

From Theory to Practice—in Search of Theoretical Approaches Leading to Informed Coaching Practices



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Abstract In order to define Coaching, we first examined what Coaching is and what it is not. Then, we compared Coaching with other types of interventions. We also considered the different types of Coaching. Being aware of all the challenges that Coaching must deal with, it is also our aim in this chapter to stress those approaches that are most relevant to orienting best practices, particularly in the organisational context.

1 Introduction

Determining a single, complete or intemporal definition of Coaching is a challenging enterprise that must involve the identification of several variables. From scientific research into this knowledge domain, it is possible to identify the most common variables that explain the difference between what Coaching is and what it is not since these concern the big theoretical-practical Coaching issues. In the main, these variables are the purpose of Coaching, the different types of Coaching, the context in which Coaching takes place, and the results expected from the Coaching process.

The *purpose of Coaching* is related to instilling motivation and responsibility in the Coachee in order for them to design and accomplish an action plan. This action plan will lead to improvement and change, specifically to improved performance in a professional domain and to behavioural change, either in a professional or personal context. Training and Consultancy can also promote this, but these are not the core goals of those specific interventions. The same can be said of Psychotherapy and

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Counselling, which could indirectly promote these goals, but that is not their main purpose either. The specificity of Coaching must highlight the non-clinical population as the target Clients.

Setting aside the existing classifications, *types of Coaching* can be mainly divided into the Coaching that is done within organisations through performance orientation, and outside organisations through other global orientation. The Coaching process is deeply related to the *context* in which it is activated. In modern societies, the major context in which Coaching has been developed is the work context where the purpose is deeply related to performance improvement. This use of Coaching is goal-oriented, that is to say, it is done to achieve *expected results*, such as to improve skills and competencies and specific behaviours that can be identified and measured, if possible, by performance indicators.

This discussion would not be complete without mentioning the different approaches that have influenced the practice of Coaching, and that involves the way the *relationship setting* is managed.

It being essential in helping provide rapid adaptation to challenges, Coaching has a special status in society today and, as such, the professional training of Coaches must be paramount for Coaching Associations or Coaching Societies in each country.

2 Coaching—to Be or not to Be...in Search of a Possible Definition for Coaching...

Despite the plethora of information about Coaching, people in general know little about the Do's and Don'ts regarding branches, processes, goals, and results. There is a tendency to believe that when something new comes along, it is a magic wand that with one wave will facilitate change processes and enhance people's well-being. Such is the case with coaching, where the multifarious information available can be very confusing and lead to misunderstandings. Coaching can stem from a variety of theoretical approaches, each of which will condition specific practice interventions and involve a multitude of techniques (Grover and Furnham 2016).

The dilemma is whether it is easier to be a Coach, or in the Coaching process as a Coachee, than to present a complete and perfect definition of Coaching. In a scientific sense, to say that something is difficult to define, when everyone can do it with little or no previous (or proper) preparation makes it sound more like an art or, even worse, something more akin to selling snake oil. Nowadays, there are mixed feelings with regard to Coaching due to its being such a widespread big business that gleans millions without any concrete proof of its efficacy. The various criticisms about the principles of Coaching and the nonexistence of a common rationale among Coaching experts regarding practice (and also between researchers of different branches of Coaching) stems from a lack of any deep conceptual framework able to shed some light on all this.

At the heart of Coaching principles are the main characters, their roles and the rapport they establish between them. There must be a Coach and at least one Coachee (assuming individual interventions) and their roles are predefined. The Coach is responsible for understanding the Coachee's frame of reference and their objectives. The Coach needs to create the conditions in which the Coachee can discover their resources, identify obstacles and develop strategies to overcome them, and define efficient actions towards achieving their goal. The Coachee should be responsible for their own development, define their objectives, intermediate targets and action plan, and provide the resources to achieve their goals.

Setting aside a single definition and an exclusive type of theoretical perspective, there are nevertheless some common aspects that can be identified in the Coaching literature (Connor and Pokora 2007; Cox et al. 2009; Smith and Brumell 2013) especially with regard to non-directive approaches, and in organisational contexts. These common aspects are basic Coaching principles that function as boundaries to the practice. Among them are:

- *Coaching as a developmental instrument*—Coaching is an instrument used to develop competencies in another (Coachee), leading to performance improvements.
- *Coaching is done by a professional*—it is possible to identify the difference between being a professional or having a Coaching attitude in the way we talk to people. A Coach facilitates the process, they are a facilitator and not a magician that will conjure solutions.
- *Coaching is to respect Coachees' agenda*—it is accepted now that to get more results a Coachee needs to be involved in their own goals in line with organisational goals.
- *Coaching is not to be confused with other developmental or health-related practices*—as a specific practice, Coaching is not the same as Mentoring, Training, Consultancy, Counselling, Psychotherapy.
- *Coaching is not to be used with other practices*—even if you are a Psychotherapist, a Psychologist, a Trainer, if you are acting as a professional Coach you must be aware of the limits to intervention that Coaching involves.
- *Coaching involves a collaborative relationship*—as an alliance between Coach and Coachee, it is based on confidentiality, action steps are designed to better achieve desired goals, and expected results, and to keep the Coachee motivated.
- *Coaching goal achievement as a Coachee's responsibility*—the Coach is a facilitator, but the action involvement and goal achievement are the responsibility of the Coachee.
- *Coaching uses communication techniques to facilitate Coachees' awareness*—Being empathetic, knowing how to formulate questions and active listening are communication skills that activate Coachees' awareness and facilitate the process of defining the Coaching steps.

When the above principles are respected in Coaching practice, it is easy to understand the powerful role a motivational relationship can play with regard to building the special bond that leads to the commitment that is the basis for success

in the Coaching process. For the Coachee, a supportive relationship also helps to reduce stress, and facilitates the improvement of psychological resources, such as self-awareness; self-efficacy; resilience and problem-solving, among others.

Awareness of some inner and basic Coaching principles makes it easier to understand what the common aspects are able to identify and to view Coaching as an autonomous and specific intervention. Above all, and setting aside the different theoretical approaches, coaching is:

- An independent, specific technique, different from Mentoring, Training, Consultancy, Counselling, Psychotherapy.
- A relational professional practice, where the roles and responsibilities of the Coach and the Coachee are defined.
- An intervention that follows systematic steps, based on a specific theoretical approach.
- Focused on previously defined goals and on achieving them.
- An intervention that can be evaluated by comparing the results with the previously defined goals.

Coaching is a widespread term currently used to describe several types of interventions which do not, however, all lead to effective Coaching. It is, therefore, important to clarify which characteristics of Coaching are to be considered key to Coaching interventions and, consequently, which are to be excluded.

3 Coaching Comparison with Other Types of Intervention

It is also important to differentiate Coaching from other practices that could have some similarities, such as Counselling or Psychotherapy. Regarding Counselling and Psychotherapy, the main difference resides in the temporal moment the sessions focus on. While those types of intervention usually delve into a person's past history in order to uncover the origins of their current way of thinking and behaviours, Coaching on the other hand focuses on the future, and develops strategies to pursue predetermined goals (Theeboom et al. 2014). What is more, the Coaching relationship should be a non-therapeutic one (Grant and O'Connor 2010). Indeed, if an individual has a limited capacity for change, it could be very difficult and even counterproductive for them to embark upon a Coaching program (McKenna and Davis 2009).

Taking an organisational context, and assuming there is a form of Coaching specifically designed to improve skills, competencies and performance within organisations (Fontes and Dello Russo 2019; Hamlin et al. 2008), it is important to compare that with other forms of in-house intervention such as Mentoring, Consulting and Training. In the case of Mentoring, it is assumed that the Mentor must have more experience in either the job itself or in the company culture (Dello Russo et al. 2016). In Coaching, any assumed superior knowledge of the coach does not exist, and there does not even need to be a shared professional background, although it has been

acknowledged that it can be helpful towards guaranteeing a better understanding of the Coachee’s context (Bono et al. 2009).

The differences between Coaching and Consulting are mainly in the output of the one providing the service: the Consultant gives specific recommendations about the best way to achieve a predefined objective or solve a problem; the Coach should not give opinions or provide solutions but should pose the questions that will lead the Coachee to find their own answers. We found that Training also differs from Coaching with regard to output, with the difference being in the way it is presented. In Training, the Trainer is expected to employ content previously agreed with the organisation. In Coaching, however, there is no agreed, predefined content since the content to be discussed will be brought by the Coachee, and not the Coach. To reiterate then, in Coaching, unlike in both training and Consulting, the Coach is not expected to provide any content or make recommendations but should help the Coachee, usually through questioning, to find their own answers and solutions.

4 Types of Coaching

As previously mentioned, Coaching is a broad term that was first used in association with sports but its application then extended to several other areas. In Table 1, several types of Coaching are shown according to three main criteria: the topic being discussed, the Coach and to whom the service is provided, and the Coachee.

Our focus will be on organisational Coaching, which means the Coaching provided in a corporate context. Since it is not unusual to find it being called different names, such as executive or business, we shall differentiate between types depending on who is receiving the Coaching: when provided to the top management we refer to it as Executive Coaching, when it is available to those who manage teams we call it Leadership Coaching, and when it is available to all employees we call it Business Coaching.

The Coach can have different positions on the organisational chart of a company. They might be included in the company structure, and considered an internal Coach or, contrastingly, be considered an external service provider not related to the

Table 1 Some types of Coaching

Topic	Non-organisational: Life; Career; Sports; Health & Wellbeing; Educational; Parental,...	Organisational
Coach		Internal; External; <i>Team*</i> ; <i>Managerial*</i> ; <i>Human Resources*</i> ; <i>Peer*</i>
Coachee		Business; Leadership; Executive
Form	Face to face; telephone; Online; Blended; Individual; Group	

*Not considered Coaching by the majority of scholars

company, and hence designated an external Coach. There are advantages and disadvantages to both types. An internal Coach knows the culture of the company in-depth, which can facilitate the Coaching process, but it can also be restrictive depending on the boundaries of the employing organisation. An external Coach would not necessarily be limited by any such boundaries (Jones et al. 2016).

We believe it is important to mention other forms that could be called Coaching such as peer, team, managerial Coaching or even Coaching provided by Human Resources. In our understanding, those forms of intervention do not comply with one of the important prerequisites of Coaching, namely the unbiased role of the Coach. In all these other forms, the Coach has a specific role in the company and their own goals. For example, imagine the case of a Coachee whose goal is to be promoted, or to be transferred to another department: openly discussing that goal at an early stage and seeking strategies to achieve it, with a peer, the manager or even Human Resources could create some early controversy and possibly become a stumbling block in the Coaching process. That is why we consider that those kinds of interactions are closer to Mentoring than to Coaching. The Coaches in that case (peers, managers, or human resources professionals) can, in fact, use their Coaching knowledge and skills, but it must be borne in mind that the role they occupy within the organisation might impede the “pure” coaching process.

Last but not least, it is important to note that organisational Coaching has one particular specificity, namely a third party additional to the Coach and the Coachee and which is normally the entity that finances the Coaching program: the company. It is important from the very beginning to establish the limits of the role of each intervenient, as well as to get an agreement of confidentiality that protects the relationship between Coach and Coachee. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to come across obstacles that can present challenges to the Coaching practice in an organisational setting.



Reflection moment—Exercise 1

Considering what you have read above, how would you answer the following:

1. If the Coaching service is paid for by the company, can the company limit the type of goals to those related to the performance of the Employer/Coachee?

2. Conversely, if the Coachee brings a topic from his private life to the Coaching session, what should the Coach do?

3. If the Coachee brings to the session his intention to leave the company and asks the Coach to guide him to the best decision, what should the Coachee do?

4. If the CEO approaches the Coach and mentions something about a certain Coachee being at risk of being fired due to poor performance, what should the Coach do with that information in the next session with the Coachee?

5 Different Coaching Approaches

The difficulties found in defining Coaching are compounded when it comes to dealing with identifying possible Coaching approaches and their relationship to practice. To achieve scientific status as a systematic intervention and gain more credibility at a social level, each Coaching intervention must be identified with some theoretical approaches which can then inform practical interventions with Clients.

Coaching theory is grounded in several areas, namely: psychology, such as positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000); and humanistic, constructivist and coaching psychology (Passmore 2010). Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP), is also commonly associated with Coaching. NLP, as explicit in the name, merges neurology, language and programming. Its multidimensional processes include the development of behavioural competence and flexibility, strategic thinking and cognitive processing. It employs several techniques whose origins are in linguistics, psychology, systems theory, cybernetics, and hypnosis (Fontes and Dello Russo 2019). However, being derived from the human and social sciences and psychotherapy schools, this very diversity of background could be either a strength for its wealth of knowledge and instruments or a weakness through misuse of techniques unassociated to specific theoretical approaches.

To understand the practices of Coaching, it is relevant to take into consideration the dimensions put forward by Yves (2008) that characterise Coaching approaches. To begin with, the practices could be considered as being directive or non-directive in the way responsibilities for the process are attributed more to Coach or the Coachee. Second, Coaching could also be focused more on personal development or be more goal-focused. Goal-oriented Coaching as a specific paradigm comprises several characteristics: non-directivity, goal-oriented and performance-driven. And third, Coaching could be derived from therapeutic approaches or performance-driven intentions.

At its inception, Coaching was seen as a partially directive intervention, with the Coach being considered as someone who could direct a Coachee to find a solution (Yves 2008). From being a partially directive intervention, Coaching has evolved to being more of a non-directive intervention, where the responsibility is assumed by Coachee.

In the interest of openness and out of respect for all theoretical perspectives and forms of intervention, it is relevant to mention just a few approaches (Stober and Grant 2010) that have influenced and oriented the way Coaching has built its role as a performance improvement tool within the organisational context.

The Humanistic Perspective based on the Maslow (1954) legacy and also on the Rogerian (Rogers 1959) principles of person-centred theory, developed and spread a theory that the inner individual motivation is toward positive change and self-actualisation. This perspective has had a very positive influence on valuing human development potential within organisations, making room for Coaching to assert itself as an intervention that can facilitate it. More recently, this humanistic perspective has been associated with other theories such as the Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Gregory and Levy 2012). According to their model, coaching practices (autonomy-, competency- and relatedness-supportive behaviours) influence employee outcomes through the attainment of psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness (Gabriel et al. 2014).

The Behavioural Approach (Eldridge and Dembkowski 2013) is based on practical behaviour change and highlights the need to achieve a better adjustment to work demands by changing specific behaviours in accordance with defined goals.

The Cognitive Approach (Ellison and Hayes 2013) has pointed out the maladaptive beliefs that informed inaccurate cognitions and influenced emotions and feelings, explaining a maladjustment to reality. This approach has influenced Coaching by challenging Coachees' distorted perceptions in order to facilitate overcoming them and develop a more adaptative way to read reality.

The Positive Psychology Approach (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000) has stressed that a positive personal disposition improves happiness. Coaching, by reinforcing a positive psychological disposition, facilitates performance improvement. By focusing on the positive aspects of their lives Coachees' can more easily access the psychological resources responsible for improving performance.

Finally, the Goal-Oriented Approach (David et al. 2014) is strictly centred on the relevance of Coaching as a tool that directs individuals to be oriented and motivated towards goal achievement.

However, there are many other theoretical approaches associated with organisational Coaching. Some of them are presented in Table 2 in this adaptation of what Cox et al. (2009) included in their book. In keeping with the authors' intention, this table aims to illustrate the variety of influences on Coaching practice, and some others that might also be found.

Table 2 Coaching in Organisations and theoretical traditions (adapted from Cox et al. (2009))

	Skills &		Developmental		Executive &		Career		Team	
	Performance Coaching	Coaching	Coaching	Leadership Coaching	Coaching	Coaching	Coaching	Coaching	Coaching	Coaching
The psychodynamic approach to coaching	*	*	*	**	*	**	*	*	*	*
Cognitive-behavioural coaching	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
The solution-focused approach to coaching	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	*	*
The person-centred approach to coaching	*	**	**	*	*	**	**	*	*	*
The Gestalt approach to coaching	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	**	**
Existential coaching	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
The transpersonal approach to coaching	*	*	*	**	*	*	*	*	**	**
Positive psychology approach to coaching	**	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Transactional analysis and coaching	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
The NLP approach to coaching	**	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Note The stars in the matrix indicate that a link is made, whether to a particular theoretical chapter on the horizontal dimension or by the practitioners or a context from the vertical dimension

6 Outcomes of Coaching

As could be expected from the theoretical implications, the outcomes of coaching show a multiplicity of benefits associated with its practice. With our focus exclusively on the organisational context, we found two relevant meta-analytic studies (Jones et al. 2016; Theeboom et al. 2014). Following the classification used by Jones and colleagues (2016) the main outcomes can be organised into categories like affective, cognitive and skill-based. In the affective category, attitudinal and motivational outcomes such as self-efficacy, self, confidence, job satisfaction and organisational commitment are included. In the skill-based outcomes, we can find several competencies, such as leadership skills, communication skills and other individualised technical skills. Finally, in the cognitive outcomes, we find that the development of new cognitive strategies can take several forms, among them being problem-solving and solution-focused competencies. What is more, several other outcomes can be found in the workplace environment, such as those related to well-being at work, like reduced instances of depression and burnout, or others related to self-regulated actions, like goal setting and goal attainment or improved performance overall (Theeboom et al. 2014).

Exercise 2—Brief exercise rationale-setting goals

Setting goals is the most important initial task in coaching. A clear definition of goals facilitates their achievement. To establish goals in life and in your career has great motivational potential since the goals defined are bespoke and should relate to one's most important values, main interests and motivational profile. Being the author of one's own goals and being aware of why they are important for you, makes you feel responsible and involved in their attainment. This is why it is crucial that the agendas of the Coachee and the Organisation must match. If a company wants to help you to develop leadership competencies, but you do not see yourself as a leader, it will not work. Goal setting must not be a Coach/Organisation imposition, but the result of a negotiation process related to your career intentions. Sometimes, it is difficult to find this balance, but the success of the Coaching process depends on it.

Several categorisations have been developed to help people establish clearly defined goals. The SMART objectives categorisation is one of the most commonly known. We invite you to reflect on specific goals that could apply in your workplace context.



Reflection moment—Exercise 2—Defining goals

Considering your professional area, define three goals related to what you want to achieve and write them in the space provided below.

To help refine your definition please consider the following categorisations and their specific characteristics:

SMART	Specific Measurable Tangible Realistic Timing
PURE	Positive Understood Relevant Ethical
CLEAR	Challenging Legal Ecologic

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