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The importance of a working alliance between coach and coachee

Alanna Henderson and Ole Michael Spaten

Abstract

Ole Michael Spaten interviews Dr Alanna Henderson on the coaching relationship, newer findings and future research. In this interview, Henderson advocated that defining coaching alliance is useful since it emphasizes the coach and coachee engagement in collaborative and purposive work. Moreover, she pointed out four of her essential findings concerning coaching relationship, which includes; Collaboration, engagement, adapting to the individual coachee and measuring the Coaching Alliance. Lastly, she mentions two areas of research as critical for further investigation; coaching relationship as a mediating variable and video-mediated coaching relationship.

Keywords: Coaching relationship, Coaching Alliance, Coachee, Coach, Engagement, Collaboration, Bond

Ole: When and how did you realize that the alliance / relation between coach and coachee was an important and under researched topic?

Alanna: First I would like to highlight the importance of the Working Alliance. My contact with the helping professions began when I retrained as a Chartered Counselling Psychologist in the UK, in 1998, following a career in the financial sector in Fund Management. Working with therapy clients showed me first-hand how important the relationship was as a common factor: in engaging clients, and supporting and underpinning the work, regardless of theoretical

approach adopted. The psychotherapy research evidence base has long supported this premise, with a moderate yet robust significant working alliance-outcome association across theoretical approaches being shown for decades across multiple studies (see Horvath et al., 2011).

It was an under-researched topic. Back in 2004, as a Chartered Counselling Psychologist new to coaching, I read many opinion pieces and coaching reviews attesting the importance of a good coaching relationship to process and outcomes of coaching. Counter-intuitively, I found there was little or no dedicated coaching relationship research findings at that time sup-

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porting the assertion of its importance in the coaching context.

Ole: Alanna, what brought you to this research field?

Alanna: It was a timely research topic. In 2006, on selecting a topic for my Doctorate research, I therefore chose to begin to examine this lacuna, with my mixed-method research study on *coachee and coach experiences of forming coaching relationships, and how the coach may adapt to the coachee*. This research study was one of few at the time to exclusively address the coaching relationship (see O'Broin & Palmer, 2010; O'Broin, 2013). Interest in researching the coaching relationship, as one of the *active ingredients of coaching* has gathered pace in the years since, with evidence, including meta-analyses (Graßmann et al., 2020), accumulating on importance of relationship quality (usually measured as Working Alliance) to coaching effectiveness, although exploration of mediating or moderating effects requires further research (see Zimmermann & Antoni, 2020), and is arguably likely to be equally relevant (see O'Broin, 2016) given the multifactorial complexity of coaching as a process.

Ole: How do you define the coaching relationship?

Alanna: First, this field is characterised by its lack of consensus on definition. The lack of consensus on a definition of the coaching relationship means that multiple referents are used for the term. This means use of the term can therefore range from a proxy for the whole coaching process, to more specific usages, such as a descriptor for rapport, or a component part of the coaching relationship, for example, Working Alliance. Whilst other component parts of the coaching relationship, such as the Real Relationship (Sun et al., 2013) have been posited as relevant markers, and recently other Common Factors, or active ingredients such as resilience and self-efficacy (de Haan et al., 2020) have tentatively been designated as putatively more important to coaching effectiveness, Working Alliance is the predominant component part of the coaching relationship that has usually

been measured and found to be associated with coaching effectiveness in research studies.

Ole: Do you think we are getting closer to a definition of the coaching alliance?

Alanna: I find that a working relationship or coaching alliance definition is useful, as it emphasises the collaborative, negotiable and client-led nature of the Coaching Alliance in coaching, as well as addressing the purposive task, goal, and bond aspects salient in goal-focused coaching: *'The coaching alliance reflects the quality of the [coachee] and coach's engagement in collaborative, purposive work within the coaching relationship, and is jointly negotiated and renegotiated throughout the coaching process over time.* (O'Broin & Palmer, 2007, p.305)

Ole: What are some of your most important findings concerning the coaching relationship and the coaching alliance?

Alanna: My PhD research was conducted and written up between 2006 and 2013, and it is interesting to assess its findings in the context of today's research on the coaching relationship. Since I began my research, there have been a succession of studies finding an association between the working alliance and outcome (eg Baron & Morin, 2009), including larger studies exploring the Working Alliance as a common factor contributing to coaching outcome (De Haan et al., 2013; de Haan et al., 2016). Latterly, reflecting an increasing recognition of the complex association between interactive variables in the coaching process, the coaching relationship has been conceptualised in various ways - as a mediating variable (for instance de Haan et al., 2016); in a process-outcome model as *emotional support*, (Zimmermann & Antoni, 2020); and Working Alliance construed as a *coachee propensity* to relate rather than a relational variable (de Haan et al., 2020). Further developments have also been a lack of convergence between data on self-report and behavioural observations of the Working Alliance in relation to coaching success, and findings of a lack of association of the bond aspect of the Working Alliance to coaching outcomes (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015; Grant, 2013), with the

latter study also emphasising the goal-focused aspects of the coaching relationship over the bond aspects. These latter studies are welcome in introducing a more detailed examination of the interacting variables at work in the coaching process, however are still some way off from making sense of, and understanding the direct and/or indirect role which the coaching relationship plays.

Ole: Could you tell me more about your most important findings?

Alanna: My main findings of interest were: 1) Collaboration a potential area for exploration

- a) Collaboration was found to be the central salient component of the coaching relationship.
- b) There were a variety of perspectives on the characteristics, and degree, of collaboration sought.
- c) Within the component of collaboration, respect (for the person of the coach), shared understanding, and support (both outside and within the coaching session) were aspects found to be particularly important.
- d) Collaboration in the Principal Component Analysis conducted in the study comprised Collaboration, Bond and Engagement, and Coach attitude and Characteristics aspects identified in sub-themes in phase 1 of the research study.

Bordin's conceptualisation of Working Alliance (1979;1994) focuses on collaboration between coach and coachee being achieved in three areas: Goals, Tasks and Bonds. Alliance is viewed as the result of a joint endeavour (collaboration) rather than something that a coach or coachee does or achieves per se, and Bordin's inference is therefore that collaboration results in the alliance, and that the alliance operates at a different conceptual level to other relationship concepts, such as empathy, genuineness, warmth, flexibility. As has been urged in the coaching research (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006; Zimmermann & Antoni, 2018) and psychotherapy research literature (Horvath, 2018), development of theoretical models dealing with coaching and psychotherapy processes respectively are necessary. The questions here are there-

fore (i) do we need to examine the different nature of alliance and other relationship variables, and (ii) how these variables relate to each other? Is collaboration, in coaching, for example a generic component? (see Horvath, 2018: pg. 512). Is the act of collaboration connected to the negotiated responsibility for deciding goals, and for planning and participating in coaching tasks, and should our emphasis be targeted on harnessing the coachee's Active Confident Collaboration identified in my research study (conceptualised elsewhere as the 'Client's enthusiastic participation' and the concept identified across Working Alliance measures as the common denominator variable (Hatcher et al., 1995).

Ole: You have had many years of research into this field. Can you tell us more about your findings concerning the coaching relationship and the coaching alliance?

Alanna: Another headline for my findings is 2) Engagement, dis-engagement, and re-engagement opportunities

- a) Respect for the coach suggested an alternative route for engagement with the coachee to the generally discussed aspects of liking and rapport (for instance in the Bond subscale of the Working Alliance.
- b) The Bond aspect of the coaching relationship was a broader concept than liking, and was linked to other aspects of engagement (such as openness, rapport, listening) and dis-engagement.
- c) Openness appeared to be an important aspect of both engagement and re-engagement on the identification of relational strains or disruptions to the coaching relationship.
- d) The Bond aspect was characterised in different ways by different participants, suggesting the relevance of adapting to the individual coachee.

Findings from my research study, and the coaching research suggest a more nuanced role for the bond in the coaching relationship, both in its composition, and its relation, and relative position to, Tasks and Goals, and for individual coachees. Variables at work in the cycle of engagement, disengagement, and re-engagement

are also suggested to be worthy of further investigation in terms of the management of alliance fluctuations and critical moments (see Zimmermann & Antoni, 2018: pg. 21; de Haan, 2019; pg. 238).

Alanna: A third headline from my research findings is 3) Adapting to the coachee.

- a) Adapting to the coachee, particularly in respect of coach style, was found to be universally applicable across coachee and coach participants. My research study found that both coachee and coach participants emphasised the importance of the coach adapting to the coachee, (see Dryden, 2017), although how to adapt, when, and in which way varied. Further studies are required to substantiate these findings and to further establish how and when the coach can most beneficially do so.

Alanna: My final headline and important finding is about how to measure the Coaching Alliance

- a) As part of the assessment of concurrent validity of the questionnaire developed in the second phase of the research (FCCRQ), a comparison was made of its Total scores with the WAI-S alliance which were highly significantly correlated ($r = .67$) suggesting that the constructs measured by the respective instruments overlapped and were measuring some of the same thing.

An advantage of the concurrent validity process for the questionnaire in my research study (FCCRQ), was the opportunity to obtain a realistic estimate of the relation between it and the Working Alliance (WAI-S) ie by using both measures on coach participants at the same time. The individual item scores of my questionnaire had all been found to be relevant to the experience of forming the coaching relationship in my coach sample (N=368).

Ole: What do you think would be future key research areas for scholars interested in further understanding and development of this field?

Alanna: I have discussed suggested future coaching relationship research areas elsewhere (O'Broin, 2016), however I will briefly cover two areas

that I currently believe need to be urgently addressed:

- 1 Process models and mediating variables. We have seen evidence of researchers moving beyond a simple correlational coaching relationship-coaching outcome link to development of process models that are beginning to include how variables interact with each other to influence coaching outcomes (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015), and include explanations of causal mechanisms (Zimmermann & Antoni, 2018). We need more such models, and those proposed require further testing, as well as measurement over time in longitudinal studies. Part of this process includes greater examination of the coaching relationship as a mediating variable, and more precise definition of coaching relationship constructs (Lopez, 2017; O'Broin, 2016).
- 2 Video-mediated coaching relationships. With many coaches moving to online video-mediated coaching for the first time, or increasing the percentage of coaching hours using this medium with the onset of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, exploration of the role of the coaching relationship in video-mediated coaching needs to be urgently addressed in research studies. This is particularly because of mixed findings on the facility for creating rapport, and a lack of studies examining the equivalence of relational engagement using online video coaching to face-to-face coaching. There may be situations however where client preferences are for a video-mediated coaching programme (Deniers, 2019) or those where a blended coaching programme is most effective. Additional coaching skills in developing video-mediated, compared to face-to-face coaching relationships are likely to prove necessary. Such differences may also suggest that there are situations where video-mediated coaching is not the medium of choice and could cause negative effects (examination of this as a possibility could form an additional component of the recent focus on negative, or side-effects of coaching) (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019; see also O'Broin, 2019).

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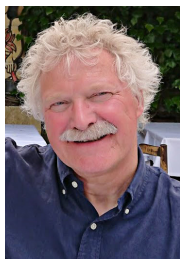
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