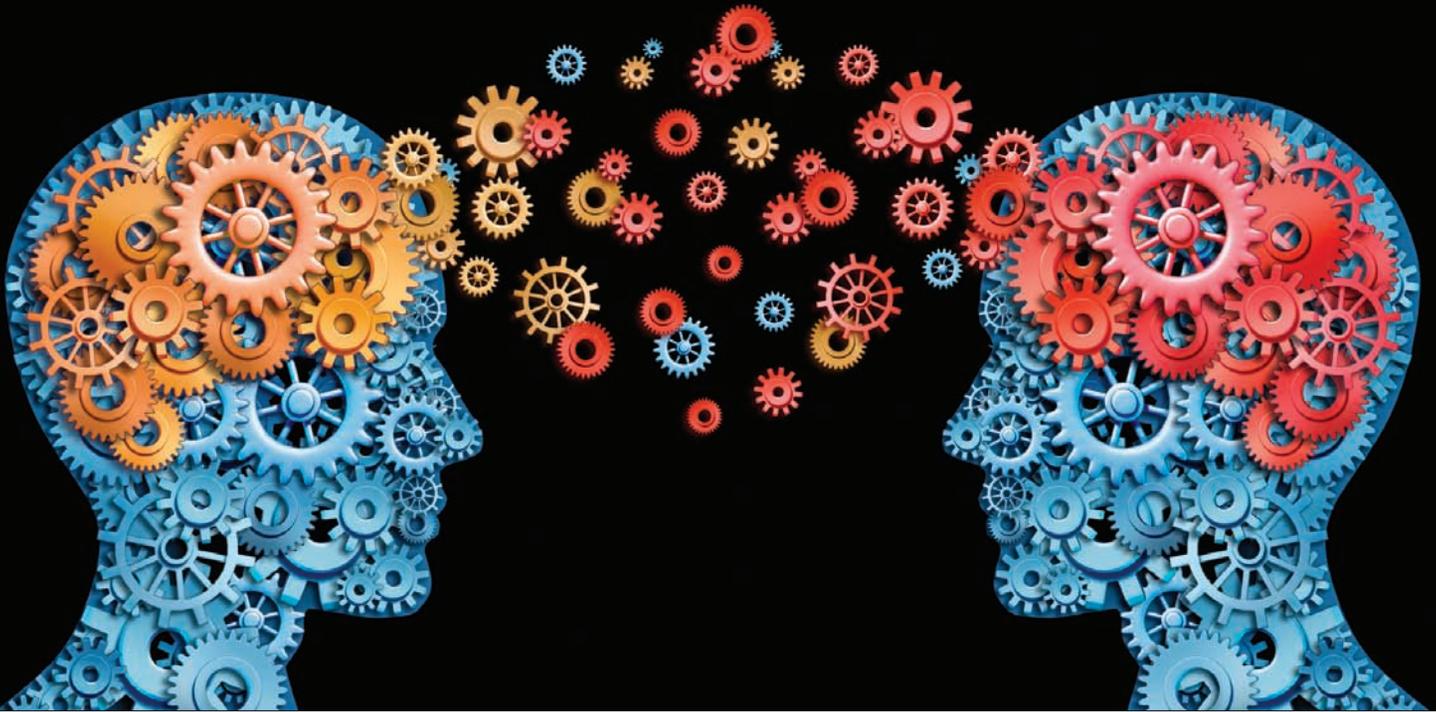


COACHING THE PERSON

in the context of complexity & uncertainty

by Brigid Russell



‘When is coaching therapy?’ In exploring this question, it is not my intention to write a treatise about the distinctions between coaching and therapy. I practice as an executive coach; I am not a therapist. I could simply assert that coaching is not therapy. Yet, when I coach leaders in the public services who are facing unprecedented levels of uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity, I know that there are times when, for some, coaching feels like therapy. So, in practice, this is not about clear-cut definitions.

‘How and when have I combined coaching and therapy with the same client?’ In addressing this question, I consider the similarities and differences between coaching and therapy - in service of exploring the client experience of coaching and the impact of this coaching within their particular context.

While trying to create a sense of direction and clarity for others, many public service leaders experience self-doubt and uncertainty themselves. No wonder, then, that coaching sometimes feels like ‘therapy’ – or what a busy, possibly stressed, leader perceives to be therapy. In the midst of ‘busy-ness’ and complexity, perhaps the leader experiences coaching as being in a calm space with someone who simply (and deeply) listens, does not judge, offers questions and challenges from a place of positive intent, and provides feedback in the moment.

‘When is coaching therapy, and how and when have I combined both with the same client?’ This is written from my perspective as a practitioner and based on my experiences of coaching leaders in the public services (rather than academically grounded research). It is my attempt to draw some linkages in practice between the system, the challenges facing leaders in that system and the potential of a particular coaching approach. My intention is to explore the boundaries around coaching and therapy through the lens of the client’s experiences of coaching, their connection with me as coach and their perception of how coaching enables them to make sense of complexity in their system. But my purpose is not to identify a clean, neat boundary between coaching and therapy – even if that were possible. As Jenny Rogers says, “stop searching for a non-existent boundary – it is, and always will be, grey” [2011].

When there is trauma and complexity in the system, what impact does this have on the individual leader? How does the individual make sense of their situation? What part might coaching play in enabling an

individual to develop self-understanding, discover insights and support themselves? In this sense, my focus is on the contextual factors facing the client, as well as their intra-psycho qualities, which mean that they might find aspects of the coaching interaction ‘therapeutic’. It is also about considering the approach and qualities of the coach, as well as the features of the coaching relationship, which enable the creation of this ‘therapeutic’ space for the clients.

In setting out on my exploration of the first question, ‘when is coaching therapy?’, I briefly outline my understanding of the similarities, differences and overlaps between coaching and therapy (in Section 2). I then provide an overview of my perspective as a coach working with leaders in the public service context.

In Section 3, I explore the focus and purpose of coaching, the qualities of the coaching relationship, and consider the relevance of a coaching approach which is ‘therapeutic’ in nature for these public service leaders. By way of illustrating how and when I have combined elements of coaching and therapy with the same client, I provide brief anonymised examples of my coaching practice with leaders in the public services (in Section 4).

Lastly, I offer some concluding reflections about the potential impact of coaching which is blended with elements of therapy from the perspective of the client in the context of public service leadership. I also consider the implications of this approach for the practice and continuing professional development of the coach (in Section 5).



2: Perspectives on coaching and therapy

Definitions and distinctions

Much has been written and debated about the definition of coaching and the factors which differentiate it from therapy. For the purpose of exploring 'when is coaching therapy', I am not going to embark on a huge foray into the territory of defining different types of coaching. My intention is simply to set out what I understand by coaching and how this informs my practice of coaching. Acutely conscious that (as with coaching) there is a multiplicity of approaches to therapy, I outline my understanding of those common aspects of therapy which I believe have relevance to coaching.

Amongst the multitude of definitions of coaching, I am drawn to the following "broad-based definition" by Peter Bluckert:

"Coaching is the facilitation of learning and development with the purpose of improving performance and enhancing effective action, goal achievement and personal satisfaction. It invariably involves growth and change, whether that is in perspective, attitude or behaviour" [2006: 3].

In my practice, coaching takes place with an individual within an organisational context and, in this way, is focused on enhancing the individual's effectiveness in role. However, while there is a focus on performance and "goal achievement", I share the view that "there is more to life than increasing action" [Whitworth et al, 2007: 13], i.e., that learning and insight are legitimate 'outcomes' too. In other words, I subscribe to the value of "awareness as a goal" in coaching [Peltier, 2001: xxx], that "awareness itself is curative" [Perls in Bluckert, 2006: 121].

I am drawn to the idea that the person's 'well-being', incorporating their motivation and happiness at work, is an essential part of the coaching field. There is increasing recognition of the causal link between a person's well-being, their engagement with work, and their effectiveness and performance at work. In other words, people who feel well and are well-engaged will perform more effectively for the organisation [e.g., West & Dawson, 2012]. 'Well-being' in the broadest sense may include helping the client to make meaning around their work and broader (societal) contribution, their values, and the 'right' balance between work and life for them, all of which may depend on their particular stage in life and work / personal circumstances.

According to the Health and Safety Executive (2001), there are ethical, legal and economic grounds for organisations to take action around work-related stress [quoted in Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005: 97]. Stress 'costs' organisations – in terms of lost productivity, the negative impact on employee welfare, and lower engagement. A European Commission report (Levi, 2000) on work-related stress defined it as:

"...the emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reaction to aversive and noxious aspects of work, work environments and work organisations. It is a state characterised by high levels of arousal and distress and often by feelings of not coping". [in Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005: 97]

In summarising research around coaching and stress, Gyllensten & Palmer point to findings in which the coaching had helped participants to reduce their stress by encouraging them "to take time for themselves regularly and by highlighting the importance of self-care [2006: 87]. In a second study (Wales, 2003), coaching was found to help managers reduce their experience of stress through a relationship which provided "a safe environment where the managers could share fears and anxieties, identify coping skills, and test new behaviours" [quoted in Gyllensten & Palmer, 2006: 87].

I support the view that coaching is about growth and change, drawing on concepts from adult learning and development about individuals' innate capacity to understand and deal with their own issues [Horner, 2011]. It is important for the coach to demonstrate their belief in the person's potential and to foster the "on-going self-directed learning and personal growth of the client" [Grant & Stober (2006) in Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011: 74] as opposed to adopting the "expert helper model" [Horner, 2011]. In this regard, an understanding of psychological principles, e.g., around dependence, transference, and counter-

transference, is essential for the coach's self-supervision and in encouraging the client's independence and avoiding co-dependency [Peltier, 2001: 22-41].

Helping a client to build their self-belief, to trust their own judgements, and to take the steps towards fulfilling their own potential may mean the coach is working on or around the boundary between coaching and therapy [Bluckert, 2006]. However, perhaps this is where the 'real' and lasting work will happen for some clients?

There are many analyses of the differences between therapy and coaching [e.g., Peltier, 2001: xxvii; Williams, 2003]. This is not surprising given the on-going debates around whether or not coaching is a distinct "profession" [Gray, 2001] as well as the emergence of 'coach psychologists' as a sub-discipline [Grant, 2006]. In this connection, Grant suggests that clients "value a coaching relationship with a psychologist that is focused on goal attainment and well-being, rather than being curative" [2006: 16]. Bluckert makes the point that the "demarcation issue" between therapy and coaching concerns many coaches (in particular those without a psychological background) but that the descriptions of the key differentiating factors can be "mis-leading" and "over-simplistic" [2005: 92-93].

The common differences (beyond those which relate to the practical delivery and contractual arrangements) are typically summarised as follows:

- Coaching focuses on the present and future while therapy deals with the past
- Coaching is aimed at "highly functioning people" while therapy exists for people who have some form of "pathology" [Bluckert, 2005: 93] or coaching has a "growth or skills development orientation" whereas therapy has a "pathology orientation" [Peltier, 2001: xxvii]
- The primary focus of coaching is on improving the individual's effectiveness in role within the organisational context whereas therapy also addresses "non-work aspects of an individual's life and may involve in-depth explorations of the client's history and their key relationships" [Bluckert, 2005: 93].
- The training and experience of coaches and therapists may differ, e.g., in terms of the depth of self-exploration and engagement in a therapeutic process.

The question is whether these are distinct differences or whether the picture is, in fact, more blurred?

The past, present and future focus of both therapy and coaching may depend – on the particular needs of the client and the approach. The distinction in terms of "psychological functioning" of the client is a potentially dangerous one which pre-supposes that the boundary is nice and neat. I subscribe to the view that a coach is best prepared if they are aware of the possibility that their client may be experiencing some psychological problems and they know whether they can work with the client or whether it is better to suggest a referral on to a suitably qualified therapist, i.e., the coach exercising their "psychological-mindedness" [Bluckert, 2006: 87-92].

The context of coaching and therapy differs, i.e., in coaching there may be both a direct coaching client and an organisational sponsor. However, in the nature of the work and the development of the practitioner there is perhaps potential for the sharing of practices and approaches between coaching and therapy. As Horner asserts:

"Coaching and coaches offer diverse and wide-ranging interventions. Our clients are equally diverse. Rather than differentiating ourselves from therapy, we need to acknowledge that we can draw on therapeutic approaches without straying into therapy itself" [2011].

Practicing around the boundaries?

There are similarities between coaching and therapy in terms of the role of the "helper" and the nature of the relationship [Egan, 2007: 47-68]. But the key difference is that coaching takes place within an organisational context and, in essence, coaching is about the individual's effectiveness in context.



As a coach, I blend approaches along the continuum between coaching and therapy [West & Milan, 2001] in service of the particular client, carefully managing the boundaries around safe practice. My approach to coaching is essentially humanist, person-centred, non-directive and developmental [Ives, 2008]. Bringing theoretical understanding and approaches from therapy into coaching may bring coaches into a “fuzzy space” (as labelled by Professor Ernesto Spinelli) or, as Horner dubs it, a “third way” which is “therapy-informed, not therapy itself” [2011].

This recognises that, while there will inevitably be some psychological dimensions to coaching issues, it is not ‘therapy’. It is a blended approach which may be suitable for clients who “feel out of balance and are drawn to reflecting on where they’ve been, who they are and what is meaningful for them during their current life stage” [Horner, 2011]. It is about being able and prepared to give the client the opportunity to express their fears about change, their self-doubt, or those things which are leading to them ‘getting stuck’ [Bluckert, 2006: 50].

What does this mean for a coach in terms of practicing safely and ethically? The coach – as much as the therapist – needs to pay attention to “doing no harm” to the client [de Haan, 2008: 48]. It requires the coach to develop a deep knowledge of the psychological models, a “deeper repertoire to help understand the client’s issues” [Horner, 2011]. For example, understanding psychodynamic theory around how “unconscious patterns of behaviour, thoughts, emotions, conflicts, defences, and relationships” may be impacting on an individual’s current attitudes and behaviours [Kilburg, 2004: 249]. The coach needs to understand which areas they will not, and should not, venture into and when to refer on to a GP or suitably qualified therapist [Rogers, 2011]. From an ethical perspective, the coach must be scrupulously honest about their qualification to practice in particular areas.

Overly focusing on the ‘problem’ and hence the quick solution, rather than the person, may lead coaches into the kinds of harmful practices about which Berglas warns us [2002]. However, as Jenny Rogers points out, Berglas is comparing “good psychotherapy” with “bad coaching” [Rogers, 2011], pre-supposing that all coaching is a ‘quick fix’. I share the critique of “solution-focused coaching”: that it achieves short-term change only and, by pushing to the solution, may minimise or overlook the underlying issues [Palmer et al, 2007]. In referencing Berglas, Lee recommends that coaches develop “psychological-mindedness” as well as “business-mindedness” [Lee, 2003: 2; Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2010: 6] so as to be able to work at both greater depth and breadth.

As an executive coach without formal psychological training, I used to avoid broaching ‘psychological depth’, for fear of getting out of my depth. I now focus on practicing safely by being attuned to the client’s needs, expectations and preparedness to work at depth. Heeding Berglas’ warning, I believe that coaching at its best is focused on the whole person within their work context and on the link between the “personal” and the “practical” journey which enables “managers to translate personal insights into new and useful behaviours” [Lee, 2003: 22].

In blending approaches from coaching and therapy, I am sensitive to the client’s personal and professional dilemmas and acutely aware of their system. In contracting, my aim is to help clarify the client’s purpose and expectations of coaching and to be clear about my approach to coaching, including how I may adapt to the client’s needs (exercising my psychological-mindedness) and align to their context (demonstrating my business-mindedness). I am also careful about the ‘power of expertise’ as coach, i.e., taking care to be clear about why I am using a particular tool, approach, or psychometric instrument.

‘Feels like therapy’

What is the client’s perspective? Rather than ‘when is coaching therapy?’ perhaps the question is: what is it that might make coaching feel like therapy?

Perhaps coaching provides a space in which the client can talk about their problems, their “unfinished business” [Bluckert, 2006: 58-9], their “inner game” as well as their “outer game” in Gallwey’s terms [2000].

“The experience of being really heard can be enough for some people to let go of their emotional investment and begin to see things differently” [Bluckert, 2006: 59].

Hearing themselves speak out loud, without being judged, may help the client gain greater clarity both about their external (business) issues as well as their “inner game”, e.g., a fear of conflict or confrontation. In working with leaders in public services, I may bring in my understanding of systems and leadership theory in supporting them to “get on the balcony” [Heifetz & Laurie, 1997], to gain perspective on what is going on as well as to understand the part they are playing in the situation. The coaching can be a calm, reflective space in which the client can slow down, understand the issue, and see their own part in it, before being able to move on again. Due to their formal leadership position within the organisation, it may be the only place where the client can be open and be assured that it is ‘safe’ and confidential.

In the context of organisational turbulence, the client may be confronted with existential dilemmas around their purpose, values or legacy. What happens when a client’s values, and sense of self, are out of alignment because of change at work? Simply providing the space in which a quest for meaning can take place safely is hugely powerful and, perhaps, even therapeutic. Such exploration may enable the client to reach some life-changing decisions, e.g., around leaving their current organisation or role. Well-intentioned coaching sponsors will accept this possible outcome as a legitimate risk (as well as a potential benefit) of coaching.

Where there is complexity or trauma in the system, perhaps individuals need the means to build their resilience? As Bluckert notes,

“...helping people grow their internal engine to cope with increasing pace and complexity is a key role for coaches and potentially one of coaching’s most relevant contributions” [2006: 47].

The challenge is that change for the client happens within the context of the system. I predominantly coach leaders in public services who are facing considerable change and complexity, such as:

- Huge pressures on the allocation and management of resources and the need to balance cost control with the delivery of high quality services
- Change in the shape, identity and scope of professional roles, e.g., challenging traditional hierarchies in some clinical professions in the NHS
- Change in how services are shaped and delivered, e.g., greater focus on delivery by the multi-disciplinary team and by generic, rather than highly specialist, roles
- Shifts in public expectations and values around public service
- Rapid pace of technological change, e.g., advances in tele-health
- Demographic change, e.g., an increasingly ageing population, which impacts both on the volume and nature of the demands placed on services.

In my experience, these (and other) contextual challenges translate into the following common themes in the coaching:

- Managing with integrity and honesty and staying true to public service values while being a leader within an increasingly challenging financial environment.
- Making the tricky transition from a professional expertise role to a broader, more corporate leadership role where the focus is more about inspiring others than it is about direct delivery of task.
- Building resilience, emotional and social intelligence [Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008] in the face of increasing complexity and the pace of change
- Managing a range of work relationships, some of which have become dysfunctional or ‘stuck’, and developing ways of having better, meaningful dialogue [Isaacs, 1999]
- Handling the ethical challenges of a public sector leadership role and balancing corporate, clinical / service and staff governance.
- Managing upwards and influencing others over whom the individual has no direct authority, all within a highly politicised context.



I sometimes get asked by clients about the 'right' issue to bring to coaching. Drawing on my knowledge of the system, I may get a sense that the client believes they should work on 'business issues' in the coaching. In some cases, this might well be the right focus for the coaching. However, in facing up to and understanding their problems, the client may need to work on both the "inner" as well as the "outer" dimensions [Bluckert, 2006: 48]. Influenced by Gestalt principles, I take the view that what a client brings to coaching is the 'right' issue – even though this might not be immediately apparent.

What issues might they be either avoiding or feeling hesitant about, e.g., dealing with inter-personal relationships or giving critical feedback to colleagues in a constructive and timely way? What deep-seated issues might be lying beneath the challenges they present, such as a lack of self-belief or fear of conflict? So, the 'real' work – underlying the client's presentation of the systemic themes outlined above – may concern issues such as:

'Am I good enough as a leader?'

'Do I want to be a leader in this climate of ever-decreasing resources?'

'I don't feel heard'

'There is never enough time to pause, reflect and learn from mistakes'

'I can't say what I really think or feel to that person'

'What if I get it wrong?'

'If I admit how I feel, I have failed'

3: Coaching the person

Since coaching concerns the individual's effectiveness in a role, within a system, it requires careful three-way contracting with the client and organisation sponsor. However, if as West & Milan assert, coaching is to "... assist those in leadership positions to develop the awareness, perspective, clarity of thought and emotional responsiveness to occupy their roles authentically and creatively" [2001: 39], then it also needs to consider the whole person.

Sometimes (but not in all cases) the client may need to talk about issues at greater depth. In my view, this is the territory in which coaching becomes 'therapy' or, at the very least, shares some therapeutic characteristics. The coach's role is to create a 'safe container' in which learning, reflection and development can take place, in which the individual client "feels held" and psychologically secure [Bluckert, 2006: 21] and sure of the confidential nature of the conversation.

What conditions in the coaching – and which qualities the coach brings to the relationship – might mean that it 'feels like therapy' to the client? In exploring these conditions, my contention is that such conditions are rare in the typical corporate environment and this explains why clients might experience such coaching as 'therapeutic' in nature.

In my experience, the "person-centred" approach as expounded by Carl Rogers is particularly powerful in working with leaders in the context of complexity and uncertainty, based as it is on a "deep faith in the tendency of people to develop in a positive and constructive manner if a climate of respect and trust is established". Its relevance is that a coach truly working in this way provides the client with a rare opportunity to "be really listened to and heard" [Peltier, 2001: 66-80].

There is growing recognition amongst employers about the link between employee engagement, staff health and well-being [North & Palmer, 2008], and organisational effectiveness and business success. In their research for The King's Fund looking at engagement and leadership in the NHS in England, for example, West & Dawson make the compelling case for the link between how staff are engaged and their capacity for providing high quality care for their patients. Perhaps unsurprisingly (but compellingly, nonetheless) if people are treated in a 'person-centred' way, then they are more likely to treat others in kind.

"In summary, the findings make it clear that cultures of engagement, positivity, caring, compassion and respect for all – staff, patients and the public – provide the ideal environment within which to care for the health of the nation. When we care for staff, they can fulfil their calling of providing outstanding professional care for patients". [West & Dawson, 2012: 20].

While Gallwey describes coaching as "... the art of creating an environment, through conversation and a way of being" through which the coachee can "move toward desired goals in a fulfilling manner", he also notes that the coach "facilitates learning" as well as caring for the person being coached [Gallwey, 2000: 177].

Drawing on Rogers' "person-centred approach", it is the qualities of the therapist (or coach, in this case) which create the core conditions for a quality 'therapeutic relationship' and help create an environment for growth within which the client can reach their potential and take responsibility for their own development. The three therapist characteristics critical for a "growth-promoting climate" [Peltier, 2001: 69; Rogers, 1980: 114-117] are:

- Congruence or genuineness, i.e., acting in accordance with your values and beliefs;
- Unconditional positive regard and acceptance, i.e., a deep and genuine caring which is non-judgemental and non-possessive; and,
- Accurate empathy, i.e., understanding the other's world and communicating this in a meaningful, thoughtful and caring way.

In addition, Kilburg [in Bluckert, 2006: 30] identifies the importance of respecting the client as a person and having an understanding and appreciation of the complexities of the client's context, life and "inner world".

While it is the client and their agenda which shape the coaching, I share the relational perspective that awareness, insight and forward movement happen through the client's connection and conversation with the coach [de Haan, 2008: 50]. The psychotherapy research about the importance of the quality of the 'helper' / client relationship is equally relevant to coaching. As Jenny Rogers asserts:

"Meta-research into therapy shows that conditions for success do not depend on the theoretical orientation of the practitioner, nor on techniques. What does work is an emotionally charged relationship of warmth and trust and a mutually shared belief that change is possible together" [2011].

In their summary of the research about the common factors which contribute to change and therapeutic success, Assay and Lambert [in Hubble, Duncan and Miller (1999) and quoted in Bluckert, 2006: 41] identified four major factors: the client (40%); the relationship (30%); hope / expectancy; and models / techniques. The client factors included inner capacities such as self-belief, motivation, persistence, and sense of personal responsibility together with their network of supports and contacts. In his research, Cooper found that "particular approaches are less important than a working alliance characterised by empathy, openness and common purpose" [quoted in Alred, 2011]. In comparing the critical "ingredients" of coaching and organisational psychology, McKenna and Davis note that "it [the client-coach relationship] is the vehicle through which the coach activates the client's ability and willingness to change" [2009: 250].

As Critchley asserts, a "skilled coaching process developed from a profound understanding of relational needs is capable of contributing to human growth", a point which is demonstrated in both the psychotherapy and coaching research into "effective outcomes" [2009]. For example, "the quality of the relationship between coach and client, as rated by the client, is what makes all the difference to the success of executive coaching" rather than "introducing clever interventions" [Duckworth & de Haan, 2009: 33; de Haan et al, 2011].

This reinforces my belief in being integrative [Passmore, 2006: 135-152], understanding a range of approaches so as to choose those which best fit [Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2010; Orenstein, 2002], rather than adopting one particular 'type' of coaching. As Horner claims, "the strength of the 'third way' coach is not being tied to one approach" [Horner, 2011], but is rather in adopting an integrative approach which draws on a range of psychological and other approaches.

As Egan describes it, "helping and other deep interpersonal transactions demand a certain robustness or intensity of presence" [2007: 73]. Perhaps it is this "attentive presence", combined with the 'helper'



skills and approaches, which is a core part of creating a 'therapeutic' environment for the client. "Visibly tuning in" and expressing your empathy is what demonstrates to the client that you are truly "being with" and understanding them, as Rogers described it [Rogers, 1980: 137]. It is what puts you "in a position to listen carefully to their concerns" [Egan, 2007: 73]. The huge relevance to leaders in the context of complexity and uncertainty is that, as Egan puts it, "there is such an unfulfilled need to be understood" [Egan, 2007: 102].

I am really struck by Egan's assertion: "Listening is not merely a skill. It is a rich metaphor for the helping relationship itself" [Egan, 2007: 78]. My intention is to listen attentively to hear the client's story, their underlying thoughts, behaviours and emotions [Egan, 2007; Reissner, 2008] and with empathy to understand them as a person in their situation [Lee, 2003: 94-110], not as a set of problems to be resolved.

In developing my practice, I embrace the Gestalt "use of self as instrument of change" within the coaching relationship [Bluckert, 2006: 84-86; Seashore et al, 2004], bringing in my 'feedback in the moment' and paying attention to the shifting dynamics of the coaching relationship and my experience of the client [Critchley, 2009]. This relies on being fully present, on establishing genuine contact and rapport. 'Being there' and being prepared to take risks works both ways; things happen when we are in contact [Bluckert, 2006: 21]. Critchley explains the 'relational' approach as one in which the coach is "capable of self-awareness and reflexivity" and open to the possibility that they, too, are "subject to the process of relating" rather than in control of it [2009].

My aim is to ensure that coaching is both supportive and constructively challenging, with 'support' and 'challenge' being points along a continuum rather than polar opposites [Bluckert, 2006: 127]. While it may sometimes be hard to give the 'tough' feedback, this may well be where the greatest learning happens for both the client and coach. This is about bringing in what Egan describes as "tough-minded listening", i.e., listening for the client's "distortions" and choosing when to challenge [Egan, 2007: 92]. I also subscribe to the importance of affirmation for the client, especially as they are unlikely to be experiencing it within their work context.

In this regard, I am struck by the relevance of Adam Kahane's ideas around power and love (both generative and degenerative) for those leaders deep in the context of complexity and uncertainty, in the realm of 'no right answers':

"To keep moving forward, we need to be able to keep ourselves upright, to self-correct. We need to be able to prevent ourselves from going so far with our power that we lose touch with our love, or so far with our love that we lose touch with our power. This requires building up our awareness of and openness to feedback about how we are exercising our power and our love and with what results" [2010: 130].

Coaching provides a safe place in which the client can explore the impact of their environment on them (and others), drawing on systems theory and family systems therapy [Peltier, 2001: 100-120] for exploring and making sense of organisations, sub-systems, rules, norms and myths. Furthermore, drawing on social psychology enables the coach to understand the power and influence of the social environment on people's behaviour (beyond personality factors) and to help the client in making sense of their environment [Peltier, 2001: 138]. Inviting a client to reflect on and suspend their judgements may feel very exposing for the client, especially where they are not used to such reflective practice.

Coaching conversations around choice and meaning (drawing on existentialism) may feel deep, even 'therapeutic', to leaders who have (let themselves) become constrained or defined by their work context. The coach's role is to raise the client's self-awareness about choice and the process of noticing how they restrict their own choices. How to (re-) focus on what is important to them can feel hard, or too deep, if the client has been avoiding 'choice', or not living by their values, in the face of the impact of the 'outer world' [Peltier, 2001: 160].

4: Coaching in the context of complexity & uncertainty

Coaching differs from therapy in that the focus is on the person in role and in their organisational context. However, coaching the whole person in the context of complexity and uncertainty means that the conversation between coach and client touches on some of the client's deeper, more personal issues too. What might be going on for the client – at both the systemic and the personal (intra-psycho) level? This is where, as coach, I need to bring together both my psychological awareness with my systemic perspective, to combine elements of coaching and therapy in differing degrees.

There are challenges in the work context of leaders in public services which are sometimes in tension. For example, in health and social care, the pressure to meet short-term targets (e.g., access targets) and to cut costs is in tension with the need to be creative and innovative in terms of service delivery and quality improvement. Such systemic tensions sometimes manifest in the organisation culture. On the 'shadow side' of the culture, drawing on Gerard Egan's concept [1994], the tension between short-term targets and long-term vision may be well known and spoken about. However, the individual leader may not feel able to have an open dialogue about their concerns and the pressures under which they are working. Instead, they keep their concerns quiet meaning that they experience considerable stress - as a result both of compromising their values and shouldering the burden of a complex workload.

What might the coaching provide that clients are not getting elsewhere? Perhaps it is as simple (and yet profound) as the space and time for reflection, the chance to be listened to, to be both supported and challenged constructively, to explore their learning and find ways of dealing with their issues without fear of being judged [Bluckert, 2006: 47]. Furthermore, coaching provides a safe place in which the client can explore the impact of their environment on them and others [Peltier, 2001: 152].

As financial pressure in the public sector restricts coaching contracts to fewer sessions, my challenge as coach is to establish rapport (as quickly and authentically as possible) with the client and still work effectively on the breadth and depth of issues. I remain cautious about the value of "solution-focused" or "brief" coaching [Szabó, 2009] because, while short-term outcomes may be achieved, deeper and systemic issues may be overlooked.

By way of illustrating how and when I have combined elements of coaching and therapy (or a 'therapeutic approach') with the same client, I have outlined three client examples from my work in the public services. To protect the identities of these clients, I have both anonymised them and changed identifiable details.

In each case, it could be argued that it is simply an example of coaching. My contention is that something about the situation of the client in each case – both their context and their underlying personal issues - made the coaching a 'therapeutic' experience, at least in part.

Client X: Working within a context of increasing service pressure, with multiple priorities and competing demands on his time

X requested an initial coaching session with the stated purpose of "balancing priorities in my role". It quickly became apparent that X was very distressed by an outstanding staff grievance which had been lodged against him. It felt important to give X the space to tell the whole story. I listened deeply and with no judgement, asking few questions but providing the occasional summary. After two hours, X shared both his surprise that he had spoken at such length as well as his sense of relief at having had the chance to say it all out loud. Simply acknowledging that the situation was over-shadowing his work and personal life, he felt calmer and more able to see a way forward.

Client Y: Leading a team within the context of decreasing resources and a lack of commitment at executive level to the purpose of her team

Y needed a safe space in which to tell her story, without interruption or judgement, with the attentive presence of someone listening empathically. She needed it to be okay that she cried tears of frustration as she told her story, of how she found it impossible to be heard by

her manager. In team meetings, he ignored or talked over her points. Sometimes, the meetings finished before she had had the chance to contribute her points of view. Through the very act of listening, with some gentle prompting questions and summaries, I felt the trust and rapport building with Y, surprisingly quickly given her hostile working environment.

She seemed enormously relieved simply to have the space in which to speak. Having spoken, she was ready to make sense of what was happening to her, to start recognising some patterns in her thoughts, feelings and behaviours. In the first session, and no less in subsequent sessions, it really mattered that I listened, that I demonstrated empathy (not sympathy), and that Y could proceed at her own pace. At the start, Y felt stuck, unsupported and unable to see a way to break out of a frustrating cycle of non-response and inaction from her manager and her own 'unsuccessful' responses. Eventually, Y was upbeat and able not only to embrace her strengths but to accept her success and positive impact in a new role.

Client Z: Working in a developmental role and unable to have the scope of impact he desired

While Z had huge enthusiasm for his area of work, he was frustrated about the limitations of his current role, the constraints in the system, and his perceptions of his manager's "lack of vision". In essence, the coaching was about providing Z with a constructive space for reflection, enabling him to enhance his self-understanding of his behaviours, strengths and weaknesses, and his areas for future development.

Through the course of the coaching, I noticed a pattern in which Z seemed able to reach new and helpful insights – through speaking his issues, concerns and frustrations out loud. In other words, the outcomes for the coaching were his learning and insight (rather than actions per se). It felt particularly important to listen, to demonstrate empathy and to co-create a safe, reflective space in which Z could 'tell his story' as well as explore its implications for his future development.

A particular feature of the coaching was to help Z value inquiry, to pause and to seek to understand the other's perspective. It was also important for me not to avoid the tough feedback in the moment, e.g., about the potential impact of his current situation on his well-being.

5: Concluding reflections

Many leaders in public services are facing increasing complexity and uncertainty. While policy promotes a 'person-centred' approach (at least in theory) for service users, the challenge is that the organisational context may (still) be somewhat unforgiving or uncondusive to learning, development and reflective practice. In this regard, I am really struck by the research which demonstrates that clients report "realisations and insights" (rather than action per se) as the most critical moments in coaching [de Haan et al, 2010; Duckworth & de Haan, 2010]. I am also interested in the growing body of research into the links between employee engagement and organisational effectiveness, believing that a person-centred relational coaching approach has huge potential in supporting and enabling leaders to experience and engender this 'engagement'.

In many cases, the coaching client simply needs a place in which to tell their story, to hear themselves talk through their thoughts and emotions out loud, to be truly heard and respected, and not judged. As a coach working with leaders in the public service, this is truly humbling. There seems to be something missing for many clients in their experience of the organisational context and their working relationships, meaning that a person-centred coaching relationship has the potential to feel 'therapeutic'. I believe that this is where, in my experience, coaching can sometimes touch on therapy by creating a psychologically safe space for the client.

The characteristics around being an effective coach, drawing on the Rogerian person-centred principles, are fundamental. Knowing the theory is important, of course. But developing "self-knowledge" [Cheung-Judge, 2001] is as important if the coach is to work effectively with clients in understanding themselves. Rather than being taught

a particular 'way' of coaching, this is about being able as a coach to articulate your influences, under-pinning theoretical principles, and to account for your practice. It is also about regarding your development as a continuous and dynamic process.

As 'relationship management' issues may loom large for some coaching clients, the person-centred coach needs to be able to model effective relationship management capabilities (drawing on their 'emotional intelligence' competences as described by Daniel Goleman [1999]) within the coaching and be prepared to give feedback in the moment on the impact of their relationship with the client.

Working at depth, or facilitating the client's deeper understanding, relies on the "psychological competence" of the coach to understand and help the client explore both the outer (systemic) and inner issues facing them [Bluckert, 2006: 21-22]. Where some would claim that coaches are not qualified to work at depth [e.g., Berglas, 2002], Bluckert and Lee emphasise the importance for coaches to develop their "psychological-mindedness", i.e., the "capacity to reflect on themselves, others and the relationship between"... "to consider more deeply the causes and meanings of behaviours, thought and feelings" [Bluckert, 2006: 87].

It is clearly critical to manage the ethical boundaries, both around professional competence (and qualification to practice) and around confidentiality within the organisational context. Supervision becomes especially important when the coach is working around the boundary with therapy, or with someone with a "more complex psychological makeup" [Bluckert, 2006: 41].

Coaching in this way requires a "much deeper knowledge of self". In short, the coach needs to have done the work at depth through coaching, possibly therapy, supervision and critical reflection [Homer, 2011]. In developing myself as a coach over the past 4-5 years, I have shifted from placing the client at the centre of my coaching 'model' to seeing the relationship between the client and coach at the heart. My development has been to bring myself fully into the coaching relationship, to be transparent and congruent [Rogers, 1980] and to value that who and how I am, my "signature strengths" [O'Neill, 2007] are essential ingredients in the process.

In further exploring this topic, it would be interesting to consider how the therapeutic qualities of a 1:1 coaching conversation might positively influence group processes, such as dialogic practice, within the organisational context. It would also be interesting to consider more explicitly the potential impact of person-centred coaching conversations on employee engagement, health and well-being.



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