

CHAPTER 1

THE COACHING PHENOMENON

The answer is coaching – what was the question?

Market developments

In the 1990s, the new hot trends were value-based management and the learning organization. In the new millennium, coaching is on the agenda, and in recent years the coaching market has expanded explosively. While coaching used to be a dialogue format that organizational psychologists and professional sports coaches developed and practised as part of their profession, coaching has now become a business area in its own right, and 'coach' has become a separate job title that appears in countless forms and variants. Today, coaching is a mainstream dialogue-based approach to development that is available to everyone.

The concept of coaching is not new, however, although it did become much more widespread in the mid-1990s when, for example, John Whitmore's *Coaching for performance* became a virtual bible to consultants, HR people and a few progressive managers. Suddenly, the tennis star Timothy Gallwey was quoted everywhere for his now famous statement that "Coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance."

In recent years, both the supply of and demand for coaching have skyrocketed, and there is a huge selection of coaching training programmes and coaching services to choose from, including e-learning coaching, mentor coaching, success coaching, intuitive coaching, cognitive coaching, NLP coaching, executive coaching, systemic coaching, business coaching, personal coaching, career coaching, stress coaching etc.

Coaching has also become a mainstream management discipline signifying a rejection of modernist and autocratic management thinking. Most managers today engage in management-based coaching as part of their daily management practice, and with good results.

Thus, in recent years, the coaching wave has washed over the Western world, and as described in the introduction to this book, the floodwaters now seem to be receding, leaving in their wake a tired landscape where many of the pioneering coaching firms are busy picking up the pieces, abandoning the coaching concept in favour of other development concepts that might ring less hollow.

The coaching wave thus appears to have devoured everything in its wake. On the downside, this means that a truly great development tool has been reduced to a superficial, mechanical technique, which appears ubiquitous and has been used to excess.

On the upside, however, the coaching wave has given a far wider audience outside the sport and corporate elite access to receiving, using and practising

coaching and thus enjoying the ethical and highly potent development approach that coaching represents. Even if coaching as an independent discipline seems a bit tired after the boom days, it has branched out into most professional fields, developing into a development philosophy and a related process and method that are here to stay.

Now, rather than functioning as an independent discipline coaching is integrating and finding its place as a method in synergy with other development tools. This is a good and healthy development, as the development perspectives are often limited when coaching has to stand alone and is treated as the answer to every issue under the sun.

There are many good reasons why so many people and professions have let themselves be swept off their feet by the coaching wave. It is no coincidence that this trend became so powerful, since coaching as a tool undoubtedly holds a huge potential for generating change, development and ownership. By the same token, however, coaching also contains a potential for doing harm.

Therefore, a heated debate has raged in the media and within the coaching profession about responsibility and quality in coaching training programmes. The debate has focused on a general uncertainty about how to understand and use coaching and about what qualifications a coach should be required to have to be a responsible practitioner. Professors and psychologists have argued that coaching is a demanding and dynamic discipline that requires years of training and experience, while the tool-oriented segment of the coaching profession has pulled in the opposite direction, maintaining that it need not take more than a few months to train as a coach. The real root of this issue is whether coaching is considered a mechanical technique for reaching a goal or a dynamic approach to shaping interventions and generating development in a person's mind and life.

The debate has thus often lacked nuance, as there is not just one but several approaches to coaching. The diversity of these approaches is more a reflection of different professional attitudes than a reflection of differences in levels of quality. All coaching firms basically agree that quality and responsibility are essential; where they do not agree is about the core purpose of coaching. To understand this fundamental difference we need to go back to the roots of coaching, which in fact lie within two very different professions with very different professional purposes.

Understandings of the coaching concept

The coaching phenomenon has its roots both in elite sport and in therapy, and that has led to very different definitions of coaching. As a common feature in these definitions, however, coaching is generally perceived as a dialogue process based on the underlying premise that the client already has the answers and the solutions. This means that the job of the coach is to uncover these answers and solutions by asking the right questions.

This understanding clearly sets coaching apart from counselling or consultancy, which rests on the premise that one person is the expert, while the other is

less knowledgeable. In consultancy, the expert asks questions in order to gather data, and based on these data, he or she then provides the answers. In coaching, the coach asks questions in order to unfold the client's potential and thus help the client find the answers.

The methodological and ethical premise of pure coaching, therefore, is that the client holds all the answers and all the solutions. This premise may seem a healthy contrast to an expert-dependent society where individuals seek guidance outside themselves instead of examining and reflecting on their own feelings about the issue at hand. The coaching wave can therefore be viewed as an element in a larger paradigm shift, where we as individuals in Western societies grow increasingly independent of outside authorities and thus return home to our own inner authority and power. In this light, coaching is a method that promotes the collective liberation process that is the key driver of post-modernism.

Coaching thus fits perfectly into a larger trend where the concept of management has also changed drastically, as mentioned above. The post-modern concept of management has replaced the modernist concept of management, and involving and inspiring leadership based on personal competences has replaced autocratic leadership based on the power of positioning and specific professional competences. Coaching as a management discipline is a natural part of this development, where personal ownership is seen as essential for employees' dedication and drive.

When the goal is to achieve the goal

With the growth of coaching market, much of the profession seems to have reached a consensus that the goal of coaching is – to achieve the goal. In this framework, the client initially defines a goal, and the subsequent process revolves around helping the client achieve this goal.

The goal-oriented approach to coaching reflects a performance-oriented mindset that can be traced back to the roots of coaching in elite sport, and which aims to enhance the client's performance capacity and confidence. In this light, the individual's self-esteem is seen to spring from his or her ability to create results, achieve goals and deliver a strong performance in the external world. The goal-oriented approach to coaching has become quite widespread, as it is simple and easy to learn, and the method is typically taught as a simple four-stage model, complete with specific standardized questions. The goal-oriented coaching approach is a mechanical approach that emphasizes specific stages and inquiry techniques, and which can easily be acquired in a relatively short training course.

Goal-oriented coaching is an externally oriented approach, which has been helpful to many practitioners and users. For example, a manager can benefit from the externally oriented coaching approach as a management tool in the typical performance culture that characterizes modern companies. The mechanical coaching approach is also well suited for athletes, in career planning and for individuals who seek coaching with a very clear idea about what they want to achieve, and why.

Running from our own shadow

The most common reason for seeing a coach, however, is that one is confused, uncertain or stuck in certain patterns in one's life. In particular, someone who is sick because of stress typically feels overwhelmed and confused. It follows logically that establishing a goal in this state will typically produce a similarly confused and unclear goal.

As Einstein legendarily is rumoured to have put it; We cannot solve a problem with the same mindset that produced it.

This means that solving a problem essentially requires a shift in mindset. And in this regard, coaching is an exceptional tool. However, establishing goals at an early stage in the process limits the potential for generating growth and development. Most people seek to change their environment when they experience a sense of dissonance between their inner and outer worlds. But that will not necessarily produce any fundamental inner transformation and thus a new stage in development; in many cases it simply becomes an attempt at modifying one's external circumstances. In many cases, seeking to alleviate inner tension reactively by addressing our external surroundings is like running from one's own shadow.

The manager's honeymoon period

Some years ago I coached a group of managers. One of the managers was new in his job, and the theme that he brought up was one of frustration, stress and uncertainty about how to handle conflicts among his staff. The other managers in the group suggested that he might want to separate the individuals, issue warnings or intervene directly.

These are all attempts at solving the problem by altering the external circumstances, which is most people's initial response. If this succeeds, of course the tension is gone, but does that mean that the problem has been solved?

When we looked into his previous history as a manager, we found that he had resigned from his previous job due to teamwork problems and severe conflicts. He had felt powerless to act and very stressed in his previous job but was excited about this new job. We then reflected on whether he might, in his current job, be transferring anxiety from the previous situation. Might his perspective be influenced by his fear of seeing a recurrence of his past problems? And was he simply transitioning into everyday life after what might be called a honeymoon period in his new position?

In this sequence, a magical moment occurred when the manager transcended himself. He did a mental quantum leap, and the problem dissolved from a heavy knot into the finest dust. The manager reflected on the notion that the staff issues may have not been as severe as he had made them out to be, and that the whole thing may in fact have had more to do with his own fear of not being up to the job.

When the manager left the coaching session, he had no action plan and no solution. No goals. And when I met with the group a month later he told me that he had not solved the staff problem. The external circumstances remained unchanged, but the new insight he had acquired as a result of the coaching process allowed him to let go of his anxiety, and he therefore no longer perceived the conflicts as problematic but instead as ordinary everyday friction that the staff could handle on their own.

This shift in awareness helped the manager grow. He learned to take responsibility for his emotions and experiences instead of allowing himself to be victimized by external circumstances. His insight did a quantum leap, and he grew stronger when he learned to contain conflicts instead of staging a reactive and forced attempt at changing his surroundings. He was thus able to send the ghosts that haunted him back to the past where they belonged.

New insights provide a new vantage point and enable us to transcend problems and find new solutions – although in many cases, the problems simply seem to solve themselves. From this vantage point, any problem holds the potential for greater insight and personal growth. Thus, a more advanced purpose of coaching is to facilitate these shifts in awareness.

When the purpose is insight

Insight-oriented coaching is inspired by a therapeutic concept of human development factors, and thus the general coaching wave has its roots both in the awareness-oriented practice of therapy and in elite sport and performance-oriented practices.

As a philosophy, then, in addition to specific practices, coaching embraces a far wider range than just goal-oriented coaching, although goal-oriented coaching, for the reasons mentioned above, does account for much of what goes on in the field. Therapeutic process psychology and sophisticated therapeutic dialogue techniques and tools have historically had – and will continue to have – considerable influence on the development of coaching practices, and in this context coaching is not considered a standardized technique aimed at improving performance.

The philosophy behind the empathic, equal and non-judging relationship as a prerequisite of coaching is in fact originally based on inspiration from Carl Rogers, the Milan school¹ and others, just as the positioning of the coach as not-knowing and curious stems from systemic therapy. Similarly, Michael White and narrative therapy are considered some of the main sources of inspiration in the development of European coaching practices today, and narrative coaching is currently gaining ground among many coaching practitioners, both as a method and as a theory of science.

Generally, coaching is seen mainly as solution- and future-oriented, while therapy is seen more as an insight-oriented practice that often deals with the past. This distinction is often less clear-cut in practice, however, and in fact reflects the high degree of visibility that goal-oriented coaching has achieved in a brief time span.

1. The Milan school is a systemically oriented family therapy method that has made major contributions to the development of a process-oriented coaching and consultancy approach in Europe.

The brief coaching training programmes maintain that a coach cannot address the past, and that the coach should adhere to the stage models and techniques. That makes sense for the early stages of a coaching training programme where the aspiring coach is taking his or her first steps. A novice coach will lack the experience, the training and the methods for operating freely and creatively in the coaching space. In an externally oriented coaching approach – that leaves out the past – the purpose is not to promote any major quantum leaps in awareness, and it is quite appropriate to define the purpose of coaching as goal-oriented.

An experienced coach with additional and more comprehensive training typically masters both the past and present as well as a wide range of methods, dialogue techniques and tools and has a greater capacity for utilizing the powerful potential of coaching to generate awareness and insight. In insight-oriented coaching the coach is not guided by a particular stage model or technique but has access to many different methods that can be brought into play to generate synergy, depending on the individual client's unique situation and psyche. This lets the coach establish the close presence and the bond with the client that form the backdrop for the unfolding of coaching as a unique and original journey of discovery.

In this insight-oriented framework, coaching is viewed as a fundamental dialogue-based approach to development that aims to unfold the individual's insight and personal awareness. The process embraces the whole person and focuses on enhancing such qualities as insight and authenticity. The underlying notion is that problems cannot only be solved but should be dis-solved or re-solved. In this space, solutions result as natural by-products of enhanced awareness rather than in the form of forced, reactive action plans in response to confusion, anxiety and stress.

Stress coaching – the new mega-trend

Along with the explosive growth of the coaching phenomenon and the parallel focus on stress, stress coaching emerged as an independent phenomenon. As the term suggests, stress coaching involves coaching people who suffer from stress, and the purpose of stress coaching is to help people reduce stress and regain balance in their life.

Managers and HR consultants and many external consultants and coaches with briefer training backgrounds typically work with externally oriented goal coaching; they help individuals identify stress factors and develop action plans aimed at reducing these factors. External coaches with a background in psychology or therapy typically take an insight-oriented approach, aiming to improve the individual's awareness and mental resilience in combination with the pursuit of goals and action plans aimed at stress reduction on the external plane.

Stress coaching as a discipline is thus used by both managers and HR consultants and has also developed into an independent business area for external providers, typically practised by coaches, consultants, psychologists etc. Thus, 'stress coach' has now become an independent job title.

The applicability of coaching

Whether one's approach is goal-oriented, insight-oriented or both, coaching is not the universal answer in every case. Coaching is always aimed at unfolding resources, insights and possibilities; that is what makes it such an exceptional development tool.

This development effort, however, requires a great deal of the person who seeks help through coaching, and far from everyone who seeks coaching has the strength and the resources that it takes to relate reflectively to one's life and surroundings.

People who for various reasons feel fragile or vulnerable or who are in a crisis do not have this strength, and they should under no circumstances receive coaching. A person who is in a crisis needs crisis counselling and guidance, which requires a very different set of competences from basic coaching qualifications. Therefore, many HR functions and external coaches cooperate with psychologists to whom they refer clients who fall outside the coaching field or who in other regards have needs that exceed the competences of the coach.

Stress – the modern trauma

One of the most severe causes of personal crises today in the Western world is stress. According to figures from the International Labour Organisation (ILO), 75% of European employees suffer from stress. 30% of cases where people are unable to work are stress-caused, whilst 85% of executives feel increasingly overwhelmed by the same problem.

Work-related stress in specific is one of the biggest health and safety challenges that we face in Europe, and studies suggest that 60% of all lost working days are related to it. This represents a huge cost in terms of both human distress and impaired economic performance².

Workplace stress will rise over the next five years according to eight out of ten workers across Europe, a major new EU-OSHA new survey has revealed.

The survey of 35,000 people in 36 European countries found that 80 per cent of people believed that job-related stress would increase, while 52 per cent said it would increase "a lot".

Results from the survey also showed that 86 per cent agree that good occupational safety and health practices are necessary for a country to remain economically competitive.

These latest findings support earlier research from EU-OSHA's survey on new and emerging workplace risks. This showed that 79 per cent of managers think stress is an issue in their companies, making stress at work as important as workplace accidents for companies, the agency said.

2. EU-OSHA (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

“The financial crisis and the changing world of work is making increased demands on workers, therefore it is unsurprising that work-related stress is at the forefront of people’s minds,” said Dr Christa Sedlatschek, director of EU-OSHA.

The typical physical symptoms include elevated blood pressure, heart palpitations, chest pressure, insomnia, digestive problems and frequent infections. Emotionally, a stress condition is often accompanied by a feeling of inadequacy, nervousness, anger, anxiety, depression and fatigue.

People suffering from stress who have not experienced physical abuse, torture or traumatic accidents display the exact same symptoms as people who have. Feelings of being overwhelmed, of guilt and of being powerless to act in combination with serious physical reactions match the symptomatology of someone who has suffered, for example, physical abuse and is in a crisis state. This underscores how important it is that professionals who practise coaching and therapy in this field have the necessary experience, training and insight to work with people who are in a crisis state.

One of the main issues in relation to stress is that it usually takes very dramatic physical consequences before the person acknowledges the condition and seeks help. Although there is a considerable focus on stress factors and symptoms today, a consistent aspect of the stress syndrome is lack of self-awareness and being out of touch with oneself and one’s body. Psychologists meet these people when they are in a state of dissolution, confused and unable to cope. They hyperventilate, are constipated and sleep poorly. They are often angry with themselves and judge themselves harshly.

Obviously, a person who is in this state is not in a condition to unfold new potentials or set goals in a coaching process – he or she is far too vulnerable and overwhelmed.

Stress coaching – a contradiction in terms

Stress is not a fad or a buzzword that calls for trendy stress coaching. Stress is a serious crisis that afflicts far too many people in the Western world today, some of whom never recover enough to fully resume their working life. The condition requires professional treatment, and the situation calls for a clear focus on training, experience and knowledge in managers and HR consultants as well as the external suppliers who offer stress coaching.

In this context, the term ‘stress coaching’ is in itself a contradiction in terms. When a person is sick or getting sick because of stress it is not coaching that is required.

A person who is getting sick because of stress is in a crisis, and as mentioned above, this puts the person off limits to coaching, as coaching is always about enabling alternative possibilities and solutions. In this situation, coaching can push an already overwhelmed person even closer to the edge. At best, coaching will fail to help the person; at worst it can exacerbate the problem and be a further source of stress.

A person who is getting sick because of stress needs urgent crisis counselling, ongoing guidance, follow-up and psychoeducation about stress and stress symptoms. Stress is a state where self-awareness might be the ultimate goal, but where the client needs immediate and specific guidance in handling the crisis, step by step.

This requires a coach who is trained and specialized in stress and who has the necessary experience to be able to “diagnose” the severity and symptoms of the condition as well as the person’s psyche and defence mechanisms. It also takes a very experienced coach, because he or she needs to abandon the general coaching technique where the coach merely acts as a facilitator and instead do what all training programmes tell prospective coaches to avoid: interviewing for data, providing instructions and offering advice.

Only once the immediate crisis is over, and the person has recovered and developed renewed resources to draw on is it time for actual coaching. And it is only once this coaching process begins that the coach and the client can work on generating awareness and solutions.

Thus, a stress coach has to be able to strike a balance between coaching and instruction and between support and expert counselling, and that requires specialized training and many years of experience.

The proper role of stress coaching

Ordinary coaching is great for the many people who simply feel that their everyday lives are too busy, and who only show low levels of stress. Goal-oriented coaching in particular is effective in relation to early stages of stress, and it is in this sense that the concept of stress coaching has its proper role. Although many people are sick today because of stress, the vast majority are healthy and able to benefit from improving their ability to prioritize and draw up action plans for their life in order to reduce the presence of stress factors. In this context, coaching is a great tool in the effort to prevent and halt the development of stress before it becomes severe.

That requires a nation of highly self-aware individuals, however, who seek help on their own initiative when they sense that they are about to cross a threshold. In fact, these people are the exception. As mentioned above, stress is often not acknowledged until it produces very dramatic symptoms, because self-awareness and stress do not usually go together.

The concept of stress coaching is therefore far from clear-cut, which reflects a similar lack of clarity concerning the concept of stress. Thus, 'stress' is used colloquially by most people to mean they are merely too busy for comfort, while at the same time, psychologists, HR professionals and doctors use it as a clinical term and diagnosis.

In relation to early stress and a general sense of being too busy, the general concept of stress coaching makes excellent sense. In relation to more severe stress conditions, however, possibly involving sick leave, another term might make more sense, although in that context too, coaching is always a key part of the process.

As we shall see in Chapter 8, the coaching phase in the stress treatment process is the most important phase, as this is when the actual learning and transformation take place. And this transformation is only possible in the framework of the coaching principles and their exceptional ethics about the client's ownership and personal responsibility.

Coaching in the border zone

In relation to stress, we are therefore in a border zone where coaching can be both effective and helpful, but where it can also be harmful if it is used unreflectively or prematurely. And in cases of severe stress, crisis management and expert advice should always be brought into play to contain the crisis before any sort of coaching can begin.

This means that the practitioner has to be capable of reaching a diagnosis and determining an appropriate process based on this diagnosis. A coach or consultant without a background in psychology or other specialized training still needs to be specialized in stress to be able to diagnose the stage of the stress disorder and then, with integrity, decide either to coach the client or refer him or her to a coach who is a trained psychologist or has other specialized training.

A manager or HR consultant also needs the proper qualifications to prevent stress and to take responsibility for balancing resources and work tasks as well as 'diagnosing' and, in more severe cases, referring individuals to a relevant external practitioner. In the coming chapters we will take a closer look at the phenomenon of stress in order to draw the map that we will need to navigate when we initiate the actual stress coaching process with the client and establish the initial diagnosis.