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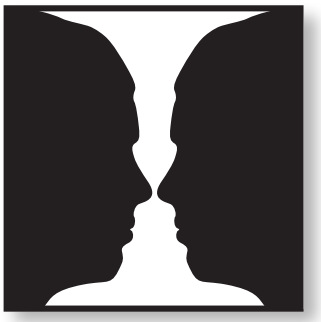


Leadership, power, and symmetry

Ole Michael Spaten

Abstract

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). This article focuses on leadership, power and moments of symmetry in the coaching relationship regarding managers coaching their employees and it is asked; what contributes to coaching of high quality when one reflects on the power aspect as being immanent? Fourteen middle managers coached five of their employees, and all members of each party wrote down cues and experiences immediately after each session. Thereafter we executed qualitative interviews with both managers and employees. Subsequently, a Thematic Analysis resulted in several themes, including power and moments of symmetry in the coaching relationship. One main conclusion is that the most fruitful coaching was obtained when the coachee experienced moments of symmetry and that necessary and sufficient conditions to bring forth such moments include a strong working alliance and the coach being aware of the power at play.

Keywords: *Employee coaching, the coaching relationship, power, symmetry, quality in coaching.*

In this article, the increasingly common practice of *employee coaching* will be discussed, with a particular focus on challenging aspects of the power relationship. We will first deal with the understanding of corporate coaching, leadership and introduce the concept "moments of symmetry" during power relations. With this underpinning, empirical data from the study will be presented and discussed. The overall aim is that the clarification of power-related issues could lead to a clearer understanding of when employee coaching works at its best, to what can we attribute when it does not work as well and lastly to suggest important aspects for future research to investigate.

Corporate coaching

Many corporations use coaching as a concrete management tool to increase job satisfaction and performance among employees. Coaching aims to enhance both personal and professional leadership and management, and coaching is frequently used by private enterprises to support action plans

for management as well as to foster employee engagement (Crabb, 2011). Large sums are spent on coaching, both in terms of training, education and time. Globally, the estimated number of professional coaches is approaching 560,000, and they generate a turnover of approximately USD 2.1 billion (ICF, 2016). This number has been ever growing since 2003, and it is not an exaggerated claim to make that coaching is an extensive and all-embracing industry seeing as around 90 pct. of US-based Global 1000 enterprises and more than 65 pct. of non-US-based Global 1000 enterprises make use of external coaching (Bono et al., 2009). In addition, many companies do not make use of outside coaches, but instead adopt coaching as a management discipline (Heslin, Vandewalle & Latham, 2006). This means that usually senior executive and senior management purchase coaching from external coaches, whilst many middle managers and employees are coached by their own superiors, or possibly an internal coach. This is made possible by the fact that leaders often receive training on short courses or long-term projects, so they can coach their employees themselves (Beltrame, 2013). External and internal coaching is often differentiated in the literature as respectively *executive coaching* and *employee coaching* (Gregory & Levy, 2010). Studies show that there are significant differences between these two types of coaching and supremely on the relationship herein, namely the coaching relationship (Palmer & McDowall, 2010). Given the importance of the coaching relationship, we shall return to the specific characteristics of the one that occurs in employee coaching later on.

Challenges associated with corporate coaching

The frequent prevalence of employee coaching advocates that coaching skills are considered an important part of excellent leadership, which for instance is crucial when organizations are about to launch their strategies, missions and plans (Beltrame, 2013; Crabb, 2011). However, in order to reap the benefits of coaching as a management discipline, companies face several organizational challenges that must be faced and overcome. First of all, coaching is fundamentally based on the belief that the individual has the innate ability to find their own solutions to current challenges or problems. If this belief is not shared by the organization as a whole (and by top management in particular), then it is very difficult as a manager to use coaching in the everyday life towards one's employees. The introduction of coaching in a company, e.g. through courses or other activities, must therefore also be a part of the development of a new management culture, which can only succeed if coaching is extended to numerous organizational levels. If the workplace culture is characterized by a lack of openness towards chancing its values and practices, the introduction of coaching is unlikely to be successful. Secondly, it is of importance to mention that coaching should be practiced regularly at the workplace. Whilst it is possible to learn the theory and some good models on a short course, the optimal effect of coaching is only achieved when coaching is implemented and practiced regularly. To sum up, the commercial effect occurs through increased motivation, supervision and a change of leadership and management culture.

Furthermore, it is essential to realize that the company can utilize and reap the most beneficial implementation of coaching only if the practice hereof is based on research. Unfortunately, as Grant & Cavanagh pointed out already in 2004, only a very small amount of methodologically sound, peer-reviewed, empirical coaching research exists, and this is still the case. By contrast, a very large amount of self-help books, theoretical literature etc. has been written on the topic of coaching (Spaten, 2013). In Denmark, only 10 pct. of books on coaching published since 2007 include systematic, empirical, peer-reviewed research into coaching psychology (ibid.). This analysis demonstrates that we, unfortunately, only are in possession of limited empirical evidence showing whether coaching works, how it works, and how coaching participants perceive and assess various interventions (Spaten, 2013; Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Peterson, 2002; Kilburg, 2001). Complicating matters even more is the fact that only a very small proportion of the existing coaching psychology research deals with employee coaching (Evers, Brouwers & Tomic, 2006; Gregory & Levy, 2010). Gregory & Levy writes: *"despite its continued growth in organizations, minimal research has been conducted on employee coaching"* (2010, p. 111). This stands in contrast to the proportion of studies that deal with executive coaching (Bono et al., 2009; Bond & Naughton, 2011). Further research in the quality and efficiency of coaching conducted within

an organizational framework is therefore required (Evers, Brouwers & Tomic, 2006).

In light of the limited empirical focus on employee coaching, this article will exclusively focus on such and the research presented herein is pertained to experiences of internal coaching done by the middle manager. The question being asked is as follows: What experiences, both successful and challenging, do middle managers acquire when coaching their employees? In the present study, the employees had no influence regarding who would coach them (their superior would conduct the coaching) and it is important to note that this particular obligation raises further questions about power dynamics that will be addressed in this section alongside the aforementioned "moments of symmetry".

The coaching relationship in employee coaching

When middle managers coach their own employees, several strata of goals and aspects of relations become pertinent. However, most coaching is typically executed with the purpose being to improve the employee's performance in relation to their job, whereas the purpose to assist the employee's development in personal arenas is quite uncommon (McCarthy & Milner, 2013). The relationship between manager and employee is first and foremost a working relationship in which the employee is functioning under the guidance of management. The daily interaction between manager and employee wherein tasks are discussed and decisions are made is a part of the working relationship and is therefore not considered coaching. More precisely put, employee coaching is defined as a development of related activity in which *"an employee works one-on-one with his or her direct manager to improve current job performance and enhance his or her capabilities for future roles and/or challenges, the success of which is based on the relationship between the employee and manager, as well as the use of objective information, such as feedback, performance data, or assessments"* (Gregory & Levy, 2010, p. 111). It follows that feedback on a task or personal behavior differs from coaching in the sense that the manager is part of a relationship with the employee which is based on more than just achieved goals, new objectives, and general performance. Perhaps not surprisingly, employee coaching thus offers a challenge for both parties because their relationship at this point must exclusively be a coaching relationship, with clear-cut boundaries where the manager is a coach and the employee is a coachee. The coaching relationship is based on the everyday knowledge exchanged between manager and employee, but also on the crucial task of building confidence before the coaching relationship can be successful (Gregory & Levy, 2011). Confidence in the coach is the bridge that can lead the employee from an experience of leadership being exerted upon them and towards an experience of coaching taking place. The managers' biggest task is to build that bridge and maintain the coaching relationship. Here, the extent to which managers and employees are different and how well they can communicate and collaborate during day-to-day job challenges may be relevant. It is thence evident that the interpersonal relationships are considered of great importance to creating and sustaining a fruitful coaching relationship. Waldroop and Butler (1996) emphasize this by saying that no behavior – not even coaching – "takes place in a vacuum" (p. 112). An additional and important factor that further complicates employee coaching is that neither the middle manager nor the employee has chosen the other party. In an effort to resolve this, the manager can listen and make use of his empathy for creating a successful coaching relationship. However, whilst this is an important action to take, it cannot be taken for granted that these efforts alone will free the coaching relationship of further difficulties along the road.

In summation, we can conclude that in order for employee coaching to be successful, it is vital that an effective coaching relationship is built, and this includes the establishment of a fruitful working alliance from the very beginning (Bordin, 1979). Bordin defines a working alliance as the collaboration between (in this case) the coach and the coachee in which there exists a shared commitment to tasks and goals and a development of bonds (ibid.). Furthermore, O'Broin & Palmer (2010) writes that this also includes: *"clarification of the goals of the coaching process, the tasks of each of the two parties, and the establishment of mutual respect and empathy"*. The mentioned characteristics of the relationship being established is done as an integrated part of a negotiation of a contract, where both parties, in the beginning, must agree on these goals, tasks, and development of bonds

(Bordin, 1979). At this point, the present article has very briefly set forth how coaching in organizations and employee coaching can be understood and will now in brevity consider leadership, power and moments of symmetry.

Leadership

Several authors point out that leadership has been facing a huge challenge consisting a shift from one era to another, and this shift is still in motion. It is a fact well known that in western European organizations there is much less emphasis today on the "old school" hierarchical and rigid management system (Graham et al., 1993). However, another era where change has become the new stability has arisen. Whitmore states that: *"We have reached a crucial point, the beginning of a shift away from hierarchy into self-responsibility"* and further that*"… we are emerging into a world where people are taking far more of a responsibility for their lives"* (in Kauffman & Bachkirova, 2008, p. 11). One can argue that this involves a higher individual need for autonomy and self-realization in the western societies as a result of the rise of neoliberalism (Smith, 2015). This is an important notion, because for the organizations that have not made this change from management to self-governance, the consequences have been weakening of the leadership within the organization. This involves that the *"leaders have lost respect and people don't listen to them in the way they used to (they are no longer "obedient")"* (ibid.). The shift to a new era is especially relevant to the field of coaching because, as Whitmore remarks, organizations can benefit from using coaching as a tool to achieve the transformation from an organizational structure that is based on self-responsibility rather than on hierarchy (ibid.). The central notion is that *"coaching helps build responsibility into the other person by enhancing their capability to make choices and decisions"* (Whitmore in Kauffman & Bachkirova, 2008, p. 10). The role of coaching as a developmental tool might have been predicted previously, for instance Myles Mace wrote already in 1950 that *"the most effective way of providing for the growth and development of people in manufacturing organizations is through the conscious coaching of subordinates by their immediate superiors"* (Mace, 1950, p. 108). Managers can therefore potentially move forward by being coaches, and managers ought to increase the practice of employee coaching in order to generate growth to the organization. However, this is not always a straightforward process and it might be easier said than done. In the upcoming paragraph we shall consider the power processes that come into play when coaching is applied as a management discipline.

Power

Foucault introduced the idea of the productivity of power, stating that power relations are integral to the modern social productive apparatus. In his notion of power, the phenomenon exists as exercised by some on others. He argues that relationships of communication imply goal-directed activities, and that by modifying the field of information between partners the effects of power will be produced. In this manner, power relations are scarcely separable from goal-directed activities that permit the exercise of power (e.g. training techniques or means by which obedience is obtained) (Foucault, 2000). These suggestions are agreeable with the aspect of power in coaching relationships discussed in the present article. Shortly defined, the exercise of power can be construed as a set of actions on possible actions, and it "*incites, induces, seduces, makes easier or more difficult, it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less*" (ibid., p.341). Expanding upon this, the execution of power can be observed from different perspectives, one of which is presented by Welman & Bachirova: *"One is power over somebody, the ability to dominate him or her, to impose one's will on them. Or the other is power to do something, to be able to, to be potent"* (2010, p. 140). This paper will take into account this dual facet of power and likewise rely on the foucauldian understanding of power as something that is everywhere. Power is then understood as immanent or intrinsic in the manager-employee coaching relationship. Aligned with Foucault (1997) it is argued that different disciplining techniques permit authorities to control the individual in such a manner that the individual considers it self-control. One such technique could be performance measurement and benefit; numbers create and can be compared with norms, which are among the gentlest, and yet most pervasive forms of power in modern democracies (Porter, 1995, p. 44). The mere existence of a norm in and of itself might put pressure upon individuals in the organization, as measurement and comparison of performance might lead to differentiating, ranking, and

Picture 1. A picture with a sense of beauty showing not just arcades, but symmetric arcades in the Mesquita, in Cordoba, the South of Spain, by Spaten.

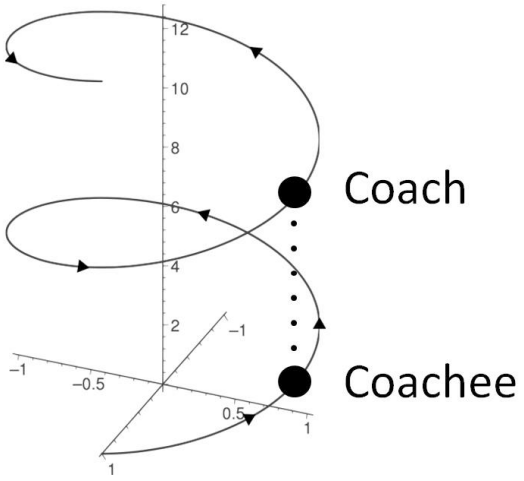
ultimately exclusion of individuals. Presumably some individuals will not meet the requirements put forth by the norm, and as a result they may be less financially rewarded – imaginably they might even go from hired to being fired! Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that these individuals may also obtain poorer social ranking, earn less appreciation and perchance hereafter become socially vulnerable. This contemplation raises an intriguing question, namely whether coaching by one's immediate boss as in internal managerial coaching can be portrayed as an oppressive form of disciplining technique. Awareness of such issues related to power is essential when power is not something you can decide whether should exist or whether it would be better if it did not exist. These concerns would presumably be linked to the notion of *symmetry* in the coaching relationship. On account of this, the next paragraph will consist of a further discussion on power along the notion of symmetry.

Symmetry

Let us right up front explain what symmetry refers to in this paper. The word symmetry is derived from the Greek word "symmetria", and means *"agreement in dimensions, due proportion or arrangement"*. In our everyday life and common language, it often refers to a sense of beauty. When we recognize symmetry we are not very much in doubt: (*Picture 1*)

Words that come to our minds when we see these colonnades will likely go along the lines of: 'pleasant', 'harmony', 'proportion', 'balance'. The following quote by Margaret Wheatley gives a good representation of what symmetry means, if it's essence is to be transferred to human relationships and interactions: "*I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again. Simple, honest, human conversations where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard, and we each listen well.*" (Wheatley, 2009, p. 15). Following this, it can be argued that when each party in a conversation is given the chance to speak, feel heard, and each listen well, moments of symmetry will occur. It can be discussed whether symmetry "as such" exists in the relationship between the coach and the coachee, and the reasoning for this will be considered in the following paragraph. To illustrate the

occurrence of symmetry in the coach-coachee relationship, it might be useful to apply the helix-figure as a symbolic representation of the phenomena:



Picture 2. A picture of a helix or a helix-like object with coach and coachee

The helix object will have infinite, endless, and unlimited symmetry just like a circle, but unlike a circle, the helix will allow for moments of symmetry along the long axis of the object. Transferred to the coaching relationship, symmetry within the setting of coaching is based on the fundamental notion that the coach is "on another level", by cause of their greater experience and knowledge concerning coaching psychology. The coach being placed higher on the long axis of the helix-figure illustrates the coach being on a higher level than the coachee *in regards to experience and knowledge*, but nonetheless each party is equals as human beings. In this context symmetry could occur when the coach and the coachee act as equals, when 'each have a chance to speak, each feel heard, and each listen well'. The coach and the coachee sharing an optimal experience of fused reflection and development characterize these instances. In the section of this paper where empirical findings are presented, such moments of symmetry are eminent. When applied to the context of the coaching relationship, the helix figure can illustrate moments of symmetry.

Moment of symmetry occur where coach and coachee *meet* through collaborative reflection and development. Although the coach and the coachee can be said to be on different levels, the relation is, in these instances, symmetrical nonetheless. However, while moments of symmetry can occur, the relationship in coaching is primarily described as asymmetric owing to the fundamentally different roles of the coach and the coachee (Haslebo, 2005; Stelter et al. 2002). Dwelling further on this, it can be noted that there exist numerous diversified asymmetric aspects of the relationship between the coach and coachee, not only in terms of roles but also in terms of the focus, the task and the overall unequal positions each party occupy in the dialogical context. In the following paragraph these asymmetric aspects of the relationship will be expanded upon.

First and foremost, the coaching conversation is asymmetric in the sense that regardless who is speaking, it is the client's world that is the focal point (Rogers & Farson, 1957). Secondly, the asymmetric aspect can be seen in the fact that the coach and the coachee have different tasks, for instance, it is the coachee who presents the content and the coach who makes the client reflect about working situations through asking carefully chosen questions (Haslebo 2005). Ultimately this leads to the coach and the coachee occupying unequal positions in the dialogue (ibid.). Finally, it is worth noting that the relationship between a manager and his employee by its very nature is an asymmetrical relation, withal so is the relationship between a psychologist and his client or that between a coach and his coachee. On account of this, symmetry will probably only occur as the above-mentioned "moments of symmetry". In that respect, one must regard the symmetry of the coaching relationship as being located on a continuum, ergo it is not an either-or phenomenon. Therefore, when we discuss symmetry between a manager and his employee in coaching, it is these moments of symmetry that will be the focal point.

Method of this study

The aim of this study is to investigate experiences of coaching in the instances where middle managers coach their employees. The dominant question goes as follows: What experiences, both successful and challenging, emerges when middle managers are coaching their employees? The first part of this article has endeavored more precisely to characterize the nature of coaching in organizations and fur-

ther focus has been placed upon leadership, power and symmetry. Now we have reached the part where the empirical segment will be presented.

Design

The presented research uses an exploratory qualitative design. The data collection takes place throughout the research and the qualitative interviews take place during the final phases of the research process. The qualitative data provide in-depth knowledge about the experience of middle managers and employees as coach and coachee, respectively. The aim of the present study is to create a comprehensive account of how the phenomena of employee coaching can be experienced, viewed from the stance of both parties.

Participants

The fourteen middle managers partaking in this study had all participated in bi-monthly training workshops learning coaching skills, among other business workshops. Previous research has documented the quality of coach training based on principles of "action-reflection-learning" (Spaten & Hansen, 2009). Thus the middle managers worked as experienced coaches, and across Denmark 70 employees (coaches) were recruited from the middle managers' own departments. In some departments all of those who signed up to be coached (up to the maximum of 5 coachee's) were chosen and if there were more than five, they were randomly picked to participate in the subsequent coaching sessions. After the coaching interventions, four middle managers and employees among these fourteen middle managers and 70 employees were randomly selected for being interviewed. They all signed up voluntarily.

Qualitative interviews

4 middle managers and employees were interviewed at the end of the coaching sessions. A semi-structured interview guide was employed covering a range of questions such as the following: Could you describe your experiences during coaching sessions? What was most challenging throughout the coaching sessions? What were some of the most beneficial outcome all through sessions? Tapes with interviews were transcribed verbatim, and these interview transcriptions will be the data for this empirical study.

Subsequently the interviews were analyzed using Template Analysis (King, 1998, 2002; Langdridge, 2007). Template Analysis (TA) is in a sense quite similar to Jonathan Smith's "IPA": "interpretative phenomenological analysis" (2003). Both are constructed and based upon phenomenological psychology, but they also include concepts from discursive psychology (Smith & Osborne, 2003; King, 1998). In TA a thick phenomenological description will represent the meaning ascribed by the individual to their specific experience, in this case their experience regarding a coaching session. A template analysis creates a coding template that contains different codes that represent themes identified in the data. Like in IPA, this process includes a thorough and exhaustive reading back and forth with several re-readings of the text. In TA, the codes are then structured hierarchically with first level codes representing broader themes in the data and then second level codes with narrowly focused themes (King, 2002). The analytic work involves non-stop modified lists of codes through continuous re-readings of the interview transcripts until a full data description is achievable (ibid.). In the end of the Template Analysis a number of first order codes are identified. This paper will cover one of these themes, specifically power and moments of symmetry in the coaching relationship. Results from the qualitative analysis will be portrayed in the results section below.

Procedure

As hitherto cited fourteen middle managers each coached 5 of their employees 5 times during a period of 4 months. When these 5 coaching sessions were concluded with all participants, four employees and managers took part in single qualitative interviews lasting for up to one hour. Ethical questions concerning this study were raised and discussed with the cooperative research group and colleagues. Informed consent and other important issues were conferred with the participants and the company involved. Participation was voluntary, and everyone was free to withdraw his or her consent without notice. The non-participation option applied to coaching sessions as well as the subsequent interviews for both managers and employees. The rules regarding confidentiality and anonymity were accessible, pseudonyms were used throughout the research process and finally

it was agreed that all interview sessions would be followed by a short debriefing session. No conflicts of interest are considered to exist with regards to this research.

Analysis and discussion

The qualitative research process encourages the discovery of novel themes (Palmer & Gyllensten, 2006) and to pursue rich descriptions of the topic at hand. The Template Analysis revealed several themes, but in the following paragraph chiefly the theme of "power and moments of symmetry in the coaching relationship" will be covered. This theme centers on the subtle balance between exercising power as manager, and yet being a coach who is able to empower one's coachee. Intriguing and insight giving quotations from the qualitative data will be presented in the following section alongside analysis and discussion of the theme raised from the TA apace with subordinate themes.

Establishment of contract

To negotiate a suitable contract for the content of coaching and to obtain good contact to the coachee is indispensable in order for the coach to successfully lead and be in charge of the coaching session. This establishment of a good working alliance (Bordin, 1979) and a "meaningful" coaching relationship appears to be of crucial importance, especially in the context of employee coaching. Thus the working alliance and the coaching relationship are the main factors contributing to positive coaching outcomes, as most of the coaching process relies on two people's conversation and interactions. It was found that numerous aspects of the coaching relationship were affected by how the coach approached the coachee in the establishment of the contract. One of the managers expressed that, in regards to negotiations of contract, the beginning of the sessions with newly hired employees differed quite a bit seen in comparison to coaching sessions with old staff members: *"There was a big difference making the contract in the beginning, the empathy and the knowledge of each other. There must be invested much more in the start-up phase in relation to 'who am I ' and 'who are you' and ' how should the entire process be carried out"*. This illustrates and exemplifies how prior knowledge and everyday relationships come into play in the preparatory work to establish the contact and the coaching contract. It appears that the manager must take the leading role in this foundational work, which means that more time and energy is required when establishing a contract with a new employee whom the manager does not know well yet. In contrast, the pre-established relationship can also be an important aspect with its historic and existing context of the power relation that can influence the way that the two parties establish the contract and the coaching relation. Should the coach forget to bear this in mind, coachee experiences, such as the following quotation illustrates, may arise: *"When I think back on the yield of the coaching session and especially the relationship with my manager, then it would have been better with an external person as a coach"*. In this citation it seems that an underlying asymmetric aspect of the coaching relationship is unfolded, but maybe the coach could have made it more evident and outspoken. This is what we first turn our focus to in terms of the issue of equality, power and symmetry.

Equality and power in the coaching relationship

Throughout the qualitative interview and findings, the notion emerges that the experience of equality in relation to the coach is essential for the coachee. This indispensable sense of equality can be achieved by a sense of trust emerging in the coaching relationship. The importance of an equal relation is described by O'Broin & Palmer (2010, p. 38): *"The relation must be based on mutual respect and empathy"*. According to the interviewed employees, mutual respect is characterized by being *"at equal levels with"*. Deriving from this, it seems indisputable that equality forms an essential groundwork for a fruitful coaching relationship. If mutual respect and empathy are present in the relationship, the coachee is able to make constructive use of the coaching session. This is due to the fact that with these principles present the coachee can enter the coaching session without worrying about the imaginable intentions of the coach, or whether confidentiality will be preserved. In the unfortunate event that mutual respect and empathy is not present, or if confidentiality is not assured, the employee may easily be hesitant to participate, and understandably so! As previously stated, research has pointed out, in a number of contexts, that the interpersonal relationship between coach and coachee is of vital importance (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2006; O'Broin & Palmer,

2010; Palmer & McDowall, 2010). This relationship should be characterized by trust, equality and confidence in the other, with the former property argued to be fundamental; "A 'trusting relationship' is paramount for effective coaching" (Ting & Riddle, 2006, p. 111). Furthermore, research on the application of evidence-based management theories to coaching managerial development argues that the power relationship should be considered as important as authority and trust in the coaching relationship (Elliot, 2011).

It seems apparent that this research aligns some of the aforementioned findings: for a middle manager to be able to coach his employees, a well-developed relationship between the two is required, wherefore a focus on power relations is crucial. But what constitutes a well-developed relationship? Below, an employee describes the importance of his relation to the coach in the coaching sessions: *"I felt we were equals during each session, and that was important, I think (…). It is in fact important, talking about power, it is important that the coach is able to step down or step up to the right level, the coach must find the right level where the person is"*. The manager seems to, in some way, have been able to take a suitable position so that the employee felt that they were equal; hence a 'moment of symmetry' occurred. Arguably at different layers, as depicted in the helix symbol, but a moment of symmetry nonetheless. Evidently, in order to achieve this well-developed relationship, it must therefore be important for the coach to be aware of the different roles that are at play in the coaching and to be capable of making appropriate and pertinent switches in these roles. One of the coachee's points to this as a "delicate balance" that the coach is required to navigate within in order to facilitate equality and a trusting relationship: *"This is a delicate balance – it is one thing that he is the manager next door, and quite another matter that when he enters my office, he is the coach – so to speak. He is still the person who should be in control. He is the one to be in control of this coaching session – on the basis of some questions and some models he has learned – and because of some training he has completed. Then he must still be the person in control – and on the other hand, he must let go of his role as manager.*" As this quotation illustrates, the aforementioned balance involves the coach keeping control of the interview and the coaching session, whilst at the same time being able to let go of his or her role as manager and take on the distinct role of a coach (Orth et al., 1987). By contrast, the client has the control (or rather, has the power, if you will) to choose the authenticity of the topics discussed in the coaching or to leave the content in the coaching at the surface, perhaps especially if the coach has a hard time temporarily abandoning his leadership role: "*I felt the pressure in periods where I just had to find an issue we had to deal with. It must be relevant and not just fiction*", and later, *"Coaching could sometimes be experienced a little bit arranged, since there SHOULD be found a "problem". So it was not always so natural to sit in the coaching session*".

The appropriate form of control for the coach exists, therefore, in an equal relationship in which it is mainly the coachee who sets the agenda for the coaching. It therefore seems to be of essential importance that the coach explicitly and unambiguously stresses the fundamental role of confidence in the coaching session (Palmer & McDowall, 2010). Once trust has been established between the coach and coachee, this should in all likelihood result in the coach receiving some valuable information, due to his or her role as coach, and consequently also as a manager. This aspect and the shift in roles are further commented on during the following subtheme: Position(s) of manager and / or coach.

The symmetry problem: Position(s) of manager and / or coach

Several of the managers interviewed had an expressed experience of having to navigate between the roles of manager and coach, when knowledge and consequently power is acquired from the coaching sessions with employees. Here is an example from an interview with one of the managers who describes the strenuous task of being in the role of both coach and manager of the employee: "*It can be very hard not to be the boss all the time and just being the coach in the coaching session. Perhaps especially with an employee where I was constantly asked directly about different solutions to problems and I did not want to seem phony by just constantly asking back and into the employee's views.*"

Here, the difficulty for the coach manifests by the simultaneous ever-present and real position as a manager where the coachee, in the search of solutions, kept trying to get the coach to step into his managerial role or the interface between manager

and coach! However, an even more controversial situation arises when the coach gets certain information from the coaching which can confound the symmetry in the relationship. This is illustrated when the manager acquires knowledge as a coach that affects the business, as is described in the following quote, where the coachee reveals that clients have complained about a colleague and the topic of the coaching is to examine whether the coachee needs to take it up with his colleague:

"And this is also something I think of, which I find difficult as a manager, because I'd really like to go in and deal with the problem immediately, and in relation to some of the information I get from the coaching conversations here (yes), but, I just cannot use what I get in the talks here, all the examples and this kind of stuff but in relation to my future observation, one can say I get some extra information regarding business issues. Yes exactly, I received knowledge that I had not been given otherwise, and outside coaching relation and conversations".

Such knowledge being transferred further complicates the aspect of symmetry in relation to power, because the manager then has the opportunity to (mis)use the knowledge acquired from the coaching as a power tool in the daily management. We refer to the usage of such knowledge as misuse in the instances where something disclosed in confidentiality is used in a later context. Usually, the coaching takes place in a context where the coach and the coachee are under the agreement that none of the content from the coaching sessions will have neither positive nor negative repercussions for the coachee or his colleagues (from a later quote on confidentiality) However, it must be realized that it is not always an easy task for the coach *not* to make use of such useful information acquired during a coaching session. One can easily imagine the dilemma the manager finds himself in when stepping out of the coach role and back into his manager role, now possessing valuable information that may be profitable for the organization, but he cannot make use of it because of the confidentiality agreement between him and his employee. Nonetheless, however difficult, it is crucial that the agreement stays intact and the manager is able to constrain his power. This also points to an asymmetry in the knowledge distribution between the coach and the coachee. The study found several examples on this, such as when the employee may provide the coach with an insight into how the employee's development is progressing. Below, the manager describes knowledge derived from an employee through coaching sessions: *"I'm almost 100 per cent certain that I wouldn't have known this if it wasn't for the coaching. Then I might have heard it in six months, and then you might say that it wasn't important – or the problem has escalated".*

The aspects of asymmetry discussed above are exemplified with the exchange of knowledge that would not otherwise have been available (to the coachee or) to the coach. This aspect has been documented in previous studies of employee coaching, which point out that employee coaching may promote job satisfaction if the asymmetry is not too strong or futile (see for instance Grant, Curtayne & Burton, 2009; Bowles et al., 2007; Grant & Zackon, 2004).

Reducing the symmetry problem

In the preceding paragraphs we have raised questions about power relations and symmetry in the coaching relationship. The power relations between coach and coachee have been discussed as *"the symmetry problem"*, and the notion of symmetry is reflected to be a universal condition for fruitful conversations (Dam Hede, 2010). Coaching sessions in the corporate world, where a manager coaches his employee, is embedded in the institutional structure, where an asymmetrical difference in the subject-object relation exists characterized by power, position and the distribution of roles (ibid.). The asymmetry is further afflicted by the extent to which the manager (the coach) services as a channel between resources useful for the coachee (e.g. further education or knowledge), and the power over their employees in respect of hiring and firing (Dam Hede, 2010). In the following testimony from a coachee it is pointed out how symmetry in resources at hand, here in the shape of knowledge, is of great significance, and furthermore he underscores the significance of trust in the coaching relation: *"What I mean is that the things I have said during the coaching sessions, they will confidently remain there (between the walls of the room and the setting) – and it is not something that will be used against me in some situation – or to make things better for me – that's very important!".* The coachee acknowledges that trust and confidence are foundational for the coaching setting. The asymmetry is then a present fact, when the coach is unsuccessful in remaining neutral and therefore fails to keep the

established trust and confidentiality. If the manager asserts his or her own agenda and acts through his role as a leader rather than listening to what the coachee says and wants, this can have counterproductive consequences for the relationship. This is an important notion to bear in mind, because it is of upmost importance that the manager can act as a coach, but nonetheless some managers may find it difficult not to step into the managerial role. In this sense, when the manager finds him- or herself unable to abandon the manager role for the time being, this contributes to the maintaining of the asymmetry in the relation between the two parties. A manager sums up his experience as follows: *"I must remain neutral for a long time and only leave the position if directly requested by the coachee"*. Yet another manager concludes: *"I have to be more listening / neutral as a coach, which I sometimes can have difficulties with"*. This citation illustrates the abovementioned crucial task of being neutral (e.g. being aware of power positions) and only to step in the role of manager when the coachee demands it and when appropriate.

Personal topics

Another important facet in relation to trust and confidentiality is whether or not the coaching should also encompass topics that fall within the personal realm of the coachee. In this context it is relevant to raise questions regarding if (or when!) some managers will see it as his or her duty as manager to offer space for listening to personal issues of the coachee. One manager asked this question: *"Is it important to me, as manager, to offer space for listening to personal issues as I do sometimes, or should I just say more often that I'm afraid you'll have to speak to someone else about this problem?"*. In these instances, it seems to be important that the manager sets boundaries to ensure that the coaching topics do not become too personal. But however compelling a dichotomous distinction between "not too personal" and "too personal" issues may be, the fact remains that it is not always a straightforward task to single out which topics are considered too personal to be subject of coaching. The ability to set such boundaries relates to the power of the coach. The question of when and in what manner to set these boundaries is dependent upon manifold matters, such as the strength of the relationship, the established contract, and the personalities of the coach and the coachee. However, the coach must always be aware of and respect the power relations at play. A coachee said: *"If the manager and the coach were the same person, I would prefer the issue related to my work"* and *" it has sometimes been a problem that my coach is also my boss, I would probably be more open to an independent coach"*. The establishment of such boundaries is not always an easy realm to navigate for neither party, because in some instances personal topics might be of relevance to the employee's professional performance! This is illustrated quite clearly in our study. One of the employees had difficulty standing his ground in private relationships like friends and family, and by cause of coaching he got the courage to change this. This success apparently had an aftereffect on his job performance, where he was better to establish limits on its service to customers, so there was more balance between time spent and earnings from the customer. Additionally, the coaches' ability and willingness to deal with both the professional and personal issues of the coachee strengthens the relation and the contact between the parties as it comprises aspects of a client-centered, open and appreciative approach to coaching which promotes an atmosphere of equality and freedom (Rogers & Farson, 1957; Rogers, 1961; Rogers, 1995). In this way, you avoid the positive outcomes of the coaching being destroyed if the coachee does not feel openly met or are afraid of possible sanctions from what he says in the coaching. The following quote from an interviewed manager illustrates the consequences when the coachee is conscious of the problem in that the coach is his boss: *"It was my clear understanding that the coachee had not prepared a proper subject that was well suited to the setting. Coachee presented a topic on a very superficial practical problem that was not of particular importance, but which one could easily be talking a while about. In addition to that, it is my firm understanding that the coachee did not respond honestly, but rather was strategic because of my role as his immediate boss"*. The manager characterized it as a fruitless coaching session, and yet another manager with a similar problem described a session as follows: *"strictly speaking, we are just sitting and wasting our time"*. This is a consequence of the power at play being undoubtedly evident and consequently the relationship is largely asymmetrical. When the coach is successful in establishing a strong contact and relationship, this issue should not be as destruc-

tive. An employee ascribes his positive experiences with coaching to seeing his leader as a coach and not as a manager: *"I've learned that you should not just give up in advance if you find the challenge a little tricky. By discussing the problem with my coach, I saw it all from different angles, and then the task is not so daunting after all."* Here it actually seems that the relationship is quite symmetrical because the coach feels comfortable in the relationship. It implies that there has been created a space where both the coach and the coachee respect each other's reflections, questions and suggestions. A moment of symmetry occurs where the power aspect in the relationship is overlooked in the sense that the coach does not feel the urge to dominate the reflective processes with his authority and that the coachee consequently does not withhold information in fear of being dominated. It is symmetrical – like represented with the helix figure – because they speak from two different levels of knowledge, role distribution and authority that follow the established contract at the start. The relationship only becomes asymmetric when the coach (or in some instances, the coachee) does not adhere to the contract by, for example, breach of confidence and trust or by leaving behind the facilitating role and adopting an expert-role or an authoritative leadership role.

Deriving from this, it may be seen as a desirable strength that the coach is open, reflective and broadminded. Dwelling further on favorable abilities of the coach, it is suggested that these should entail his or her aptitude to:

- Create such an environment that
  - the coachee feels comfortable discussing professional and personal issues alike
  - the coachee trusts the coach to take the confidentiality of the coaching seriously
- Navigate the power dynamics and make role distribution manifest so that a fruitful result is likely to emerge through the coaching sessions
- Ensure that the coachee experiences equality in order for the coaching session to have value

It is worth noting that since the coach is both a coach and a manager, he or she may consequently find it difficult to establish equality in the coaching session, even though this issue was seemingly negotiated successfully in the coaching examined by this research project. Nevertheless, the coach must try to overcome these challenges with the implementation of a meta-reflexive perspective on both the symmetric and asymmetric power relations that are at play in coaching. This will upsurge the chances for moments of symmetry.

Can a boss be a coach at all?

After reading this article so far, a question may have materialized in the back of your mind. With all the challenges affiliated with a leader being a coach to his employees; is it at all beneficial, or even ethical, for this type of coaching to take place? As underscored in the previous paragraphs the coaching relationship is described as a primarily asymmetric relationship in the form of the focus, the task, and the unequal positions in the dialogue (Stelter et al. 2002; Haslebo, 2005). The inherently asymmetric nature of the coaching relationship and the power relations at play can be problematic when the coach holds power in more than one sense. Is the manager, acting as coach, truly able to establish a relationship built on trust and characterized by a sense of equality, when he unarguably as a coach still is maintaining a sort of control during the coaching session? This is a question of paramount importance, especially when power and symmetry seem to be opposites, where one can wonder whether a subtle balance can be established at all. The interpersonal relationship the between coach and coachee, with a focus on the power held by the coach, was a key finding from the template analysis. In the following discussion, these questions will be expanded upon, drawing on existing literature in the field and the already processed themes in this paper.

As previously mentioned it is recognized by foucauldian scholars, among others, that power is immanent in, and exerts an influence on, the relationship between coach and coachee (Dam Hede 2010; Elliot, 2011). It might be important to consider this power dimension as central for the quality of the relationship between the coachee and the coach – which is paramount for the positive result of the coaching session (O'Broin & Palmer, 2007; O'Broin & Palmer 2010). This may include the typical power struggle between the employer and the worker, where the workers have power through unity to hold on to their knowledge, skills, and knowledge of the specific group dynamics and performance, whilst the employer through his power in the form of the use of e.g. sanctions, control and surveillance is trying to split this unity by obtain-

ing this knowledge. In addition, development is the basic idea of coaching and the employee may fear for the repercussion of the coaching when it becomes a part of the manager's leadership style. For what are the consequences for the employee, if he fails to achieve the desired development? Will the coaching become a part of the manager's measuring tools? The answer depends primarily on whether the manager is able to establish a strong working alliance and a clear coaching contract and later, if he is able to respect and uphold this. According to Whitmore (2004), the manager can be a coach and obtain the abovementioned – but certain commitments mentioned below ought to be reached. Whitmore points out that for employee coaching to be functioning at its best, the nature of the relationship between the manager and the employee needs to have the nature of a partnership of trust, confidence and minimal utilization of pressure (ibid.). The manager as a coach should be able to be honest, objective, have empathetic skills and be ready to take a new stance and a new view at the employee (Whitmore, 2004). Adding further to this discussion, it cannot be rejected, on the basis of current research, that managers who are formally qualified and educated as coaches may function equally well comparing with psychologists doing coaching (Bono et al., 2009; Passmore, 2007).

To summarize, it can thence be concluded that whilst it can be beneficial for a boss to be a coach for his employees, there are several challenges that he should beware of and try to minimize. The power and the quality of the relationship are inalienable factors in the coaching relationship, thus it becomes a key issue that the coach is aware of the power relation between the coach and the coachee. Furthermore, it has been suggested that there is a risk that employee coaching can become a powerful oppressive tool for the manager to control his employees. The coach acquires access to information that he would perhaps not otherwise have access to, and which can be used to optimize the workflow and business growth (at least temporarily). This leads us to the question of what kind of power the manager as a coach should use to maximize the effectiveness of the employee coaching.

The power to empower the coachee

The controlling aspect of coaching includes the embedded power held by the coach, and is linked to the coaching relationship and moments of symmetry. The search for an excellent balance between equality in the relationship and the controlling power held by the coach is of vital importance for the relationship between the coach and the coachee. The influence of power on the coaching relationship has been investigated by several scholars, and Welman and Bachkirova (2010, p. 1) in their analysis of the relationship between coach and coachee, defined power as dually: *"the ability to dominate him or her"*, or *"the power to do something, to be able to, to be potent"*. When seen in relation to findings from the qualitative analysis, this definition describes the dual relationship that is at the center of the coaching relationship. Balancing this becomes even more essential due to the coach's position as manager of the employee. The manager needs to "constrain" the power he possesses as manager, and it is necessary that he adopt the power as a coach in the coaching relation. During work as a coach, power could rather be described as the power or the ability to *em*power the coachee instead of the power to dominate the coachee. If these abilities are sufficiently developed, the power held by the coach may be used in a positive and productive manner for the em*power*ment of the coachee, so that the power notion as mentioned by Welman and Bachkirova ("*the power to do something, to be able to, to be potent")* is understood as precisely the power to empower the coachee. This empowerment and feeling of symmetry are illustrated by the quite similar experiences from two coachee's. One stated as follows: "*I have become better at setting goals on what I want with a challenge or a problem - it makes it more measurable and manageable. Besides, I was also listened to, and there was not a solution in advance. On the contrary, it was rewarding to have a discussion about a problem, and then reasoning out a solution where both of us actively participated. And actually having to rely on your own solution*". Yet another employee said: *"I experienced that there was great trust from my leader and a very positive dialogue, which among other things meant that I was more aware that I often have the solution to my problem myself"*. The employee's development of new insight of available competences and tools is of great importance for both the company and the employee, as this entails larger ability to self-control and better possibilities for autonomy. In the long run this can result in fewer expenses used for control and surveillance and maybe even more potential for cor-

porate growth. This is perhaps one of the greatest benefits employee coaching can produce.

Conclusion

According to Heslin, Vandewalle & Latham (2006), the coaching of employees is a key task for middle managers in many major American enterprises, and this phenomenon is widespread and during the last decade increasing in Danish enterprises as well (Coaching Barometret, 2009). Due to this frequent prevalence of employee coaching, it is highly relevant to conduct studies of the practice hereof. In this article we have analyzed and discussed how managers and employees experience coaching, and which challenges and opportunities emerged during coaching of employees by managers. The following paragraphs will regard these challenges and opportunities.

The first issue, which is considered most pertinent, is the power balance in the coaching-relationship. According to Welman & Bachkirova (2010), the power balance is a key focus point in all kinds of coaching. However, when the coach is also the manager of the coachee, this seems to be of an even more critical importance. The coach may be tempted to exert power over the coachee, and this jeopardy seems to be heightened when the coach is also a manager and thence often wishes to achieve a certain goal. On the basis of this study, we would further emphasize the vital importance of actively assessing the power issue in coaching, especially because this balance has a significant effect on decisions or discussions. The dilemma of being a manager and a coach at the same time has been illustrated in the present study, where the theme emerged during the qualitative analysis.

Secondly, another aspect of the experience of middle managers coaching their employees concerns, in more general terms, the relationship between coach/manager and coachee/employee. This study showed, in accordance with the existing research (Gregory & Levy, 2010, 2011; O'Broin & Palmer, 2010; Palmer & McDowall, 2010), that the coaching relationship is of crucial importance to not only the effectiveness of the coaching, but also for the future leader/employee cooperation. Certainly, this is paramount to take into account, seeing as the relationship between manager and employee is of vital importance for employees' work involvement, the (work) alliance and to the experienced power relation (Gregory & Levy, 2010, 2011; O'Broin & Palmer, 2010; Palmer & McDowall, 2010; Bordin, 1979). In spite of the widely acknowledged significance of these issues, the amount of research on the influence of the coaching relationship on the efficiency of the coaching process is still very limited (Gregory & Levy, 2010).

Thirdly, it was considered and discussed what impact it has on the coaching that a (middle) manager acts as coach. The results of earlier qualitative methodological studies demonstrate that coaching may contribute to a reduction in stress, but paradoxically may also increase stress if it is not considered relevant and useful, but is instead is seen only as a "time waster" (Hackett, Palmer & Farrants, 2007). The conclusion of this study was, however, that through coaching, the participants obtained tools that they considered to be useful for them in future stressful situations. In general, participants found that coaching helped them combat stress and not escape conflict-ridden situations but instead endure these without imposing another stress factor upon themselves (Gyllensten et al., 2005, Palmer & Cooper, 2007).

Fourthly, issues such as who are good (enough) coaches, and what are important active ingredients in coaching have been discussed. In this article, it was found that the manager as a coach should be able to be honest, objective, have empathetic skills, and be ready to take a new stance towards the employee. In addition, the coach needs to implement a meta-reflective approach to the coaching and have an understanding of the different symmetrical and asymmetrical aspects of employee coaching relationship. The latter strength includes having an understanding of favorable and unfavorable aspects of asymmetry and what causes it to be visible and destructive. Here, the coach must be aware of power positions and respect the confidentiality. The coach must use his power to empower, rather than to dominate the coachee.

Finally, the study confirms that power is immanent and that power relations are of great importance to the relationship between the coach and the coachee in employee coaching. In relation to this, it was found that the nature of the coaching relationship could be characterized as being both symmetrically and asymmetrically placed on different parameters that are both rigid (focus on the coachee's' world; roles and tasks; power and unequal positions) and changeable (the knowledge distribution). However, it was also found that the

most fruitful coaching was obtained when the coachee experienced moments of symmetry and equality. This insight in and of itself can be of great value for the manager working as a coach to his employees, but nonetheless it is also important that the coach knows *how* to achieve these moments. We can conclude and confirm that in order to achieve these moments, the quality of the coaching relationship is of immense importance. Additionally, other important qualities and strengths of the coach have been discussed. Especially with regards to achieving moments of symmetry and equality, the coach's relational competences seem to be imperative. It appears to be of vital importance whether the manager as a coach is able to design a safe and trusting context for the coachee, and that he is aware of essential skills such as being empathic and establish a strong working alliance. Further attention could be paid to the influence of power on the experience of equality in the relation. In relation to the key question of whether the boss can be the coach for his employee, this study confirms that coaching of employees by internal (middle) managers can be feasible and fruitful when the mentioned necessary and sufficient conditions are accomplished. In spite of the widely acknowledged significance of these issues, the amount of research on power and symmetry in the coaching relationship, including how these topics affect the efficiency of the coaching process, is still very limited and calls for further research.

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