The Coaching Alliance as a universal concept spanning conceptual approaches
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Abstract
This article proposes that regardless of the conceptual coaching approach, the coaching alliance is a universal concept related to positive coaching outcome. Drawing from coaching and coaching psychology research, counselling and psychotherapy outcome research and applications across allied domains, the Coaching Alliance is defined and an argument for addressing the alliance by coaches working from any conceptual approach is made.

Keywords: Coaching Alliance, working alliance, coaching psychology

Introduction
This article begins by posing a salutary question for us as coaching psychologists. “To what extent do we take the time to address the coaching alliance with our coachees, particularly if our conceptual framework de-emphasises the importance of the coaching relationship?” In response to this question and drawing upon sources from coaching and coaching psychology research, psychotherapy outcome research and their applications across allied domains, a case is argued for the value and appropriateness of addressing the Coaching Alliance (as defined) as a property of the components of coaching in any conceptual approach.

The role of relationship in conceptual approaches
As coaches and coaching psychologists, we recognize that our conceptual coaching approaches incorporate a role for the coaching relationship in the coaching process. For instance, in coaching approaches within the humanistic perspective (see Stober, 2006), including the existential (Spinelli and Horner, 2007), gestalt (Allan and Whybrow, 2007) and person-centred approach (Hedman, 2001; Joseph and Bryant-Jeffries, 2007), as well as in the integrative goal-focused (Grant, 2006) and the psychodynamic (Allcorn, 2006) approaches, the coaching relationship is viewed as essential for constructive change. In other approaches (see Figure 1 below) the working relationship (or working alliance) between coachee and coach is considered important.

Regardless of whether the conceptual approach places an emphasis or de-emphasis on the role of the relationship in the coaching process, all approaches recognize the requirement for a good working relationship between coachee and coach.

Complex processes in change-inducing relationships
Developments in recent years in the counselling and psychotherapy outcome research literature can further inform this discussion of the Coaching Alliance. These developments are first, the increasing realisation that a consideration of participant, relational, technique and contextual factors is required in the complex process of change, rather than the previously prevailing assumption that
either the relationship or technique factors were key to outcome (Castonquay and Beutler, 2006). This development resonates with the development in coaching and coaching psychology of evidence-informed models of coaching (Cavanagh and Grant, 2006; Drake, 2009; Stober and Grant, 2006; Stober et al., 2006) drawing upon evidence from multiple and wide sources including research and practice from allied professions. Second, and partially reflecting these developments, conceptual approaches previously placing less emphasis on working with interpersonal relationship dynamics than on techniques, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (Leahy, 2008) have garnered greater interest in relationship processes (Gilbert and Leahy, 2007; Bennett-Levy and Thwaites, 2007). Cognitive Behavioural Coaching (Palmer and Szymbanska, 2007), adapted from its counterpart in cognitive and cognitive-behavioural therapy is anticipated to reflect this development (O’Broin and Palmer, 2009).

Common factors across approaches and change-inducing relationships

Thirdly, as part of the broader movement towards integrative psychotherapy (see Palmer and Woolfe, 2000) and as a contributor to the development of a more inclusive examination of the factors of change in psychotherapy, the common factors approach (Frank and Frank, 1991; Greencavage and Norcross, 1990) seeks to identify and define those elements, crossing all conceptual approaches, that contribute to therapeutic change. The common factors approach has been applied across several other change-inducing, helping relationships, including coaching of all kinds (Lampropoulos, 2001). The most consensual common factor, found to be one of the most robust predictors of outcome (Martin et al., 2000; Wampold, 2001) is the working alliance (Bordin, 1979; 1994). The working alliance has also been applied across several other domains including sport and exercise psychology (Katz and Hemming, 2009) and coaching psychology (Joo, 2005; Kemp, 2008; 2009; O’Broin and Palmer, 2009; 2010; Palmer and McDowall, 2010).

The Coaching Alliance defined

In discussing the Coaching Alliance, first there is a requirement to define what exactly we mean by the term. In the counselling and psychotherapy research literature the term alliance has sometimes been used as a proxy for the broader therapeutic relationship (see Horvath, 2001). However, in this article the alliance is referred to in a more specific sense using the definition by Bordin, (1979:1994, as extended by Hatcher and Barends, 2006). A working definition of the Coaching Alliance deriving from this definition is:

The Coaching Alliance reflects the quality of the coachee’s and coach’s engagement in collaborative, purposive work within the coaching relationship, and is jointly negotiated, and renegotiated throughout the coaching process over time.

(Adapted O’Brien and Palmer, 2007: 305)

The Coaching Alliance as a universal concept

The Coaching Alliance is thus conceptualized as a pantheoretic concept that is universally applicable across conceptual approaches. It is also expressed through an interactive and dynamic relationship between coach and coachee. The Coaching Alliance provides a framework for assessing the degree, level and kind of collaborative, purposive work of the coach and coachee. Here there is a recognition that the kind of collaborativeness and purposiveness of the work negotiated and taking place will differ depending on the conceptual approach. Bordin identified three associated core features of the alliance, those of goals, tasks and bonds. In respect of the goals, mutual agreement needs to be reached on the goals and the desired coaching outcomes; on tasks, mutual understanding of the tasks of coachee and coach and how the coaching work will take place are required; finally, on bonds, mutual empathy and respect need to be extended by coach and coachee. Bordin’s less well-known narrower work supporting bond supports the goals and tasks of the coaching and links its relationship features to the core alliance issue of purposive, collaborative work.

Conclusion

Findings in the early-stage coaching relationship literature attest to the importance of the coaching relationship to coaching process and outcome (Luebbe, 2005; Gyllensten and Palmer, 2007; Baron and Morin, 2009), paralleling findings over the decades in the counselling and psychotherapy research literature. The alliance too is being researched in the coaching literature, with findings of a correlation between the quality of the Coaching Alliance and outcome for coachees (Duckworth and De Haan, 2009) and that the Coaching Alliance plays a mediating role between the number of sessions of coaching and the coachee’s self-efficacy (Baron and Morin, 2009). Further discussion and research of this topic seems timely and a priority. Further confirmatory studies and findings of any similarities and differences from the working alliance in other domains could also be of value across the specialisms. Taken together, these points argue for the Coaching Alliance as a universal concept potentially beneficial to outcome in the coaching process. As such, regardless of our conceptual approach to coaching, and in response to the question posed at the start of this article, if we are not taking the trouble to address the coaching alliance with our coachees perhaps we, and in particular our coachees, may benefit by us doing so.

References


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Biographies

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