

The Coach as a Fellow Human Companion

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Abstract The relationship between coach and coaching partner is presented as a main condition for successful coaching. The role of this relationship seems to be even more important when current societal changes are taken into account, changes which are often the pivotal point for the understanding and necessity of coaching in our society: We live in a hypercomplex society in which both individuals and organizations struggle with increasing diversity and organizational challenges, and where it has become impossible to reach unequivocal and long-lasting solutions to these challenges. The agenda for the coaching conversation is to provide a space for new reflections by initiating a process that leads to transformation, a new self-understanding and enhanced agency. This transformational process may be inspired by third-generation coaching, where the coach and coachee are collaborative partners, and where the dialogical focus is on value reflection and the striving for meaning-making. Based on research into ‘common factors’, the main intention of the chapter is to unfold and illustrate key dimensions that lead towards the coach as a fellow human companion of the coaching partner: (1) The dialogical dimension, (2) The narrative-collaborative dimension, (3) The protreptic dimension; (4) Mentalization and (5) Feedback as collaborative and outcome-oriented practice. The intention of this chapter is to show the importance of relationship with a ‘human face’ as the most important influencing factor in coaching, a factor that is also recognized with growing interest and evidence in both psychotherapy and coaching research.

Keywords Dialogue • Hypercomplexity • Collaboration • Meaning-making • Narrative approach • Self and identity • Third-generation coaching • Transformational learning • Value-orientation

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1 Introduction

We live in a hypercomplex society (Qvortrup 2003) in which both individuals and organizations struggle with the increasing diversity and growing organizational challenges, and where it has become impossible to reach unequivocal and long-lasting solutions to these challenges.

These social changes and specific challenges are often the pivotal point for the understanding and necessity of coaching in our society, a form of dialogue that has to be further developed and refined when society and its organizations and institutions change. The agenda of coaching conversations and coaching-inspired dialogues has to provide a space for new reflections by initiating a process that leads to a transformation, a new self-understanding and enhanced agency. A coaching agenda that focuses exclusively on goals and quick solutions will fail to meet the needs of postmodern, late modern and hypercomplex societies, where the challenges and demands on the individual are changing very rapidly.

With this societal context in mind, it is fundamental to develop a coaching format that puts *sustainability* on the agenda. In this context, sustainability means that clients or coachees can reach a state of renewed independence and self-assurance. Coaching and coaching-inspired dialogues lead to a new stage in the coaching partner's mindset and self-understanding. This transformational process may be inspired by third-generation coaching (Stelter 2014a), where the coach and coachee are understood as collaborative partners, and where the dialogical focus is on value reflection and on striving for meaning-making. A coach, consultant, leader or psychologist inspired by third-generation coaching will aim to develop a dialogical format that matches some of the following key dimensions:

- The coaching process is focused less on goals and quick fixes, because the coachee needs *room for self-reflection* in order to be able to take an action-oriented approach in his or her practice as a manager, employee, job-seeker, person struggling with stress, career-maker etc. The basic idea is that the in-depth meaning-making and value-oriented dialogue between coach and coachee should ultimately enable the coachee to link his or her personal and professional identities with specific action perspectives.
- Coaching is a *reflective process* that considers both an existential-experiential and a relational perspective. The reflexive aspect is also expressed in the special position of the coach. The coach is not merely a facilitator but, in certain stages of the dialogue, an equal self-reflective fellow human being and a generous listener, who is able to reflect on the challenges that the coachee is facing, and which the coach relates to in the coachee's life perspective with the intention of supporting the coachee in his or her reflective process. In a coaching dialogue that involves both sides in a reflective process, often based on value reflection and meaning-making, the relationship between coach and coachee will at times be *symmetrical*.
- The coaching conversation is based on a close link between person (i.e. coachee) and context. This inclusion of the context and the specific situation promotes

meaning-making in the dialogue. The coachee thus becomes more aware of the impact of certain actions on his or her identity and self-concept, and how these actions are involved in representing certain life values and convictions.

- The coaching conversation facilitates a new narrative in relation to the challenge that currently concerns the coachee. This *narrative is a product of the collaborative dialogue practice* as it unfolds between the coach and coachee and also reflects the developmental process of the dialogue. The art of coaching is about changing the person's past history collaboratively by incorporating new events and persons and by creating and challenging the story's plot. Earlier – often troubling – narratives are always treated with respect and may form the basis of new narratives that emerge in the dialogue between coach and coachee.

This chapter does not, however, set out to present a new coaching model. The author's intention is mainly to enhance the understanding of the coaching partnership. In the following, therefore, the term *coaching partner* will be used to replace the terms *client* or *coachee*, as these terms might not fully describe the intention of coaching as a fellow human companionship. The essence of coaching from a third-generation perspective – as described above – will be illustrated through the following relationship dimensions:

1. The dialogical dimension
2. The narrative-collaborative dimension
3. The protreptic or value dimension
4. Mentalization
5. Feedback as collaborative and outcome-oriented practice

The unfolding of these dimensions should help the coach or coaching psychologist to develop an intensive and collaborative attitude to his or her coaching partner.

2 Dimensions Towards Fellow Human Companionship

In the following, these five dimensions will be unfolded. The author will argue for the central importance of these dimensions for a good coaching practice. Whatever their preferred coaching model, all coaches can adapt and include some or all of these dimensions in their work. The intention is to present these dimensions on the basis of a literature study and by including results from both research and professional practice.

2.1 The Dialogical Dimension

In the present context, coaching is understood as a dialogue form that appreciates the coaching partner as a fellow human companion. From this dialogical stance, the term *intervention* should be avoided. *Intervention* means 'to come between, to

interrupt' (Online Etymology Dictionary) and thus implies an understanding associated with a medical model, where the focus is on dysfunctions within the patient, and where the physician is responsible for providing a problem-solving treatment (see also Farlex Partner Medical Dictionary 2012). Intervention can therefore be interpreted as an act where something is done to the patient by an external provider. This intervention-oriented understanding is quite far removed from the understanding of the collaborative partnership in coaching that is promoted in this chapter.

From an etymological perspective, the term dialogue is quite broad. Here, dialogue is understood in its original Greek connotation: dia-logue = through (διά/dia) speech, meaning or discourse (λόγος/logos). The participants in a dialogue develop a mutual relationship through speech and discourse. The dialogue becomes the art of conversation, where one simultaneously engages with the other and with oneself. When the emphasis is on shaping something new in the coaching dialogue, the focus has to be on how something new can unfold in the dialogue between coach and coaching partner, and what these new developments can be. The English communication theorist Shotter (2006) suggested the term *witness-thinking* to describe the profound character of the dialogue. In his writing, Shotter generally tried to link a social constructionist and a phenomenological position. In dialogue, we co-create reality by listening and sharing ideas with each other on the basis of our own understanding and sense-making. The term witness-talk or witness-thinking seeks to grasp this intense meeting with the other:

Witness (dialogic)-talk/thinking occurs in those reflective interactions that involve our coming into living, interactive contact with an other's living being, with their utterance, with their bodily expressions, with their words, their 'works'. It is a meeting of outsides, of surfaces, of two kinds of 'flesh' (Merleau-Ponty 1968), such that they come into 'touch' or 'contact' with each other... In the interplay of living moments intertwining with each other, new possibilities of relation are engendered, new interconnections are made, new 'shapes' of experience can emerge (p. 600).

The most significant point in this quote is probably the emphasis on *coming into touch with* the other. In times of accelerating hyper information, where we mostly only receive messages and possibly 'Likes' via online social media, it is important to *linger* on one's own and the other's thoughts. Sharing one another's thoughts or reflections in a trustful and empathic way is fundamental to the quality of the dialogue and the ultimate basis of a successful relationship between coach and coaching partner(s). Being *in touch* can be compared to *being empathic*, which I would describe as being passionate on behalf of the other and sensing with the other. Carl Rogers (1975), still one of the greatest figures in counselling and psychotherapy, recognized being empathic as a central element of counselling and offered the following definition:

Being empathic means entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meaning which flow in the other person ... It means temporarily living in his/her life, moving about in it delicately without making judgments ... It includes communicating your sensing of his/her world ... (p. 4)

Here, Rogers' phenomenological understanding is evident. He applied the term 'felt meaning' to describe a meeting place for the counsellor and client. The notion of felt meaning or felt sense goes back to Gendlin (1997), who nowadays is known for his focusing approach (Gendlin 1978, 1996). Felt meaning or felt sense can be regarded as a possible starting point for the coaching partner's own in-depth understanding of his/her life. When the coaching partner grasps his or her felt meaning and shares this understanding with the coach, both parties achieve a sense of mutual closeness where witness-thinking and witness-talk unfold, and where the coach is deeply involved in meeting and understanding the coaching partner's lifeworld.

This intensive meeting can be further described as the basis for a *relational attunement* that can be established between dialogical companions. As mentioned earlier (Stelter 2014a), as the foundation for this companionship, both coaching partners 'have to demonstrate a willingness to be involved in each other and to show sympathy' (p. 94). The aim of the dialogue is to develop a presence and an attunement where the participants are constantly trying to tune in to each other's thoughts, feelings and reflections. But something more develops in this process: When listening to the other's story, one can pay attention to oneself and the sensations, feelings and thoughts that the story might produce in one's own mind. Ultimately, relational attunement also means to reflect back on what one has heard, and how it might have an impact on oneself. We *wonder* about what we hear, share our questions with each other and try to make sense in collaboration – through dialogue. From this perspective, relational attunement can be defined as 'a shared or co-created articulation, where a sensation, a sensory impression or a theme is addressed collectively, and where the participants achieve a meeting' (Stelter 2014a, p. 94). This leads to the following conclusion: 'People become each other's sounding boards ... in a relationship characterized by mutual responsiveness' (Stelter 2014a, p. 94).

Dialogue philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Buber might help us gain a better understanding of the importance of the other for self-development. Kierkegaard (2010) spoke about the double reflection of the message, which may grasp these important moments of symmetry, as the first person becomes the 'mid-wife' of the other's thought and reflection, and where the other ultimately finds him/herself in the co-reflective process with the first person. Similarly, Buber (1983) stated: Through the *Thou*, a person becomes *I*. In this perspective, dialogue is grounded in the mutuality between partners where both sides are provided with the opportunity to understand, develop and grow in a process of giving, receiving and sharing.

2.2 *The Narrative-Collaborative Dimension*

In the post-modern world, the meta-narratives or grand narratives have lost their value and explanatory power. These narratives used to help people find a broadly accepted understanding of historical changes and placed big events into a widely culturally accepted frame of reference. However, the 'small stories', the narratives

of everyday life, where people talk about uplifting events or hard times, are still the foundation for all humans wishing to understand and share their world with each other. Telling stories is the basis of social interaction, building culture and – ultimately – being a human being. Sharing stories can have a healing effect and can provide support for tackling challenging life situations (Charon 2011; Frank 1995). Narratives help us develop our identity. They tell us something about who we are, what we stand for, and what we dream of, and hopefully they anchor us in an appreciative context with the listener. At best, we feel understood, relieved and uplifted. And as the philosopher David Carr (1986) put it: ‘Lives are told in being lived and lived in being told’ (p. 61).

In a coaching dialogue inspired by a narrative-collaborative practice, the coach will use narratives actively to build a collaborative partnership where the coaching partners feel safe and open to sharing, and where they are open to modify their understanding, view or perspective with the aim of developing and further discovering who they are. In stories we always highlight (a series of) specific events with the intention of relating something specific; thus, every story has a plot that enables the story-teller to make a specific point. At the same time, stories do not tell ‘the whole story’; we leave out events that do not fit the plot of the story. Acting as a dialogical partner, the coach is a co-creator of new and hopefully more uplifting stories that are shaped in collaboration with the coaching partner. The narrative-collaborative coach works from the basic assumption that narratives can be transformed and developed – a position that clearly lies in the extension of social constructionist epistemology.

There are a number of strategies and dialogical approaches available in narrative and collaborative practices aimed at inviting the coaching partner to embrace new perspectives of stories to be told (see Drake and Stelter 2014; Stelter 2014a, b; Stelter and Law 2010). In the following, the readers’ attention is drawn to the most collaborative activity in the coaching partnership, where the coach appears as a fellow human companion of the coaching partner, and where coach and coaching partner take up a relative position that contains *moments of symmetry* in their mutual relationship – a totally new and innovative feature of coaching that can place the coach into an actively collaborative position in relation to the coaching partner(s) with the intention of optimally promoting their reflective process. In group or team coaching, this role of a collaborative partner can be easily adopted by all participants of a coaching group. Moments of symmetry may occur when the coach or a coaching group participant shares his or her reflections on specific descriptions, statements, feeling or thoughts of the coaching partner in focus. It is a form of *resonating* to what is said by the coaching partner in focus. To resonate means to be a sounding board for the words, phrases or storylines presented. Hearing another’s words is an encounter, an interchange of experiences, feelings, thoughts, where we not only respond to the other but also reflect on our own experiences, feelings and thoughts. As co-reflecting partners, the coach or coaching group members tend to hear the other’s stories through the perspective of their own experiences and sense-making. And these experiences, thoughts and reflections might prove beneficial to the coaching partner in focus. A space of collaborative reflections and mutual

understanding emerges where all coaching participants feel enriched and enlightened: All the participants reflect on each other's sense-making and stories in the light of their own sense-making and stories. It is important to remember that the contribution of the coach or coaching group participants should encourage and contribute to new reflections and new understanding for the coaching partner in focus. It would be unfortunate if the contribution of the other derailed the topical focus of the conversation.

Chené Swart (2013), a narrative coach and consultant from South Africa, described the act of 'being moved or touched by the stories being listened to' (p. 168) as a *gift*. Sharing the reflections of the coaching partner in focus by offering one's own reflections means *receiving or handing out a gift*: (1) By appreciating the words of the coaching partner in focus we receive a gift by becoming clearer about our own feelings, thoughts or challenges, and (2) By reflecting back what has been said, we deal out gifts to the coaching partner in focus, who might construe the words of the other as valuable in regard to the challenge at hand. Receiving and dealing out gifts appears a nice metaphor that elucidates the value of the collaborative nature of coaching. Narrative-collaborative coaching can infuse new life into a dialogical format that seems more important and necessary than ever in our hyper-complex world, where people need inspiration and mutual reflection, both in their private and working life, to help them to handle their challenges. Receiving and dealing out gifts means also to share one's cultural background with the other. Hypercomplexity means always to appreciate multi-cultural perspectives and by that to understand the many ways to make sense of the world. Figure 1 illustrates how a coach or a coaching group participant can be an *outsider-witness* who either receives or deals out a gift. Narrative coaching is embodied in the coaching partner's descriptions, statements or reflections, which are either related to specific actions/activities (the landscape of action, e.g. 'Recently, when I started up a new project, which was quite complex, I managed to organize my people in a way that helps us all work with focus and energy ...') or based on specific personal convictions, attitudes, values, dreams, intentions, expectations etc. (landscapes of identity, e.g. 'I believe it's crucial to have a good working climate in the team.'). Figure 1 illustrates the different perspectives of possible outsider-witnessing.

In the therapeutic literature, outsider witnessing would often be defined as *self-disclosure*, although the two terms are not completely identical in meaning. In psychotherapy, the benefits of self-disclosure are appreciated, and the potential risks are highlighted (Sturges 2012). In a collaborative practice which is the approach promoted here, this sharing of gifts, as this form of interaction could also be framed, is promoted as a valuable feature that strengthens the working alliance between coach and coaching partners. As Norcross (2010) mentioned in regard to psychotherapy, self-disclosure can be perceived as helpful for enhancing empathy and immediate outcomes; however, he also underlined the importance of avoiding self-disclosures that merely serve the counsellor's need, as they only remove focus from the client. This warning cannot be taken seriously enough. However, outsider witnessing goes beyond the intention of self-disclosure. Sharing gifts means more than creating a good atmosphere in the dialogue. It means developing our understanding

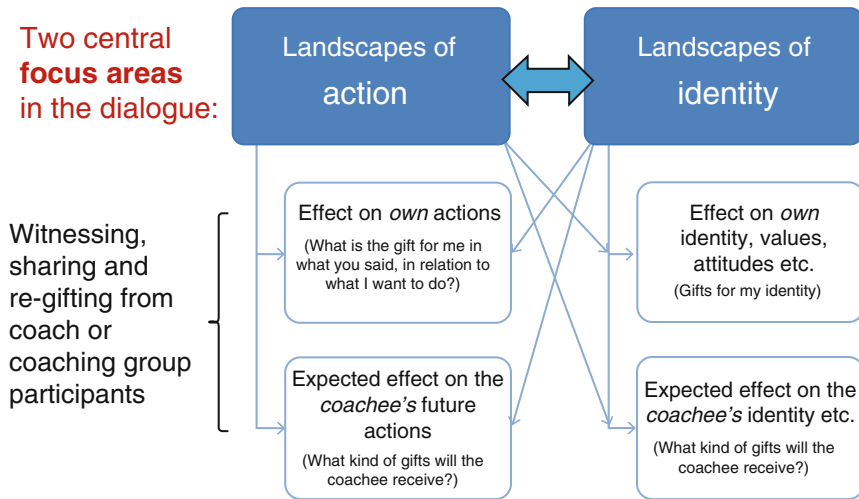


Fig. 1 Outsider witness procedure as a process of receiving and dealing out ‘gifts’

and inviting different perspectives into the conversation, new perspectives that help the coaching partners develop and shape new meaning and new narratives about themselves, about specific events and, ultimately, their lives.

2.3 The Protreptic or Value Dimension

Values, convictions, ambitions or dreams are central aspects of what is described as *landscapes of identity* in narrative practice. In a broader sense, values can be seen as the guiding star for an individual to act in a specific way. Values are the key to people’s sense of agency and their capacity to be in charge of themselves and their life. Kirkeby (2009), a professor of management philosophy at Copenhagen Business School, has revived the ancient Greek concept of *protreptic*, a form of dialogue that would nowadays be understood as executive coaching. This form of dialogue was founded in the Greek academies around 400 B.C. and developed by Plato with the goal of achieving the Socratic concept of ‘eupratein’, the ethically mastered life, and turning another person into the most essential entity in his or her own life. The root of the term *protreptic* is ‘τρέπο’/‘τρόπος’ meaning *turn*. To elucidate the principles of protreptic processes, Kirkeby (2009) stated the following:

On the basis of the magnum opus of Aristotle we can define protreptic as *dialectic applied with the aim of prompting a person to liberate himself by reflecting on her/his basic values*. Thus protreptic is bound to social dialogue, and to the possibility of becoming the master of one’s own inner dialogue (p. 13).

A protreptic process is aimed at a central goal that is ‘desirable for its own sake’ (see Aristotle’s ‘The Art of Rhetoric I’, quoted by Kirkeby 2009, p.14) and should

ultimately lead to *eudaimonia* – translated as happiness, welfare or human flourishing. From this perspective, there might be a parallel to positive psychology in a very broad sense. A protreptic process is not, however, a psychological tool but a path for getting in touch with the guiding values, principles and convictions that drive individuals' actions in the world. Coaching, especially earlier generations¹ was very much focused on helping a person to meet a specific goal, moving a person from A to B. Protreptic, value-based coaching principles, on the other hand, are applied to give coaching a broad and generally human approach to promote the coaching partner's self-understanding. Thus, they are not aimed directly at promoting actions, events or situations but have a more abstract focus on specific values that are somehow essential for the coaching partner (and ultimately also for the coach). The focus is on what lies behind one's action and what can define the meaningfulness of an action, an event or a situation for the individual or a group. This broad focus on the central values of the individual, group or team guarantees that coaching is *sustainable*, meaning that the knowledge and the reflection in the dialogue have a long-lasting and general impact on the life and actions of the coaching partner(s). Protreptic or value-oriented coaching unfolds the implicit drivers that cause the individual to act in a specific way.

These values are not necessarily eternal and universal – some might be, but often, they are rooted in local practices and events. Surely, freedom, love or justice can be described as eternal values, but in our everyday life, interactions and cooperation with others will be additional values that are highly contextualized. The ultimate goal of coaching is to facilitate and improve leadership, communication and cooperation by reflecting on key values as a fundamental condition and quality in human endeavours and activities that will continue to provide a sense of direction in relation to specific goals. In this value-oriented process, a coach acting as a collaborative partner can be a helpful reflective companion in the coaching partnership. From this perspective, values are also a product of a co-active process unfolding between coach and coaching partners. Listening to each other's voices and all the dialogue, participants can become rooted within themselves and what they stand for. They will find commonalities, differences and possibly a path where they can co-create meaning in a reflective community of practice.

The following presents some theoretical reflections on the way in which values and meaning-making are founded as the driving force or guiding star of an individual or a working team. Values are a central part of our identity. In narrative practice, we speak about *landscapes of consciousness* (White 2007) or *landscapes of identity* (Stelter 2014a). Narratives presented by the coaching partner will touch on key issues with regard to what is important in life for him or her – in more or less explicit terms. Here, it is the task of the coach or other group participants to act as outsider witnesses, focusing on what they heard in regard to identity issues or spe-

¹See a description of the three generations of coaching in Stelter (2014a, b). First-generation coaching is very goal-driven, e.g. applying the GROW model, while second-generation coaching is more solution, future or strength-oriented.

cific commitments, values or dreams. Focusing and reflecting on values marks an attempt to highlight the most central aspects in the coaching partner's life.

Referring back to my reflection on the *sustainability* of coaching, values are an anchor or a guiding star for the individual. Kirkeby (2009) underlined that values represent 'a possible mode of certainty' (p. 155). And he continued: 'A value is an "I can" based on knowledge, and knowledge of what we have done, and will be able to do, and guided by ethical imagination by both deliberate and intuitive judgment' (p. 156).

Values are the entrance to our lived knowledge and our practical wisdom, in Greek *phronesis*. The critical social scientist Flyvbjerg (2001) regarded *phronesis* as important, because instrumental rationality needs to be balanced by value rationality, a balance that 'is crucial to the sustained happiness of the citizens in any society, according to Aristotle' (p. 4). Through *phronesis*, people implicitly base their actions on specific values – through lived knowledge that is often immediately unfolded while acting. Individuals, groups or teams are always situated and anchored in the context in which they live, and which they shape through their doing. Values help to prepare the individual to be implicitly ready in the moment. Values help to establish our way of acting based on gut feelings or intuition.

An example to complete this section on protreptic and value-oriented coaching: The conversation can take its starting point in the reflection of a specific term – for example *trust* or *responsibility*. In this version, the *coach* presents a term and asks the coaching partner to reflect on the term. Another option is if the coaching partner is familiar with this dialogue form, he or she may suggest a term that is important to him or her. In a further version that seems to be easier to include in any kind of coaching, the procedure is the following: Coach and coaching partner talk about a specific challenge and event facing the coaching partner. At some point, the coach invites the coaching partner to step back from the specific issue and move towards a reflection on values, commitments, convictions or dreams. The landscapes of identity, initially connected to the specific issue, are generalized and elevated to a protreptic reflection on a specific important value that becomes apparent in the coaching dialogue; this value could, for example, be trust or responsibility.

2.4 *Mentalization*

With this topic we return to a more psychological position, a perspective that stresses what happens *inside* the individual, but also how a sensitive insight might be the first step towards understanding the other or form the basis for an intensified relationship between the dialogue partners. The concept of mentalization, which is presented in the following, was developed by, among others, Peter Fonagy, a psychodynamic psychotherapist and researcher, and Eia Asen, a systemically oriented family therapist (see Asen and Fonagy 2011). Mentalization-based work is not considered a specific intervention or therapy form but rather an approach that can be integrated into a wide range of conversation approaches and methods. In general,

mentalization-based approaches are aimed at the following goals for the client: (1) better behavioural control, (2) improved affect regulation, (3) more intimate and gratifying relationships and (4) the ability to pursue life goals (Fonagy and Bateman 2006).

The concept of mentalization is included here as a source of inspiration to highlight the relation between coach and coaching partner and as a way to strengthen the individual awareness and attentiveness of both coach and coaching partner in regard to their sensing and perceptual processes. The capacity for mentalization can be considered one of the most essential factors in any form of conversation-based intervention and a basic requirement for understanding oneself and others. Asen and Fonagy (2011) describe mentalization as ‘seeing ourselves from the outside and seeing others from the inside’ (p. 347).

To strengthen their mutual relationship and companionship, coach and coaching partner(s) will benefit from improving their ability to mentalize, i.e., to get in touch with one’s own senses, feelings and thoughts about what happens inside oneself, and on the other hand, to get in touch with what happens inside the other. Earlier, the term *witness-thinking* was introduced, which seems to be closely related to what is expressed here. If this process of mutual mentalization is developed in the coaching relationship, the term *relational attunement* – presented earlier in this chapter – is a fairly apt description of the intensity of the relationship between coach and coaching partner.

With reference to Asen and Fonagy (2011), various possibilities for strengthening mentalization – especially with a focus on developing the coaching partnership – may be suggested:

Through *openness and a wondering stance*, the coach shows genuine interest in the coaching partner’s perspective. By exploring the coaching partner’s life, the coach challenges the coaching partner to examine his or her own emotions and thoughts. The coach’s wondering position, which includes encouraging the coaching partner to reassess certain assumptions in his or her perception of the outside world, the coach supports the coaching partner in taking a fresh look at him/herself and his or her interactions with others.

This helps the coaching partner achieve better *impact awareness*: Open, curious and wondering questions can strengthen the coaching partner’s capability for developing mentalization skills and thus the awareness and understanding of how one’s own emotions, thoughts and actions might affect others, and how they contribute to creating a reality for others. The ability to see the other from the inside in regard to this impact can generate vital changes in the coaching partner. Systemic coaching circular questions (Tomaschek 2006; Tomm 1988) may further help to develop the coaching partner’s awareness of the position of others and thus help to paint a broader picture of the world.

The final stage in the coaching partnership may lead to a form of mutual *reflective contemplation*, which can be viewed as a mentalizing stance. There is a situationally adapted and relaxed attitude in the coach and coaching partner as they each relate to the other’s specific descriptions, feelings, thoughts or reflections. Involving the other in how these descriptions, feelings, thoughts or reflections resonate in

one's own system, i.e., what happens inside when one listens to the other, can form the basis for further development of the coaching partner's perception and understanding of his or her reality. In turn, it may thus change some of the coaching partner's specific stories about him/herself or specific events. The ability to mentalize by seeing others from the inside can help create these new realities and serve as the starting point for deeper understanding for the coaching partner. It is especially important for the coach to act with *humility*, as this is a condition for understanding the coaching partner. This requires a willingness to be surprised and to learn from the other. Importantly, this perspective must apply to both parties in the coaching dialogue. With this attitude, both coach and coaching partner(s) will have a real sense of companionship on their shared journey.

2.5 *Feedback as a Collaborative and Outcome-Oriented Practice*

Despite the intention to view coaching as a *collaborative activity* where the coach or the coaching psychologist functions as a fellow human companion, which goes beyond the role of neutral facilitator, the bottom line remains the same: The coaching partner or client should reach a state of change and development. And, coaching is a fee-based service delivered by a professional that should serve the client's interests as efficiently as possible. From this perspective, it is important to keep in mind that coaches have to do their best to meet their clients' needs, and therefore, they can only be the fellow human companion that is promoted in this chapter if they strive towards outcomes that are in line with the interests and progress of their clients. The concept of being a collaborative partner is (only) highlighted here with the intention of *intensifying the coaching relationship* and thus to improve the effectiveness of the coaching process. Another purpose of intensifying the relationship is to give professional dialogues a 'human face'. Only when the clients accept the coach as both a competent professional and a fellow human companion, with all the qualities described above, can the dialogue unfold in an efficient and human manner.

On this basis, the coaching relationship can be improved by focusing directly on outcomes. Systematic work and research – albeit based on psychotherapy – is presented by Scott Miller and his colleagues (2007, 2013), Miller and Hubble (2011), and Duncan and colleagues (2007). Some of these ideas should now be transferred to coaching, especially with a focus on the *real-time feedback* during the session. In the present context, I do not want to go so far as to promote written outcome assessments of the sessions, as Miller and his colleagues (2003) suggested. That would also go beyond the scope of this chapter. My objective here is to encourage coaches both to include the coaching partner/client more actively in the process and to engage actively in the dialogue as reflective partners. By providing mutual feedback, the coaching partnership can be elevated to a new and intensified collaborative level. Duncan and Miller's (2000) praise for the *heroic client* can also be a useful

stance in coaching. These authors moved beyond the medical model by recasting the client as a central protagonist in the dialogue: ‘The client’s view of the relationship is the “trump card” in therapy outcomes, second only to the winning hand of the client’s strength’ (p. 72). From this position, the collaborative aspects of the relationship and the usefulness of mutual feedback will be at the centre of the rest of the chapter. As mentioned earlier, the movement advocated here is a move *away from intervention* and towards seeing coaching as an *interaction*; a position that highlights the collaborative nature of the dialogue (see also De Haan 2008). Based on the work of Miller and his colleagues (2006, 2007, 2011) and the author’s own theoretical work presented earlier in this chapter, several aspects can help to unfold the collaborative and feedback-informed nature of the coaching relationship:

Create a Culture of Collaboration and Feedback

From the very beginning, it is important to make clear how the relationship should unfold. Therefore it is crucial, as part of the psychological contract, to describe central features of the collaboration. Coaching partners need to see themselves as active partners in the working alliance. Progress and development have to be visible from the beginning, and it is helpful in building a sound working alliance if the coaching partner/client provides feedback about the development, progress and possible setbacks. For the coach it is important to develop some of the feedback qualities described above, for example, witness-thinking and outsider witness procedures.

Integrate Alliance and Outcome Feedback

To establish a good working alliance, it is helpful to look at how the coach and the coaching partner interact, how they establish and work on their relationship, and what degree of progress they are making in regard to the path they have agreed on. This may, for example, include small comments such as, ‘I am really happy that you’re sharing this with me,’ questions or suggestions about how to proceed after having reflected on progresses made or sharing reflections on something the other said. The coach may also offer feedback when coupling some aspects of the coaching partner’s story with events or reflections that were mentioned earlier by the coaching partner. This latter example is not only a way to offer feedback; it is also a way to develop new stories or a new understanding that may serve as the basis for change. Sometimes it may also be necessary to ask the coaching partner(s) for feedback about:

- How the coaching partner(s) experience(s) the relationship,
- What seems to work,
- How things make sense, and
- Any wishes and ideas that stand out.

Use Your Intuition and Be on Perceptive Tiptoes

Make sure not to overload the client with demands for feedback. It is important for the coach to sharpen his or her awareness of changes and to be attentive to what happens with the coaching partner and in the relationship. A few questions from the coach about these observations may be enough to develop a clear enough picture. Sometimes, it is enough just to notice nonverbal feedback in order to readjust the alliance. *Empathy* plays a decisive role here and can be linked to positive outcomes (see Elliott et al. 2011; Norcross 2010). To ensure the progress of the session and the working relationship between coach and coaching partner(s), it is important not to take things for granted and to be willing to step out of one's own comfort zone (Duncan et al. 2007).

Be Non-judgemental

Being mindful of one's own perceptions as a coach also means being non-judgemental, being accepting and clearly expressing this stance. This gives the coaching partner the feeling of being okay, and it helps to ease the conversation. The coach needs to be curious and investigate possible differences in perceptions and understandings of the world; appreciate the coaching partner's perspective and be curious about understanding this perspective even better. Judgements would only disturb the working alliance between coach and coaching partner(s), but a question that invites the coaching partner to unfold his or her lifeworld helps to bring both parties closer to one another. A non-judgemental stance is also important for the coaching partner to develop. Being critical of oneself and being judgemental about the way one thinks, feels and acts can undermine open reflections and, ultimately, self-acceptance. The coach should help the coaching partner move towards being open-minded to whatever comes up in the coaching process.

Learn to 'fail successfully'

Any coach can make mistakes, fail on the basis of the specific assumptions they make about the relationship, about the coaching partner's position or about the way the situation is perceived. It is important to remain open-minded in regard to the coaching partner's possible self-understanding and understanding of the world. The flow of mutual understanding and the process of meaning-making between coach and coaching partner are essential. If the coach gets the sense that 'something' went wrong, it is important to pause, involve the coaching partner in sorting out the possible misunderstanding and then re-build the case and re-structure the process of the dialogue.

The idea of presenting these guidelines on feedback is to help the coach and all other dialogue partners to be open to a collaborative process where they engage as

professional partners and as fellow human companions and to an interaction that has the ultimate goal of helping the coaching partner change and develop.

3 Research Evidence for Relationship Issues in Coaching

Since the beginning of this century there has been a growing interest in the impact of relationship issues in regard to the efficacy of psychotherapy and lately also of coaching. The interest has recently moved away from focusing on approaches, methods and techniques towards a strong acknowledgement of the importance of *common factors* and especially the *working alliance* as the key ingredient in all forms of psychotherapy, coaching or counselling. There is a growing awareness that psychotherapy and other dialogue forms do not always work in the same way, as medicine does, i.e. that specific psychological treatments should work for specific disorders (Duncan et al. 2010). There appear to be relational and other common factors that have a decisive impact on change and development, but which are hard to pin down, and which may be even very complex and difficult for a practitioner to acquire. From this perspective, it is difficult to predict when a psychotherapist, coach or counsellor is going to do a good job (see Miller et al. 2007 about their attempt to offer guidelines to psychotherapists).

A growing number of studies and publications have shed light on relationship and common factors issues (see De Haan and Duckworth 2013, for coaching and Horvath 2011, for psychotherapy). Many of these research findings are presented with a special focus on psychotherapy, simply because this area has a longer research tradition than coaching. It will be made clear to the reader what these studies are based on – psychotherapy or coaching – but on the other hand, when speaking about relational and common factors, it can be assumed that many results from therapy research may also be applicable and valuable in coaching and coaching psychology. Let us now take a look at what research has brought to light:

Lambert and Barley (2002) made the following summary of results in regard to what accounts for change and development of clients in psychotherapy: The *relationship* between therapist and client accounts for 30% of the variance in outcomes, with 40% of the variance attributed to external or contextual factors, 15% to hope or expectancy effects and only 15% to specific theory or techniques. This study makes clear that the relationship is the one single factor that has the highest significance in regard to therapeutic success. With reference to a psychotherapy studies of Wampold (2001) the following results appear even more shocking in that sense that client and extra-therapeutic factors account for 87% of the variance of change, leaving only 13% accounted for by treatment (see Fig. 2).

The small circle (treatment effects) inside the big circle (client and extra-therapeutic factors) in the upper left corner of the figure is enlarged into the biggest circle on the right in Fig. 2. If we take a closer look at the big circle, we see that only 1% of the variance can be accounted for by the therapeutic model or technique. The heroes are our clients. Their readiness and willingness to change is the cornerstone

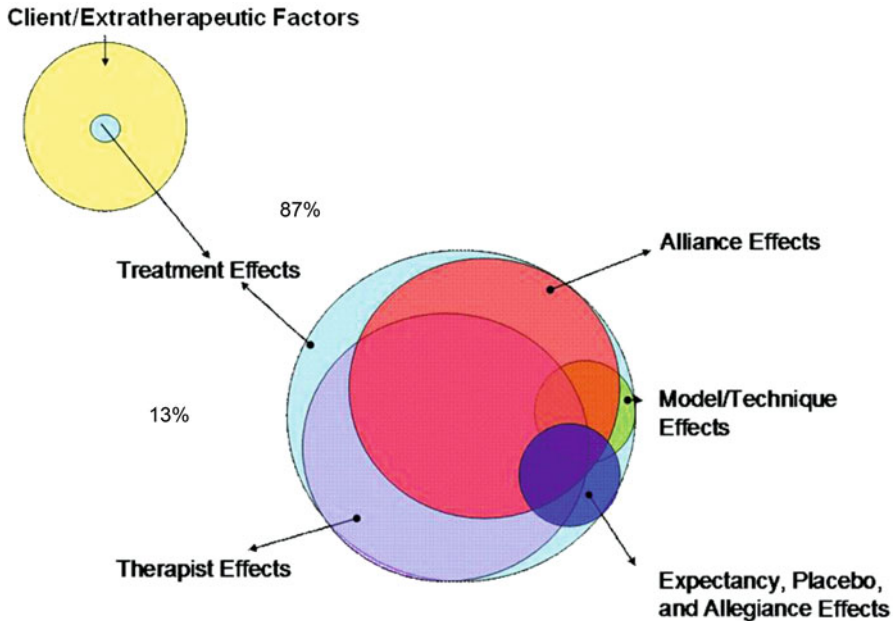


Fig. 2 Common factors with a proposed feedback factor (Duncan et al. 2010, p. 366)

of their capacity for development and progress. But this readiness and willingness also needs to be kept alive during the session, and here, the client's positive perception of the working alliance is of central importance.

In the following, some results that focus on relationship issues shall be highlighted. Let us have a look at one of the most recent studies in the area of coaching:

De Haan and colleagues (2013) found in their outcome study that the clients' perception of the relationship is the key factor in determining how clients perceive the outcome of coaching, and that outcomes are significantly related to the working alliance, client self-efficacy and the perceptions of the coaching interventions ('generalised techniques'). They found that the working alliance scores by clients predict 25% of the variance in coaching outcome. However, they also cautioned coaches not simply to assume that their perception of the relationship necessarily matches the perception of their clients:

We think it is fascinating that despite the high predictive value of the client estimate of the coaching relationship, the coach estimate of that same relationship neither correlates with the coaching outcomes nor with the strength of the relationship as measured by the client (p. 54).

This is a warning to all coaches, on the one hand, to work seriously towards improving the alliance with their coaching partner(s), and, on the other hand, to work towards including real-time feedback strategies and collaborative practices in their

coaching and thus improve the effectiveness and impact of the dialogue on the change and development achieved by their coaching partner(s).

Boyce and colleagues (2010) carried out a study based on 74 coach-client relationships in the US military, including senior military leaders as coaches and cadets as clients, and reported that the relationship affected outcomes significantly, as assessed both by the client, with an explained proportion of variance around 50 %, and by the coach, with an explained proportion of variance around 25 %. Similar results were presented by Baron and Morin (2009, 2012). They documented that the coaching outcomes correlated with the coaching clients' rating of the *working alliance*, which they used as a measure for the strength of the coaching.

On the basis of a large number of research studies, Horvath and colleagues (2015) presented a number of recommendations for psychotherapists, which are probably equally valuable for coaches and coaching psychologists (see further recommendations in Norcross 2010):

- The development of a good alliance is essential for the success of psychotherapy, regardless of the type of treatment.
- The ability of the therapist to bridge the client's needs, expectations, and abilities into a therapeutic plan is important in building the alliance.
- Because the therapist and client often judge the quality of the alliance differently, active monitoring of the alliance throughout therapy is recommended.
- Responding non-defensively to a client's hostility or negativity is critical to establishing and maintaining a strong alliance.
- Clients' evaluation of the quality of the alliance is the best predictor of outcome; however, the therapist's input has a strong influence on the client and is therefore critical.

4 Implications for Future Research

On the basis of this short presentation of research that is relevant for the topic of this chapter, the following can be highlighted as focus areas for future research: Clearly, the chapter has included many references from psychotherapy research. The central statements of this chapter would even be more valuable if they could be supported by evidence from coaching research. The suggestions for future research are two-fold: (1) Bearing the topic of this chapter in mind, it is essential to strengthen the practitioners' understanding of relationship issues and to help them to gain insight into what happens in the working alliance with their coaching partner. Therefore, it would be a big step forward to conduct studies that are based on video observation and interviews with both the coach and the coaching partner. That would offer insights into what happens in the relationship, and how things work when the coaching partner appreciates the coach's specific approach. (2) It is worthwhile to promote research that focuses on the impact of specific relational topics on the coaching outcomes.

5 Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to unfold the importance of the relationship between coach and coaching partner(s). The aim was *not* to present the tools that novice coaches often call for, but rather to encourage coaching professionals to develop a fundamental *attitude* to improve their working alliance with their coaching partner(s). It would be unfortunate to approach coaching as a form of treatment. It is essentially a meeting of two (or more) people, where one – the coach – seeks to support the other(s) – the coaching partner(s) – on their path. The aim of this chapter was to improve the awareness of coaches of the impact of elements that seem difficult to grasp and to operationalize; concepts such as *witness-thinking*, *relational attunement* or the whole matter of *receiving and dealing out gifts*, just to mention some of the central concepts presented in this chapter.

I encourage the reader to focus less on specific goals and instead invite their coaching partner to *linger on* thoughts and feelings and to make time for reflection. In our time, we have lost the idea of simply having time. Coaching has to be a dialogue form where we reinvent the concept of just lingering, of having time to be on a journey with another person. It is a journey into the unknown, where neither the coach nor the coaching partner clearly knows the destination or the route. It is a journey of discovery into relatively unknown territory, where both parties are travel companions, and neither knows anything for sure about the road ahead.

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