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The Coaching Relationship – and beyond

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Abstract

In the coaching context of an ongoing search for evidence-based research, and increasing interest in the ‘active ingredients’ of coaching the impetus for ‘the coaching relationship – and beyond’ was the quest for deeper understanding of the coaching relationship as well as its influence on the outcomes of coaching. It is a presentation, on factors specifically related to engagement of the coachee and building effective coaching relationships: (a) a study examining the power relations between employee coachee and coach from the middle manager coach perspective, highlighting coaching relationship quality as a necessity for moments of symmetry and equality in fruitful coaching; (b) a study on the diversity factor of coach age, finding that age was not significant in executive coachées coach selection, however age signified credibility and experience, with possible implications for young executive coaches in organisations. Broader topics include (c) discussion of a Systematic Review study investigating those coaching psychologists’ attributes effective in productive coaching relationships, and how to facilitate desired coaching outcomes, suggesting desirability of expansion of concrete outcome measures from the existing coachées’ satisfaction evaluation metrics; and finally (d) an overview of coaching relationship research in the context of prevailing assumptions and issues in coaching, offering implications for future coaching research and coaching practice.

Keywords: *the coaching relationship, evidence-based research, systematic review, power and symmetry, coach’s age*

As coaching research has grown and with it increasing evidence that coaching is effective (Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh and Parker, 2010; Theeboom, Beersma and van Vianen, 2014; Jones, Woods and Guillaume, 2016); emphasis has shifted more toward the question of which are the ‘active ingredi-

ents’ in coaching (De Haan, Duckworth, Birch and Jones, 2013; Smith and Brummel, 2013) and *how* coaching works. As part of this shift in emphasis, an increasing amount of interest has been directed at the coaching relationship as a natural candidate for focus as a potential ‘active ingredient.’

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A study by Gyllensten & Palmer, (2007) was one of the first dedicated coaching relationship research studies; a stream of articles and book chapters has followed in the past decade (e.g. Kemp, 2008a; 2008b; O'Broin & Palmer, 2009; 2010a; 2010b), as well as further dedicated coaching relationship research studies (e.g. De Haan, 2008; O'Broin & Palmer, 2010c) whilst first books specifically on the coaching relationship such as *The Coaching Relationship: Putting People First* edited by Palmer & McDowall (2010) and *Coaching Relationships: The relational coaching field book* edited by De Haan & Sills (2012) were published. Recent coaching research studies (Baron & Morin, 2009; De Haan, Duckworth, Birch and Jones, 2013), including a large-scale global outcome study (De Haan, Grant, Burger & Eriksson, 2016) have found significant links between the coaching relationship (working alliance) and coaching outcomes. With increased confirmation of this important association of the global coaching relationship with coaching effectiveness, interest in the coaching relationship is likely to continue, however the question of *how* the coaching relationship influences coaching outcomes remains a largely open one.

However, to take a step back, what is a relationship? Looking the term up in the Cambridge dictionary confirms 'the way two or more people feel and behave towards each other' as one definition, whilst relationship science suggests that *mutual influence* could be the hallmark of partner interactions in a relationship (Rees, 2007).

Through this Special Issue we are interested in exploring the relationship that exists between coachee and coach in a coaching context. In this setting usually two people engage in a systematic process around a common exploration of issues presented by coachées with an overall goal to facilitate personal, and or professional learning, growth and optimal functioning. Issues can range from values, meaning of life, or be performance related, and often the issues in coaching may concern relations to other people (Spaten, 2016). So one might say we are dealing with a relation (the coaching relation) in which the issues at stake often are concerned with relations. As Palmer and McDowall put it '...*Thus as others have also recognised (de Haan, 2008), relations are at the heart of coaching. Not only is the content of coaching sessions frequently in some way concerned with relationships,*

the process itself is always based on relationships (Palmer & McDowall, 2010, p.3-4)

From several different points of view, in this Special Issue we seek to magnify and nuance our understanding of the coaching relationship, as has been noted in the literature to be needed: "...*Paradoxically, the coaching literature has repeatedly attested to the importance of the coaching relationship for over a decade (...) yet little dedicated research literature currently exists on those qualities or characteristics important in its formation*" (O'Broin & Palmer, 2010c, p. 124).

In an on-going search for more evidence-based research that can consolidate findings on the active ingredients of coaching, it seems justified and necessary to look deeper into the processes involved, and at our own approach to researching and building, coaching relationships. Indeed as Palmer and McDowall (2010) in their book point out 'While the chapters are all rooted in research, not all evidence is from research on coaching. While looking to other areas of psychology and social sciences is fruitful and can provide rich cross-fertilisations, we nevertheless, end with a 'call to arms' to all coaches and coaching psychologists to help build an evidence-based framework for refining our understanding of interpersonal relationships in coaching (ibid., p. 223).

We have heard this 'call' and our aim for this special issue of *The Danish Journal of Coaching Psychology* was the quest for deeper understanding of the coaching relationship and its effect on coaching outcomes, for purposes of research and to better inform us in building more effective coaching relationships in our coaching practice. The series of contributions presented here centre on two areas of focus: first, research studies detailing under-researched topics of (a) power in the coaching relationship, and (b) coach age respectively; then second, broader topics of (c) discussion on a Systematic Review investigating effective coaching psychologists' attributes for a productive coaching relationship and how to facilitate desired outcomes, and implicit outcome measure implications; and (d) a contextual overview of the coaching relationship research to date, with discussion of issues arising of relevance to future coaching relationship research endeavour and potentially to considerations of working with the coaching relationship in coaching practice.

The coaching relationship: The power to empower

In a contribution about power within the coaching relationship Spaten (2016) presents research results with the purpose of contributing more new knowledge for nuanced understanding of the coaching relationship. The important issue of power has been addressed several times (e.g. Askeland, 2009; Wellman & Bachkirova, 2010). In Askeland (2009) we see the following notion concerning coaches' influence on the coaching process; "...as coaches we need to understand our power and influence and not dismiss power as something that can be granted to the relationship and to claim we are neutral in the coaching process. We can never be neutral..." (ibid., p. 74). More specifically in the article by Spaten (2016) we look into the relationship between managers coaching their employees and what role power might play in this relationship. Research publications concerning managers who coach their own employees are barely visible despite its widespread use in enterprises (McCarthy & Milner, 2013; Gregory & Levy, 2011; Crabb, 2011). In this study, research was conducted with the goal of elucidating managers' and employees' experiences of their own coaching sessions. Fourteen middle managers coached five of their employees, and everyone wrote down cues on their memories and experiences immediately after each session. Furthermore, qualitative interviews with both managers and employees were carried out. A Thematic Analysis resulted in several themes, including power and moments of symmetry in the coaching relationship. A main conclusion of the study is that the coaching relationship is developed and maintained as a productive working alliance when the coach is aware of the power relationship between the coach and coachee. The article expands upon this notion with rich excerpts from interviews, which underline that the coaching manager is to be aware of the existence of power within the relationship to be able to go beyond asymmetry and empower the coachee. Challenges and opportunities concerning power dynamics emerging during Employee coaching in the coaching relationship are evaluated and suggestions made for working with coachées.

The coaching relationship – Does age matter in the selection process?

In this article, Dobosz & Tee, (2016)'s study of whether Generation Y coaches' age matters in the selection process initially highlights that specific coach attributes appear important when clients are to select an executive coach. Their results from a mixed-method study of thirty four participants suggests that "personal rapport" and "effectiveness of coaching process" are the most valued attributes of potential executive coaches. However, themes from the qualitative data suggest that age can be a barrier in hiring coaches under the age of thirty. This leads to the overall questions: "How significant is age of an executive coach, relative to other personal attributes, in a client's selection process? And to what extent might the young age of a coach influence potential clients when selecting a coaching service provider?" The findings of this study suggest that age, in itself, is not one of the most significant factors in a client's selection of a coach, but that it is often a signifier of credibility and experience. In addition, sufficient executive coaching experience is often a prerequisite for corporate buyer's shortlisting coaching service suppliers, making it difficult for inexperienced Gen Y coaches to enter organisations. Emerging themes of opportunities and barriers for Generation Y coaches, are discussed in the article, as well as recommendations for young coaches in working with their coachees including the importance of building effective coaching relationships.

Is the coaching relationship a main component in regard to evidence-based (effect) studies?

Lai & McDowall (2016a)'s article draws upon the Systematic Review conducted by them (Lai & McDowall, 2014) investigating effective coaching psychologists' attributes associated with a productive relationship and subsequent coaching results. The Systematic Review of coaching papers highlighted that the coaching relationship is a key focus of coaching research and practice, and that coach attributes significantly influence the effectiveness of coaching processes and outcomes. The article pinpoints that most coaching programmes are evaluated by clients' (especially coachées') direct feeling and feedback after their sessions. More specifically, it is mainly based on whether the coachee is happy or satisfied with the coach and coaching

process. This, somewhat limited, focus is then challenged with an invitation to expand coaching evaluation from “clients’ reaction and satisfaction” to concrete outcome measurement (e.g. attitude and behavioural improvement) as a crucial step to the enhancement of evidence-based coaching. Lai & McDowall then discuss the concept *coaching relationship* and explain the role of the coaching relationship for the development of evidence-based practice. From the basis of a number of quantitative studies (Baron & Morin, 2009; Boyce et al., 2010; de Haan et al., 2013) they propose that we are in “the age of relational coaching”, with evidence to support this claim found in the positive correlation between the coaching relationship and results of the coaching session.

Where next for the coaching relationship?

An article by O’Broin (2016) embeds its overview of coaching relationship research to date in the context of coaching and coaching research, in order to address the question of what do we actually know about the coaching relationship and its role in coaching and in coaching outcomes. In the process prevailing assumptions in the coaching research literature, the major one being that the coaching relationship *is* an ‘active ingredient’ of coaching are discussed and evaluated, and issues arising of relevance to future research studies on the coaching relationship, and to our approach to building effective relationship in our own coaching practice are also assessed. Finally the discussion and evaluation conducted in the article provides a basis for recommendations for future research studies on the coaching relationship.

The quest for research on the coaching relationship

The quest for research on the relationship contains a review of the collection of current articles, with a discussion of any themes arising from each article that are informative or applicable to future research on the coaching relationship or to establishing, developing and maintaining coaching relationships in coaching practice.

It is intended that this selection of articles stimulates further interest in research and practice focus on the coaching relationship and interpersonal processes in coaching – both for coach and coachee’s.

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At psychology Ole leads the coaching psychology graduate program for master psychology students, supervises and teaches clinical skills. At the psychology Department he is Head of Studies and is the founding editor-in-chief of the Danish Journal of Coaching Psychology.

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Previously an investment analyst and Fund Manager for Investment capital group 3i, Alanna is a practicing coaching psychologist, working primarily with executives in achieving their developmental and performance goals. She also runs a small therapy practice.

Her doctoral research was on the coaching relationship, and she has authored and co-authored a number of book chapters and peer-reviewed articles on the coaching relationship and related topics, including parallels between sport psychology and coaching psychology. Alanna was Co-Editor of *An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, a Consulting Editor of *The Coaching Psychologist* between 2013 and January 2016, is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Annual Review of High Performance Coaching and Consulting*.



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Lillith Olesen Løkken er psykolog fra Aalborg Universitet og tilknyttet den Coaching Psykologiske forskningsenhed og psykologistudiet som ekstern lektor.

Hendes forskningsmæssige interesse ligger især indenfor særligt kvalitativ forskning, hvilket har givet sig udslag i medvirken til flere publikationer indenfor personlighedspsykologi, udviklingspsykologi og i særlig grad studier indenfor coaching psykologien. Senest har Lillith været med til at gennemføre en større længdesnitsundersøgelse af livscoaching psykologi, ligesom Lillith tidligere har været forskningsassistent på et studie omkring coaching psykologis indflydelse på nystartede studerendes velbefindende. Ud over en særlig interesse for coaching psykologi har Lillith også både på personlig og faglig basis beskæftiget sig med mindfulness i en række år.

Privat bor hun sammen med sin mand og deres to børn i Lundby Krat ved Aalborg.

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