



# The Listener

## A journal for coaches

*Sharing knowledge and developing practice in the coaching community*

**New Series #7 April 2015**

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*“First we only want to be seen, but once we’re seen, that’s not enough anymore. After that, we want to be remembered.” – Emily St John Mandel*

In the post-apocalyptic novel from which the above quotation comes, and in which the great majority of people have died in a flu pandemic, one of the protagonists walks alone through a deserted landscape of decaying towns and overgrowing wilderness. After so many days’ wandering, his sense of himself fragments. The biography of his life, the memory of his relationships, the collection of places and people that he had carried with him, all start to crumble and fall away. It is as if he can only be himself, can only create himself, through the presence of others.

Reading this passage in the book reminded me of one of the very touching stories which Grayson Perry included in his fascinating television series on identity. It concerned a husband and wife who had been together a great many years and who now were living with the husband’s decline through Alzheimer’s Disease. As the husband was losing his identity, with its integral capability to recall and to recognise the places, people and objects that connected him to his past and present, so too was his wife losing her own identity. Her husband was beginning not to see her, not to remember her. In turn, she struggled to maintain the sense of self that she had formed and carried with her inside the long, cherished presence of her husband. The object Perry created in response to this couple’s story shows them embracing amidst the brittle shards of memories, cruel, sharp, no longer quite cohering, slipping apart.

It seems perhaps a little crass in the recollection of this story to seek to make a connection between its tragedy and the work we do as coaches. But I have no doubt that one of the things that makes our work a privilege and effective and valuable, is that for the time we are together with them, our clients can feel seen and remembered. And, in wondering why we do the work, we can allow ourselves sometimes to feel that way too.

**Ken Smith**  
**April 2015**



## Ontological Coaching

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*Aboodi Shabi*

*"We don't just need a new map; we need ways to change the mapmaker." – Ken Wilber*

### Blind to our Blindness

**Developed by Fernando Flores, Rafael Echeverria and Julio Olalla, and drawing on the work of Heidegger, Merleau Ponty, Humberto Maturana, John Searle and John Austin and others, ontological coaching is based on an exploration of the clients' interpretations of the world and their way of being. By its very nature, this approach to coaching is a philosophical one and supports coachees in a reflection of who they are, rather than simply setting goals and achieving them (although that can be a part of ontological coaching, too).**

Another distinction of ontological coaching is the emphasis on the transpersonal element: we are not individuals growing up in isolation, but are shaped, as we will see, by the world we are immersed in. As ontological coaches, we take a systemic perspective and claim that an individual cannot be effectively coached without some understanding of the world and the systems which the coachee inhabits.

The guiding principle of ontological coaching is well summed up by James Flaherty who writes:

"Each person's actions were fully consistent with the interpretations he brought, an interpretation that will persist across time, across events, across circumstances. Our job as coaches will be to understand the client's structure of interpretation, then in partnership alter this structure so that the actions that follow bring about the intended outcome." (Flaherty 1999 p.9)

It is this "structure of interpretations" with which is our focus in ontological coaching.

As humans, we usually take our interpretations and ways of being for granted. For example, if an individual sees the world as dangerous, he is likely to be risk averse and say no to opportunities; similarly if someone sees life as an adventure, she is more likely to say yes to opportunities and to take risks. Our ways of seeing, and of interpreting, the world will have been shaped by the narratives in which we have been immersed. Most of the time, these narratives are transparent to us: they are not consciously seen; we have grown up in discourses that have shaped us all our lives, even before we were aware of ourselves or of the world. Therefore, we don't say, for example, "I have learned to see the world as dangerous, and that makes me risk averse"; instead we might say, "the world is dangerous,

and I have to be careful.” In other words, *it appears obvious to us* that the world is dangerous and that we have to be careful, rather than something to investigate further.

It’s so obvious that we don’t see our ‘being’. In other words, we are blind to our blindness. From time to time, we need someone “outside ourselves” to help us see what we cannot see – to reveal our cognitive blindness. We can say that an ontological coach is that someone.

## The Observer

Ontological coaching seeks to challenge our presuppositions and helps the client to recognise that what we think of as ‘the truth’ is usually nothing more than learned narratives. Our narratives are usually expressed linguistically – in the things we say and in our beliefs and values; but they also have an emotional and somatic dimension.

In addition to listening to the coachee’s concerns and goals, an ontological coach will also be curious about how the coachee is being. You could liken this to paying attention to the music and rhythm of a song, as well as to the lyrics. An ontological coach will observe how the coachee uses language, what emotions are shaping her or his interpretation of the world, how she or he moves through space, all the time facilitating the coachee’s awareness of what she or he was previously blind to. The coach will also be curious about what the coachee may become.

The aim of ontological coaching is to facilitate the transformation of the coachee, generating new possibilities that were previously unavailable or invisible to the coachee, and to allow new learning to emerge. As Julio Olalla and Rafael Echeverria have said: “Ontological coaching is a process aimed at producing a change in a person’s soul, which only happens when we are willing to observe, question and be curious enough to change the self that we are.”

In the work of Newfield Network (the coaching school established by Julio Olalla), we call the coachee’s structure of interpretations the “observer”. As human beings we take action, which produces results. Normally, when we don’t like the results we produce, we look at the actions we take and try to change them – we might do more, we might do less, or we might try a new action. But, if we do not look at the observer that we are, if we do not question our structural interpretations, then we are likely to simply produce more of the same. We also say that this observer occurs in three domains, language, emotions and body.

## Three domains

By *language* we mean the stories we have learned about life, the narratives in which we live, the values we have; for example, “the world is dangerous”, “it’s important to be independent”, “you can trust people to be helpful”, “money is hard to come by”, etc. We learn and absorb these from the world around us and they become part of who we are.



In the context of ontological coaching, we use *emotions* to mean that which pre-disposes us to act. In our approach, we are concerned with emotions in the philosophical sense – how emotions shape our way of being or our capacity for action. For example, if I am resentful I will act differently at work, than if I am grateful. If I am sad, I will have a different pre-disposition for action, than if I am angry or joyful, etc.

By *body*, we mean the way we move through space. Some people move through space quickly and efficiently, which results in them getting things done; at the same time, however, they might be less available for connection. Others might move more slowly, take their time, and be available to connect with others; but they might not get things done or they might lose focus on the task because they prioritise relationship. It's important to note that neither of these two examples (and there are many other polarities we could explore) is 'good' or 'bad'; rather they lend themselves to certain outcomes. Again, these ways of moving through space are learned. We can observe this when we look at how people from different cultures move and interact physically with the world and others, as any trip to an international airport will reveal.

We learn in all three domains. We learn stories and narratives about the world from our families, from the culture around us, etc., but we also learn emotions and how to move through space. We can say that all of this learning, happening throughout our lives, forms the "structure of interpretation" described by Flaherty above.

### Narratives

To return to the previous example of the individual who sees the world as dangerous, we might perceive that, in terms of language, he might have certain narratives about the world that he learned from life – perhaps he grew up in a conflict zone, or there was a lot of anger at home, or he might have been told that 'you can't trust people' or 'life is hard'. Maybe he grew up in a family with violence and learned to hold back and lie low to avoid being seen in order to stay safe. Now, if we watch him move, we might notice that he is hesitant, holding himself back when he meets a group of people, for example, or looking around nervously when he ventures an opinion. In the emotional domain, he might be fearful or timid, or anxious – maybe there was a lot of fear at home, or in the culture at the time. All three domains together produce a coherent picture of someone who is unlikely to take much risk in life, and will tend to hold himself back. The individual may have become successful at feeling 'safe', but, from another perspective, he could also be seen as missing out on numerous opportunities and possibilities.

The coach's role is to help the coachee to uncover her or his structural interpretations and how these structures have shaped them; and then to open new territories for learning that were previously unavailable or invisible to the coachee – or as Flaherty puts it to alter that structure, in partnership with the coachee, in order to produce new results.

### Lightness and curiosity

This requires a mood of lightness and of curiosity in the coach. A coach needs to be curious about the self in front of us – what stories have they learned, what interpretations do they

live in, how have they been shaped by their lives? This requires the coach to leave behind all assessments and judgements about how a coachee should behave, or about the right mental attitude to have, and simply to be willing to find out how the coachee got to be the human being that presents itself in the coaching session. It also requires a particular mood in the coachee, which is a willingness to take a look – to be open to questioning ways of being that they have hitherto taken for granted.

### Transforming the self

Having raised awareness, the coach works with the coachee to identify new ways of being – almost literally how to build a new structure; to go beyond the old learned self and to discover new ways of being that were unavailable to the “old self”. Another way to see this is that, having realised that who we think we are is largely a function of what we have learned, we can now embrace the possibility of learning something new; that we literally learn to be a new self by the practices that emerge out of ontological coaching conversations.

When the coachee transforms at the level of the soul, the actions taken might be very similar, but because the being that takes those actions is different, she or he might produce totally different results. As Proust puts it: “The real journey of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

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## Alter Ego – the authentic chameleon

*Bruce Grimley*

**At the heart of Alter Ego there lies a personal journey. It is a journey of generating a theory of personality which sits well with the extant literature in psychology yet also with the situational perspective of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP); one which suggests we are more flexible than trait and type theorists would have us believe. Alter Ego is the name I've given to the theory and to the associated personality questionnaire I've developed. It's an acronym which stands for "Achieving Lives Team Effort Role.....Enhancing Generative Outcomes".**

The basic idea behind it is that as humans we can change our personality. While doing that takes substantial effort, we can also bring great flexibility to how we change. My belief is that when we learn to change at this fundamental level we do not have to experience the snap back or stress after a period of time which type or temperament theorists predict, such as those who work with MBTI or the McQuaig system. Also, as with all learning, the more we make use of this flexibility the less we turn to personality as an excuse for not being able to perform in a particular context either professionally or personally and consequently the more we can achieve and the more generative we can become.

### Personality

NLP would suggest the word "personality" is a nominalisation. What is meant by this is "personality" is in fact a highly complex, dynamic process which has been reduced to a static noun. Nominalisation has the effect of portraying the complex in a simplistic way as though we could pick up a packet of "personality" at the supermarket and put it in our shopping trolley. The reason this is problematic is this simplification provides the impression that we all know what we are talking about when we use the word "personality". However a bit of Socratic questioning yields very different answers from different people concerning the meaning of "personality" and thus the realisation we actually are very unsure of what we are talking about.

Statistically the evidence seems quite clear: we do not change that much throughout our life. The doyens of trait theory tell us:

"Personality traits are indeed unchanging; we leave to other authors the question of whether they are unchangeable." (Costa & McCrae, 1994 pp.21-22)

As both a psychologist and an NLP practitioner my journey started with wanting to answer this question of whether or not we can change at this fundamental level.

## Parts and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)

So in beginning my journey, which led me to Alter Ego as a theory of personality, I started with the clinical disorder of DID in order to begin to understand how this process of “personality” worked. What DID seems to show us from the start is that personality is not a unitary function. Not only is this apparent from the clinical work done, but also our natural language makes use of metaphors readily, to give us clues as to the nature of the normal unconscious workings of “personality”. Phrases such as “Oh I don’t feel myself today” or “I don’t know what comes over me”, or “turning green with envy or seeing red” suggest a potential multiplicity of personalities. Trait theorists will dismiss these instances as situational adjustments; however, they don’t feel like that when we are in the moment. The experience is that momentarily we literally do experience these metaphorical states as though they are real experiences. At a very deep part of our neurology temporarily our personality is no longer the driving force of our life ... something else is. However the expectation is that we soon return to our normal self which takes over again and we present ourselves to the world in a relatively stable way; and indeed in difficult situations, and as a result of learning, make more cognitive and contrived adjustments to our interactions compared to those times when our unconscious mind seems to do so on our behalf. My contention is that this normative perspective is unfounded and our metaphors illuminate the presence of a more dynamic and multi-faceted way of being in the world.

### Authenticity as a driver of singular personalities

The fascinating book “The Minds of Billy Milligan” (Keyes 1982) tells the story of the first person acquitted of serious crimes on account of having multiple personalities, 24 to be precise. In the book Authenticity and Capability seem to be at the forefront of Milligan’s mind when both the court and Dr George suggests these 24 “personalities” need to be fused so as to break the amnesic barrier which isolated them from each other.

There is a time when two of Billy’s personalities begin to merge in therapy. “Tommy” and “Allen” had fused for an hour and according to Milligan it had felt very weird. He was concerned because he didn’t want any of the other personalities to die or lose their talent on account of fusing. An outside perspective seemed to support the justification of this fear when a nurse reported an instance when she heard Milligan playing the drums:

“Only Allen had played them before, in this fused state he was obviously not as good as Allen had been on his own. ‘I feel like I am stealing Allen’s talent,’ he told her. ‘Are you still Tommy?’ ‘I’m a combination and I don’t really have a name now. That bothers me.’”

In the book there is a superordinate personality called “The Teacher” who sits behind the scene observing all that goes on as the other 23 personalities take the spotlight sequentially in the world and do their thing. Ernest Hilgard (1977) calls this part “The Hidden Observer”. For Hilgard the first demonstration of the Hidden Observer was in a case of hypnotic deafness. In answer to the question whether at some level the person really could hear the blocks of wood being banged together, it transpired there was; and it was the “Hidden



Observer” who was doing the hearing, whilst the rather bored experimental subject busied himself doing a statistical problem. Hilgard’s research finds the same phenomenon occurring in hypnotic analgesia, with the “Hidden Observer” feeling the pain whilst the conscious experience is that of being totally pain free.

Psychologist John Rowan (1990) is of the opinion that the idea of “people inside us” is quite normal and has even suggested, as a result of his own research, the mean number of sub-personalities within each normal person is 6.5. He regards the concept of unity of personality as a social construct with multiplicity being punished as it begins to threaten the ease with which social order, predictability and reliability can be attained.

In the clinical condition of DID, context is king. For Billy Milligan each of the 24 personalities came into existence to deal with the fact the core personality could not cope in a particular situation. The “Teacher” however talks of an interesting distinction between people inside of us and personalities inside of us. There came a time when he began to take on board the characteristics of some of the other people without switching, he himself having to take responsibility for the attitudes and behaviours of the other people. When working with Tommy’s CB (Citizen Band) equipment the “Teacher” heard himself say aloud: “What am I doing, broadcasting without a license is illegal” ... then without switching to Tommy he said aloud: “What the hell do I care?” Thus the key question for us as individuals is: How can I integrate at one level and not lose the immense capability and authenticity of the sub personality, who has split off at another level?

### Alter Ego

When someone in a coaching relationship with me fills in the Alter Ego questionnaire there is no assumption of normality at all. Alter Ego is a discussion document which assists me in starting a conversation about 9 dimensions which are commonly known as patterns of behaviour and language. In terms of questionnaire construction I am afraid the dimensions quite simply were plucked out of 20 years’ experience and regarded as dimensions which were important in explaining human functioning. Drawing from the work of Bruce Lipton (2008), each dimension is expressed as a metaphor of energy. Unless we are energised in similar ways it is hypothesised we will struggle to communicate effectively, irrespective of the conscious strategies we adopt. These dimensions can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1 - 9 Dimensions of Alter Ego and their “energy” configuration

Bi-Polar Dimension	“Energy” Characteristic
Proactive – Reactive	Energy Initiator
Away from – Towards	Energy Direction
External – Internal	Energy Regulation
Options – Procedures	Energy Shape/size
Extravert – Introvert	Energy Location
Small Chunk – Large Chunk	Energy Latitude
Feeling – Thinking	Energy Impeller
Trusting – Untrusting	Energy Gateway
Matching – Miss-matching	Energy Texture

Additionally, the idea that someone will fill the questionnaire out one day in a similar way to the way in which they will fill it out another day, I regard as a social construct which constrains us as well as giving us the convenient excuse of “this is who I am”. Just as Milligan’s “Teacher” finally recognised the people inside of him were extensions of himself, so too Alter Ego assumes that we have parts inside of us; and even though we may be responsible for them, they cannot perform and do their thing within the context/s which created them, unless we let them off the lead so to speak. The reason so many of us struggle with internal conflicts is that our “Teacher” insists on keeping all of our personalities on the lead at the same time. Consequently an unearthly chatter prevents us fully appreciating the context within which we find ourselves and knowing which of our sub-personalities should be let off the lead in order to act out in an excellent way on behalf of the whole personality. At the heart of each of the 9 Bi-polar dimensions is a story for each individual that coherently tells them why they sit where they do on each dimension and how in differing contexts they can fluently move up and down that dimension; as all the while “The Teacher” on behalf of the whole lets different personalities off the lead to do what needs to be done.

Ray Cattell (1997) would suggest personality is that which permits prediction of what one will do in a given situation. Similarly Block, Weiss and Thorne (1997) would regard personality as the more or less stable internal factors that make one person’s behaviour consistent from one time to another and different from the behaviour other people would manifest in comparable situations. However the psychologist who would most speak in accordance with the perspective of Alter Ego would be Will Schutz (1997) who suggested personality is the person I choose to be at this point in my life to fulfil my needs, both conscious and unconscious. It is this provision of choice that Alter Ego claims to bring to the lives of people which traditional personality theory seems to rob them of.

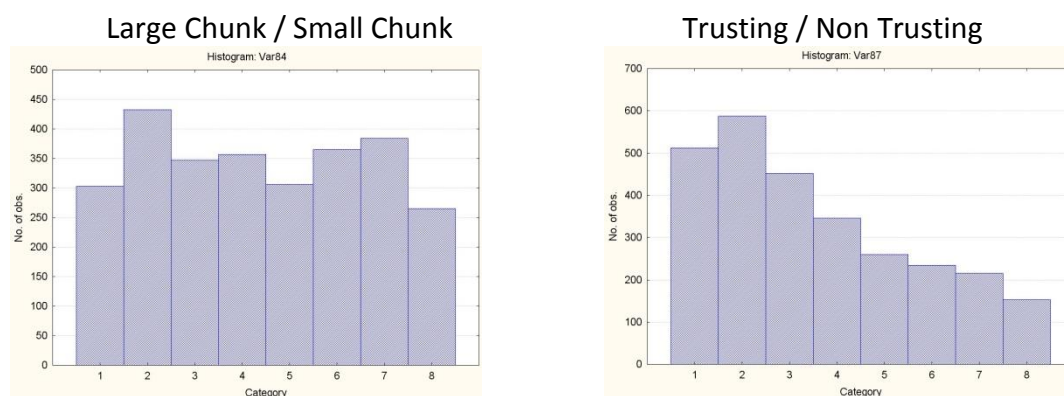
### Statistical verification

The credibility of personality questionnaires is generally held to stand or fall on their statistical merits. If I wanted to be precious about construct validity and the statistical properties of Alter Ego I would be expecting a bi-modal distribution, representing two normal distributions at each pole of the dimension. However, even in the well-known MBTI, which should (in representing Jungian type theory) return such constructs, we find in fact that it does not; with the manual providing reasons, and pointing out such distributions are rare and only to be found in populations of highly developed people (Briggs Myers 1985 p157).

Below are a couple of examples drawn from the research data gathered in developing the Alter Ego questionnaire. The reader can see that the graph for the NLP Meta Program “Large chunk / Small chunk” might begin to approach something like a bi-modal distribution; however the Meta Program “Trusting / Untrusting” shows a big skew towards Trusting. Whether this represents the population who tend to use Alter Ego generally speaking, or whether it represents a social desirability effect or something else is of course open to conjecture. In NLP of course we are of the opinion that there are no wrong answers as both poles of a Meta Program can be useful in some context. However despite this

presupposition there can be a skew for some dimensions. For instance generally it is more socially desirable to be regarded as trustworthy rather than the opposite untrustworthy. This is demonstrated in the research of the 16PF5 which found a trusting mind set is correlated with the global domain of agreeableness in the NEO PI-R (Rossier et al. 2004). As a result participants might not answer as honestly as they should along this dimension, wanting to hide from others and maybe even themselves that they tend to be rather vigilant and sceptical concerning other people, one could almost say disagreeable.

The key point to grasp is that Alter Ego could conduct item analysis all day long in an attempt to get the right shapes and if it did, it would miss the point – which is to provide descriptive feedback and not a normative prescription. Alter Ego is not about fitting people into statistical shapes, it is about having a discussion concerning who a person needs to be at a particular stage of their life in order to achieve outcomes which are important to them. As a result of this discussion people discover they can choose to be whoever they wish.



## Summary

Whether it is Donald Super (1980) or Eric Erikson (1950), the idea that as we progress through life we need to change and adapt effectively to the different challenges we encounter, is a key idea behind Alter Ego. During these life stages we indeed may get away with making the kind of situational adjustments trait theorists allude to; however, at key points in our lives we need to make more than pre-conscious situational adjustments and re-invent ourselves in order to keep in the flow, moving forwards with purpose, direction and innovation. People who cannot do this get stuck at certain life stages, working from a foundation which is not fit for purpose and wondering why more superficial linguistic and behavioural strategies do not work. They discover the more they change, the more they stay the same; or more elegantly in French: “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose”. The intention behind Alter Ego is to empower my clients and all who encounter the questionnaire to recognise the rabbit hole goes very much deeper and to enable them to go there with confidence so as to make the required alterations and refurbish the burrow to form the best possible of homes.

I hope you have enjoyed these thoughts and if you would like to have a go at filling out Alter Ego free of charge, please go to [www.achieving-lives.co.uk](http://www.achieving-lives.co.uk) and click on the personality questionnaire link in the bottom right hand corner.



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## Review: “The Leadership Shadow” by Erik de Haan & Anthony Kasozi

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*Ken Smith*

**Some years ago, in another life, I was asked to put together a competence framework for my employing organisation. Having gratifyingly emerged from the quality assurance group with the members’ enthusiastic endorsement, I then presented the framework to my sponsor group of Directors for sign-off. My sense of pained consternation has faded down the years but the memory of how the framework was received has somehow remained with me, not just on account of the rather brutal way in which my submission was critiqued but more so because of the surprising contempt with which the inclusion of a set of behavioural indicators under the title of “managing yourself” was dismissed.**

I wonder what my erstwhile colleagues would make of Erik de Haan’s and Anthony Kasozi’s book, which states its ambition as helping “you understand more deeply and live more truly the critical aspects that shape your leadership performance: your leadership “input” (you as a person) and your leadership “outcome” (your impact).”

Critical to the authors’ stance is their view of leadership as a relational process, a view which puts aside trait and situational models in order to “get closer to the intractable realities of leadership.” In doing this they begin by offering a definition of leadership which is compelling in its simplicity:

“Leadership is the function that is devoted to enhancing an organisation’s effectiveness.”

Out of this definition, it follows that leadership rests not in the hands of a single leader but is something to which many inside and even outside an organisation can contribute; and that it is experienced by the leader and the led through definable if greatly nuanced patterns of behaviour.

Before opening up the detail of these patterns, the authors give us their account of the changing context in which leadership now plays out and the great risk of hubris which this newly emerging context so easily seems to engender. They contend that avoiding exhaustion and intolerable stress can elicit an excessive self-assertion grounded in unmerited claims of worth and capability. The very act of becoming a leader, of finding yourself or of taking upon yourself the act of leading, can bring out the best and worst in you. This is so because, in bringing out the best while attempting to deal with the great hurricane of what seemingly must be dealt with, the act of leading inevitably results in the suppression or projection on to others of those aspects of ourselves which we would rather not face. When this is overdone, we go into what the authors call “overdrive”, with damaging consequences for ourselves and those around us: “We can be pushed or push



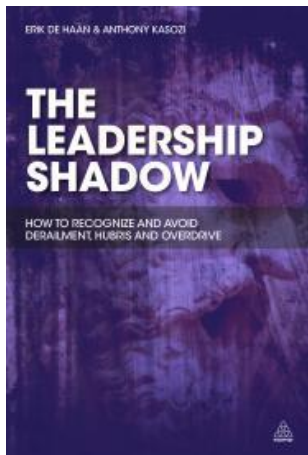
ourselves into a balancing effort that overshoots, and that we have difficulty in recovering from.” Consequently de Haan and Kasozi encourage leaders to step up “in a new way ... by developing the ability to work with change in a less driven way and employing more balance,” a balance which comes from an honest familiarity with the light and the shadow of their leadership.

The book is primarily addressed to leaders rather than to coaches and falls into three parts, each headed with an introduction respectively to the importance of “framing the leadership dance”, of “leading oneself” and of “invisibility”. A number of small chapters offer readers opportunities for structured reflection using the material preceding them; though they are encouraged to look for coaching to support their reflection. Among the exercises, I found the core qualities quadrant (drawn from Daniel Ofman) attractively intriguing, tied into the notion that the observation of annoying behaviours in others can open up the exploration of your own shadow, as you may simply be observing a part of it that you have hitherto packaged away.

At the core of the book is the collection of the eleven leadership patterns identified by the authors. The patterns are clustered around the three leadership functions of supporting, inspiring and containing; with each pattern carrying an evocatively metaphorical label. The light and the dark side of each is described, drawing on DSM-5 (for readers unfamiliar with the territory, this is Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association as a diagnostic tool) and weaving in the five behavioural drivers commonly found in Transactional Analysis. The descriptors include paragraphs on how the pattern is experienced by those working to or near the leader; and on how to work with the leader when they are demonstrating the pattern. The authors follow this up with material on hubris, how this can manifest itself and what antidotes can be found for it; the nature of resilience; and leader derailment, with the proposition that more could be done to select out leaders with related derailing characteristics. I was particularly taken by their comments about discretion being the currency of achievement in leadership and the bribe that will corrupt leaders.

“A leader’s task is fundamentally altruistic and selfless, just like the task of an executive coach: to intervene so that others can perform”. p.269

The kind of categorisation of behaviour and personality the book provides is likely to appeal more to coaches who place a strong value on their diagnosis of their clients; and who are open not only to perspectives allied to the DSM but also to the challenge of absorbing and getting into the muscle of their practice the rich descriptions offered by the book. The author’s engaging labelling of the patterns will help with this. Coaches who may feel that such labels freeze the dynamics of the client’s information at the expense of its inherent and often elusive logic, however, may perhaps be less well disposed. And I think the point made early on about the distributed nature of leadership, implying that a more systemic perspective will follow, gets somewhat lost in the strong focus on individuals’ patterns. Nonetheless, the book lays out in an engaging way “an inventory of realistic and ‘observable’ overdrive patterns” certainly worth taking a little time to wander through, not least on account of how this inventory could enable coaches to be more alert to the leader’s and their own projections when working together.



I found most appealing the more discursive parts of the book, where the authors make some admirably provocative challenges to the general orthodoxies found in the leadership literature; in particular the refreshing question mark they place over the very notion of transformational leadership; and their appreciation of weak leadership over the endless imperative for the infallibly strongly. Also with resonance for me were their view of leadership as having at its core the creation of meaning for others and for the leader him or herself; and their scepticism regarding the over-rewarding of leaders and the associated inappropriately high regard in which they are held, given the great uncertainty over the nature and scale of the difference which senior leaders actually make. The related distinction drawn between effective and successful leaders is telling.

The book is in large part a repost to the positivist, linear and quantitative perspectives on leadership that have dominated writing about it for many decades. The authors close by taking a brief look at alternative, much older, non-western models leadership as a precursor to the final paradox they offer us, reinforcing their advocacy of leadership as a relational process:

“... for leaders to lead, the focus cannot merely be on them: it has to be on others. At the same time, for leaders to be able to focus on others they have to be aware of and focussed on themselves.”

So perhaps after all, it is a little about managing yourself!



## **Coaches' Resilience – a research project into how coaches sustain their own level of resilience and its impact on daily coaching practice**

*Léonie Akkerman*

**This article reports on a research project I recently undertook as part of my MSc in Coaching and Development at University of Portsmouth, looking at principles and skills necessary to develop a coach's self-regulation and self-awareness with focus on resilience as a way towards obtaining these skills.**

### **Introduction**

I think it's true to say that the effects of the global economic downturn of recent years are likely to negatively affect mental health. Stress, anxiety and depression-related disorders have increased and have led to greater absenteeism and withdrawal from work. A study published by EU-OSHA (2009) suggests, of all lost working days, between 50% and 60% is due to stress.

Stress can be defined as the *sense* of being unable to cope, or the *perception* that someone is unable to meet the demands placed upon them. Our unconscious immediate response to this threat is to 'fight or flight'. One way of taking control of the stress response is through building resilience. Wagnild cited by Driver (2011) confirms that resilience is highly significant for our physical and psychological health and could prevent or even reverse stress, depression, fear and anxiety.

According to Rosetti (2012), not only can coaches be equally affected by the existing tough economic climate, working with more stressed clients can weaken a coach's inner resources and undermine their own resilience. It seems doubly important for a coach to remain resilient given that as resilience can be transmissible. As coaches we can infect our clients with our own level of resilience or lack of it. (Johnstone – cited by Rosetti, 2012)

Since a coach and the client can both be challenged by the current economic decline and have to deal with stress subsequent from that, I am interested to explore more about how coaches assess and maintain their own level of resilience and how their level of resilience impacts their coaching practice.

### **Approach to the research**

I had three objectives for my research:

1. Come to a definition of resilience
2. Identify ways how coaches assess or maintain their level of resilience
3. Determine how coaches' level of resilience impact their practice

I completed the primary research from the perspective of the coach. This would allow me insight into a coach's resilience and their experience of it in a practice setting. Taking the perspective of the client in to account would have added greater value and objectivity. Nevertheless, given the timeframe for completion of this assignment I chose not to.

I carried out an online survey, using a short questionnaire to gather data from coaches about their definition of resilience, their behaviour on maintaining their level of resilience and their experience and opinion on the impact of their own level of resilience on their practice. The questionnaire consisted of open questions and lists to be ranked.

My aim was to collect 20 responses. Out of a total population of 81 coaches who meet the research criteria (professional coaches with over 8 years coaching experience having frequent supervision sessions) a sample of 22 completed the survey giving a response rate of 27%.

### Definitions of resilience

It appeared little literature was available specifically on coach's resilience. Therefore I took a wider look through positive psychology, adult learning and leadership development, which provided me with a greater understanding of what resilience could be.

Our level of resilience tells us how we respond to adversity. We respond either consciously – the long road - or intuitively - the short road.

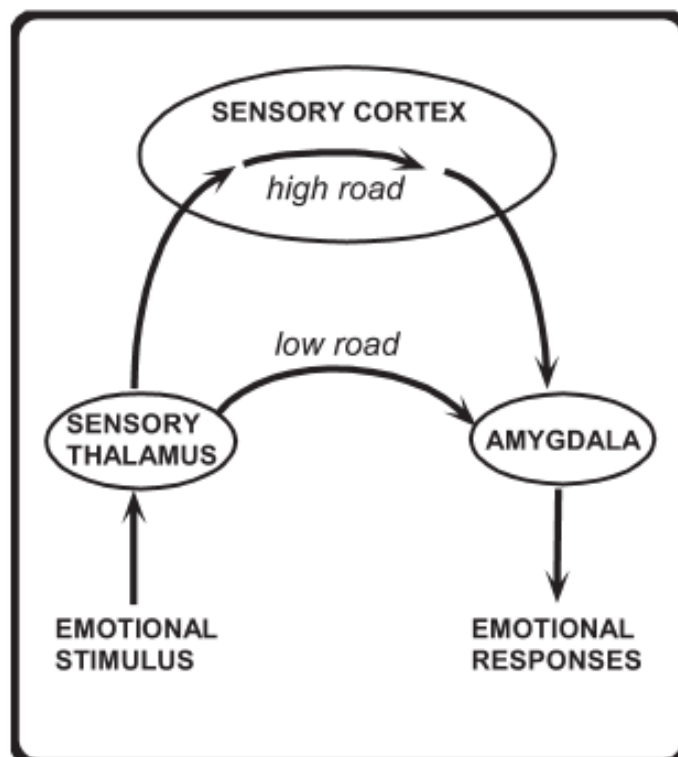


Figure 1: High road and low road to the amygdala (Lewis, Haviland-Jones & Feldman Barret, 2008)

Knowing that resilience is related to *how* we respond to adversity has consequences for a definition of resilience. The most commonly found definition of resilience is: the ability to bounce back after adversity (see e.g. Driver (2011), Margolis & Stoltz (2010) and Fredrickson (2010)). Within this definition Bhamra (2011) distinguishes a difference in contexts including: ecological, metallurgical (i.e. material substances), psychological, supply chain management, strategic management and safety engineering. Despite these different contexts the concept of resilience is closely related to "... the capability and ability of an element to return to a stable state after a disruption and relates to both individual and organisational responses to turbulence and discontinuities..."

Bhamra also suggests that resilience is a skill that can be learned. For Seligman (2006), personal resilience can be defined as a way of *thinking* which determines your ability to overcome, steer through, and bounce back when adversity strikes. In contrast Coutu (2002) sees resilience as a set of characteristics: acceptance of reality, possession of a strong belief that life is meaningful, and the ability to improvise. A popular definition is given by Rosetti (2012), in the term 'bouncebackability', proposed as a character trait of flexibility in tough times. It's also worth mentioning Campbell (2009) who suggests that not only does resilience comprise the capability and ability to overcome setbacks and to absorb any learning offered by those setbacks, but that this should happen quickly and at a minimum cost.

### Sustaining resilience in coaches

If, as Seligman tells us, our thinking style defines our level of resilience, how then can our thinking style be influenced? Reivich & Shatte (2002) state that we are able to control our thinking style through: learning our ABCs (Adversity, Beliefs, Consequences), avoiding thinking traps and detecting "icebergs". Driver (2011) asserts that resilience can be built through experiencing positive emotions, since this increases the range of our thinking on problems. Goleman (2013) specifically recommends developing the left-brain, the part of the brain associated with linear and analytical thought, through mindfulness practice allowing us more choice in how to respond to a stimulus.

Rosetti (op cit.) suggests that a key way for coaches to sustain resilience is through undertaking reflective practice and/or coaching supervision. This is supported by Grant et al (2009) who found that having a supportive relationship in supervision and setting self-concordant and personal value goals, together sustain resilience. Johnstone, cited by Bouch (2012), suggests coaches identify: what strengths they draw on; what strategies they use; what resources do they turn to and what insights make a difference for them. I used this model in the primary research to determine coaches' reflective strategies.

Another interesting view on sustaining resilience is presented by Campbell (2009) who states: "...When the level of resilience is highest, the effort is considerable: it necessitates either letting go of control or undertaking an extremely new or different form of activity to extend learning..." For me this implies that moving out of your comfort zone allows you to sustain your level of resilience.

The more general area of wellbeing and health in organisations is also relevant here, for



example the programme offered by Vitae, in New Zealand. This and other programmes, e.g. *experiencelife.com*, emphasise building resilience as a continuous process. In my primary research I drew on Warner's (2012) seven principles of resilience and on the top tips for Developing Personal Resilience for Portsmouth University Staff; which focus in a clearly stated way on what to rely on when facing adversity and how to behave.

### The impact of resilience on a coach's practice

Resilience is transmittable: coaches can act as an 'infectious agent' passing on their energy to their clients (Rosetti 2012). This implies that when a coach is not performing in an optimal way, this will affect the client's experience of the coaching. The relationship is somewhat circular, as stressed clients and organisations can affect coaches' resilience. A parallel process operates whereby coaches may play out unknowingly the dynamics and energies they absorb from their coaching relationships. Exposed to toxic environments and perhaps confused by unclear contractual obligations and indistinct boundaries, coaches can unconsciously be pulled into defensive behaviours. So it follows that critical to the success of coaching is the awareness a coach brings of their level of resilience and how they manage themselves.

Ethical codes published by, for example, the International Coaching Federation, The Association for Coaching and the International Coaching Community, alert coaches who experience interference of any kind that will impact their performance, of the necessity of withdrawing from coaching until they are able safely to resume. This implies that a coach should have strong awareness of their physical and mental state, of their level of resilience and when they are in- or off-balance. A coach becomes an even better resource through maintaining their resilience (Driver 2011).

### Research findings

#### Coaches' definition of resilience

My research showed that there is not just one generally accepted definition of resilience, neither in the literature nor in the responses given by the coaches in the research sample. This could mean that the exact definition is determined by individual coaches' interpretation through the lived experience of their practice. All 22 respondents used different wording. One word that was most commonly used, however, was 'ability', which may mean that resilience is perceived as a skill that can be learned (e.g. Coutu 2002).

Looking at the difference between resilience in general and coaches' resilience, my research suggests this difference is connected to the coach's ability to cope with interference in order to be present with the coachee. But this is a wary conclusion since the response on defining the coach's resilience was limited and there and the client's resilience may be a factor within the coaching perceived effectiveness.

#### Coach's way to sustain their resilience

**Model 1 - Top Tips for Developing Personal Resilience (Portsmouth University (n.d.), Management and Staff Development)**

Only 23% of the sample group ranked all the aspects the same. There seems to be little homogeneity in the ranking given by respondents. This could mean there is little explicit preference or the sample group was not large enough to show any explicit preference.

'Helping others' did not appear in the ranking by the coaches. This means that from the 11 aspects, this one does not come forward as being most important but is also not seen as least important. Ranked 1st: 'staying positive', requires mental attitude in order to cope with difficulties, whereas 'helping others' is quite specific and can be brought in practice by offering someone your help; the distinction here being, helping someone cross the street as against a challenging thought process distracting the amygdala. When this would be a trend among a large group of coaches, not many coaches would prefer to offer a helping hand.

**Model 2 - Building Resilience Principles (Warner, R. (n.d.) Seven principles of building personal resilience: practical ways of growing through adversity)**

'Generating positive feelings' was not valued with importance with sufficient frequency to make it visible in the ranking. This does not say that it is not important. It may be that knowing positive feelings does impact your resilience and thinking style (Fredrickson, 2003), especially when one compares the responses between 'generating positive feelings' and 'connecting to your purpose in life' (ranked 1st). Should this outcome be significant for a larger group of coaches, 'generating positive feelings' would not be '*top of mind*'.

**Model 3 - Ways to preserve resilience through building energy according to Schwartz in Driver (2011)**

In this model 'eating healthily' is not ranked with the 1st five, when looking at the total response. This implies 'eating healthily' is neither important nor unimportant. This in turn could mean the interconnectedness of body and mind (Whitmore, 1992) is generally not known among the respondents. It could also mean that 'eating healthily' is a common behaviour and the respondents are not aware of its importance but are not conscious of their own behaviour and the impact it has in daily life. Should this outcome become a trend, 'eating healthily' would not be it.

Overall looking at the three models it seems the lesser choice in aspects, the more explicit the same ranking within this specific target group.

### **The impact of resilience on a coach's practice**

Of the respondents, 36% explicitly state their resilience level has impact on their practice. This implies they are aware of their level of resilience and how it impacts.

Another 36% are aware of their level of resilience and how it impacts their own being. This could imply they are also aware that it could impact their coaching, but this did not come forward explicitly. This could mean that the question was not stated explicitly enough or was misinterpreted.

The other 28% did not state anything on the impact of their own resilience on their being nor on their coaching. This could mean that the question was not stated clearly enough or was misinterpreted, or their awareness level is to be questioned. It could also mean their knowledge of the impact of resilience is limited. Should they lack awareness, we could conclude they are not good coaches (!), since requirements of the ICF, for example, state a coach should be fully present to the coachee, which would certainly imply self-awareness.

## Recommendations

It would have been interesting to have applied a separate measure to assess the resilience of the respondents; and to know if any of them actively assessed their own resilience as part of their reflective practice. It would also have been interesting to find out if a larger sample group would have shown more homogeneity in the ranking of the factors within the models to see what trends emerged.

My research suggests the need to look further into a number of questions:

- What is the difference between the general definition of resilience provided in current literature and coaches' resilience; and what is the relationship between the definition of coaches' resilience and coaching presence.
- By what means, besides supervision and reflective practice, should coaches sustain their resilience - yearly assessment, maybe?
- How do supervision and other reflective practices generate and sustain resilience?
- What is the necessity of making a universal self-reflection instrument available in order to sustain resilience within or outside supervision and what should the content be? Would Johnstone's model on Personal Strategies to preserve resilience (Bouch, 2012) have enough impact or should it be elaborated to sustain resilience?
- What is the possibility to secure a certain level of resilience? Since resilience is invoked when facing adversity would this be possible?
- What is the relationship between the coach's self-awareness of their own resilience and the impact of this awareness on their coaching?
- Is there a necessity for a coach to meet a certain level of resilience in order to satisfy professional requirements to be fully present with the client?
- If and how a coach would be able to notice the level of resilience dropping or rising in the client?
- How can a more specific insight be obtained on the effects on clients when coaches practice without being resilient?

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## Virtual Coaching – connecting across time and space

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*Bev Hancock*

**I came to virtual coaching with a question – is it possible to have a deep, meaningful coaching interaction using virtual technology? As a coach working at varying levels of depth with coachees and an avid techno-junkie, I was intrigued by how coaching interactions have changed since the advent of social media and web 2.0 technology and beyond.**

### **So what's different?**

Coaches have been working both face-to-face and at a distance for a number of years and recently Skype coaching has become increasingly popular as broadband quality improves. When the video quality is good, it is possible to pick up the nuances of body language and presence that are usually available in face-to-face coaching. So the question was – what is the big deal about virtual coaching if there is not really that much difference?

I started to explore the continuum between face-to-face at one end and full virtual reality at the other and discovered an untapped richness of potential coaching interactions.

More and more, people are communicating through text and images and videos have become the learning media of choice. Through platforms like Second Life, it is possible to play out various scenarios using avatars. Whereas traditional coaching requires that coach and coachee be present simultaneously, in the virtual world it is possible to work online or offline, or even to replace the coach with an automated process. The virtual environment also enables the coach to use a range of learning tools as part of the coaching interaction. Virtual coaching is generally accepted as distance coaching using any of a range of technological tools. These tools could include real-time interaction using video, voice or text chat and offline tools like coaching platforms, discussion forums, video, document repositories and social media platforms. As coaching moves deeper down the virtual continuum, there is room for coaches to create a coaching offering that is self-managed allowing for individual reflection and application. The wisdom and skill of the coach is inherent in the design of the coaching programme rather than in the direct coaching conversation. This could also serve to moderate the cost of coaching and make it accessible to a wider audience.

In 2014 I completed a Master's qualitative research project on virtual coaching with three coaches using video, voice and text-based coaching. It was during this process that I met Bob Griffiths, the creator of CoachMaster™. Through the CoachMaster™ platform I was intrigued by the additional coaching elements he has built into the programme. Although CoachMaster can be used with video and voice coaching as well, it is structured to work



with text conversations (similar in format to instant messaging). But more importantly, it comes with a range of GROW-based question sets to guide the coach through the coaching process. Although CoachMaster can build question sets from a range of methodologies, the GROW question sets were chosen because it is a universally accepted coaching model. To broaden the scope of the coaching interactions, we used a combination of video, voice and text based coaching with a number of coachees each to explore the potential of each medium in the coaching engagement. Bob, an experienced virtual coach was joined by Alan Ahlfeldt, a coaching psychologist, and Alroy Trout, an executive coach and strategic facilitator.

Moving between the personal video/audio to a text-based paradigm required some adjustment from all of us. The pace, the quality of the silence, the way you listen, build rapport and the way the coach's presence shows up into this space are qualitatively different. Although many of the same principles as in face-to-face coaching apply, the way they are applied is different according to the medium used. In this article I will share some of these differences as they emerged from my research.

### Preparing for the technological experience

The first and most essential difference is coming to terms with the technology. Conducting the coaching in South Africa where the quality of the broadband connection is not great, we were faced with a number of common challenges: slow connections, poor video and audio connection, at times a slow connection speed which caused error messages and a delayed response time to text messages. We learned the importance of preparing and testing the technology prior to the coaching session and also that the coach needed to be flexible enough to change between technologies in order to minimise the disruption to the flow of coaching. It also highlighted the importance of preparing the coachee and to ensure they were comfortable with the coaching experience, especially if they are new to technology. There is a greater need for the coachee to take time to prepare for the coaching interaction both in terms of technological readiness and to ensure that their coaching space is conducive to a constructive and meaningful conversation.

### Text-based coaching

The contribution of text-based coaching to virtual coaching was an exciting one. Seen as the poorer cousin of rich verbal interaction, part of me was expecting to see this view reflected in the feedback. And certainly there are times, especially where heightened emotion is involved, that text-based coaching would seem not to be suitable. The response, however, contradicted this and was overwhelmingly positive. As the coaching clients were given the opportunity to experience both the personal interaction and the text-based approach, they were able to compare their experiences. Positive feedback was that this form of coaching allows for a more thoughtful, structured approach to thinking through an issue and as a result greater clarity. Seeing internal thoughts and feelings expressed in writing made them concrete and thus easier to deal with. Having the full transcript of the conversation after the coaching engagement for reflection and follow up was seen as a useful feature. It enabled the coach to revisit the conversation in its entirety and to see what else could be emerging from the conversation that might have got lost in the moment. Coaches found

this a rich resource to revisit in preparation for the next coaching session; and having the facility to structure a goal and create action plans directly from the conversation stimulated the learning from the session.

### **Creating the connection with the coachee**

#### **Rapport**

Despite the qualitative difference between face-to-face and virtual coaching, the lack of physical interaction did not appear to have a substantial impact on the coach's ability to build rapport. Coachee and coach were encouraged to start with a video call so that a face-to-face introduction could take place. Coachees did find it easier to relate to the personality of the coach as it is always good to put a face to the voice. However, possibly due to the quality of the video connection, the conversation settled into a voice only or text only medium.

#### **Presence**

The coach's presence makes an important contribution to the quality of the coaching interaction. The coaching relationship works best when the coach brings their full attention and awareness, free of distraction. As the coaches reflected on the quality of their presence, some interesting stories emerged. All three coaches commented that their level of attention was actually heightened at times by the lack of visual interaction which can in itself be a distraction. It brought a different quality of internal attention and the deeper level of concentration allowed them to listen to the nuances of the language and the story of the coachee – either verbally or through text. It also changed the quality of their thinking, particularly during the silences in text-based coaching. On the flip-side, there is a temptation to become distracted and multi-task during these times and the coach's ability to be fully present needs conscious attention to ensure this does not happen. In preparing ourselves as coaches for the virtual coaching experience, questions arise about our clients' ability to imagine; to create; co-create; and to think; and about the importance of putting thoughts into words for clearer understanding — ultimately about how to make tangible the coachee's thinking.

#### **The coaches' personalities**

The impact of the coaches' personalities on their individual coaching interactions was an exciting finding for me. Each coach followed a similar process, used the same technology and coached within the parameters of the study. And yet their own individual personalities and coaching styles emerged. Bob seamlessly worked through coaching issues using his expertise on CoachMaster™ and his structured approach and quality of thinking was evident in the client's solution. Alan brought his deep knowledge of personality to the interaction which unlocked aspects of "stuckness" to open up a whole new way of seeing things. Alroy's ability to connect with people at a deep level was so evident in the quality of the relationships that developed in such a short time despite some significant technological challenges.

## Deepening the connection

Techniques and skills for deepening the connection also emerged from the research:

- Coaches can draw on different empathetic techniques to correctly define and contextualise their coachee's emotions. These included using the coachee's name more often and clarifying the emotional response through questioning and dialogue. There is a great emphasis on words in the virtual environment, in the absence of visual and/or verbal cues. There is an increased emphasis on tone, the choice of the words themselves and the manner in which they are delivered. When virtual coaches are coaching without clear video support, they would seem to need greater expertise in working with verbal communication and the ability to listen to and interpret the emotion and meaning inherent in language and silence.
- Coaches using text based coaching, should be aware that the lack of verbal cues can diminish clarity of feedback and greater care should be taken to ensure that it is correctly received and interpreted. Because there are no confirming visual or verbal cues, there is a greater risk of misinterpretation in written communication. Consequently, the skill to clarify and confirm meaning in writing through dialogue and clarifying questions becomes important.
- Coaches need to be sensitive to which media will work most appropriately in the moment rather than be set on a particular medium that meets their preference. Richer media (live voice and video platforms e.g. Skype) are perceived as personal and allow the coach to have a better sense of the energy, pace and tone which is useful in interpreting meaning and emotion. Leaner media (like text-based platforms e.g. CoachMaster™ and document sharing e.g. Dropbox) are useful for creating structure and sharing content.

## The quality of silence

In the virtual environment silence takes on new meaning. Silence is a powerful tool in coaching and when combined with physical presence and visual cues, it is easier to interpret. When separated via technology it could raise issues of uncertainty, anxiety and misinterpretation. When waiting for a reply, especially in text-based coaching internal dialogue – e.g. “did you hear me?” or “did you get that?” - may cause a disruption to the coaching flow and it is important that as part of contracting that these issues are discussed and possible avenues to connect and confirm are established. On the positive side, however, allowing coachees to take time to unpack their thinking, to reflect on their experience and to structure their response is one of the benefits of the virtual environment. Becoming comfortable with this silence is the coach's challenge.

## More from less

The amplified learning experience was also something that flowed naturally from these coaching conversations. Because virtual coaching can quickly access resources available from the vast learning landscape available online, each conversation naturally extended into a deeper learning experience. Alan preferred to do this as part of the conversation where he was able to provide links to learning resources like TED videos and personality

assessments to be used between coaching conversations. In a Skype conversation this can be done using the instant messenger function or in the text conversation can be inserted directly into the conversation which provides context and saves the coach time. Alroy preferred following up with emails after the coaching conversation and went and searched for relevant audio, video and reading resources that would speak to the coachee's experience. Bob ensured that this learning conversation and agreed action plan was clearly mapped out in CoachMaster™ which was sent as a post-coaching report; whereas I particularly like the use of post-coaching reflective question frameworks as well. Because virtual coaching can be online or offline, the coaching conversation does not have to stop. If contracted as such, it can be an on-going, in the moment conversation that spans a period of time.

### Concluding thoughts

So I came to virtual coaching with a question – is it possible to have a deep, meaningful coaching interaction using virtual technology? In his feedback, Alroy describes coaching as a “sacred space” and whether that space is face-to-face or via technology we must never lose the reverence we have for what happens in that space. I saw deep and meaningful potential for this space. Even in three short coaching interventions, the coaching shift was there. The feedback from the coachees reported breakthrough insights, increased confidence and a deeper connection with who they were. It was not only about finding solutions, but also about that life-changing shift that makes coaching the powerful medium that it is. Lives were deepened and perceptions broadened. As I have travelled further into the virtual environment, I have begun to see wells of potential waiting to be explored. As we as coaches become pioneers into virtual coaching in deeper and more meaningful ways, we are only tickling the surface of what is possible. And with unknown territory comes both possibility and danger. I look forward to exploring this space some more.



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*And finally:*

*“Just as we need to know when and how to give ourselves fully to a task, so we need to know when and how to stop and rest.” - Stephen Batchelor*