

Coaching at Work

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Work hard play hard

*Coaching psychologist,
Siobhain O’Riordan, on
her contributions to
the profession*

Conservation for all
WWF mentoring
strengthens its values

Let’s compare
How do we match up
to other professions?

Reciprocal mentors
A practical guide by
David Clutterbuck

Adaptive capacity
Banishing burnout
in team coaching



*In this three-part series,
Charlotte Housden
reflects on how
coaching matches up
to other professions.
Part 1: Crossing the
river by touching
the stones*

Next-level feedback

Feedback is the lifeblood of coaching. It keeps us focused and reflective, connecting us with clients and ourselves. We elicit it after sessions – what stayed with our client, where did they see shifts, what do they want to amplify or change in the work?

We also request it when the work is coming to an end, reflecting on the path we've walked together, the highs and lows, learnings for them and us. But what if we took feedback up a level? What if we gathered it for coaching as a whole?

In this series of three articles, I'll reflect on how coaching matches up to other professions. I'll share thoughts on where others could learn from us and where we can learn from them, plus how we might address the gaps. Biswas-Diener and van Nieuwerburgh (2023) write: "the greatest risk to our profession is complacency... If we are to continue to provide high-quality support to our clients, we must ask provocative questions about our professional practices, the purpose of our work and the philosophy that underpins our craft."

My hope is that these articles could serve as a prompt to help us develop.

Then where to begin? It could be a lifetime's work benchmarking coaching to everything else. I've therefore set myself some parameters to make



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it manageable. Across the articles I intend to:

- Offer reflections to provoke our thinking
- Focus on occupations with interesting parallels
- Include conversations with individuals working in other areas
- Consider individual practice as well as our profession

It's hard to start without mentioning the last few years. A strange time full of worldwide shifts – Covid-19, polarising politics, wars, devastating weather events, to name a few. I chose to call this article 'crossing the river by touching the stones', a Chinese expression which means dealing with change step by step, learning as we go, because I think it reflects how many of us are handling these shifts in our lives.

It also sums up how coaching has developed, growing into a multi-billion dollar enterprise without a joined-up strategy or agreement on who we are or what we do. Passmore and Evans (2021) summarise coaching as "a cottage industry, dominated by sole traders and small collectives, with little consolidation of services by larger providers." Being so new, we also borrow from psychotherapy, psychology, leadership development, sports and others – touchstones to cross the river.

So, how do we compare? One area in which we excel is accessibility. People from a wide range of backgrounds become coaches, from clinical, occupational and educational

psychology, HR, consulting, organisation development, along with folk from every organisational function and industry.

With this vast array of coaches comes a vast array of approaches, offering individual or team sessions, in-person or remote, inside or outside, and a multitude of tools and techniques. This brings a wide range of thinking styles, personalities, life experiences, qualifications, theoretical underpinnings, methodologies and skills. What a wonderful smorgasbord we are! Of course, this has downsides too, but that's for the next article.

Let's compare accessibility of coaching to other professions. More than 65% of students applying to UK medical schools are rejected. In France the acceptance rate is 22%. (Mais, 2023). The lucky ones who get through train for nine years to become a general practitioner, 15 years as a radiologist, 16 for emergency medicine. For those passionate about helping others, training as a coach is a much shorter and simpler path.

Then there's accessibility for clients. Coaches have been working remotely for a while, but since Covid-19, online coaching has grown exponentially. A 2021 global survey (Passmore, Liu, & Tewald, 2021) highlighted that 98.3% of coaches used online tools and a 2023 survey (Passmore, Liu, Tee, & Tewald, 2023) found 85% preferred online coaching, with 83% saying their clients agreed. For clients it saves time and money and increases their choice. For coaches, working with a wide range of

individuals offers more learning.

Time to service is another benefit. Accessing psychotherapy can take weeks or months and medical interventions even longer, with multiple consultations before patients reach the right practitioner. Coaches are easier to find, have availability to start work and clients pay them directly.

Accessibility shows up in comfort too. Val Watson, deputy chair of British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy Coaching Division believes coaching is more accessible because it doesn't have the stigma of mental illness. Gill Fennings-Monkman MBE, ex-chair, says coaching "gives you a skill set people are looking for. It reflects changes in the way the world is going and opens up a whole other landscape of work" (Jackson, 2023), suggesting therapists "bring the zing of coaching" to their practice.

My second area for comparison is personalisation. As coaches we adapt our approach, using interventions that fit clients' needs, stretching them from where they are, not where we'd like them to be. It's in our DNA, but for others this is a new way of working. 'Personas' are a concept used by marketing and advertising – composite profiles that represents target audiences, human faces to represent market segments. Can you imagine coaching a persona?

Marketing and sales functions see potential in personalisation (much more achievable now with AI) offering "consumers on a one-to-one segment... [with] the ability for these technologies

to create more compelling, individualized marketing that creates value” (Chui, Robinson, & Singlua, 2023). Customer service functions call it hyperpersonalisation or “care of one” (Amar, Berg, Buesing, Obeid, & Raabe, 2020) and for hospitality it’s micropersonalisation: “You can imagine a world in which every single touchpoint with a guest is unique.”

Digital channels recognise guests, “know their history and their background, and contextualise what we show them”. Hotel staff serve them “in a personalized fashion... something distinctive for every single guest” (Bettati, 2023). There are plans for personalised shopping, too, displays changing based on our tastes in clothes, music and perfume.

Healthcare is one profession that’s more closely aligned to coaching. Personalised medicine has been around for 20 years, creating ways to diagnose and treat patients’ needs. However, in conversation with a doctor in general practice they said there’s little room for personalisation beyond one or two drug options. This is often down to cost.

Commentators, though, see “an exciting opportunity to improve the future of individualised healthcare... holding much promise for disease treatment and prevention. There are high expectations for the future” (Vicente, Ballensiefen, & Jönsson, 2020). There are similar plans for the health and wellness industry using connected devices to advise us what to eat and drink based on our sleep cycles and exercise. In fact, I’ve just signed up to one – a personalised eating programme based on my microbiome, blood sugar and fat control, assessed through medical tests and wearable technology. I’m now getting tailored advice through an app and am supported by online health coaches.

Healthcare providers have big ambitions: “Imagine receiving a treatment carefully selected just for you, one that would minimise side


effects, and give you the best possible outcome.”

But let’s press pause for a moment. Imagine a coaching session where we didn’t tailor interventions to our client! Despite being in play for more than 20 years, personalised medicine doesn’t yet match up to our coaching profession. Given we can stand tall on accessibility and personalisation, how might we maintain our focus on them both? Here are some suggested reflective questions you might ask yourself:

1) *How accessible is my practice*

- Have I written my marketing materials in ways that are easy to read? Am I clear in what I’m offering?
- Am I flexible on timings and location/media I use for coaching?
- Do I check digital comfort levels of clients when working online?
- Am I charging fees clients can afford? What is the lowest I’m willing to charge? How often do I charge that?
- Do I offer pro bono work?

2) *How do I personalise my service*

- How often do I review the tools, techniques and thinking I use?
- What is my contracting process with clients? Do I support them to identify what they need, rather than offering a prescribed approach?
- How do I change interventions/style to suit clients with differing needs, personalities and backgrounds?
- How do I adapt my approach for neurodiverse clients?
- How many sensory areas (verbal, visual, physical) do I cover? How can I increase my range? 

● *Next issue: when we’re behind other sectors*

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