COACHING IN PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS

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The Importance of Understanding Professional Contexts

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WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT COACHING IN PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS?

The premise of this book is that it is helpful to consider the various ways in which professional contexts can impact on the experience of coaching. Right from the outset, it is important to reflect on this premise. Is it true that a coaching programme in a hospital is unlike a coaching programme within a university? Is coaching a senior executive within a multinational bank essentially different from coaching a senior executive working for a professional services firm? The process of drawing together the experiences and thoughts of a wide range of practitioners and academics to create this book has helped to start to formulate a considered response to these questions. Firstly, as you read this book, it will become apparent that particular contexts have nuances and perspectives that seem to be more pertinent than in others. This may be due to the nature of the business or the predisposition of the people who choose to work within a sector. Secondly, you will note that the ethos of coaching and some of its principles feature across all the professional contexts covered in this book. So we start our exploration of coaching in professional contexts with a challenging paradox: coaching is at once different and the same across professional contexts.

As you read through the book, please keep an open mind, noticing what is consistent and what varies. Although purists might argue that a coach does not need to know anything about the coachee’s profession, executive coaching does not take place in a vacuum. It usually involves conversations about the challenges and opportunities of working and leading in fast-paced complex systems. While knowledge of these systems may not be a prerequisite for effective coaching within such contexts, the commercial reality is that a coach without professional credibility is unlikely to get business.

We will be approaching these questions from a number of angles, explicitly and implicitly. These discussions are informed by the real-life professional experiences of many of
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the contributing authors. Your own thoughts and experiences should be brought to bear in this process.

This book is rooted in professional practice. It is written by practitioners and for practitioners. By the word ‘practitioner’, we mean all professionals who share an interest in the use of coaching within organisational settings. This includes executive coaches, executives, managers, leaders and human resources (HR) and organisational development (OD) professionals. The contributors have experienced coaching within professional contexts from these various angles. The passion of the chapter authors is inspirational. It is clear that each is driven by a commitment to create flourishing workplaces through the use of coaching interventions—professional contexts that encourage engagement and motivation.

HOW SHOULD I READ THIS BOOK?

This first chapter will provide a broad introduction to the book, raising interesting questions for consideration and proposing some key definitions. Every chapter is summarised below in order to support you to focus your attention on those most immediately relevant. One of the purposes of this book is to provide practitioners and students of coaching with insights into the context of most interest to them. At the same time, it is hoped that reading about coaching within alternative contexts will spark new thoughts and possibilities. Coaching in Professional Contexts is structured so that some ‘generic’ chapters provide a theoretical frame for context-specific chapters. By generic, we mean that the chapters relate to coaching in organisations, regardless of the professional context. Chapters 2 to 4 relate to all professional contexts. Chapters 5 to 12 consider the use of coaching within specific fields. Chapters 13 to 17 will be of interest to anyone introducing coaching within an organisational setting. Many chapters are accompanied by case studies written by practitioners with direct, recent and relevant experience of the coaching under discussion.

So you, the reader, may wish to approach this book in a traditional way, working their way through it from start to finish. Alternatively, you could start with an area of particular interest and then dip into other professional contexts out of interest. It is also possible to read the ‘generic’ chapters before reading context-specific chapters. As a team of authors, our intention has been to support the most effective use of coaching within organisational contexts. While we are all committed to finding ways that coaching can engage and motivate people within professional contexts, we are also keen to ensure that you will find this text interesting and relevant. So, any way that works for you is the best way of approaching this text.

WHAT IS COACHING?

It is not possible to avoid this question. And yet often it is not sufficiently discussed in professional contexts. The reality is that the term ‘coaching’ is used liberally to mean a
broad range of interventions and approaches. This is the unspoken reality that many prefer to ignore. Due to its confidential nature and disparities about the way in which coaches are trained (if they are trained at all), there is sometimes little clarity about what is actually taking place under the banner of ‘coaching’. On the one hand, this is welcome news for those who wish to see coaching taking place in as many contexts and within as many situations as possible. On the other hand, professional associations may be concerned about the quality assurance of interventions labelled ‘coaching’. While we hope to see the continued growth of coaching within professional contexts, we believe that the lack of agreement about terminology can get in the way of successful implementation of coaching initiatives and programmes.

There are many excellent definitions of coaching being used. Perhaps best known within professional contexts is the phrase coined by Sir John Whitmore: ‘Unlocking people’s potential to maximize their own performance’ (2009: 11). His book, *Coaching for Performance*, may have been the catalyst for the surge in the use of coaching in professional contexts in the UK soon after the first edition was published in 1992. In fact, the GROW model presented within this book is probably the most-used coaching process within organisations worldwide. With this in mind, it is essential to note that Whitmore’s notion of coaching for performance was underpinned by a belief that this should be brought about simply by raising coachees’ awareness and increasing their sense of personal responsibility. Whitmore follows up the well-known quote above by being very clear that coaching is about ‘helping them to learn rather than teaching them’ (2009: 11). In other words, coaching is a largely non-directive conversational intervention.

I have noted elsewhere that there is ‘broad agreement in the literature that coaching:

1. ‘Is a managed conversation that takes place between two people
2. Aims to support sustainable change to behaviours or ways of thinking
3. Focuses on learning and development.’ (van Nieuwerburgh, 2014: 5)

While coaching and mentoring are similar conversational approaches that share many of the same skills (Willis, 2005), we propose that one (coaching) takes a primarily non-directive stance while the other (mentoring) is generally more directive. It is recognised that there is some overlap in the interventions and that both coaching and mentoring are effective and necessary ways of supporting the development of professionals. However, this text will focus on the use of coaching within professional contexts.

Executive coaching is a conversational process that leads to a change of thinking or behaviour with the aim of improving outcomes in professional contexts. It is the role of the executive coach to create an environment in which the coachee can reflect deeply and generate new ideas and personalised solutions. As opposed to life coaching, the concept of three-way contracting (between coachee, organisational client and coach) is central to executive coaching. This ensures that the coaching supports both the coachee (the client who receives the coaching) and the organisational client (the person who represents the
entity that pays for the coaching). So the purpose of executive coaching is to support the client to achieve more of their potential and maintain or enhance their wellbeing within their organisational context.

**HOW WERE THE PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS CHOSEN?**

It is acknowledged that not all professional contexts are covered in this book. The military, charitable and hospitality sectors, for example, do not appear. The various professional contexts included were chosen for two reasons. Firstly, it was important to include contexts in which coaching was being used extensively. Secondly, the choice was driven by the availability and expertise of the chapter and case study authors. A later edition of this book will no doubt include a greater number of professional contexts.

**CONTROVERSY AND CONFUSION**

The field of executive coaching is flourishing and continues to grow despite a challenging economic climate. However, the surge in interest and growth has led to a situation that has been described by the *Harvard Business Review* as a ‘Wild West of Executive Coaching’. Despite the best efforts of an increasing number of professional associations, there is a reputational challenge facing the industry. We propose that some of the reasons for this are the confusion of terminology (e.g. executive coaching vs. consultancy vs. leadership mentoring), the ease of entry into the profession (i.e., anyone can call themselves a coach), and the fact that the ‘brand’ of coaching is seen as attractive. This has meant that some people and a number of consultancies have simply re-branded what they do as ‘coaching’. This makes it difficult for:

- researchers to study the effects of coaching (as the interventions may vary);
- clients to know what they are buying;
- coaches to be seen as credible and trustworthy.

This book tackles some controversies head on. Firstly, there has been much debate about whether managers can act as coaches. An entire chapter is dedicated to this issue. Secondly, the status of academic research into coaching in organisations has been contested. This is also addressed directly in a chapter on the topic. There is no question that academic research is needed to generate relevant theories and inform practice within organisations. Of course, it is important that research and theories should be rooted in practice and also directly inform practice. Finally, throughout the book, there are a number of ‘myth-busters’ in which authors challenge some common misperceptions within the field.
WHAT IS COVERED IN THE CHAPTERS?

Chapter 1: The Importance of Understanding Professional Contexts

This chapter answers some questions that may be helpful to address straightaway. Key definitions are presented and a brief overview of every chapter is provided so that readers can make decisions about how to use this book to best effect.

Chapter 2: Coaching for Optimal Functioning

In this key chapter, Gordon Spence discusses ways that coaching can be used to support sustained high performance in organisations. He presents a new conceptual framework and this is further supported with practical tips for executive coaches to use with clients.

Chapter 3: Manager as Coach: The Challenge

Julia Milner and Alex Couley address a key challenge head on: is it possible for someone to both line manage a coach a direct report? This intriguing chapter explores an important issue by considering the complexities of merging the roles of coach and manager. The authors also present a new framework for practitioners and provide practical advice for those wishing to develop ‘manager as coach’ programmes.

Chapter 4: Coaching for Careers and Professional Development

In this chapter Julia Yates considers the use of career theory to inform coaching professionals about their careers and development. Two case studies (‘Coaching using career theories’ and ‘Coaching mid-life career change’) support this chapter.

Chapter 5: Coaching in the Financial Services Industry

Emma Fowler and John Ainley focus on the application of coaching within the financial services industry. The chapter is supported by three case studies: ‘Executive coaching for
top team members', 'Using a coaching approach with the executive team' and 'Leadership development in a multinational bank'.

Chapter 6: Coaching within Professional Services Firms

Caroline Flin and Ian McIntosh address the topic of coaching within professional services firms. The chapter is supported by two case studies: 'Preferred supplier list assessment and selection process' and 'Transition to partner programme'.

Chapter 7: Coaching in Local Government

Colin Williams and Samantha Darby explore current practice in the public sector. The use of executive coaching, coach training programmes and the creation of internal coaching resources will be covered. The chapter is supported by an in-depth case study of a public sector coaching pool ('West Midlands Coaching and Mentoring Pool').

Chapter 8: Coaching in Healthcare Settings

Vivian Walton and Julia Sinclair provide an overview of the use of coaching within the National Health Service (NHS). The chapter covers the use of coaching within healthcare settings and considers ways in which it can support medical careers. The chapter is supported by three case studies, 'Career coaching for a doctor', 'Coaching assistant directors within the NHS' and 'Coaching general practitioners'.

Chapter 9: Coaching Patients

Rachel Hawley discusses the use of coaching to support patients and explores the importance of dialogue between patient and clinician. The author proposes a new approach to the use of coaching with patients. The chapter is supported by two case studies, 'Coaching conversations, care and confidence' and 'Better conversations, better care'.

Chapter 10: Coaching in Schools

In this chapter, John Campbell provides a broad overview of the growth and development of coaching within schools in the UK, the USA and Australia. The use of coaching with school
leaders, educators and students is explored and a new framework (Global Framework for Coaching in Education) is presented. The chapter is supported by two case studies written by educational practitioners, ‘Opening the coaching portals’ and ‘Empowering our greatest resource’.

Chapter 11: Coaching in Higher Education

Three practitioners with experience of using coaching in higher education, Ioanna Iordanou, Agnes Lech and Veronica Barnes, share their thoughts about how coaching can be used within university settings. The use of coaching with staff and students is explored. The impact of teaching students to become coaches is also discussed in this chapter. The chapter is supported by a new ‘Framework for Practitioners’ on the topic of coaching for research supervision and three case studies, ‘Developing coaches and coaching staff’, ‘Coaching PhD students’ and ‘A student’s perspective’.

Chapter 12: Integrating Coaching and Positive Psychology in Educational Settings

In a ground-breaking chapter, Clive Leach and Suzy Green make a case for the integration of coaching and positive psychology within educational settings. The evidence-base for the use of positive education is surveyed and practical suggestions for the use of coaching and positive psychology are made. This chapter is supported by two case studies of the use of integrated approaches in schools, ‘A strategic approach to enhance wellbeing’ and ‘A strength-based coaching programme’.

Chapter 13: The Current State of Research

In a timely and topical chapter, Tim Theeboom surveys the current state of play in relation to the research into coaching within organisational settings. A broad range of research into the field is presented and critiqued.

Chapter 14: Coaching for Wellbeing at Work

In this important chapter, a leading academic in the field, Lindsay Oades, argues for the inclusion of the concept of wellbeing in discussions about coaching. The concept of wellbeing at
work brings together theories and practices from the fields of coaching psychology, positive psychology and health psychology. This chapter is supported by a case study entitled ‘Coaching for wellbeing’.

Chapter 15: Supervision for Learning

Mary Watts, Esther Cavett and Sarah Dudney explore the role of supervision in supporting the development of coaches. In a thought-provoking and sometimes challenging chapter, they highlight the need for coaching supervision to support the use of coaching within professional settings. The chapter is supported by two case studies, ‘Experience of coaching supervision’ and ‘Finding time to think’.

Chapter 16: Towards a Coaching Culture

This chapter considers the idea of ‘coaching cultures’. Various approaches to ‘creating coaching cultures’ will be surveyed and discussed. Some practical ideas to support the development of coaching cultures will also be proposed. This chapter will be supported by a ‘Framework for Practitioners’ on the topic of coaching cultures and ‘A Sports Coach’s Perspective’.

Chapter 17: A Philosophy of Coaching?

The final chapter brings together the learning from this writing project. It explores what has emerged as unique within the various sectors. More importantly, it reflects on what has emerged as consistent. This is explored provocatively as a ‘philosophy of coaching’ and questions are raised about ‘coaching cultures’ and the future of the coaching profession.

To the reader

On behalf of all of the contributors to this book, I would like to thank you for taking the time to reflect on the question of coaching in professional contexts. As the editor, chapter authors, case study contributors and writers of the frameworks for practitioners, we are all deeply committed to the effective use of coaching within our professional contexts. We hope that you will find useful insights, helpful experiences and thought-provoking questions within this text that will make a difference both to you and the contexts with which you engage.
REFERENCES