



Coaching: one of the fastest growing industries in the world

BACP launched a coaching division in June of this year, but what does the term 'coaching' now cover, and how does it differ from therapeutic work?

By Julia Bueno. Illustration by Matthew Richardson



'Helping by talking' has evolved into various professional guises over the years, with counselling and psychotherapy being so well established they are now (almost) receiving a statutory rubber stamp. Arguably, however, it's the coaching industry that has attracted the most mainstream media attention of late. 'Life coaches' in particular have become a well-known source of psychological support in Hollywood and beyond – Nelson Mandela and Patricia Hewitt included. But what does coaching mean exactly, and how does it differ from therapeutic work, if at all? Efforts to define this boundary are fuelling the current literature, and reflect exciting times for an industry that appears to be presenting a more 'organised' face to the outside world, just as the counselling profession has done over recent years.

The global growth of coaching is now well documented. A number of authors on the web claim that business coaching is the second fastest growing industry in the world. The International Coaching Federation (ICF), the oldest and biggest professional body, has an estimated membership of 17,000 coaches in 90 countries. There are many other professional coaching bodies and many coaches who may not be members of any, so this is clearly a low estimate of the

whole (I've read global guestimates ranging from 30,000 to 80,000).

Responding to this phenomenon, which has been accompanied by letters to BACP and website forum chats, BACP launched a Coaching division in June of this year, chaired by Linda Aspey – perhaps known to you already through her coaching columns in this publication. A known significant minority of members (around 3,000 out of 33,000) are practising as coaches alongside their work as counsellors or psychotherapists, and by offering a forum for them to network and develop their own practices, it is hoped that the new division will collaborate with other coaching bodies to begin to think about standardising practices – another emerging theme of the field today.

The development of coaching

Coaching as a worldwide phenomenon has grown organically from various fields of self-development and, in particular, the development of humanistic psychology (the so-called "Third Force"). One view¹ is that coaching reflects a synthesis of three movements: the growth of the talking therapies; consulting and organisational development and industrial psychology; and the proliferation of personal development trainings such as the

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Landmark Forum and Lifespring, along with the high-profile work of personalities such as Anthony Robbins in the US.

Thomas Leonard is often quoted as the main architect and driving force behind coaching as we know it today, along with his pioneering methods of ‘tele-coaching’ (coaching by telephone) that still persist in updated ways (email/Skype). He was also behind the founding of the ICF, which held its first convention in 1996.

As counsellors and psychotherapists we are familiar with the semantic struggles to define what we do, and coaching clearly is too. It continues to find its shape besides other helping relationships such as mentoring, counselling, psychotherapy, and coaching psychology. Tatiana Bachkirova is a senior lecturer in Human Development at Oxford Brookes University and has published widely on the field of coaching. In a recent editorial³ she (and Carol Kauffman) write: ‘A scan of the literature and websites of professional bodies reveals that very different definitions of coaching are suggested. Initially presented definitions seem to be evolving, and new ones surface regularly.’ She notes 11 different versions, including the AC’s (Association for Coaching’s) version from Anthony Grant at the

University of Sydney: ‘A collaborative solution-focused, results-orientated and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of work performance, life experience, self-directed learning and personal growth of the coachee.’

I wonder if counsellors reading this may view their work through a similar lens. It quickly becomes clear that any attempt to define coaching as being against counselling or psychotherapy will come down to the fairly fraught task of choosing to describe a unified type of coaching as well as a unified type of counselling and psychotherapy. But more of this later.

Types of coaching

Coaching thrives in various contexts too. ‘Life coaches’ have been popularised by the (largely American) media, and those who have read Lucy Kellaway’s zeitgeist novel *Who Moved My BlackBerry?* will know Pandora, the protagonist’s ‘lifestyle’ coach, only too well. Aspey tells me that ‘personal coaching’ is the more favoured description in the UK now, and is largely distinguished from the now well-established ‘executive’ and ‘business’ coaching arms that have postgraduate trainings in business schools and universities.

Again, the problem of making

distinctions and definitions rears its head. According to the AC, ‘executive’ coaching ‘is specifically focused at senior management level where there is an expectation for the coach to feel as comfortable exploring business related topics as personal development topics...’ Meanwhile, ‘business’ (or ‘corporate’) coaching focuses on ‘supporting an employee, either as an individual, as part of a team and/or organisation to achieve improved business performance and operational effectiveness’.

I spoke to Lynn Howell Macwhinnie, who has been involved in coaching, training and counselling for individuals and organisations for 20 years, with time as a Trustee and Board member of BACP and Chair of the Association for Counselling at Work (now BACP Workplace). She wonders too about labelling the work that she does. ‘I practise executive coaching and a person is not in isolation to their role or business issue,’ she says. ‘People are more than their job and their personal life is an aspect of the whole too. As with counselling, there can be tribalism in coaching, with some arenas being perceived as more important than others.’ This may be led by the market (City firms demanding expensive, ‘corporate’ coaching), but perhaps it also has to do with the fact that coaches are

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generally good at selling themselves.

Howell Macwhinnie says, ‘Historically counsellors weren’t as good at marketing as coaches, and the internet, blogs and Twitter really accelerated the coaching industry growth. Coaches seem more comfortable seeing their services as a brand to market, although it’s also changing for counsellors.’ Aspey suggests that ‘there are so many trained coaches out there, and many who want to survive may need to develop a niche and brand themselves. Finding clients is a necessary evil in all helping professions and some coaches have the business development background to help them.’

This may explain the increasing numbers of ‘niche’ coaches emerging in the market with very impressive websites (and tweets) to support their carefully devised brand – ‘bereavement’, ‘trauma’ and ‘dating’ coaches included. A friend of mine has pretty much pioneered a ‘fertility coaching’ profession and tells me of a colleague who does similar work with supporting adoptive couples – ‘adoption coaching’.

Theoretical influences

Meanwhile, as types of coaching continue to grow in this organic way, so do the theoretical influences behind them, with ideas that would be familiar to practitioners from Gestalt, solution-

focused, CBT, and narrative therapy fields – as well as Jung, Adler and Maslow fans. There are also an overwhelming number of organisations (huge and tiny) offering different ways to train – from the in-depth postgraduate level courses to web-based trainings that take a very cursory look at psychological concepts.

However, Bachkirova and Cox observe that ‘coaching, as a new profession, does not at present have any elaborate theories about development of its own. Whilst there has been an exponential growth in practical coaching, the conceptual ground that coaching is built upon could be viewed as, at best, multidisciplinary, and at worst as theoretical or even anti-theoretical.’³ Bachkirova adds, ‘Some time ago coaches tried to differentiate themselves from any association with in-depth psychological work. Now there seems to be a U-turn in the attitudes to the mention of psychology in relation to coaching: the need for psychological underpinning of coaching interventions is better acknowledged amongst professional coaches.’⁴

Indeed, the British Psychological Society now has a Special Group in Coaching Psychology aiming to ‘promote the development of coaching psychology as a professional activity and clarify the benefits of psychological approaches

within coaching practice’. Its website hosts a selection of podcasts from the 2009 European Coaching Psychology Conference (the second of its kind), where, for example, the role of Personal Construct Psychology in coaching is explored by Professor Stojnov. Like counselling and psychotherapy, thinking and research in this field is far from standing still, and for any would-be coach, now is a fascinating time to train.

I ask Aspey if, like counselling, coaching struggled with theoretical rivalries. ‘I think coaches tend to be welcoming of new ideas,’ she says. ‘Counsellors and psychotherapists by contrast tend to train in “one school”. There are, perhaps, fewer rivalries and divisions within the coaching industry in terms of theoretical orientations, but there are huge misunderstandings as to who makes a better coach – a therapist or non-therapist.’

The difference between coaching and counselling

This tension between the boundaries of counselling/therapy and coaching has already been touched upon, and takes up lots of space in the literature. It clearly impacts upon how the profession defines itself now. Traditionally distinctions have been made between the two along the lines that coaching doesn’t seek to

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resolve deeper underlying issues that can cause problems (like poor job performance/self-esteem), but aims to set goals and achieve results within specific time-scales. Aspey describes this common perception further: ‘Coaching is often seen as more positive, quicker, less painful, and doesn’t go into childhood, being less attached to emotions.’

Many more nuanced distinctions between the two are made and I can’t do them justice here. One coach I spoke to, Anya Sizer, stopped her training as a counsellor before it ended. ‘I am too much of a fixer,’ she tells me. ‘I was frustrated by the person-centred training I was doing and too keen to “move people on”. I wouldn’t make a good counsellor and if I feel I’m working with someone with too much emotional fall-out I may realise that I’m putting a plaster on things, and will refer them on for therapeutic work.’

However, many coaches with therapeutic backgrounds do not experience their way of being with clients in the same distinct fashion. I spoke with Debra Jinks, who originally trained as a counsellor before training as a coach. Now completing an MSc in Personal and Corporate Coaching, she is fascinated by the interface between the two practices and is researching the topic of ‘personal consultancy’ as a possible way of

integrating the two. ‘Years ago I was working with a coaching client on his career but something kept getting in the way and I could see it could always get in the way without some therapeutic work. This created a dilemma for me in terms of working as a coach and I turned to the BACP and AC ethical guidelines for a way to do the work within an ethical framework – and it wasn’t clear. The easiest and safest interpretation of the BACP framework would have been to refer the client to another counsellor, but it felt like what was best for him would have been to do the work within the established relationship.’ Her research has brought her into contact with many other ‘dual qualifieds’, who experience similar tensions in their work. She feels there needs to be a better ethical infrastructure for people who find they are working within this overlap.

The nascent practice of ‘personal consultancy’ may reflect one response to a desire amongst many to bridge the blurry (and lively) boundary between two professions. The work of Erik de Haan at Ashridge Business School could be seen as another. Now programme director of Ashridge’s Masters (MSc) in Executive Coaching and the director of Ashridge’s Centre for Coaching, de Haan has written extensively about ‘relational coaching’, where he emphasises the

relationship between coach and client as paramount, particularly from the perspective of the client (coachee). He draws upon many disciplines and schools of thought, including, unsurprisingly, many thinkers within the psychotherapy and counselling fields. Bachkirova has also been working on and presenting ideas of a new way to integrate the two. Her theory and framework of developmental coaching applies the existing body of theoretical knowledge developed within counselling to coaching, and will be fleshed out in more published detail soon. But it is interesting to note the efforts made to forge a position for coaching alongside counselling through an actual process of integration.

A bigger question is whether any of these distinctions and definitions really matter. I don’t attach significance to whether I’m ‘doing’ counselling or psychotherapy with my clients (I’m qualified in both). Although counselling and psychotherapy have been trying to distinguish their practices from each other for a long time (re-ignited by the regulation debate), we are surviving well side by side nonetheless. But some feel there is a lack of clarity as to what professional coaching really is and what makes for a reputable or effective coach; the mainstream press like to pick this up

References

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(such as Tim Dowling in the *Guardian* a couple of years ago).

Could it even be that ‘blurriness’ between the two professions serves those who wouldn’t seek counselling? I have the occasional client who is ashamed of seeing me and does so in secret. Aspey agrees when I suggest there are fewer taboos attached to coaching, and has written in this publication that ‘many people, particularly senior managers, would rather have a coach than a therapist, even when the going gets really tough, particularly when their working world is involved’. Her story of Michael sums this up well – his boss responded to Aspey’s suggestion of counselling with ‘he’s not mentally ill’, but was happy for him to be supported by ‘one-to-one training’. Howell Macwhinnie also wonders if coaching has been traditionally seen as more ‘palatable’, especially in the expansive 1990s where ‘performance improvement’ was in demand (with Whitmore’s GROW model in vogue).

Practising ethically

It strikes me that *one* bottom line in all of this is ethical practice. It is crucial that a coaching practitioner of whatever denomination knows of her competencies and boundaries. Supervision is clearly crucial to support

and encourage this self-monitoring. Initial training and CPD has to be paramount too. A client should know what she is ‘getting’ in terms of the service she has agreed to, and where to turn if things go awry. In the same way, I hope I know when to refer a client on for psychiatric or other types of support, when my experience and competence runs out. My supervisor certainly does.

Indeed, Aspey’s role in the new Coaching division of BACP is to support the evolution of the *Ethical Framework*. ‘It needs to speak to coaches if members are practising coaching as well,’ she argues. ‘We haven’t yet tested a conduct procedure in BACP where a member is a coach. Members will need to let their professional indemnity insurers know what they are doing. We need to help clarify things, including how clients can informatively choose between therapy and coaching. All coaching trainings deal with the issue of “contract making” with clients, and increasingly they are exploring how to spot where a referral to therapeutic work is appropriate, along with the need for adequate supervision. There is an area here for therapists who have a coaching training to supervise.’ It seems that the coaching profession knows all of this, and many of the established professional coaching bodies are raising awareness of important issues

in practice. There are notable efforts to collaborate, with the AC, the Association of Professional Executive, Coaching and Supervision (APECS), the ICF, UK and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) signing an agreed ‘Statement of Shared Professional Values’ in February 2008. It defined a common ground in the codes of ethics and practices currently used by such bodies in the UK and is working toward mapping out a single route to accreditation as a coach. Aspey will be representing BACP interests.

In many ways coaching seems to be addressing issues of training, practice and theory as the counselling profession has done in the past – and indeed continues to do. The co-existence of the two professions has clearly made fertile ground for disagreement, but for agreement as well, with the coaching profession learning much from counselling. But perhaps there’s also much that counselling can learn from coaching too. Counsellors have been encouraged already in this publication to market themselves in ways in which many coaches excel, and it may be that using the latest methods of communicating (web, texts, tweets and more), may best suit the ‘liquid moderns’ described by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. ■