



*Reflecting pathways to
learning and change*



F. Campone, Inc. Newsletter

All of us- whether we've coached for years, months or weeks- are likely to experience moments with clients that cause us to struggle. In those moments, we are likely to wonder: "What can I do here?" and "Am I the only one who's ever faced this?" This month's research article, "I struggle and emerge: Critical moments of experienced coaches" by Erik deHaan¹ offers data which are both reassuring and thought provoking.

Currents in Coaching Research: The Gift of Critical Events

DeHaan initially studied inexperienced coaches, identifying the dilemmas and doubts they encountered in their first year of practice.² Building upon insights from the initial study, he looked to investigate the critical moments encountered by experienced coaches. Identified experienced coaches- defined as those with eight or more years of coaching experience beyond formal training or accreditation- responded to deHaan's e-mailed question: "Discuss briefly one critical moment (an exciting, tense or significant moment) with one of your coachees. Think about what was critical in the coaching journey, or a moment when you did not quite know what to do." (p. 107)

The author grouped the resulting 78 critical moments and analyzed the groups for what they might reveal about the process involved in generating constructive coaching outcomes. Rather than documenting the outcomes, deHaan is interested in adding to the understanding of results-generating events in the coaching process. Of the 47 respondents, 25 were based in The Netherlands, 18 in the United Kingdom; two in Germany and one each in the United States and South Africa.

The article provides verbatim examples of the responses. I found it reassuring to read these and recognized from my own experience some of the "uh-oh" inducing situations represented. More useful, though, are deHaan's groupings of the critical events. Three main headings identify both the potential pitfalls and opportunities in challenging coaching events.

The first grouping of results presents critical events in managing key conditions. These include the mismatched coaching contexts (location or setting); potential conflicts in third-party contracts; and initially misreading clients. Each of the challenges is presented with the respondent's description of how he or she chose to manage the condition.

The second group of critical events is described as deepening the coaching conversation and relationship. Critical events in this group called upon the coach to search in the moment for a key question or focus topic that would serve as a doorway to open up the client's underlying issue or

challenge. In some cases, the coach's reframe turned the event; in other instances, coaches took risks in offering feedback or by being more self-revealing.

Responses in the third grouping included challenges resulting from issues of transference and counter-transference. This group overall reflects critical moments in handling what arises in the coaching conversation and relationship. DeHaan notes that "the Dutch have much more to say about counter-transference ... This might be due to the more direct and candid nature of Dutch culture." (p. 109). Cultural differences notwithstanding, coaches with limited exposure to these concepts may find the critical events arising here to be of particular interest. "Surprises" in this category included revelations of widely disparate perceptions of coaching effectiveness; coach's experiences of self-doubt; and coach expectations or emotions interfering with the process.

Overall, deHaan found that while experienced coaches have fewer doubts than inexperienced ones, they are also much more aware of the need to closely monitor every aspect of the coaching process and to exploit the growth opportunities presented by surprises. By way of putting a spotlight on such potential opportunities, deHaan suggests that critical moments arise from anxieties in seven areas: (1) the boundaries of coaching; (2) satisfying outcomes; (3) the coach's own role; (4) the coach's own intuition; (5) what the coach does or does not contribute; (6) specific coachee behaviors; (7) coach counter-transference issues.

In examining the outcomes of the 78 critical events, deHaan identified 26 which he characterized as major or minor breakthroughs. Of these, 20 (77%) of the critical events could be characterized as unpredictable and holding a deeper emotional meaning. This is consistent with a theory put forward by Carlberg (cited by deHaan), which defines turning points in psychotherapy as "those moments when the therapist notes something qualitatively new in relation to the client's behavior or to the relationship between therapist and client." The author concludes by noting an interesting paradox. He suggests that as coaches, we tend to be conservative: i.e. seeking to work within a consistent and defined role. Nonetheless, we expect our clients to be progressive: i.e. to break out of their previously self-defined boundaries and roles. It would appear that turning point events underscore the dynamic tension in this pair of positions. What distinguishes experienced coaches from less experienced coaches in the moment appears to be that the experienced coaches have greater self-confidence and a greater self-awareness. Thus, experienced coaches are better able to "tolerate the tension and tackle the ongoing struggle", shifting their focus from their private inner struggles to the struggle in the coaching moment itself.

Coaching research of this type stretches the territory of coaching knowledge to better inform self-knowledge and create awareness of the skills and competencies of mastery in coaching. deHaan's study looks to de-mystify the magic in the coaching process and provide coaches with grounding for their own on-going development in service of their clients.

¹ Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research. 2008 v. 60, no. 1

² *I doubt therefore I coach: Critical moments in coaching practice*. In the same issue of Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research.

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