based on a strong relationship between the coachee and her 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 other 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. 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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