

Coaching at Work

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Being human

'I care because I can't not care.' Coach and supervisor, Rita Symons, on her commitment to climate coaching action

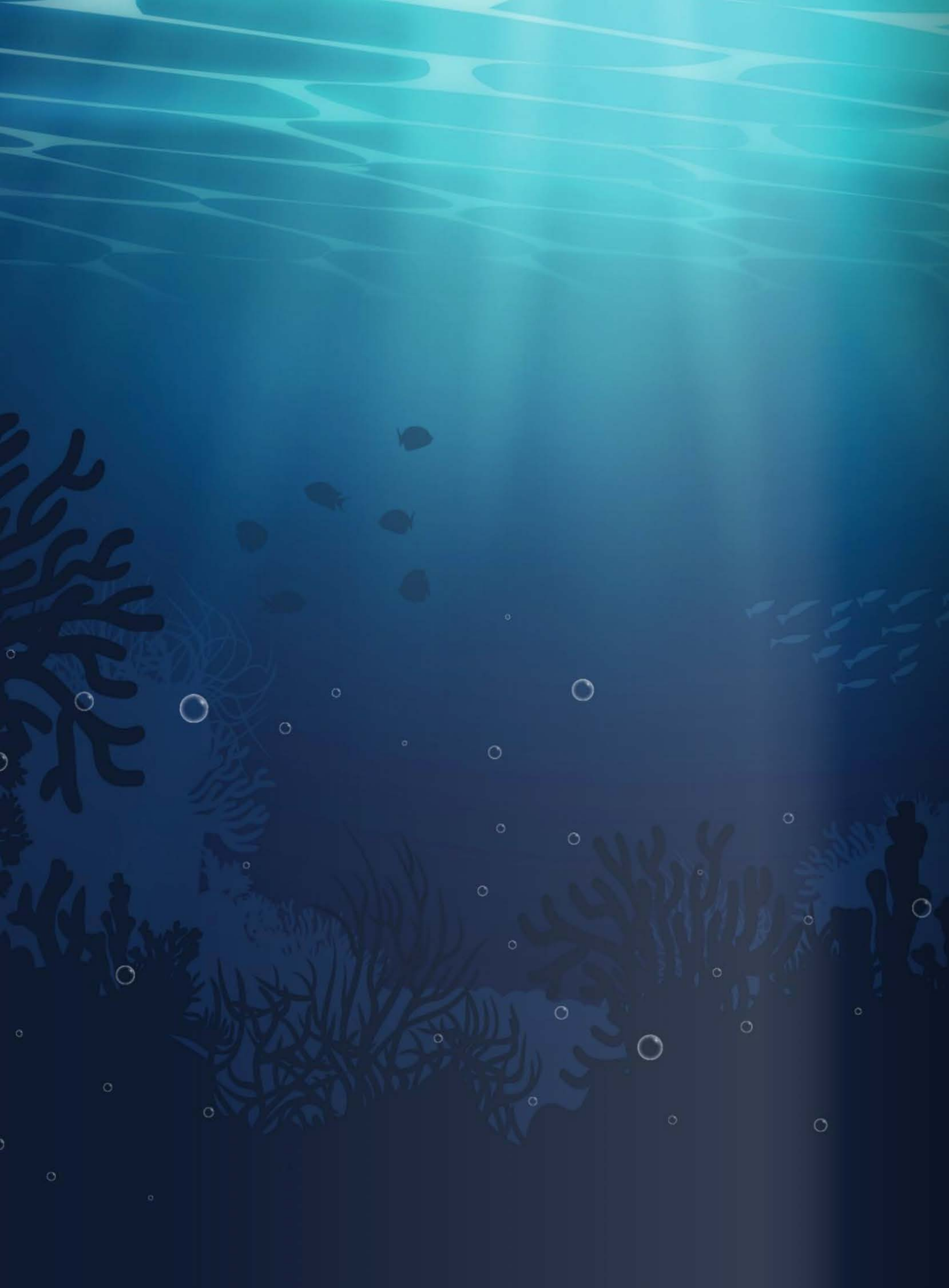


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Recommendations
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Enabling talent
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with disabilities

Tech Fest 2023
Learning to love
the metaverse

Creating ripples
Climate Coaching
Action Day 2024



Under the surface

In the final part of this series comparing coaching with other professions, Charlotte Housden looks at ways in which we can mature. Part 3: The sea of opportunity

At its heart, coaching is about development, helping clients to move forward, build their awareness, grow their skills and make sustainable change. As coaches we apply these principles to our practice through self-reflection, supervision and CPD, but we don't always use the same lens to think about our profession. Could we do more to grow our awareness of our collective strengths and gaps and increase our insight about where we might stretch? Would this help coaching to mature as a profession?

This article is the final in a series of three in which I've assessed how coaching matches up against other occupations. In the first (Nov/Dec 2023) I focused on where we're forging ahead

and in the second (Jan/Feb 2024) I outlined where we could do more. In this article I'll share the changes we could make as individuals and as a profession. I've fashioned the title from a Boyatzis (2022) quote: "underneath the surface exists this sea of opportunity to really dig more deeply into what enables coaching processes to help people change and transform." There is also a sea of opportunity for us to mature.

If you haven't read the first two articles here's a quick summary: in the first I mentioned coaching's accessibility – a wide variety of people can join the profession, bringing with them a multitude of methods and modalities, tools and approaches. There's accessibility for clients in terms of lead times and accessibility in the way we work, since online coaching is the most widely used delivery form today (Passmore et al, 2023). We're

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also ahead of other professions, such as marketing, in the way we personalise our services for our clients.

In the second piece I wrote about our reputation and how it’s taking a bashing. Despite professionalising, the public are still confused about what we offer, how we’re trained or where to complain. I included the views of a journalist who stated that coaching isn’t legitimate, has no qualifying or regulatory body and that “anyone can claim to be a coach and take people’s money”. I outlined work we need to do to address our reputation, including more coaching research, increasing accessibility of research, and reviewing self-regulation.

SELF-AWARENESS

In this final article I’ll add additional ways we could help our profession to mature, one example being the focus on prevention rather than cure, a direction health, sports and nutrition professionals are taking. Our equivalent is supporting the general population to become more self-aware. This way we help them to help themselves. This might sound like ‘turkeys voting for Christmas’ and a speedy way to do ourselves out of a job, but I’ll elaborate.

While coaching has grown exponentially, there’ll be many people we can never reach. Yet we can still help them by increasing knowledge of psychology and coaching ideas and theories and promoting self-coaching as a core life skill. I wrote a book (*Swim Jump Fly: A Guide to Changing your Life*, 2022) for this specific purpose, to bring

psychology and coaching to life in an easily digestible way. I’ve reached many more people than I’d ever hope to work with personally. Recently, I had a conversation with David Clutterbuck about his project to train 5 million school-aged children in coaching and mentoring skills – a wonderful way to raise the bar of self-awareness for the next generation.

Having greater insight won’t stop clients from seeking us out and it may well increase the volume of work across our profession. Arriving with more awareness means clients are more likely to bring a clearer understanding of what they need to work on, their appetite for change will be higher and they’ll have a better understanding of how we can help. Congruency between expectation and reality builds a virtuous circle – greater trust, a stronger relationship and a growth mindset, all helping to create positive outcomes. Overall, a better educated client base would raise the maturity of our profession, create greater impact and ameliorate some of the reputational issues I outlined earlier.

Like many professions, coaching has grown from the bottom up. Passmore and Evans-Krimme (2021) summarise it like this: “a cottage industry, dominated by sole traders and small collectives, with little consolidation of services by larger providers.” It’s similar with professional bodies, too. Whereas the UK has one professional association for psychology (*the British Psychological Society*) coaching has a plethora, with many chapters and branches.

Clutterbuck (2023) says that “sorting out the value each [association] brings to practising coaches and to other stakeholders of coaching can be difficult”. While associations are starting to work together, there’s more work to do. Most industries experience a later-stage consolidation phase once they have matured which enables greater synergies, efficiencies and a better deal for customers. Could this be on the cards for coaching organisations and professional associations over the next few years?

I interviewed a GP and medical training director for these articles and she believes that coaching “needs to catch up” with medical services. In medical settings patients are offered reassurance around qualifications, understand how to make complaints and professionals have one place to seek out consistent views on research and advice (the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence). Could such a singular body work for coaching?

FAILING WHILE FLYING

Another area to reflect on is how open we are about our failings. I spoke to a pilot at a well-known airline about the aviation industry’s collective responsibility for learning from its mistakes. Granted, “failing while flying” is more dramatic than ‘failing while coaching’, but the more subtle impact of poor coaching doesn’t excuse us from focusing our efforts here.

The airline captain described a “positive reporting culture in aviation” with a reliance on safety for “individual wellbeing and the viability of individual airlines.” There’s an emphasis on creating organisational climates which “readily report safety and security hazards, issues, problems, errors and near misses, as well as accidents and incidents”. Feedback is given after flights and simulator tests to share what went well and what could have been done better.

Training is also personalised. The pilot said that “six-monthly training is responsive and evidence-based rather than formulaic”. Pilots are assessed on the first day of training which enables the training to be “individually tailored to our specific areas of weakness” which encourages self-reflection and a stronger safety culture.

Additionally, airlines have flight data monitoring processes. If a flight gets flagged but the pilot doesn't report it, this can lead to “individual retraining, permanent notes on our record or a demotion”. If the system highlights an endemic problem across flights, the airline creates training to address the issue for everyone in the next six-monthly simulator check, along with opportunities for anonymous reporting for the airline and the Civil Aviation Authority.

Clearly there are still challenges, otherwise planes would never crash. While in theory there is a ‘no blame’ culture at this pilot’s organisation, in practice that’s only if issues are “not perceived as serious or avoidable”. Equally these high standards are not adhered to everywhere. The pilot said, “some airlines and countries unfortunately have a reputation for cost-cutting and are known for being more defensive.”

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

So what can we learn from the aviation industry? Perhaps our profession could be less cautious and focus more on seeing mistakes as opportunities for learning? Could we offer more personalised training that’s based on an individual’s training needs? Should we also implement more statutory monitoring and development? Together, these changes might help build collective benefits across our profession.

We might also take a leaf out of the tech industry which runs conferences

about failure and how to learn from it. Silverberg (2023) writes about events called ‘F***up Nights’ that take place in more than 250 cities around the world. Tech professionals gather to share their mistakes and, Marsha Druker who organises some of these sessions in Toronto, invites those who are willing to be open about their professional failures, to reflect on what they’ve learned and share how they’ve bounced back.

Carlos Zimbrón is the Mexican tech entrepreneur who created this approach in 2012. He was fed up with normal tech conferences where people only talked about their success. Instead, he wanted to hear the “B-side” of their stories. Wouldn’t this make an interesting theme for a coaching conference.

Perhaps I’ll set one up.
Would anyone like to join me?

INDIVIDUALS

Finally, what can we do as individuals to help our profession mature? Here are some reflective questions you might like to ask yourself:


1. Role modelling: How well am I adhering to my professional body’s values and standards (eg, how is my

self-reflection process working, how frequently am I in supervision, how often do I do ethical audits, what is my GDPR policy and how do I apply it, etc).

2. Reputation: How do I keep up with the latest research and thinking? What coaching research am I involved in? How am I sharing this with coaches or clients? How am I improving the standing of the coaching profession?

3. Communication: How often do I write about coaching and psychology for the public? How often do I give my knowledge away for free? How accessible is my writing?

4. Influencing: What role do I play in my professional association/do I volunteer? How am I shaping the future of the association and its impact on coaching?

5. Sharing learning: How often do I talk about my mistakes? How vulnerable and open am I with coaching colleagues or clients? 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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