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How vital is the coaching relationship in influencing coaching process and outcomes?

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Back in 2006 , when I started my PhD research at City University ¹, the coaching relationship was customarily assumed to be important in the coaching process and to coaching outcome. Yet few dedicated research studies existed confirming these fundamental assumptions. There was also a tendency to compare the coaching relationship with other professional relationships, in particular the therapeutic relationship, and the role of the coach in the coaching relationship was largely untapped. My research questions derived from these observations, by seeking to explore those principal aspects involved in forming coaching relationships, how these aspects made their contribution, and how might the coaching relationship be tailored to the individual coachee.

A mixed methods approach using the results from the second quantitative phase to help develop and inform the results from the first qualitative phase was the chosen design for this exploratory research study.

Briefly summarising the two phases of the study will illustrate how the research sought to address the research questions. With a sample of coachees and coaches, Phase 1 used a semi-structured interview method, finding Collaboration, Bond and Engagement, and Coach attitudes and characteristics as

¹ In 2016 City University became City, University of London

the key themes or grouping of aspects considered critical in forming coaching relationships. Using the themes deriving from the first phase as the basis for an instrument created for the purpose of the study, phase 2 of the research employed an internet questionnaire study with an online sample of 368 coaching psychologists and coaches. Analysing the data using Principal Components Analysis, Collaboration was found to be the largest factor, with 4 further factors identified. Respect was the highest weighted individual aspect. In a simultaneous comparison of this instrument with scores on the Working Alliance Inventory Short Form (WAI-S), a positive significant correlation was found, indicating overlap between the two measures and providing preliminary concurrent validity for the instrument. The coach adapting their style to the coachee appeared to be a more universal finding than in previous studies.

As in any research endeavour, the journey between start and finish was not a simple or straightforward one. Hurdles needed to be overcome, articles needed to be written, and decision-making points were sometimes pressured and difficult, all part of the research study journey. Yet these all contributed to my knowledge, experience and personal and professional growth garnered during the period of study.

My PhD was conducted part-time, and was completed in 2013. Since then, the research literature on the coaching relationship has gained ground, with studies finding the coaching relationship (primarily conceptualised as the working alliance) to be an 'active ingredient' in coaching. Greater interest has also

shifted to 'how' coaching works witnessed by emerging studies on interpersonal interaction in the coaching relationship.

Having conducted my research, I would like to share my reflections with you on that experience as well as include any updates on my thoughts on the state of coaching relationship research and practice today.

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About Dr Alanna O'Broin PhD



Alanna is an experienced practicing coaching psychologist, working independently with coachees in achieving their developmental, performance, and well-being goals. Her professional interests include building effective coaching relationships, the influence of the relationship on coaching outcomes, and boundaries with other professional helping relationships.

Following a first career in the financial sector with investment capital group, 3i, Alanna retrained as an applied psychologist, becoming Chartered as a Counselling Psychologist in 2002. She was active in the promotion and founding of coaching psychology in the UK in the early 00s.

Her doctoral research explored the forming of the working relationship in coaching, as well as how the coach can adapt or tailor the relationship to their individual coachee.

Alanna has co-written 5 book chapters on the coaching relationship, presented at national and international conferences on this topic, and has several coaching relationship and coaching psychology related publications in peer-reviewed publications. She was also Co-Editor between 2013 and 2016, of the coaching journal, *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, an international publication committed to the advancement of evidence-informed coaching theory, research and practice. She is currently a member of the International Advisory Board of the Coaching Psychology Unit at Aalborg University, Denmark.

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