

# MAKING SENSE OF COACHING

# INTRODUCTION

# 1

## CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- Set the scene
- The Coaching Cycle model
- Introducing the underlying ontology and epistemology of the text
- Outlining the structure of the text

## SETTING THE SCENE

I invite you, the reader, to enter into a dialogue with me for the purpose of making sense of coaching. You may share some of the ideas I put forward and you will no doubt also hold views that differ from mine. In the pages to follow I hope I will be able to contribute to your understanding of coaching and challenge some of the assumptions you may currently hold as to the nature of coaching. Coaching as a developing field remains in its infancy, both in terms of research as well as its practice. The diversity of techniques and intellectual traditions that underpin its disparate practices reflects the eclectic views on what constitutes coaching. It is for this reason that coaching is perceived as having a long way to go in establishing itself as a profession (Brockbank and McGill, 2006; Cox et al., 2010). This can be perceived as both a strength and a weakness. The weakness is reflected in the questions raised from different quarters as to the credibility of the emerging profession. The strength is the immense flexibility of coaching, with its array of creative intervention strategies to meet the individual needs of the coachee. I will explore the tension between these two positions, namely the desire for proper professional status complete with agreed standards and the

appeal offered by the freedom of manoeuvre, supported by a critical approach as put forward by postmodernism.

Coaching has its roots buried in education, psychology, therapy, counselling, sports coaching and organizational development, all contributing to the eclectic nature of coaching. The extant literature of coaching would suggest that it has developed along two parallel paths. One path favours the models- and techniques-based approach, with its assumptions based on the behaviourist tradition. This perspective is particularly evident in executive and management coaching, which is dominated by a need to achieve goals and objectives and bring about visible changes in behaviours (du Toit, 2010). However, this approach ignores the unconscious and cognitive elements that shape the behaviours and performance of individuals. The second path, according to Stober (2006), has its philosophical foundation based in a humanistic psychology with human growth and change at its core. Stober (2006) also suggests that many of the approaches to coaching, such as the person-centred approach, therapies that include practices such as Gestalt, existentialism and psychotherapy, all have their roots in the humanistic perspective. However, this perspective is embedded in a therapeutic environment that deals with varying levels of dysfunction and pathology whereas coaching endeavours to work with functional individuals with an emphasis on the future.

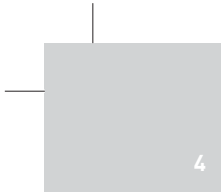
Irrespective of the approach to coaching, it requires deep reflection by both the coach and coachee and the necessity to explore the values and beliefs that drive the individual while at the same time having a consideration of the wider system in which the coachee operates. In the chapters to follow I put forward the argument that the transformational power of coaching needs to be much more informed by a critical perspective than has been the case hitherto. Within the coaching space the role of the coach is both to support and challenge the individual to engage in a process of retrospective sensemaking. It is often in the space of silence created by coaching that the individual is able to become aware of the very essence of who they are, the values and beliefs which drive their behaviours and the contribution they have made to the particular set of circumstances they find themselves in. I argue that coaching at the

highest level challenges the participants to take responsibility and ownership for their role in any situation or experience they encounter. The coaching space therefore has the ability to challenge the rhetoric that has informed the reality the coachee is experiencing at a given time.

The audience for this book is first and foremost aimed at the systemic eclectic end of the mature or maturing coach as identified by Clutterbuck and Megginson (2011), who offer four stages of development for the aspiring coach to journey through. These are as follows:

1. Models-based coaches. This identifies the aspiring coach who sets off on their development journey and who seeks the comfort and security of tried and tested models. Their approach is mechanistic as the model drives the intervention and conversations with the client.
2. Process-based approach. There is more flexibility in the coach's approach and they draw on a number of different tools and techniques, although their repertoire remains limited. The approach continues to be wedded to a solutions focus.
3. Philosophy or discipline-based mindset. The coach begins to apply a much wider portfolio of responses to the needs of the client and their approach is identified by the ability to reflect on their practice.
4. The systemic eclectic. This is the most liberated approach and the coach has a wide-ranging portfolio that includes knowledge and expertise from different disciplines. Their approach is non-mechanistic and they have internalized the array of tools and techniques which enables them to identify the most appropriate approach to meet the needs of the client.

However, for those of you embarking on the coaching journey and currently at the beginning of exploring what coaching might mean to you, the debates I put forward in this text will give you an alternative view of coaching and one mainly based on an underlying philosophy of coaching. This book therefore does not offer any new tools or techniques, nor



does it favour any one in particular. It does, however, endeavour to explain what transpires within the coaching space, irrespective of the technique or approach employed by the coach. It aims to transcend the mechanistic input of coaching and instead addresses the black box of coaching; the conversion of the intervention strategy which leads to the output. The assertions are supported by vignettes offered by individuals and their particular experiences of coaching, whether as a coach or coachee.

There has been an explosion of the coaching literature in recent years. Whatever the desired outcome there are a vast array of existing and growing models and techniques put forward with which to achieve these outcomes. This text will focus on the theories and concepts not hitherto associated with coaching, but which helps to explain the process between the inputs and the outputs. This text therefore transcends the need to engage in what Clutterbuck and Megginson (2011) define as the motivations of different schools of thought who seek to marginalize the views of alternative approaches, which in my view is counter-productive and serves no purpose other than to discredit the profession. I believe that any of the models and techniques thus far promoted in the literature all have a place in the toolbox of the coach. The challenge arises when any of these is hailed as the holy grail of coaching. As Clutterbuck and Megginson (2011) point out, the truly mature coach is able to elegantly and seamlessly select the right tool or technique for the specific situation presented by the coachee or, in certain circumstances, no tool at all. The structure of the book is guided by the model described below which reflects the key stages of coaching as I perceive it.

## COACHING AND MENTORING

Some readers will no doubt come to the subject of coaching with the unanswered question as to the differences and similarities between coaching and mentoring and I suggest it would be of value to attend to this question at the outset. Two of the key authoritative figures on coaching and mentoring, Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005: 14), suggest that any attempts at polarizing



coaching and mentoring is, in their terms, ‘futile, and undermines the credibility of both coaching and mentoring’. Furthermore, the subject of coaching is dynamic and constantly in the process of changing and evolving, and I share the view of the authors that any attempt at categorizing coaching and mentoring is unhelpful. As Garvey et al. (2009) identify, there are distinct schools of thought in both camps and some of these vigorously protect their respective territories.

The reference, both directly and indirectly, to mentoring can be traced back thousands of years, beginning with Plato and Aristotle with some tentative links to classical times associated with coaching, namely that of Socrates and the Socratic dialogue in particular. I conclude the brief foray into the debate of the distinction between coaching and mentoring by suggesting that there is probably more that unites rather than separates the two practices. Any attempt at providing a definitive position on the differences or similarities between coaching and mentoring is beyond the scope or purpose of this book. The discussions and debates that follow are therefore levelled at the practice of coaching, some of which will no doubt apply to mentoring as well.

## THE COACHING CYCLE

The following model, which I suggest goes some way to define the coaching process, acts as a map by which the book is structured. The first stage of the coaching journey is defined by identifying the client or clients and establishing a contract for the duration of the coaching relationship. The contract should include the agreed outcomes and should determine specific and clear boundaries as to the type of coaching, how a successful outcome will be achieved, identify the expectations of different stakeholders, etc. This stage should also reflect the particular approach and underlying philosophy of the coach. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, there are many routes into the provision of the coaching intervention and it is important for both the coach and coachee that there is clarity about the particular approach and the tools and techniques that might be employed.

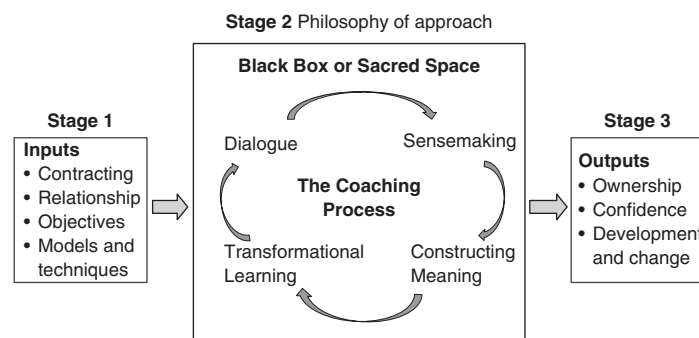
Stage two of the coaching journey is what I define as the ‘black box’ of coaching. The focus of the existing literature seems to be on either the inputs, namely the models and techniques with the GROW model as probably the most well known, or the outputs, i.e. performance and achievement of goals. There appears to be little by way of addressing the stage in between and its contribution to what would be identified as coaching. As there is an absence in the literature on making this stage explicit, it remains an enigma – a black box that is complex and difficult to define. It is for this reason that this book deliberately excludes the positioning of different models or techniques. There are other texts that specifically provide a description of the various approaches available to the coach and the endless models and techniques associated with various traditions. Instead, the purpose is to focus on the actual process of coaching in an attempt to make the black box more transparent.

As one coachee mentioned to me, it is a ‘sacred space or bubble’, which is not necessarily defined by a physical place but rather refers to a psychological space that can equally be established within a busy public place or a quiet environment dedicated to coaching. It is also seen as a place the coachee can return to in their mind during the periods between the actual coaching sessions. Irrespective of the approach or techniques employed by the coach, I will suggest that certain key practices are associated with this stage of the coaching process and these will be discussed at length throughout the book. The final stage is identified as the outputs of the coaching intervention, which will, of course, be different for different individuals although there appears to be some common benefits identified by coachees. Irrespective of the individual benefits, one such common theme is that of personal development and change.

## PHILOSOPHY OF THE COACH

I will argue throughout the book that it is necessary for coaching to be supported by an overall philosophy on behalf of the coach. As I perceive it as the underpinning of the coaching practice, irrespective of the models or techniques an individual

coach employs, I will begin my discussions with exploring how philosophy can inform the practice drawing on some examples for discussion. Having an overarching philosophy to one's practice of coaching allows for congruence in how the coach engages in their practice and it enables the coach to navigate through the sometimes challenging and turbulent waters encountered during the coaching intervention. One such philosophy, which I argue is well suited to the practice of coaching, is that of scepticism, which has its roots in critical theory and which I discuss in depth in Chapter 3.



**FIGURE 1.1** The Coaching Cycle, adapted from du Toit (2010)

Unlike many other discourses, which allow the researcher, author and reader to indulge in the joy of pure intellectual debate and pontification, coaching is the application of the many theories and concepts that have all played a role in shaping what we have come to understand as coaching. Unlike the student of many other subjects, learners on various coaching programmes are engaged in the learning journey for the express purpose of becoming a better and more developed coach. The applied application of theory has been a passion of mine and has underpinned the long journey of learning I embarked on many years ago and which supports all my activities, whether it is coaching, research, writing, designing of programmes or engaging in debates at conferences. I have therefore endeavoured to address the needs of both the academic community, drawing on relevant theories and concepts supported by the appropriate references. At the same time



I have also endeavoured to demonstrate how these ideas could inform the practice of coaching and to provide a map to the potential coachee who wants to better understand what coaching may or may not offer them.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book is organized in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 provides a critical overview of the current coaching literature for the purpose of positioning the ideas that follow within current thinking and practices of coaching. It is true to say that coaching has been greatly influenced by psychology, but it remains without wider philosophical principles to underpin its practice. The practice of coaching that has received most attention and focus has been executive and business coaching with the explicit goal of seeking to improve the performance of the individual and the organization. Coaching has yet to address wider social debates, challenging the fundamental and corresponding social beliefs that underpin and condone organizational practices. Instead, it has historically reflected the organizational obsession with performance and goals or on the opposite end of the continuum, life coaching, which in its extreme is devoid of challenge and realism.

To lend credibility and substance to coaching, many of the models and concepts have been borrowed and adopted from psychology. Psychology has traditionally focused on the disease within individuals and groups, seeking ways of 'fixing' what is perceived to be wrong with the individual. There is a lack of reference to a wider philosophical underpinning to truth and reality in both the literature as well as the practice of coaching, which I endeavour to address in this text.

Chapter 3 introduces the role of philosophy in coaching and that of critical theory in particular, which promotes the virtues of scepticism. As I perceive the support of a coaching philosophy to be fundamental to the personal approach of the coach, I begin the journey of exploration of what coaching is with a debate and discussion as to the contribution of philosophy to the practice of coaching. The sceptical bias of recent critical theories, namely that of poststructuralism and postmodernism,

is introduced and its implications for coaching are emphasized. Scepticism particularly encourages radical and ongoing assessment of belief systems and their received wisdom; the dominant ideology. Of significance to coaching is the emphasis of difference in poststructuralist thought. Poststructuralist thinkers challenge the perceived homogeneity subscribed to by those in power and instead argue that the world around us was characterized by difference. This is a point of view shared by postmodernism, which sets out to undermine the grand narratives of our culture. Jean-François Lyotard in particular encouraged the rejection of institutional authority, suggesting that it invariably includes the suppression of divergent viewpoints. Psychologically this may be challenging to an individual who prefers to stay loyal to the status quo due to the emotional energy that has been invested in particular institutions, such as an organization, over the years. Coaching supported by critical theory provides the mechanism by which such power structures can be challenged. Critical theory is rich in concepts enabling the user to construct new narratives thereby furthering the debate in a particular field.

As we argue in our book, a coaching practice more geared to scepticism would be a significant step towards challenging the fundamentalism that has created so many problems in the business world at the time of writing (du Toit and Sim, 2010). One of the key values of coaching is that it is powerful in assisting the individual to address both their own internal barriers as well as the collective barriers that exist in organizations. Coaching addresses the worldview of the individual and their place in that world. Coaching offers the mechanism through which to challenge the stories and narratives that come to dominate an organization and, by default, the behaviours of those within it. In order to develop a sceptical attitude the coach is able to draw on a rich tradition of thought in this area, including that of contemporary postmodernism which is committed to the scrutiny of authority, its assumptions and practices. Furthermore, the coachee is encouraged to examine their beliefs with a view to seeing what lies behind them and whether they are more than tradition or habit. Asking the awkward questions helps the coachee to foster an enquiring mind at all times.

Chapter 4 discusses the prerequisites that contribute to the power of coaching. Before we even embark on the coaching itself, we need to contract both with the coachee as well as any other stakeholders, such as the line manager, Human Resources and the organization itself. The contracting process will help the coach in dealing with the sometimes tricky question of who is the coachee. The success of any coaching intervention is dependent on the quality of the relationship between the coach and coachee and the dialogue they engage in within the coaching space. A further key aspect of a successful coaching relationship is the ability of the coach to develop a high level of trust with the coachee. As with many journeys, the coaching journey also takes the participants into the unknown, which may feel scary and at the same time messy. The trust the coach and coachee establish provides the comfort and support for the coachee to continue on this unknown journey of discovery. The trust is also important as it legitimizes the time, space and commitment of the coachee to the process and it also offers their support in entering the unknown. The trust experienced by the coachee goes beyond the contractual relationship between the coach and coachee, and reflects more of a psychological contract. Although it is relatively absent from the coaching literature, Rogers (1967, 1980) has written extensively on the value of the relationship, as outlined in his person-centred approach in counselling and learning. This chapter will identify the value and importance of creating the relationship between the coach and coachee and the setting up of the space for reflection necessary for the benefits of coaching to be realized. A key component not often discussed in the literature is the readiness of the coachee to be coached. Identifying the willingness to engage with the process will be part of the contracting as well as establishing the psychological contract.

The coaching space is the container within which the coaching takes place. It needs to be consciously created by the coach, and one way to achieve this, as I will argue, is the presence of the coach. Coaching legitimizes the space to think, which is perceived as one of the most important benefits of coaching. Coaching provides both a mental as well as a psychological space in which people can explore what is important to them. It is not necessarily a physical space, but a

‘sacred space’ that facilitates deep thinking and reflection. The emphasis is on inner learning where constructs about self and others are questioned, often resulting in inner struggles. The process involves values, feelings, ideals and often moral decision-making and the exploring of self-concepts. It is argued that this process addresses the subjective world of the coachee, challenging their taken-for-granted assumptions about themselves and their world. There are a number of prerequisites to ensure the quality and depth of such thinking which is explored in this chapter.

Chapter 5 introduces the key principles of sensemaking, which is depicted as the process through which people reduce the complexity of their environment to a level from which they can make sense. The chapter will discuss the ideas of sensemaking as a meaning-creating activity put forward by Weick (1979, 1995). It is the process through which various kinds of information, insights and ideas coalesce into something useful and come together in a meaningful way. A fundamental assumption of sensemaking is that of a process involving the social construction of reality. Retrospection is also an intimate part of the process of sensemaking and reflects how the coach supports the coachee to make sense of their issues and context retrospectively. Sensemaking suggests that people learn about who they are by projecting themselves into their environment and gaining insight from the feedback this generates. People therefore both react to and are shaped by their environment whilst influencing and contributing to the surroundings they experience. The reflective space provided by coaching facilitates the sensemaking process as described.

It is suggested that sensemaking is an ongoing, retrospective activity a person engages in collectively within their relationships or communities of practice. The sense they make of a particular event or situation will in turn influence future sensemaking activities. It is through stories that the individual shares the sense made, thereby creating a collective and shared understanding of reality as perceived at a particular time. As soon as a person becomes aware of an experience it is already in the past; it is the retrospective action of capturing a moment in the continuous flow of the present. Sensemaking is also reliant on dealing with equivocality rather than certainty. The ability to

make sense of new situations may very well require the sense-maker to disrupt beliefs based on previous sensemaking, which is an assumed outcome of the coaching process. Sensemaking is also described as a process without beginning or end; it is a continuous flow of meaning creation. The person is constantly revising and building provisional assumptions. Sensemaking as an ongoing activity enacted through conversation, storytelling, narration, linguistic abilities, suggests that they all play a part in the process of making sense of the complexity and ambiguity the coachee operates in.

Chapter 6 draws on the theories of narrative and storytelling, which have received much attention from organizational scholars in recent years. This chapter will build on the previous chapter on sensemaking, which suggests that it is through stories that we make sense of our environment and experiences. Some of the main proponents of storytelling who inform this chapter are Boje (1995, 2008; Boje et al., 1999) and Gabriel (2004). The narrative approach draws on a history through which philosophers and scientists endeavour to understand the ways we come to know what we know. Narrative and storytelling are underpinned by a key assumption that reality is constructed as a story and which social actors are constantly rewriting through a collective process. Furthermore, the narrative paradigm advocates that people come to know what they know by telling stories of personal experiences in different settings, such as the setting provided by the coaching space. It is through the rewriting of their stories and the redefinition of their experiences and supported by the transformational process of coaching, that frames of references are adapted.

Storytelling is a complex process as there are multiple interacting stories unfolding simultaneously. Individuals are participating in their own life story, the story of their organizations, communities and families concurrently, with each story influencing the other. The history of storytelling is as rich and varied as the history of mankind and perceived as the most widely used means of communication. Storytelling combines perceived facts with emotions, ideas, values and norms. Through the telling of our stories are we able to organize events, thereby establishing coherence. It makes the communication of abstract ideas and behaviours possible, creating shared expectations and

interpretation. Storytelling has a relatively long history in its contribution to learning and meaning construction. Through the use of stories, the coachee is also able to make sense of and experiment with an alternative past, present and future. Storytelling also allows the coachee to understand how their story is influenced by the many stories of others they are interconnected with.

Chapter 7 introduces a constructionist perspective, which suggests that we are the authors of our own stories. The objective of the book is to move away from a performance-led, psychology-biased approach to coaching to one based on critical principles drawing on theories of constructionism as outlined by Gergen (1999, 2001; Gergen and Gergen, 2008), Bruner (1986, 1990, 1991) and Burr (1995). A constructionist perspective challenges people to be ever-vigilant and critical of their assumptions and assumed truths about the world. A constructionist perspective argues that knowledge is not discovered, but rather constructed within a relational environment of shared experiences and understandings. A social constructionist philosophy encourages the individual or group to be open to possibilities and to reconstruct reality through a process of continuous reflection. It also carries with it the burden of responsibility for the reality created, which must constantly be subjected to sceptical scrutiny. Without scrutiny individuals are constrained into maintaining the status quo.

According to constructionism, reality does not exist independently of the individual. An appreciation of the world is seen as being dependent from an understanding of how an individual shapes the world internally. The social world is therefore perceived as the product of social construction by the individuals within society, a process that is of an ongoing nature. Furthermore, adherents to this paradigm do not believe social reality to have an independent existence outside the consciousness of individuals and perceives the ontological status of the social world as being questionable. Every human situation is considered novel and emergent and filled with multiple, and often-times conflicting, meanings and interpretations. An overriding purpose of coaching is, as will be argued in previous chapters, to support the coachee in making sense of such ambiguity.

As the lived world is continuously changing, meaning can only be achieved through participation in the world. The participative nature of the constructionist paradigm is contrary to the positivistic paradigm which considers the observer to be detached from the world. Instead, constructionism endeavours to understand the world of interactive relationships that connect individuals into webs of meaningful experience. The acceptance of a multiplicity of reality is encompassed within this paradigm. The primary interest of approaching coaching from this paradigm is the quest to understand the subjective experience of the coachee and is supportive of the theoretical assumptions of the other proposed chapters.

Chapter 8 introduces the assumption of this book that coaching is also a journey of discovery and learning. There is much diversity amongst researchers as to what constitutes learning. It is suggested that learning can be understood as a change in the behaviour of the learner as learning facilitates a modification or addition to existing behaviours. Adult learning is seen as complex and multidimensional, involving an understanding of meaning and self-knowledge gained through critical reflection. Transformative learning promotes a learning environment in which the learner plays an active role in their own learning. The result is that teacher and learner collaborate in the process of constructing meaning. Learning therefore becomes a reciprocal experience for the learner and teacher. This equally reflects the practice and experiences of the coaching process. Some of the proponents informing this chapter are Knowles (1980), Cranton (1996), Dirkx (2001), Mezirow (1990, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1997), Brockbank and McGill (2006).

The traditional approach to learning defines it as a process whereby the individual gained knowledge and skills and possibly also attitudes and opinions. However, in recent years learning has increasingly been seen as a social process that takes place in the interaction between people, resulting in the constructionist view of learning. Transformational learning is defined as inner learning where constructs about self and others are questioned, often resulting in inner struggles. Furthermore, adult learning involves values, feelings, ideals and often moral decision-making and the exploring of self-concepts. It is argued that such learning addresses the subjective world of the



learner, challenging their taken-for-granted assumptions about the world – which is an expected outcome of the coaching intervention. The theories of transformational, adult learning reflect the discussions of constructionism, sensemaking and storytelling introduced in previous chapters.

Chapter 9 draws together the various theoretical concepts introduced, which would ultimately lead to the outputs of coaching – the final stage of my proposed model of coaching. There is a sense that the coach does not offer solutions, but instead emphasizes the need for the individual to take ownership for their own development and any changes they may want to bring about in their circumstances. The notion of ownership is also a major theme of transformative learning as we will have seen in the previous chapter. Other than the gift of ownership, coaching also results in empowerment and the confidence of the coachee to make any change to their situation or circumstances, if they so choose.

The chapters described above are interactive and a coachee may journey through them a number of times throughout the coaching experience. The chapters refer to the experience of coaching identified in the ‘black box’ referred to in the introductory chapter. The coaching process as addressed throughout therefore puts forward a new heuristic of coaching as a process of sensemaking constructed between the coach and coachee and which is achieved through dialogue resulting in transformational learning.

And now, let us begin the exploration of the black box of coaching ...

