

***Relational Coaching*, Eric de Haan (2008)**

A review by Des O'Connell

Do you ever look back on a coaching session and wonder if you've done the right thing? Worry about whether you may have done too much, or too little? Or (if the session has gone well) wonder what, if anything, you did that made a difference? If you do, I strongly recommend this book.

Some books on coaching can seem 'top down', didactic - describing what good coaches do (or ought to do). This is more 'from the inside out' – exploring what it feels like coaching; acknowledging the uncertainties that lurk within the emergent process, the courage required to go into the fog, with the coachee, not knowing where things may end up; trusting the process, hoping.

Its central message is simple, radical and liberating: focus on getting the relationship right – the *working alliance* between you and your coachee. Research shows that if you get that right, it won't matter too much what style of coaching you adopt or what interventions you make or don't make. The coaching is likely to be effective.

Lessons from the world of psychotherapy

De Haan begins with a look at extensive meta-research¹ now available in the field of *psychotherapy* which shows that –

- Therapy works
- No one school or approach appears more or less effective than another
- Even within a single approach (e.g. CBT) no one intervention seems more or less significant in terms of its impact²

This suggests that what matters is not the differences *between* approaches, or the individual ingredients within a given approach, but the *factors that all these approaches share*. De Haan explores in detail the *common* factors which studies show to be linked to positive outcomes and lists the four which have the greatest impact. They are (in descending order of impact):

1. *External factors*

What happens *outside* the therapy sessions! The client's work environment, colleagues, family and support network

2. *The person of the client*

A particularly important factor here is the degree of 'hope' or 'expectation' which the client holds about the therapy

Clearly these factors are largely³ or totally outside the sphere of influence of the therapist. Two other factors, which rank broadly equally in their impact, and which the therapist can influence are:

¹ *The great psychotherapy debate* (2001), Bruce Wampold

² And, to the extent that small differences in impact do show up, these may be linked to the *person of the therapist* rather than to any single ingredient of the approach

3. *The person of the therapist*

4. *The relationship between client and therapist, as experienced by the client*

The personal characteristics of therapists which, from research, clients identify as impacting outcomes are:

- Empathy, understanding, warmth and authenticity
- Being attractive (sic), inspiring confidence, appearing competent – in that order!
- The therapist's own mental health
- The ability to let go of one's own system of values and to communicate within the other person's value system.

An additional finding is that *belief, conviction* or *commitment* with respect to a given approach makes a significant difference to the outcome. To be clear, it is not the particular approach that is linked to better outcomes; it is the therapist's belief in it. De Haan concludes that, whatever school or approach the therapist favours, it provides an effective framework to hold the client and the relationship during the therapy. Where therapists clearly demonstrate their passion for their approach (whatever it is) clients seem to do better.

De Haan also cites findings which suggest that the majority of change occurs as a result of the *first session* or *within the first few weeks*. And studies have even found clear indications that significant changes can occur *before* the first session (which prompts one to wonder how much is down to the client's 'hope' or 'expectation' of benefit – or even to the *Hawthorne Effect*).

Application to coaching

De Haan's goal is to explore the extent to which these findings from psychotherapy apply equally to coaching. His opening proposition is surprisingly cautious⁴:

"I can't be sure that the translation of the results from [psychotherapy] to coaching is more than a thought experiment."

He reviews a number of research findings relating to *training* and *coaching* which clearly show that coaching is effective – in one study, four times as effective as training.

"[Coaching] yields a modest but quantifiable outcome ... [It] appears to make a demonstrable, positive difference time after time."

And, even before assessing the findings from his own research studies in coaching, he confidently suggests that there are powerful lessons here for coaches. Ones that stand out for me are:

³ But see further (below) the importance of supporting the client's sense of *hope* in a coaching context

⁴ Surprising, given the confidence of his many other propositions throughout the book, and the findings from his own research studies. '*Not proven*' I can understand; but '*no more than a thought experiment*' seems a touch tentative.

1. *Trust yourself*
Don't worry too much about the specific things you are doing
2. *Trust the coachee*
He/she will do all the important work that they are ready to do
3. *You can be robust*
Your clients are robust. You don't have to confine yourself to facilitation, exploring and supportive interventions; you can make use of more directive, suggestive and confronting interventions, if that seems appropriate
4. *Let the coachee decide whether you should continue or stop*
If the coachee finds the relationship positive, keep with it. If the relationship is not ideal *in the coachee's eyes*, don't hesitate to refer (and support the coachee through the transfer)

He adds a couple of words of warning:

- Don't be overly eclectic, or nihilistic (*his words*) about coaching approaches. Demonstrating a belief in *an* approach may matter
- Be careful about any intervention that could jeopardise the working relationship

And a recommendation, linked to the finding about the impact that the client's sense of 'hope' has on outcomes: A typical coachee question might be: "*Will this help me?*" Here the coach might feel inclined to say - in honesty: "*I don't know yet. I have no idea if this will help you*". De Haan encourages us as coaches to connect with our own sense of optimism to find a positive – and still honest – reply. For example: "*I personally have very positive expectations about the outcome.*"

De Haan's research studies into coaching effectiveness

De Haan sets out the method and findings of four studies he has carried out into coaching effectiveness. The four groups studied were:

1. Coachees (71 respondents at outset; 31 respondents in the follow up study)
2. Less experienced coaches⁵ (72 respondents)
3. Experienced coaches⁶ (47 respondents)
4. Very experienced coaches⁷ (28 respondents)

(1) Research among coachees

The question which de Haan posed to research participants was -

⁵Trained management consultants (75%) and independent coaches (25%). None held a diploma or were accredited as a coach or therapist.

⁶ At least 8 years coaching practice behind them after completing their formal training

⁷ Mean coaching experience was 11.3 years

What is it that makes the coaching journey worthwhile/effective/helpful to participants: how is it that they themselves feel that they learn or change through executive coaching?

The main findings from the research were:

- (1) The nature of *specific coaching interventions* seem less important to coachees than the *coaching relationship* itself. Those who reported the overall coaching experience as more helpful appreciated *all* the behaviours of their coaches⁸.
- (2) Coach qualities such as *listening, understanding and encouragement* were most valued by coaches
- (3) Coachees who identified attributes of their coach such as *friendly, courteous, approachable, available, attentive, and responsive* generally experienced a significantly better outcome

These findings are consistent with the earlier findings from psychotherapy. And they support de Haan's view that what is really important here is the *working alliance*: the coaching relationship, as experienced by the coachee. This, says de Haan, is the best predictor of outcome.

(2) Research with less experienced⁹ coaches

De Haan is particularly interested in what he terms 'critical moments' in coaching sessions:

"...the moments when the coaching relationship is really put to the test.... In moments where fear of the new, uncertainty and doubt overcome coach and/or coachee, they are both closest to a breakthrough...it is often solely as a result of such moments that the coachee actually begins to learn and change"

De Haan's aim, by studying such moments, is to obtain a greater understanding of the processes that lead to change through coaching. He acknowledges that this approach is *narrative* and *qualitative* in nature – as distinct from the more common *quantitative* studies (using, for example, a Likert scale).

In this study de Haan invited a group of less experienced coaches to –

"Describe 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 know quite what to do."

This produced 80 critical moments which de Haan analyses. His conclusions are:

- (1) Critical moments go hand in hand with doubts
- (2) At root, these amount to *"What is going on? Do I have an answer for it?"* or *"What do I see? How do I respond?"*
- (3) Handled properly, critical moments are the starting point for significant learning – i.e. breakthroughs

⁸ One difference that emerged related to learning styles: theorists appear to value a supporting style more; activists to value a directing style more.

⁹ See footnote 5, page 3

- (4) Broadly speaking, the more the better – provided they come from the coachee (rather than being generated by the coach)
- (5) Preparing for critical moments, and staying with them when they arise, is coaching ‘with backbone and heart’
- (6) The challenge for coaches working with critical moments is ‘containment’: remaining calm, open and authentic when surrounded by questions, tensions and doubt

(3) Research with experienced coaches¹⁰

Once again, this time with more experienced coaches, de Haan asked participants to list some critical moments – using the same formula as previously¹¹. Among his observations, drawn from an analysis of their responses (a total of 78 ‘moments’), are the following:

- (1) Even experienced coaches continue to have doubts – about what they should do, whether they are doing it well; and major doubts about themselves
- (2) Experienced coaches work very intuitively; this appears to be an important aspect of their growing skill as coaches¹²
- (3) Experienced coaches are more willing to surface, in the moment, their personal responses, observations, discomforts, etc. De Haan suggests this is where the boundary lies between real coaching and an ‘ordinary’ good conversation: coaches stay with moments of tension and use them as opportunities for generative learning
- (4) Part of the skill demonstrated by experienced coaches is the ability to set boundaries and yet, within those boundaries, create space for the coachee to develop and change – a combination of openness and unconditional support within a stable context

(4) Research with very experienced coaches¹³

Once again, de Haan’s starting point is to ask the participants to identify two or three critical moments (using the same formula as before). In addition he asked them about their use of supervision in relation these events. His purpose in this study is two-fold:

- To investigate the dynamics and impact of critical moments
- To explore how coaches use supervision to help them work with critical moments

For this study he conducted in-depth interviews of 1-2 hours. From the material generated he analyses what he calls the ‘temporal patterns’ within each critical moment. He does this by codifying each phase or stage (for example, *action*, *counteraction*, *distancing*, *shared reflection*, *deepening*, *change*, *breakdown*) and tracking their presence and sequence as the ‘moment’ unfolds.

¹⁰ See footnote 6, page 3 above

¹¹ See page 4, above

¹² De Haan does not make the point, though he could well have, that there is a great difference between the intuition of the experienced (e.g. the ‘chess master’) and that of the beginner.

¹³ See footnote 7, page 3

Among his findings are the following:

- (1) In many cases of critical moments there is a point of rupture, an emotional disturbance in or suspension of the working alliance.
- (2) Where coaches respond to the disturbance in similar vein (e.g. matching irritation with irritation) this leads to *distancing* and, sometimes, *breakdown*.
- (3) Where coaches respond with *containment*¹⁴, e.g. by reflecting back what they notice with curiosity rather than emotion, the result tends to be a *deepening* of the relationship.
- (4) The cycle of *rupture/repair* observed in successful counselling and therapy appears to have a role also in coaching relationships
- (5) *Change* and *deepening* of the relationship only ever occurs in situations preceded by *shared reflection*. There were no examples of *change* or *deepening* of the relationship happening in the absence of *shared reflection*.
- (6) There were 11 examples where the temporal pattern (*action, counteraction, distancing, etc.*) proceeded to the point of *breakdown* in the absence of *shared reflection*.

Turning to the role played by supervision, de Haan notes the following:

- (7) Coaches use supervision for reassurance, confidence building and benchmarking their practice
- (8) Supervision can be important for maintaining the psychological health of the coach
- (9) Supervision assists the coach in identifying what 'material' belongs to them and what belongs to the coach

He concludes that supervision is an important mechanism for providing 'containment' for the coach - which, in turn, is a critical ingredient for *deepening* and *breakthrough* for coachees. Although he does not say so explicitly, de Haan in effect says that the skill of practising 'containment', supported where necessary by supervision, is a hallmark of excellent coaching:

"Excellence in coaching means conquering an impossible dilemma...[that of] being consciously anxious and exploring that anxiety...steering an unstable and fluctuating course...mastery involves keeping to that course as tightly as possible, while enduring the fact that you are never truly on course."

Further reading – de Haan's list of recommended books and authors

De Haan lists eleven of his favourite reads – the books he would most recommend to other coaches. As well as briefly describing each book he provides a personal reflection on what he has taken from it. The effect is both engaging and touching as he shares, with great humility, his own discoveries and learning across the years.

These are the books he lists:

¹⁴ i.e. remain calm, open and authentic

1. *The Odyssey*, Homer
The mythic journey of discovery by Odysseus, and the role of Mentor in guiding him and his son, Telemachus
2. *Meno*, Plato
The search for excellence, virtue and robustness; and the role of questioning and dialogue to progress insight and understanding.
3. *When Nietzsche wept*, Irvin Yalom
A historical novel which brings together Nietzsche, Freud and Joseph Breuer in 1882 Vienna. A fictional evocation of the birth of psychoanalysis with reflections from Yalom on the role of coaching.
4. *Brief psychology of the conversation*¹⁵, Harry Stroeken
An exploration of helping conversations.

One striking extract from this book is Stroeken's description of *listening* as like *picking up a vibration*. De Haan adds:

“*The two biggest mistakes with listening [are]...the risk of not picking up the vibration i.e. not sensing the actual idea or intention...[and] the risk of reverberating with the vibration, as a result of which the vibration takes us over and we are no longer able to observe it impartially.*”
5. *Executive coaching with backbone and heart*, Mary Beth O'Neill
A guide for the coach as *partner* to the executive
6. *The psychology of executive coaching*, Bruce Peltier
How the coach can learn from the theory and practice of psychotherapy
7. *Helping the client*, John Heron
A much-used work for training coaches, and for training managers in a coaching style of leadership
8. *On becoming a person*, Carl Rogers
About the value, according to Rogers, of sharing at a more personal level and thereby allowing the client to express more of their own internal processes so as to become more fully 'themselves'.
9. *Individual psychotherapy: the science of coaching*, David Malan
This book takes a critical look at Freud's legacy and, through a series of case studies, explores how helping conversations work
10. *The drama of the gifted child*¹⁶: *how did we actually become coaches?*, Alice Miller
A look at how the factors which shaped our development in early childhood may affect how we are as coaches and shed light on our reasons for becoming coaches.

¹⁵ *Kleine psychologie van het gesprek*

¹⁶ *Das Drama des begabten Kindes*

11. *Supervision*, Peter Hawkins & Robin Shoheit

A detailed look at all aspects of supervision and the role of supervision in supporting the coach

Other chapters / appendices

And there's plenty more in the book. Other chapters address topics such as the training available to coaches, accreditation, CPD, transference and counter-transference, co-coaching and peer consultation, the role of supervision (as well as different types of supervision and their respective merits)

Separate appendices contain –

- Actual critical moments from coaching sessions (more than 150 examples are given). These are both fascinating and enlightening
- A short coaching case study based on one of de Haan's clients
- A verbatim transcript of the first 10 minutes of a coaching session (annotated to show the coach's thoughts at the time, and subsequently)
- A code of conduct for executive coaches
- Intake instruments and checklists

In conclusion

By the end of this book I was not surprised to discover de Haan's appreciation of the kindness and generosity of other writers. Of one, he writes:

"Here is a man [Harry Stroeken] keen to share his huge experience and wisdom with all of us, confident that we will become even better coach-practitioners in consequence ... He believes that his readers are able to do something useful with his examples and insights... even with esoteric matters such as transference and counter-transference, resistance and the helper's syndrome. He entrusts that knowledge to them without being over sensitive about the need for the study of medicine or dream analysis, or for accreditation or ethical codes, as you find in many other texts."

These words are as apt to describe de Haan himself. Through this book he shares his latest research and a lifetime of experience, insight and wisdom with us, fellow coaches, trusting to the ripple effect – that we may all coach better, and with greater confidence – as a result. He has certainly had a powerful effect on me, and on my coaching practice. His book has given me greater confidence to access my full range of coaching skills and has left me feeling more resourceful .

Isn't that so like a good coach, to do that!