

A Reflection on Coaching: Bringing Us Up to Date and a Look Ahead

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Abstract

The coaching profession has evolved greatly over the past decade, making now an ideal time to evaluate its current state. The number of professional coaches has grown dramatically, and the efficacy of the coaching modality has been proven. In addition, specialty coaching, that is coaching within a domain in which the coach has expertise, has emerged for coaches looking to establish a niche practice. Coaching skills are being more broadly deployed in team coaching by managers and leaders, and increasingly by everyone in organizations. And since coaching skills enhance dialogue, they can improve communication and mutual understanding in all conversations, which benefits individuals (micro), teams and organizations (meso) and the wider global community (macro). Finally, emerging artificial intelligence (AI) technology is poised to further grow and evolve the profession, which in turn would benefit individuals, teams, and organizations. With this in mind, the purpose of this perspectives paper is to introduce some of what we know about coaching with a view to encouraging the reader to think about what is next.

Keywords

executive coaching • business coaching • team coaching • coaching culture • coaching skills

Introduction

The field of HRD and more specifically the area of learning and development, has grown and transformed over time, dating back at least to Taylor's encouragement to improve management and efficiency in organizations (Taylor, 1911). In comparison, coaching is a young modality with diverse origins, emerging in earnest only in the mid-1990s (Brock, 2012; Wildflower, 2013). The profession has experienced rapid growth over the last decades and is now well-established within organizations. A recent global survey from the International Coaching Federation (ICF) indicates that the top three coaching specialties are leadership, executive, and business coaching (ICF, 2023). ICF estimates there are currently over 110,000 coaches worldwide (ICF, 2023).

At the heart of coaching lies an interest in underlying client motivations to change either behaviour or attitude (Greif, 2022). Using this desire to change as a lever, a coach facilitates client growth. While coaches often facilitate growth broadly, some have chosen specializations such as agile (adaptive, people-focused development through rapid iteration) and health and wellness, where they use extensive domain knowledge to effectively integrate coaching skills.

Several systematic reviews of the coaching literature have been published over the years (Bozer & Jones, 2018; Grant et al., 2010; Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Passmore & Gibbes, 2007), with the most recent in 2020 (Graßmann & Schermuly, 2021; Trayler et al., 2020) focused on the coach to client working alliance and team coaching respectively. Now seems an appropriate time to update our appraisal of the current literature and the state of the coaching profession.

Current Perspective on Coaching: Bringing Us Up to Date

The coaching profession is maturing. In November 2021, the British Psychological Society (BPS) re-designated their Special Group in Coaching Psychology to a full division, the Division of Coaching Psychology (British Psychological Society, n.d.). Division 13 (Society of Consulting Psychology) of the American Psychological Association (APA) has examined coaching psychology extensively, including the exploration of a coaching psychology competency

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model (Vandaveer et al., 2016; Vandaveer & Palmer, 2016). Recently, rigorous job analysis methods from industrial and organizational psychology led to the development of a comprehensive coaching competency model (DiGirolamo et al., 2024). Additionally, the efficacy of coaching has been established, solidifying support for the profession (Jones et al., 2016; Theeboom et al., 2014). Given this maturity and solid foundation, what is the trajectory of the profession now and in the future?

Let us start by considering the evolution of coaching through a sociological lens, as illustrated in Figure 1. At the micro level, professional coaching began as a one-to-one relationship, for either remedial development or for adequate performers to advance further and faster.

Especially at this level, coaching is akin to an individualized learning programme in which the coach may facilitate the learning framework, but the client must independently explore resources. This aligns with Carl Rogers' philosophy that the client has everything they need to move forward and grow (Rogers, 1951). For many years, the focus of coaching had been for "sustained change" (Bennett & Bush, 2014; Koroleva, 2016). Given the speed of change in our global society, perhaps coaching for resilience or adaptability should be prioritized (Kellerman & Seligman, 2023). Considering the rapid changes required in the global workforce early in the COVID-19 pandemic, empathy, often considered lacking in organizational leadership, suddenly became essential for managers and leaders, as they pivoted to maintain their workforce and productivity (Kaiser, 2024).

An evolutionary path for coach educators shifted from training professional coaches to training managers and leaders to use coaching skills. This was likely a good business decision for the coach educators and at the same time may have provided a significant positive impact on organizations' performance. DiGirolamo and Tkach (2019) found that more frequent use of coaching skills by managers and leaders was associated with high employee engagement, working alliance, and a reduced intention to quit. Another important finding in this study was that as managers and leaders learned and applied coaching skills, they began using them to enhance dialogue in all their conversations, not just one-to-one interactions with team members (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2019).

As one-to-one coaching became more common, many coaches sought an evolutionary path and began team coaching. Effective team coaching entails a higher cognitive load due to the addition of complex interpersonal dynamics among the clients (Britton, 2019; Widdowson et al., 2020). In group coaching "... these layers - purpose, goals, approaches, and accountability are usually different and distinct for each group member rather than being shared or similar" (Britton, 2019, p. 25). Teams need to have shared goals, with all members

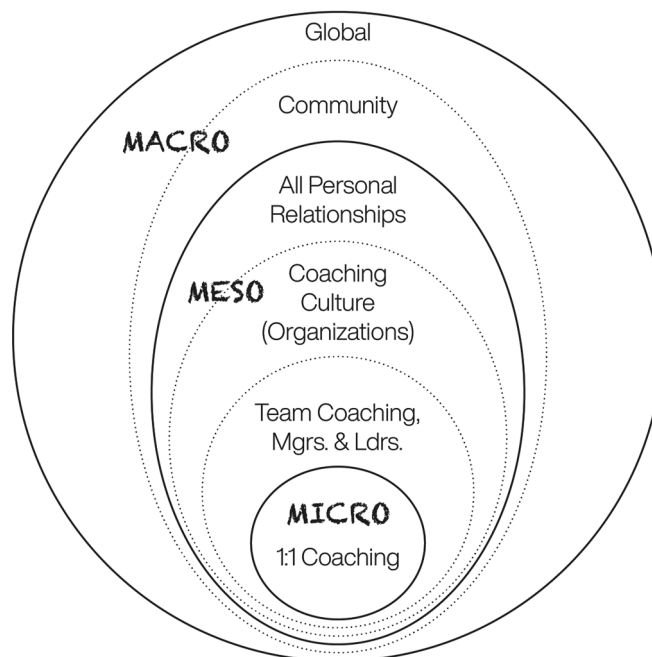


Figure 1. The Evolution of Coaching.

aligned toward those objectives. The factors of goal alignment and attendant team processes can make team coaching significantly more challenging than individual or group coaching (Britton, 2019). Unfortunately, we do not yet have as much research on the efficacy of team coaching, rendering it an area ripe for exploration by coaching researchers (Zajac et al., 2021).

As Figure 1 indicates, the next level in the progression is for organizations to adopt a "coaching culture". In a thorough and systematic review of the coaching culture literature, Kapoutzis et al. (2023) found little uniformity in the definitions of coaching culture. Perspectives range from Schein's classic approach of culture (Nieminen et al., 2022; Schein, 1985) to Hawkins' professional coaching-first approach (Hawkins, 2012) to policy-based approaches, as illustrated by Milner et al. (2020). It would seem that the idea of building a coaching culture solely around the use of coaching skills by all employees would provide a good foundation for enhanced dialogue and potentially higher overall organizational performance. It is also important to note that many organizations recognize the significant value of coaching and thus seek to implement a formal internal coaching programme (e.g., Fitzsimmons et al., 2023).

HRD interventions such as training and consulting are generally considered the transference of domain knowledge and skills from a more experienced individual or team to those with less experience. Integrating coaching skills with knowledge transfer can enhance learning and growth by

tapping into the client's motivations and providing them with what they may be ready for at that moment (Sackett & Dabby, 2024). This latter concept is often referred to as the Vygotsky Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD (Vygotsky, 1934/1986). Utilizing the concept of ZPD coupled with the idea of leveraging client motivations and domain knowledge brings us into the realm of specialty coaching.

It is difficult to count all of the areas of specialty coaching. We have business coaching (Berman, 2019), agile coaching (Griffin, 2022), health and wellness coaching (Wolever et al., 2010), sales coaching (Badrinarayanan et al., 2015), and many more. The common theme in these specialties is that they are "coaching first": that is, understanding the client's motivations and developing goals — and then offering knowledge or exercises to try, or skills to practice. It is anticipated that this wave of specialty coaching will continue unabated, perhaps because many specialty coaches have found that their clients often progress faster and better.

An important coaching specialty area emerging in recent years is wellbeing (Crabtree & Swainston, 2023; Jarosz, 2021; Kellerman & Seligman, 2023). It is heartening to hear these sentiments, since wellbeing is related to thriving, and a thriving society may bring us closer to global unity and peace. Community developers have been successfully applying coaching in their work for over a decade (Emery et al., 2011), illuminating the power of utilizing coaching to achieve a unified purpose.

Supervision of psychotherapists, counsellors, and coaches has taken circuitous paths among the modalities and geographic locations (Tkach & DiGirolamo, 2017). Several organizations, such as the Association for Professional Executive Coaching & Supervision (APECS) and the Association of National Organizations for Supervision (ANSE), provide community and support for coaching supervisors. Further, the two largest coaching associations, the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) and ICF, have coaching supervision competency models (EMCC, 2019; ICF, 2024a) and promote supervision as part of a coaching practice. While the efficacy of coaching supervision has not yet been quantitatively established, it is nevertheless well-established in the coaching profession (Bachkirova et al., 2020).

Technology is playing a larger part in the coaching profession. Coaching platforms such as BetterUp, Coaching.com, and EZRA boast a wide variety of tools and resources for coaches. Many also provide their client organizations with a cadre of coaches vetted for proficient performance. The business models for these platforms vary and evidence suggests that coaches find them useful. Undoubtedly coaching platforms will provide purchasing organizations with a confluence of tools, coaches, and AI coaching, with the AI coaching satisfying the most basic coaching offering on a 24/7 basis. The advantage of coaching platforms to organizations is a single point of purchase and management.

An Inflection Point: The Advent of Artificial Intelligence in Coaching

AI coaching emerged in the coaching profession several years ago (Terblanche & Cilliers, 2020) and has advanced rapidly. If the pace of technology continues to advance as quickly as it has, it is likely that AI will be an integral part of almost all coaching engagements and sessions (DiGirolamo, 2024; Graßmann, & Schermuly, 2021).

The efficacy of AI coaching has been established (Terblanche et al., 2022). While the AI coaching technology will continue to advance, it is expected that the market for AI coaching-related tools will grow and provide coaches with a plethora of offers to assist them in many aspects of their practice.

The coaching profession has been rife with concern regarding the ethics, privacy, and confidentiality of data in AI coaching and coaching platforms in general. Both the EMCC and ICF have published AI coaching standards (EMCC, 2023; ICF, 2024b) to assist developers, purchasing organizations, coaches, and clients in their understanding and decisions regarding these tools. AI's emergence in the mid-2020s and beyond will likely mark a critical inflection point when the coaching profession welcomed a wide variety of useful tools.

Implications for Practice

Considering the progress in the coaching profession noted above, at a foundational level, it would be useful to encourage everyone in an organization to have some measure of coaching knowledge and skill. Organizations frequently introduce coaching on an ad hoc basis with external coaches and progress through stages, bringing some coaching in-house and ultimately seeing coaching skills as an element of their corporate strategy (Riddle & Pothier, 2010).

Assuming an organization already has a robust professional coaching offering for all or most employees in the organization, they need to consider how they might take advantage of broader deployment of coaching skills. Integrating coaching into change management programmes or ongoing efforts, such as implementations of agile frameworks, may significantly boost their adoption and efficacy.

The performance of teams is what drives the performance of the organization. Incorporating team coaches into the mix of professional development efforts can pay significant dividends through improved processes and results (Peters & Carr, 2019). To reinforce the coaching message, professional development programmes teach coaching skills to managers, leaders, and virtually all employees and can be contracted or developed and deployed in-house.

Utilizing a coaching platform with a cadre of proficient coaches can be a low-cost way to jump-start a coaching programme. Platforms often provide coaches with an array of tools to deploy the coaching engagement and sessions as well as offering robust resources for clients to explore and enhance or reinforce their development.

And finally, exploring AI coaching applications and other AI applications could enhance client development through reinforcing desired behaviours, analysing options, and more. Almost all future professionals will likely rely daily on AI-enabled tools (Passmore et al, 2025).

Conclusion

Bringing to light in this work the many advances and enhanced benefits in the coaching profession can raise awareness among HR professionals about many more tools they can suggest for professional development. Perhaps the profession has evolved to the point where its rich possibilities change an organization's question from "Should we offer coaching?" to "In what ways and to whom should we offer coaching?"

As AI coaching was introduced in the early 2020s, anecdotally, a chorus of fearful voices questioned the continued viability of humans in the coaching profession. A more balanced perspective is now possible as we discern where AI is best utilized alongside human coaches. In the future, it is likely that we will look upon general-purpose AI tools much as we do electronic spreadsheets today — tools to enhance our productivity and explore a plethora of alternatives. AI coaching may become mainstream in some niches and human coaches will have learned to coexist and even thrive alongside these AI platforms.

Professional HR services organizations and coaching platform providers will have a range of standard offerings, including coaching tools, a cadre of vetted professional coaches, and AI coaching for unlimited basic coaching availability. We can expect ongoing demand for human-delivered coaching and training in coaching skills across all corporate levels.

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