

Coaching at Work

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Life changer

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Charlotte Housden reflects on how coaching matches up to other professions. Part 2: We lie in wait in caves and forests

A look in the mirror

How are we faring as a profession? Where are we ahead and where do we need to mature? Biswas-Diener and van Nieuwerburgh (2023) say that “the greatest risk to our profession is complacency... we must ask provocative questions about our professional practices” and Boyatzis et al (2022) note that it’s “only through honest and courageous critique... [that] the practice of coaching [can] truly develop”.

In the last article (*C@W*, 18.6) I focused on where we’re forging ahead, but here I reflect on the harder question: where are we behind? I’ll be provocative but hope this will be useful. As Nietzsche (1974) said, “We are our own worst enemy, lying in wait in caves and forests, ready to trip ourselves up.”

One area where we make things worse is around our reputation. Here’s an example: I’m a member of an online group of writers and journalists and recently someone posted a note saying they were struggling with work. I provide some pro-bono places in my practice, so offered them a free session but I was surprised by their response: “I don’t believe coaching is legitimate! There’s no qualifying body or regulating body and anyone can claim to be a coach and take people’s money.”

Did they mean I wasn’t legitimate? Was my note the issue? 

'As the new kid on the block, we also borrow from other helping professions. We need to ramp up coaching-specific research, stop borrowing our siblings' clothes and tailor a wardrobe for ourselves'

I said I was a coach and psychologist but not that I'm a chartered coaching psychologist regulated by the British Psychological Society, a practitioner psychologist with the Health and Care Professions Council and a member of three coaching bodies, all with codes of ethics and complaints procedures. That would have been a mouthful.

Or perhaps the issue was the profession itself? You may have watched the BBC documentary, *A Very British Cult*, about a coaching organisation. In reviewing the programme, *The Guardian* (2023) referred to the organisation's "success in what appears to be brainwashing perfectly intelligent, ordinary, reasonable people" and described the BBC documentary as "a study in the worst of humanity, with glimpses of the best".

The issue for coaching is that this review doesn't differentiate between 'worst-of-humanity-coaches' and those with training who run ethical practices. If journalists don't differentiate, neither will clients.

REFLECTION AREAS

I think there are three areas for reflection here:

1) Good research is based on sound theories – but we can't agree on what they are. As Boyatzis, et al (2022), say, "The popularity of coaching as a development activity in organizations has outpaced the research." Cannon-Bowers and others (2023) agree: "We do not understand exactly what works, what the underlying mechanisms of action are, which

coaching approaches are most effective, or how long coaching needs to take to achieve results." As the new kid on the block, we also borrow from other helping professions. We need to ramp up coaching-specific research, stop borrowing our siblings' clothes and tailor a wardrobe for ourselves.

2) We can do much more to make research accessible for coaches and clients. Research papers can be hard to read and are often behind a paywall. This is why I've written a coaching book full of psychology and coaching theory that's easy to digest (*Housden - see Sheridan, 2022*) and have started a project exploring how we can improve accessibility of psychology and coaching research.

3) Regulation could make a difference in many ways:

a) Clarity. I take part in a monthly coaching peer practice group and recently we discussed titles: coach, coaching psychologist, life coach, counsellor, therapist, psychologist, psychiatrist... if we can't differentiate, how can clients?

b) Boundaries. Duffell and de Estevan-Ubeda (2021) ran a survey and found 58% of coaches and supervisors thought mental health issues had increased, and while most respondents didn't have mental health training, they were happy to work with clients with these issues. David Britten is a psychotherapist and coach who calls this "disputed territory". He trains coaches in therapy and they "often

don't know how to deal with difficult stuff when it comes up... how you can be pulled in by a client's stuff, and how to manage that."

c) Raising the bar. It could shift us away from just "measuring the 'high watermark' of practice", as Duffell and de Estevan-Ubeda put it. Erdős (2023) outlines a case study on internal organisational coaches who had minimal training yet "believed that they were coaching when they weren't, which created a false sense of safety and security, for all." While some coaches train to vault the high bar, others just duck underneath.

d) Trust. Back to the online group where one person noted a worrying increase in coaching programmes being "peddled" to vulnerable people on social media. "It's a completely unregulated industry which is making a lot of people very rich while others fall into the same trap over and over again." Another recounted a similar trend a decade ago "for anyone and everyone to designate themselves a nutritionist, despite little or no genuine qualifications and little understanding of biology and human physiology." A coach wrote, "I have invested heavily in my training and my course was extensive and is accredited. I wish [coaching] was more regulated" and another was "disturbed by an industry that doesn't require qualifications, accreditation and supervision as standard (I do all three!)."

CAN WE SELF-REGULATE?

I believe the miss-step is expecting coaches to regulate themselves. Self-regulation requires insight of our strengths and development needs, awareness of risks, unconscious incompetence and an understanding of the Dunning-Kruger Effect (when poor performers consistently overate themselves). It requires alignment to the profession's values, a focus on ethics and awareness of power and

vulnerability. What self-regulation doesn't account for is the conflict of interest between what's best for clients, the profession and self-employed coaches who need to work.

I had a conversation with a GP who talked about regulation by the General Medical Council. "There is reassurance for patients around qualifications and ongoing processes to check professionals are up to date. This protects them from bad actors." There are clear structures if patients want to make a complaint (NHS England, Ombudsman, CQC) and she believes "coaching needs to catch up".

Perhaps we're blinkered? I read an article on a school of coaching's website written in 2013. The article included this: "There have been attempts to regulate coaching... but so far, coaching has established itself as a profession that doesn't target vulnerable populations, nor those who are in crisis, nor do coaches give advice on health, mental illness, or finance; three areas that usually require credentials". If you're a new coach then the writer says, there are no legal hoops for you to clear. Is this optimistic, wilfully naïve, or has coaching (and society) changed this much in ten years?

DISCUSSION

There are many other areas for discussion. Some include:

- **Prevention, not cure.** Why aren't we improving self-coaching by raising awareness of psychology and coaching more, promoting it as a core life skill in schools and universities?
- **To mature we need to be open about our failings.** Business psychologist, Carsten Schermuly, has been researching the negative effects of coaching but more work is needed. Why don't we borrow from sectors like aviation, which takes collective responsibility for learning from its mistakes?
- **Our professional bodies are fragmented.** In November 2023, EMCC

and ICF UK published a press release: "These challenging times require leadership, bold actions, and collaboration if we want our coaching profession to adapt and thrive into the future". Their plan is to work together on training, accreditation and ethical practice in the UK. What a great start.

What else can we do?

The GPI spoke to discussed the role of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the medical profession. "It's a very useful body that looks at all the research and supports professionals by saying 'we think the evidence says we shouldn't be doing this anymore, or outcomes are really poor for people'. Interventions have to be robust so there's a lot of scrutiny and evaluation." Why don't we have a National Institute for Coaching?

- **One final area I could mention is adaptation.** We work with clients to unlock fixed ways of thinking and behaving, yet we can be very fixed ourselves. Approaches get fed to new coaches as immutable truths. For

example, never use the question 'why'. Yet Biswas-Diener and van Nieuwerburgh note it can be very helpful to ask this. Graf (2023) ran research on open and closed questions and found there were no differences in the length of a client's response to either one.

These are just a few areas for discussion and I'm sure you will think of many more. I hope the few I have included might act as a provocation, holding up the mirror so we can identify where we need to do more. In the next article I will revisit these and offer suggestions about what adaptations we can make, both as individuals and as a profession. 📍

- **Next issue:** *The sea of opportunity*

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