READING

8 Practising professionally

Coaching is a relatively new profession. Many of us have come to it from allied disciplines such as management development, organizational consulting or therapy. In this chapter I look at what issues the professional coach needs to take into account and how some of those issues might be resolved.

Ethics

Coaching may present you with a number of dilemmas, none with easy, obvious solutions. There are few, if any, absolutes.

What alerts you to the presence of a dilemma? First, there could be a gut feeling that something, somewhere, is making you uneasy. Or there could be the knowledge that if whatever it was appeared in a newspaper, it would at the very least be embarrassing and hard to defend. Another symptom could be discomfort at the thought of having to endorse it to a person whose moral judgement you respect and whose good opinion you prize. There may be the knowledge that a proposed action is against the law or a realization that you may be infringing a stated (or implicit) value for you or your practice.

Dilemmas may concern priorities. Some possible ones might be: ‘truth’ versus ‘sensitivity’; individual versus organizational need; organization versus community; business versus environment; short-term versus long-term impact; financial versus client need.

Dilemmas in action

These are real examples.

- You are giving individual coaching to a management team of six people, excluding the boss. You make the usual promise of confidentiality. As the coaching progresses, it seems clear to you that there are some important systems issues emerging about the way the total team operates with its customers.
- The Chief Executive of a company with whom you want to build business has set up a coaching programme for one of his Directors. He accepts that you will not be able to give any feedback direct to him. However, he asks you to let him know if the Director terminates the coaching or fails to turn up for a session.
- A client confesses to something illegal or dangerous in a session with you.
- You are working with two people from the same management team. Their relationship is a hostile one. Both trust you and have a good relationship with you. Both tell you a large number of things about their own position, attitudes, hopes and fears, including how they feel about their colleague.
- You are coaching a Director and gathering 360-degree feedback on him from ten people nominated by him through focused, structured interviews. You discover that all his colleagues appear to hold him in very low regard. The more you probe for some positive features and behaviour, the more detail pours out about the poor esteem in which his colleagues hold him.
- You are working with a number of Board-level individuals in an organization. You are approached by the Board of their most significant competitor to undertake a similar programme.
- You are asked to coach two candidates for the same job, both of them clients in different organizations and in different organizations again from the one with the vacancy.

There are no easy answers to most of these dilemmas and it is perfectly possible that different coaches would respond in very different but equally acceptable ways. For instance, some coaches will refuse to coach more than one member of the same team on the grounds that while the coach may be well able to keep the issues separate, the team members may not believe that this is so. In my own case, I will not now work as facilitator to a coaching client’s team, though I used to do so. Now I will recommend a colleague on the grounds that the client’s team will inevitably see me as biased towards the client, thus reducing my perceived value as an objective resource. Where I used to coach several members of the same team, I now avoid doing so, on similar grounds.

It is difficult to mix roles, but not impossible. Where there seem to be boundary issues, it might be possible to resolve them through naming and facing up to any dilemmas that might be created. If it is not, then stick to one role.

Where organizations ask me for progress reports on a client as a condition of the work, I will refuse the work. This is because I believe that such a progress report will first of all be valueless because it is the client’s judgement of progress that matters. Also, the real evidence of change is in the daily business where the client actually does their work. As coaches we do not witness this, so how could we judge our clients’ performance? Most
significantly of all, I know how impossible it would be to create trust if the
client believes that the coaching is about assessment - a completely different
process. Even where the client's boss has made the apparently bland request
for me to confirm the client's attendance, I refuse because in its mild way, this
amounts to coercion. I suggest that client and boss agree amongst themselves
how to satisfy the boss's need to know what is going on.

I will not work with direct competitor organizations simultaneously
because it is inevitable that commercially sensitive information will be part of
the coaching. I know that I can keep such secrets, but the client may still be
cconcerned in spite of my assurances.

If you could not be a coach to two competing football teams simulta-
necessarily, it is difficult to see how you could coach two candidates for the same
job. When faced with this dilemma recently, I consulted both clients, without
of course telling them the name of their rival. One candidate told me he was
'perfectly relaxed about it and may the best man (sic) win'. The other told me,
a trifle unconvincingly, that she would live with whatever I decided. My
decision was to recommend a colleague for the candidate with whom I had
been in a previous coaching relationship, not at that point live, and to go
with the woman candidate with whom I had a very active relationship.

In discussing it later, after I had told her of my decision, she confessed that she
would have felt 'very hurt but concealed it probably rather well' if I had
chosen to coach both of them. It added drama to the whole event that she
was not successful but her rival, coached by my colleague, was.

Where you have personally collected feedback for a client and this
feedback unequivocally shows how much the client is disliked by colleagues,
you have a duty to convey it to the client. It is patronizing to assume that the
client will be unable to handle such feedback. The art is to write and then
debrief it in a way that the client can hear without warping the essential truth
of the messages (see also page 99).

The ethical situation is easier with whole-organization coaching pro-
grames. Here we will ask all coaches involved to keep a note of the overall
themes that are occurring in the coaching, eventually producing a brief report
to the organization without giving any information that could identify
individuals. This can provide the client organization with invaluable data on
how the 'psychological contract' between a set of individuals in key roles and
the organization is going - for instance, whether people feel that the balance
between what they give to the organization in terms of time, effort and
energy is well matched by what they receive in return - financial reward,
status, promotion, and so on.

At the beginning of the coaching I explain to clients that confidentiality
is not a blank cheque. In the unlikely event of clients confessing to something
illegal or dangerous to themselves or others, I forewarn them that confi-
dentiality rules would not apply. Our protocol here is that we would always

try to persuade clients to take appropriate action themselves but if they
refused we would do whatever we thought to be right, alerting the appro-
priate authorities while also doing everything we could to preserve the dig-
nity of the client. Fortunately, I have never had to put this principle to the
test. Common sense should override any over-exaggerated concerns about
confidentiality. For instance, in 2007, an employment tribunal ruled against
the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) which had sacked a staff member for having
called a doctor when a client described having taken a potentially fatal
overdose. This saved the client's life. It is hard to see how such action could be
'wrong' or 'unethical'. CAB policy dictated that the proper course of action
was to refer to a senior manager who would then consult a committee. CAB
justified the sacking on the grounds that the staff member has made an
'irrational emotional error'. The tribunal had no difficulty in deciding that
this judgement was 'ridiculous'.

We consider it is important to preserve client confidentiality, including
the fact that people are actually clients. There are occasional exceptions. For
instance, clients who have spoken openly about being clients, often on public
platforms, can of course be named although it is good practice to state clearly
that such permission has been given, otherwise it may look as if you are
breaching confidentiality.

Ethical guidelines

Ethical guidelines are essential because they are helpful. They make explicit
what may be assumed and therefore misleading. We base ours on the
guidelines suggested by the European Mentoring and Coaching Council
(EMCC). We aim to keep them as simple as possible, without underestimating
the complexity of the issues:

1 You act at all times to protect the public reputation of coaching,
avoiding doing anything which could reflect badly on how the
public perceives the coaching profession.
2 You clearly describe your levels of competence and experience and
will never overstate your qualifications or expertise.
3 As a coach, you believe in the resourcefulness of each and every
client with a matching recognition of the fact that all clients make
themselves vulnerable in the coaching relationship. You recognize
and protect this vulnerability.
4 Clients must be volunteers. If there is any element of coercion you
decline the work.
5 You clearly set out the terms of the coaching contract at the begin-
nng of the relationship and confirm it in writing: times, fees,
cancellation policy and limits, if any, on telephone and email contact between meetings.

6 You will protect clients from exploitation of any kind: sexual, financial, emotional. The purpose of the coaching is the client’s well-being and development and as a coach you demonstrate this in all your dealings with the client.

7 You make every effort to protect the client’s confidentiality and this will be fully discussed at the beginning of the coaching contract and will be raised with the client whenever it could be an issue. The coaching relationship is not privileged under law and clients need to be told that this is so. In the extremely rare cases where the client discloses something dangerous or illegal, you may be obliged to inform the relevant authorities with or without the client’s permission. You will encourage clients to take appropriate action themselves, without the intervention of the coach. There is no obligation under current UK law for a coach to disclose such matters.

8 Confidentiality involves preserving the names of clients unless they have given active assent to disclosing them. The confidentiality rule applies to third parties who are funding the coaching: recipients of the coaching can decide what they disclose, for instance to a funding sponsor, but the coach will not do so without the explicit consent of the client.

9 The data that you collect for a client belongs to that client: they have a right to hear it, however uncomfortable it might be for you or the client.

10 Where there is the possibility of a conflict of interest, for instance over boundaries or roles, you and the client will discuss it and look for a fair resolution. You will always look for a way to preserve the client’s best interests. If there is any appearance of a conflict of interest which could damage the coaching relationship you should consider withdrawing, explaining why to the client in a way that protects the client’s dignity.

11 Where you have a business relationship with a third party concerning referrals or advice, you will disclose it.

12 Where you feel that the coaching is not appropriate for the client or is not working effectively for some reason, you are obliged to discuss it with the client in a way that preserves the client’s dignity and protects their vulnerability. Where the solution involves referral to another professional, you will make every effort to avoid injury to the dignity and feelings of the client.

13 You manage your own issues in a way which means that they do not intrude into the coaching relationship.

14 You have regular sessions with a supervisor or mentor to review and reflect on your practice. ‘Difficult’ sessions or clients should be discussed as soon as possible with another coach or supervisor. You commit to regular training and updating.

Supervision

Coaches need supervisors. But what is supervision for?

What a strange word supervision is, when used in the context of professional development. A supervisor in the managerial world is someone who has direct line management responsibility for your work. This is the very thing that a coaching supervisor does not and cannot have. There is also a distinction between a coach having coaching – a place where the client-coach can discuss any and every issue, and supervision, where only professional issues are on the agenda. In some of the many rival schools of therapy, a therapist is expected to have a lifelong commitment to receiving therapy and a major commitment to supervision as two separate but parallel streams.

What is supervision?

In her book on supervision, Julie Hay (2007) defines three levels of supervision, equating roughly to your levels of experience.

- **Normative** applies to the beginner level and here the supervisor is in effect extending the training of the coach by providing benchmark standards. The supervisor may also be an assessor and the supervision sessions may have an openly directive flavour.
- **Formative** supervision may be appropriate when your experience is more extensive, but here again the supervisor may offer advice, role-modelling and direct feedback. The aim is greater self-awareness and greater understanding of the psychological patterns that may play out in the coaching as well as offering unconditional support.
- **Supportive** supervision has more of a peer-peer flavour and is suitable for more senior and experienced coaches. The role here is to exchange reflections, for the supervisor to spot patterns that the coach may be missing and to provide a place where the coach can discuss how their own personal issues may be getting in the way of delivering excellent coaching.

How frequent should supervision be? Supervision is more useful at more frequent intervals when you are in training or a relatively new coach than it is when you are more experienced. However, there is also a good case for supervision when you are very experienced indeed. The long-serving coach
may need supervision to guard against potential jadedness or the complacency of burn-out. For instance, a coach who becomes invested in being a clever coach may urgently require challenge and refreshment.

Watch out for signs of either burn-out or rust-out both in yourself and in fellow coaches with whom you work on a regular basis and deal with them quickly. Clients notice these differences, possibly before you will. Any incongruity between what we claim and how a client actually experiences us is immediately apparent. Such signs might include:

- feeling messianic – you can save your clients from their own failings;
- feeling wonderfully insightful all of the time;
- boasting about your expertise as a coach;
- failing to experience at least a quiver of apprehension before meeting new clients;
- believing that you know exactly what clients are going to say long before they open their mouths;
- claiming that you have acquired special powers of problem-solving simply through people being in your presence;
- noticing a high degree of irritation and distraction with your clients – reverting to Level 1 listening a lot of the time;
- knowing that you are seeking new gizmos, 'tricks' and 'techniques' to jazz up your coaching to keep boredom at bay;
- realizing that a higher than usual percentage of your clients are opting for fewer sessions than originally booked, matched by a smaller percentage than usual of people who are extending their programmes.

These dangers can be overcome by applying some realism and common sense and discussing them openly with a supervisor. It is also invaluable to have an experienced practitioner with whom to discuss difficulties and triumphs. It is not a guarantee of perfect practice, but it may make poor practice a lot less likely.

Getting best value from a supervision session

- Choose your supervisor carefully. Liking and mutual respect are important. It takes about 1000 hours of practice to become experienced enough to handle the range of everyday coaching situations and about 3000 hours to be equipped to work with virtually any client. Regardless of the actual amount of experience, it probably takes at least a chronological year to become reasonably adept as a coach and another three or four years to operate at a high level with any client most of the time. This is the level at which you would be acceptable as a supervisor with another coach. This is because 3000 hours of coaching and several years of practice imply a successful coach with a high level of repeat business based on word-of-mouth recommendations. A good working assumption is that someone who is a successful coach will also be an effective supervisor. Training and qualifications to become a supervisor are now emerging in the UK but again, as with coaching itself, there is little regulation or standardizing and most providers are their own judges on the quality of their work.

- Prepare for a supervision session carefully, constructing your agenda in just the way you expect your clients to do.

- Notice your own reactions to the sessions. It is highly probable that you will be feeling apprehension combined with excitement, pleasureable anticipation and interest. This is useful – it reminds us that our clients make themselves vulnerable in their work with us. Similarly, in order to get value out of a supervision session, we also make ourselves vulnerable by being willing to own up to doubts and mistakes and to receiving feedback.

- Build the relationship on candour and trust, just as you would expect from one of your own clients. If you are not getting value from the sessions, stop. Offer the supervisor feedback and be scrupulous about accepting responsibility for your own part in whatever has not worked.

- Expect to get non-judgemental comment. Your supervisor was not with you when you made those quick decisions about what to do in the moment and there is a literally infinite number of routes that any coaching session could take. There is no one right way.

- Concentrate on you and your coaching style, not on yet another intellectual analysis of your clients’ issues. To me one potential flaw in some supervision is the danger of second-guessing. The sessions can come to be about the supervisee’s clients rather than about the supervisee. Just as your clients may try to lure you into discussing people who are not present in your coaching sessions, so you could do the same with your supervisor. There is only you and your supervisor – you are the raw material, not your clients. The questions should be, ‘My dilemma with this client is x’, not ‘this client’s problem is y’.

- Good questions for supervision sessions include:
  - Which clients am I finding it most enjoyable to work with? What does that say about me?
  - Which clients am I finding it tough to work with? What does that say about me?
What is the best/worst coaching moment that has occurred since we last met?
What ethical issues am I troubled about?
What dilemmas am I facing (with particular clients, or in general)?
What issues do I find recurring with my clients? What might this suggest I am noticing or ignoring? What does that say about me and my practice?
Which skills and techniques do I find easy?
Which skills and techniques am I avoiding because I find them difficult?
What concerns do I have about my coaching practice?
What feedback have I had from my clients? How should I be addressing the themes that come out of this feedback?
How is the relationship between us going? What does the answer to that question suggest about my coaching style?
How am I developing as a coach?
What else is going on in my life that could shed light on the above issues?

Alternatives to a paid supervisor can work well. These will include a co-coaching arrangement with another coach or a learning set – a group meeting where coaches will take it in turns to have air time to explore their issues, coaching-style. Some learning sets also usefully do live coaching with each other for review and feedback. This is another invaluable way to benchmark your practice and to get skilful and thoughtful feedback from people in the same business. The downsides of these approaches is that where coaches share the same weaknesses or gaps in experience, these might be reinforced rather than challenged.

Evidence

In coaching itself, we know that the value of the process is immeasurably increased when it is based on observation and external data rather than just storytelling from the client. The same principle applies to your own development as a coach. There are a number of ways you can seek such evidence:

- Ask a client for permission to record a session, using it as the basis for your own reflection and then as the basis for a supervision session. Reassure the client that the purpose is your own professional development and the recording will only be heard by your supervisor, perhaps offering the client the tape after your supervision session is over. It would be rare for clients to refuse this permission. This enables a supervisor to get first-hand evidence of your coaching practice rather than just relying on your account of it. Making this the basis of a supervision session transforms its value.
- Ask a trusted and experienced colleague to sit in on a session with you as a strictly non-speaking observer. Choose the client carefully, backing away immediately if they show any signs of reluctance. Reassure the client, as with a taped session, that the focus is on you, not on them. Allow plenty of time for a debrief after the client has left, accepting that the observer's presence will have altered some aspects of the session.
- Ask a willing client to write a reflective diary after each session, matching it with one of your own. Topics could include: highlights and low lights of each session; useful and less useful coach behaviours; thoughts and feelings that it was difficult to express in the session itself, and so on, exchanging the diaries towards the end of the coaching programme. This is a humbling and challenging experience for any coach, usually revealing a wide discrepancy between what the coach and client believe has happened.
- Ask a third party to run a simple emailed questionnaire for you with clients who have completed their coaching. Ask them for feedback on how useful the coaching has been, what changes they have made in their lives as a result of the coaching and any suggestions they have about what you might do to improve your effectiveness. For some ideas on how to do this, see my (2006) book, Developing a Coaching Business. The reason for asking a third party to perform this service is that you will get more truthful answers and ones that go beyond conventional politeness. Where you work for a coaching firm, it is good practice to conduct such client surveys from time to time. If you work independently, you may be able to offer a mutual exchange service with another coach.

Being realistic about supervision

What can supervision actually do, compared with the claims that are sometimes made for it? In the UK, many of the professional therapeutic bodies insist on a high ratio of therapy-giving hours to supervision hours, sometimes as high as 8:1. Similarly, I have seen some coach-training organizations suggest a ratio of 25:1 for coaches. That also seems high. In my own case, since on average I give 12 hours of coaching in a week of part-time working, I would need to be employing a supervisor every two weeks – but of course I do not.

In practice, inflated claims are sometimes made for supervision,
Some supervisors may criticize supervisees over their lack of adherence to such theory rather than looking at whether the coaching is actually working. Such blind spots are built in because of the theoretical bias of that school.

Examples where the coach discovered that he or she actually had more experience than the supervisor. Supervisor and supervisee could well share such a system of supervision which has been in operation for at least forty years, yet continues. Whether supervision fails or succeeds seems to me to depend to a large extent on the honesty and self-awareness of the supervisee. A dishonest or un-self-aware supervisee could, in theory, fool a credulous supervisor.

A supervisor is also assumed to have access to greater wisdom and experience, but there is no certainty that this is the case. I can think of examples where the coach discovered that he or she actually had more experience than the supervisor. Supervisor and supervisee could well share the same blind spots, especially if they have been trained in a school where such blind spots are built in because of the theoretical bias of that school. Some supervisors may criticize supervisees over their lack of adherence to such theory rather than looking at whether the coaching is actually working for the client. In some parts of the therapeutic world, there seems sometimes to be almost as much supervision as there is therapy - an ever-reflecting series of supervisor-supervisee mirrors, including supervision for the supervisor. All this adds to the costs that have to be borne by the client.

I have worked with six different supervisors in my coaching career. All have contributed something different to my own development but what they have in common is that their impact on me was to increase my feelings of prudent confidence in relation to my own work. I have heard many other coaches describe the same thing and have heard it at first hand from my own supervisees. But does a more prudently confident coach do better work? We assume that this is so, but it is hard to prove. For instance, I was faced recently with giving a coaching session to one of the most challenging clients of my entire coaching career, a person profoundly damaged by the tragedy of her history and someone who had openly acknowledged that she needed therapy as well as coaching. I was quailing inside at the prospect of working with her and actively considering terminating the relationship. Luckily, I had a supervision session with Julia Vaughan Smith immediately prior to the session with my client. Julia listened quietly, steadied me down, reminded me of what it was probably possible and not possible to do with this client. In this way I entered the session calmly grounded and with a lot more focus than would have been likely without it. But did it mean I did better coaching? I really don't know and I think it would be impossible to prove one way or the other.

In general, I see supervision as one part, an important one when done rigorously, of the continuing professional development to which all of us need to commit. We may need it in different ways and at differing levels of frequency at different stages of our coaching careers. We also need to seek out other forms of development such as training to update our skills and qualifications, attending conferences, reading and simple networking with other coaches.

**Reflective practice**

As part of their progress towards the Diploma in Coaching, we ask our candidates to keep reflective diaries on a selection of coaching sessions. Many find it so useful that they continue the practice on an occasional basis, sometimes using it as preparation for group or individual supervision but sometimes just for their own benefit, thus creating a fascinating log of their own learning. The headings are simple:

- a summary of the client's issues;
- what worked during the session;
- what didn't work - or worked less well;
Keeping notes

As a coach you absolutely must keep and file notes on each client. This is a different process from the reflective diary I describe above. The focus is on the client, not on you. As your practice grows, you will begin to forget details of what your clients have said at their earlier sessions. Similarly, you may forget how many sessions a client has had and paid for, or there may be confusions between you about this. A professional coach spends time before a session reviewing notes from the earlier sessions as a way of getting in the right frame of mind to work with a client. Finally, if by any unfortunate chance your notes were subpoenaed by a court, you would want them to be immaculate.

New coaches often want to know whether you should write notes during the session. My own practice is that I rarely do, but I respect other coaches who make the choice to write at the time. These are the various arguments for and against.

Taking notes during the session

For
- It is a reliable way of remembering what the client has said and of recording details accurately.
- It looks as if you are taking the client seriously.
- You don’t have to spend time later reconstructing the conversation.

Against
- You may find you have jotted down the inessentials, or have written notes that are too full to be read quickly next time.
- The client may wonder what you are writing.
- You have to break eye contact with the client in order to write; the notebook forms a barrier between you.

Making notes after the session

For
- You can concentrate wholly on the client.
- There is no barrier between you.
- Writing the notes later makes it easy to edit down to the essentials.
- It sharpens your listening skills when you know you are going to have to write up your notes later.

Against
- You may forget some of what has been said or remember it inaccurately.
- Not taking notes may worry the client who may think you are likely to forget vital details.
- You have to spend time after the client has left writing up the notes.
- Your listening skills may not be as good as you think they are.

If you coach using the telephone, you may be able to have the best of both worlds though be aware that there is a temptation to write down a jumble of everything the client says, which may or may not make sense later.

Basic principles

- Keep notes short and simple: a page and a half of bullet points is usually more than enough.
- Keep judgements out of your notes – limit them to the factual and descriptive.
- Always write notes in a way that would not embarrass you if they were seen by clients – which clients have the legal right to do.
- Store the notes in a secure, locked cupboard or filing cabinet.
- Tell a trusted colleague how to gain access to the notes if for any reason you are unable to run a session or need to get access to your notes when you are not in your office.
- It is best practice to keep the client’s contact details separate from the actual notes of each session. This enables a PA or admin assistant to contact a client without having to risk breaking confidentiality by accessing session notes.

Use the notes to record:
- client’s name, date, session number and time taken at each session (e.g. Jane Smith, session #3, 14.1.08, 1 hour 45 minutes – client 15 minutes late);
- how much time has been invoiced, or when an invoice is due;
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Presenting issues for the session;
- What was discussed;
- Outcomes of any forms you used – e.g. the Balance Wheel or psychometric questionnaires;
- Any handouts you gave the client or reading suggestions;
- Agreed action points and accountabilities;
- Next steps/any items agreed for discussion at the next session.

Some coaches prepare simple forms to help create order with their notes. Feel free to do this if it will help you.

Client: Chris Scott Invoice submitted March 21
Session: #2 of 6
Date: April 24

Issues
- Review of action points since last session
  Experimented with new type of departmental meeting – i.e. with 'show and tell'/fun elements; project reviews; etc as agreed. 'Went brilliantly' – lots new energy in team. High approval rating. Will do now as routine.
  Had conversation as agreed, with Nigel (boss). Tried offering him feedback – 'semi worked'.
- Goals for this session
  1. Improve ability to say no to inappropriate demands.
     Offered saying no protocol. Practised with me asking for quick-fire series of ludicrous things. 'I find this so hard – hear my mother saying got to be good girl.' Gremlin territory – reminder – she agreed. Got better with more practice. Offered feedback on where she comes across as determined, where still tentative. Confirmed that did NOT seem 'rude'.
  2. Tackle B – poor performer in team.
     Discussed evidence of B's performance. B 'gets away with it because believes organization won't ever sack anyone'. Brief discussion organizational culture. My challenge: 'what are you doing to sustain this?' Answer: 'ducking it!' Explained feedback principles. Did initial practice. NB: return to this again next time with tougher scenarios.

3 Feedback on FIRO-B
Fed back her scores with interpretation

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Discussed light this shed on assertiveness and leadership feedback she's already had.

Action
- Return to Nigel and reopen discussion; get assent to study leave
- Find one opportunity a day to say 'no' using techniques practised today
- Practise giving positive feedback using feedback principles to praise min. one person per day between now and next session

Sending Notes to Clients
Some coaches follow up a session by sending a long letter or email to clients with their notes from the session. I don't recommend this. First, it will inevitably be your slant, not the client's and who should say whether yours is the 'truth'? If the client disagrees with your version, then you could be involved in wearisome exchanges about who is right. Second, it will take time, so will you charge for this time? I believe this practice may reflect the origins of therapy in medicine and has percolated into coaching from this route. I know one orthopaedic consultant who not only sends follow-up letters to his patients with a summary of his findings but actually dictates them in the patient's presence. This is good practice for doctors because it overcomes the potential confusion we patients can experience when, in the heightened emotion of the consultation, we cannot absorb everything that our doctors tell us, but it is only necessary where there is an expert to non-expert relationship, which is not what coaching is.

To me it seems pointless to send notes to the client about the session. It is the client's job to make their own notes from the session and I encourage my clients to do this. I notice that many have special notebooks in which they record our joint work during and after the sessions. Where they have the luxury of a PA, the PA may be commanded to start a coaching file which is produced for each occasion and includes the client's preparation notes.
Training and development for coaches

Training can make a substantial difference to your effectiveness as a coach. It can offer you a framework for understanding and assessing what you are doing, feedback on how you are doing it and the chance to swap bright ideas with other participants. Furthermore, with the coaching market saturated with coaches, all claiming equal expertise, corporate clients are now insisting on qualifications.

More and more providers are entering the coach-training field, many of them of dubious merit. For instance, some widely advertised so-called training courses are really pyramid-selling schemes where a relatively small initial sum buys you a set of workbooks and DVDs with the promise of ‘sales-leads to coaching clients of your own’. These turn out to be other people who have responded to similar advertisements in the national press, and your task is then to sell the same scheme to them through ‘coaching’. Some providers do not actually coach at all – they just train coaches, so it is hard to see how they are keeping their own practice up to date or on what basis they think they can advise beginners.

There are many ways in which training can now be delivered: by open/distance learning, by electronic means and through teleclasses where there could be many dozens of learners on the line with one tutor. These methods are a great deal cheaper than doing the same thing face to face. Where written materials are concerned, once the development money has been recovered, there is far less cost to the training provider than there is with face-to-face training. They have the great advantage of being flexible – with open learning materials, for instance, you can work at your own time and pace. As with any kind of learning delivered at a distance, everything depends on the quality of the written materials. Some of this is deplorable, some excellent. I am a supporter of blended learning in the right place and for the right purpose. However, my own belief is that face-to-face training is easily the most effective way of learning how to coach. This is because coaching is a complex and subtle skill. It is difficult to acquire such a skill from a book. You can read descriptions of coaching but, until you actually do it, you may have no idea what your actual standard is and whether you are going to find it easy or difficult to acquire the skills you need.

Delivering face-to-face training is expensive for both provider and student. In general the principle of ‘buy cheap, buy twice’ prevails, though note that buying at the upper end of the market does not necessarily guarantee higher quality training.

The most effective training for coaches is often about challenging ingrained poor practice as well as finessing an already sound style. Without that instant individual feedback from a practice partner or experienced tutor, bad habits can become chronic handicaps, simply because they are never challenged. Some of the most common mistakes we see trainee coaches make, for instance, arise from lack of awareness. This includes: not realizing how intrusively long a coach’s typical question is; failing to set goals; unawareness about asking advice-in-disguise questions, wrongly believing them to be innocent, open questions; failing to notice how often rapport is broken when the coach’s anxiety subtly changes the dynamic, and so on. This is the kind of thing that would be hard to spot when you are one of thirty people on a telephone line, viewing a DVD, or just reading a few pages on a website.

In choosing a training provider, these guidelines may help you reject the charlatans and identify the quality providers:

- Look for realism and modesty in what providers say about their training. Anyone promising the full, once-and-for-all authoritative guarantee that they can turn you into a fully-fledged coach within a few short days will be misleading you. A training course starts, rather than ends, the process of growing as a coach. Beware particularly of that exclamatory text which offers amazing discounts if you buy NOW!
- ‘Free’ workshops often turn out to involve paying several hundred pounds for essential workbooks plus accommodation, so investigate before booking.
- Look for a low ratio of participants to tutors: 1:10 is about the maximum that can be guaranteed to provide enough individual attention.
- Four days of face-to-face training is the minimum for serious learning about coaching.
- Look for providers who are also successful practising coaches with an demonstrable track record in the field in which you intend to practice. Some training companies save money by employing recent graduates of their own courses, thus possibly perpetrating the Chinese whisper effect of poor-quality training. Ask how many years of successful practice as coaches the actual course tutors have.
- Beware of coaching based principally on any one theory or school of thought. Coaching works best as an eclectic and pragmatic art.
- Look for a high ratio of practice to lecturing.
- Look for an emphasis on personal feedback.
- Ask how your participating in the training links to accreditation and who will be doing any accrediting. The accreditation should fit within the national framework – be suspicious of any that do not.
- Press for information on how strictly the verification process is handled. Many accrediting bodies have only the most notional part in maintaining quality.
• Specialist training will become increasingly likely – for instance courses that offer to turn therapists into coaches; fast track courses for already-experienced coaches; courses aimed exclusively at life coaches, and so on. Courses aimed primarily at managers are not usually suitable for people who want to work as professional coaches, and vice versa.

Other types of training
Many coaches are interested in developing parallel skills in areas such as psychometric testing. It is no longer a competitive advantage to have such qualifications as so many people already hold them, but it may be a competitive disadvantage not to have them. See pages 105-7 for some suggestions concerning particular questionnaires. It may also be useful to acquire training or qualifications in your own niche. Some coaches have trained as mediators, for instance, and many have also found it useful to acquire the facilitation skills which are vital if you want to work as a team coach. One of our actor-coaches holds a specialist qualification in voice training. This has deepened an already impressive expert knowledge as well as making her more credible to potential clients. Two of our associates are also qualified psychotherapists, enabling them to blur the boundaries between therapy and coaching if they wish.

Accreditation
Assessment of your actual coaching through observation or recordings should be at the heart of any accreditation process rather than writing essays or asking your clients to fill in a questionnaire about you, useful though these processes can also be as back-up to the main question: ‘How good a coach are you?’ For instance, some training providers accredit students solely on the basis of a ‘dissertation’. Interesting and challenging though this no doubt is, it does not prove anything about their likely quality as coaches. You could write a brilliant essay about coaching and be a terrible coach or be a brilliant coach and be unable to write an essay about it.

As a new profession, many people are interested in the question of accreditation. The demand for it may come from different quarters. Coaches may want to be able to use it as part of their marketing and may also want to be certain that they are properly trained against a national or international standard. Increasingly, coaches may want credits towards a master’s degree. I also notice how much more frequently clients ask for evidence of training and accreditation. Clients may assume that there is some national or international standard and hope that, if there is, this will protect them against employing rogues. At the very least, clients are seeking some reassurance that their coaches have been rigorously trained and look for it as a sign that a coach is serious and not just a well-meaning amateur.

Comparisons
The greater the potential for danger to life, limb, soul and pocket, the more important this issue becomes. The key issue is accountability. Thus the professions where there is tightly-administered accountability include medicine and its allied professions, the law, religion, architecture, accountancy and flying. So, for instance, you cannot pilot a plane solo, practise medicine, call yourself a nurse, be a priest in the Anglican Church, or practise as a solicitor unless you have passed examinations controlled by a professional body. In these cases, licensing, which can include active re-registration and continuous retraining (now compulsory in some professions), controls access to the profession.

The situation in coaching
The current situation is improving all the time. The European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) is the lead body in the UK and has done sterling work towards assessing training courses. Other, competing, bodies are emerging – for instance, the Association of Professional Executive Coaches and Supervisors (APECS). Where the EMCC makes a quality award to training providers, APECS accredits individual coaches, as does the International Coach Federation (ICF).

However, this is a more complicated question than it first appears. To have real control over quality there would need to be a national body – say the equivalent of the various Institutes in financial services (Chartered Accountants, Secretaries, etc). To be effective, these bodies need:

- the power to control entry to the profession, backed up by statute;
- money – to set and test standards;
- consensus on what constitutes a good outcome of a professional intervention;
- a complaints mechanism and accountability procedure;
- teeth – to discipline and if necessary expel miscreants;
- public support and agreement that the profession is important enough to be worth controlling, i.e. has the potential to do significant harm as well as good;
- the support of all practitioners;
- staff – to administer all the above.
There is no national body in the UK which can deliver all of this at the moment, and frustration is leading many people to follow their own paths. The existing accrediting mechanisms do not and cannot control access to the coaching profession. This is easy. Anyone can call themselves a coach regardless of whether they have been trained or hold a coaching qualification. It is impossible to identify misdemeanours because there is no widely agreed analysis of what constitutes success in coaching, let alone what constitutes failure. There is no effective means of disciplining a coach who has been accredited but who is guilty of a professional misdemeanour, because there is no way to prevent a poor coach from continuing to practise.

The actual knowledge content specific to coaching is relatively small, though there are substantial sister-fields in therapy, sports training, management development and organizational development. This is the opposite situation from, say, the knowledge of tax law needed by an accountant. An excellent coach has wisdom and skill. Real success as a coach is the result of a great many hours of practice with real clients and commitment to continuing professional development rather than the accumulation of factual knowledge which can be tested fairly straightforwardly through an exam.

Parallels with other professions

The nearest parallel is with psychotherapy. There are many university-accredited courses leading to qualifications in psychotherapy. However, there are a number of rival psychotherapeutic bodies in the UK and there is no universally agreed approach. Indeed, there is sometimes a high level of unseemly squabbling, reminiscent of the bickering between religious sects about who has real access to the true faith. You can call yourself a therapist and practise as a counsellor or a therapist without licensing or training, though this is becoming increasingly difficult. The existence of training and of professional controls does not prevent corrupt therapists having sexual relationships with their clients nor prevent other kinds of inappropriate behaviour. This suggests that controls are weak.

Even in professions such as medicine with the tightest controls, it can be notoriously difficult to expel a poor performer. For instance, constant rudeness and arrogance are not normally bad enough behaviours on their own to justify being struck off the medical register, however many patients complain. By contrast, a coach who was rude and arrogant would not stay in business very long.

This situation may improve over time. However, I notice a similarly hostile press developing around coaching as it did about psychotherapy in the late 1980s. For instance, in a recent newspaper article about a coach specializing in parenting skills, the opening paragraph contained a reference to coaches praying on clients. This casual insult contradicted the content of the long article that followed. This was entirely positive about the coach who was the focus of the story and contained glowing testimonials to her skill from a number of satisfied parent-clients.

Return on investment

With coaching now becoming a familiar part of management development, the question of whether coaching delivers a good return on investment becomes ever more pressing. It is common for commissioning clients to ask: ‘How do we know it will work? What can you tell us about how you assess success?’ This is a tricky question. If we fail to take any of the credit for the apparent successes of our clients, we do not honour the coaching process. If we take it all, we do not honour our clients. It is an infrequently discussed danger of coaching that we can be over-keen to see our clients ‘succeed’ as a way of proving to ourselves and others that we add value. For instance, if I coach a client for a job interview, how much of the credit can I claim if that client is successful? And am I helping that client in some way to ‘cheat’?

My approach is always to answer that I work with a client to bring out what is already there rather than in any way subverting the selection process. A client who wanted interview coaching once asked me straight out as a condition of hiring me what percentage of my interview-coachees did actually get the jobs they apply for. If the percentage is at the level of chance, then what does that say about my coaching? But if it is high, then that may say more about the poor quality of the selection process than about anything I do in the coaching room.

Learning from coaching is also not a smooth, steady process. Instead, it typically proceeds in fits and starts, often with fast progress at the beginning followed by lulls and apparent lack of progress. These lulls often precede another major leap forward, but it is impossible to identify this except retrospectively.

Coaching is, or certainly should be, a voluntary process. So any clients who seek coaching could be different in some way from clients who do not — for instance, they may already be more self-aware and probably therefore already more successful. This makes it difficult to compare a coaching cohort with a control group unless there is also a large waiting list group. Knowledge and skill may also leak from individuals getting coaching in an organization to individuals who are not — in fact we have to hope that it does.

Asking clients after the event can be difficult because memories fade, even where the coaching has been successful — the lessons are internalized to such a high extent that the client forgets their origin. Then, too, success in work or in life is never down to any one factor. There are usually far too many variables to be able to say for certain that it was the coaching that made the
difference. For instance, in any large-scale coaching project, there are not only many clients, but many different coaches. It may be impossible to establish how much of the success or failure of the coaching was because of the strengths and weaknesses of any individual coach. Coaches vary in their style even when they have been trained using the same methodology and it is difficult to separate out the impact of the individual coach as opposed to the value of the coaching process generally.

Clients themselves may be no better able to assess this than supposedly objective researchers. It is common, for instance, for clients to say, 'I did it myself, and I do know I couldn’t have done it without you – but I don’t really know how or why.' Then, too, enjoyment of the coaching does not necessarily correlate with behaviour change. It is relatively easy to assess the immediate impact of the coaching by asking the client for feedback on each session/coach. This is valuable for the coach but not necessarily for the organization. For instance, the client can have enjoyed the session but may fail to make any changes in behaviour. Alternatively, the client may not have enjoyed the sessions but may indeed make significant changes in what they do as a result.

Concern with measurement may also lead to attempts to measure the only things that can be measured. Dismaying often, these are the most trivial things. For instance, you can easily measure how many sessions any individual client attended, but how far does this tell you whether or not that client had value from the process?

It helps to be clear what commissioning clients actually want because a number of separate processes may be wrapped up in a request for proof that coaching works:

- **Research** could be a separate process, involving looking at long-term outcomes, coaching style, and assessing the value of different theoretical and practical techniques.
- **Audit** may involve benchmarking costs and outcomes with those obtained in other ways or in other organizations.
- **Evaluation** may try to measure what tangible and intangible benefits have been obtained by the individual and the organization. Few robust studies have been carried out here, though those that have do suggest both tangible and intangible benefits to both individual and organization. One example is the study carried out by Merrill Anderson in 2002 with forty-three participants on a leadership development programme in the United States and Mexico. This study looked at evaluation from a four-level framework. First, what did individuals feel about the coaching, second, how were they applying the learning? The third level asked for third-party validation – how others had seen this learning applied. Finally, clients were asked for causal connections between the coaching and measurable changes in the performance of their units. Even when results were adjusted to exclude relatively ‘easy’ measures such as staff turnover, 77 per cent of the participants cited coaching as having had significant impact on bottom line results. Altogether, the return on investment was calculated at a staggering 700 per cent (Anderson 2003).

As a coach you will be unlikely to be able to create such convincing proof of your effectiveness. However, there are a number of actions you can take to ensure that there are answers to the legitimate concerns of the commissioning organization about how its money is being spent, or indeed any individual client of a life coach:

- Ensure that the goal-setting process gets enough time at both the outset of the coaching and in every session (see Chapter 5).
- Make your goals measurable.
- With executive coaching, ensure that you link business results with the relationship and skills issues.
- Ask for feedback all the time on how the client is progressing towards achieving these results. Ask what and how the coaching is contributing.
- Where you are involved in a large-scale project, look for ways to build evaluation in from the start.

Coaching still has a long way to go as a profession. The word coach may be on its way to becoming a laughably vague term much like its close cousin consultant, a word that often conceals a temporarily stalled career. While in practice the market decides who is an excellent coach and who is a fraud, this may not be apparent to those not in the know. Making what contribution we can to continued professionalism is a duty we all share.