

Academic Paper

Insight events in coaching sessions

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Abstract

There is little research available that describes or gives a picture of what happens in a coaching session. This paper provides a view of the events containing insight within coaching sessions. Using the lived experiences of six coach/client dyads, themes emerged as to the structure of the significant moment and wider events, before, during and after insight manifestation. Approached from a critical realist underpinning synergised with a relativist empirical methodology, this research suggests that there is a coming together of both coach and client in a shared, mirrored and physiological moment.

Keywords

Coaching, Insight, Events, Intuition, Awareness,

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Introduction

Experiences of insight and awareness moments in coaching hold a fascination for coaches and clients when they experience them. The crucial moments of insight in a coaching session, a time when a client appears to gain an understanding of what it is they are seeking, i.e. answers to the questions they pose, appear to be a key component of a successful coaching outcome. Coaches also appear to gain a significant amount of personal and professional satisfaction when these moments occur in session. It is the events that contain these moments that have been researched. Understanding more about these moments, can aid the coaching industry to understand and, perhaps enable a move toward an appreciation of how to trigger or even to replicate them over and again.

At the time of writing, somewhat surprisingly, there appears to be no literature that considers the congruence of a whole coaching session and therefore what a coaching session 'looks like'. A number of papers and case studies have provided a fuller understanding of how a typical coaching session is structured. Coupled with the lack of understanding of session structure, it also appears that there is no clear indication as to how long in time a typical coaching session lasts, or the location of the coaching session or the actual process of coaching. These decisions, it emerges, are predominantly made by the coach, guided by their own internal experiences. As a coaching session is in flow, significant moments may appear. In their research, de Haan et al. (2006, 2007,

2008a, 2008b, 2010a, 2010b, 2011 and 2015) have identified that no matter how experienced a coach is, doubts and anxieties still remain, especially at the most significant times during the session and wider assignment. Due to the research conducted by de Haan et al, coaches can begin to understand how these doubts can affect the coaching dyad and coaching relationship, yet a question still remains as to why these anxieties appear. One hypothesis is that perhaps coach training produces coaches trained in the trainer's own image. I suggest that both academics, and practitioners may be unknowingly providing an unclear message regarding the important processes and structures of coaching. An expert practitioner may well have no structure for a coaching session other than GROW (Whitmore, 1994) in mind, and within the session moments of insight may or may not manifest. De Haan (2010b) even suggested that insight perhaps is not the holy grail of coaching and that effective support may well be enough to achieve a successful outcome for the client. In academia there is some theory suggesting an underpinning foundation of the coaching session with a number of academics suggesting that coaching should follow transformative and reflective learning models (e.g. Cox 2013, Askew and Carnell, 2011) in order to be effective. Yet, if insight is the outcome that a client is seeking, then there appear to be few papers that really seek to identify what occurs at the moment of insight manifestation within the session. This lack of information is based upon what Fillery-Travis and Cox (2018) specifically refer to as the coaching waterline activities i.e. the very experience and coaching interaction by client and coach.

Researchers over the last decade have been concentrating upon questions such as 'Does coaching work?' and 'What are the key skills of a coach?' rather than seeking to understand the phenomenon itself. However, a number of researchers have been active in the insight and significant moment area. In their research, de Haan and the Ashridge Coaching Centre have been researching significant moments to uncover the effect upon the relational aspect. Whilst in his 2013 case study paper, Kets de Vries suggests that there are four stages of insight manifestation: preparation, incubation, illumination and verification. However, although Kets de Vries covers a lot of background, from the intrigue around the neuroscience experimentation through to the types of change that people may experience, his paper stops short of identifying the detail at a more in-depth, micro-sessional level. In discussing the creation of the 'good hour', the kinds of exchange that make tipping points more likely i.e. when all the coaching, learning and understanding comes together, he is expressing a wider view from his own empirical experience as a leadership coach. His view is more holistic: that preparation and incubation may take a substantial time to conclude before illumination occurs, and there are no time frames provided. His view is more from the social constructionist perspective, which leaves questions to be considered in terms of structure and mechanisms of the moment. To do this, research for the current paper was conducted on a more focused micro-level.

Insight is defined by Constable and Kiefer (2010, p.32) as a 'moment of transformation', transformation being the movement from one state to another. In coaching, this movement of knowledge from unknown to known is as Cox (2013) proposes, moving information and learning from the sub-conscious to consciousness.

There are a number of other writers who have written about the manifestation and encouragement of moments of insight. These writers have written about aha moments or magic moments, a phenomena that is difficult to describe due to their being so subjective. Constable and Kiefer (2013) state that 'new thoughts' (insights) are triggered from the subconscious in response to new learning and prompts, while Jones (2012, p.12) wholeheartedly disagrees, stating that 'nobody can have a truly new idea – all that happens is the combination of existing factors or notions, gained by observations or the remarks of others' and that new thoughts are due to the individuals' prior experiences, this correlates with Seifert et al.'s (1995) theory which suggests that the incubation phase is when the mind puts all the pieces of information into place to bring forward understanding.

The coach has always been told that they drive the process of coaching forward (Haneburg, 2011, p.30) suggesting that the coach provisions the stimulus or trigger moment for the client to

'experience a catalyst'. This is experienced as the movement towards insight, a paradigm shift, awareness or a eureka moment (Jones, 2012). Insight may manifest as a rapid and sudden knowing, like a 'bolt from the blue' (Kets de Vries, 2013, p.155) or indeed may arrive more slowly (Jones, 2012; Kets de Vries, 2013).

Looking at the effect of this moment, there is an understanding that this special moment is created through the positive relationship between coach and client (de Haan, 2010a and 2010b) in terms of 'posture' (MacLennan, 2015, p.44), 'curiosity' (Hanneberg, 2011, p.29), and 'crystallisation' (Kets de Vries, 2013, p.161). The abrupt moments of knowing, awareness and insight are predictably accompanied by a physiological response, a feeling of knowing or realising that the world is viewed differently. This moment was described by one respondent in the study as:

...it was almost as if I could feel those Tetris blocks just 'ding ding ding ding' into place...[it is as] if I've had a hard week at work and it's that first sip of scotch on a Friday evening eight o'clock, whatever it might be, you know, it's that sort of... this is that sort of feeling of reward...

This physiological response is also recognised by Brann (2014), Kets de Vries (2013) and Robinson, Morrow and Miller (2018). Brann states that the reason for the physiological feeling is potentially due to Palaeolithic heritage, 'the amygdala communicating with the hypothalamus to activate the production of adrenaline' (2014, p.34) whilst Kets de Vries (2013, p.157) suggests that it is due to feelings of 'exhilaration...[and] energy'. Robinson, Morrow and Miller more simply state that it is a surge of 'internal electricity' (2018, p.9). Although it would be advantageous to understand why there appears to be a combined physical and cognitive reaction, the important aspect is knowing that there could, and is likely to be, a physiological feeling at the moment of insight. This feeling is an indicator of insight manifestation.

Methodology

The aim of the research was to explore the events that lead to insight within coaching sessions. The research subject and question indicated that a subjective methodological approach, qualitative in nature, would be most suitable. A small number of dyads were recruited in order to obtain descriptive accounts. Semi-structured interviews held after the coaching sessions captured the essence of the significant moments and ensured the accounts were rich in content. Additionally, the coaching sessions themselves were recorded in order to break down the events to identify what was happening before, during and after the moment of insight.

A phenomenological approach was adopted to data gathering at the empirical level, however, the philosophical foundations of the research was Critical Realist. There are many who would suggest valid concerns that this synergy creates philosophical tensions, yet, when considering the Husserlian development of epistemics towards ontological being a connection can be made between Critical Realism and Husserlian phenomenology. The empirical level can be examined and explored by suspending objectivity and concentrating on the essence of lived experience (*epoché*) (Husserl, 2006). A limitation of Husserl's phenomenology, and reason for the academic anxieties, is not seeking to understand the nature of intentionality, but it is the drawback of not identifying the mechanisms, triggers and praxism within critical realism. As Bhaskar (2008, p.259) suggests: 'The intentionality of praxis is shown in the capacity to transform the world ... this is the starting point of all the major transcendental arguments that critical realism has employed.' What Bhaskar is suggesting is that decisions and influences have an effect on social and natural reality and therefore individual experiences should not be ignored providing that themes are drawn from the many rather than the individual, 'the real and the actual come to a fuller existence in the experience of the individuals and societies that incorporates the real world' (Budd, 2012, p.78). Within the complexity and intentionality of human social existence, causality can be identified and

add therefore add to knowledge: 'men are not passive spectators of a given world, but active agents in a complex one' (Bhaskar, 2008, p.107).

However, there is a limitation of phenomenology. The outcome of phenomenology is usually a rich and thick description of the essence of lived experience. Critical realism does not agree because of the need to understand the actual and identify the mechanisms and structures of the real. There is a requirement from the critical realist perspective to identify a 'so what' from the narrative, an acknowledgment that events happen and occur due to a deeper reason or 'casual power' (Danermark, 1997, p.198). It would appear to be wholly reasonable to adopt an ontologically realist yet epistemologically relativist position, an overlapping of post-positivism and phenomenology.

Method

The participant dyads were recorded in-session and later they took part in a semi-structured interview as close to the session as was possible, reducing the time available for reflections and deliberations. The following questions covering the before, during and after significant event were posed:

1. Which moments in the coaching were most significant? Identification of the moment if insight in the session according to the participant's perception.
2. What led to this discovery? Identification of the mechanisms that have influenced the moment's manifestation.
3. What happened just before this discovery? An expansion of detail.
4. What happened just after the discovery? Exploration of what happened just after the moment.
5. At the time, what did you feel (physiological response) about this discovery? To understand how the participant felt about this insight.
6. How does this moment compare to other moments of discovery? For me to understand how the client views the session in terms of other moments of insight.
7. What happens now because of the discovery? How does this insight affect the individual in the moment?
8. How did the moment of discovery affect the coaching?
9. Are there any other implications of the discovery? An opportunity for the participant to expand on any identified points.
10. How do you conclude that the discovery has changed you? An opportunity to learn how events containing insight in coaching have affected the individual moving forward.

Following the interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted of both the client and coach interviews in order to provide key themes. These key themes then provided a descriptive output to show what the coaches and clients experienced:

Coaches' Experience

The coaches were engaged in the flow of coaching when their own insight was provided to the client. This gave the client additional information to consider. Having given their clients space to think, the coaches became aware of an important moment of learning for their clients, for whom the coaches' comments resonated. This learning in their clients overall had a positive effect on the coaches who felt relieved and satisfied that they had again achieved a result. Although sometimes this familiar moment can be uncomfortable, it can bring new ideas about the direction of the next session, their own coaching skills and realisations that coaching is about continuous reflection for themselves as well as their clients.

Clients' Experience

The clients faced pressure to solve a personal issue, an answer to which had hitherto proved elusive. The dyad was engaged in a focused exploration around their question. The clients suddenly realised that they had the answers inside themselves and that it was their responsibility to solve their issues. At this moment, a number of factors came together and the clients felt a deep sense of relief, with the realisation and insight into how they would solve their problem. Increasingly becoming more positive, there was a strong desire to continue to reflect upon this new clarity to understand the direction they could now follow. The clients were left feeling motivated and empowered with a changed mind-set. The clients left their session with an increased respect for coaching.

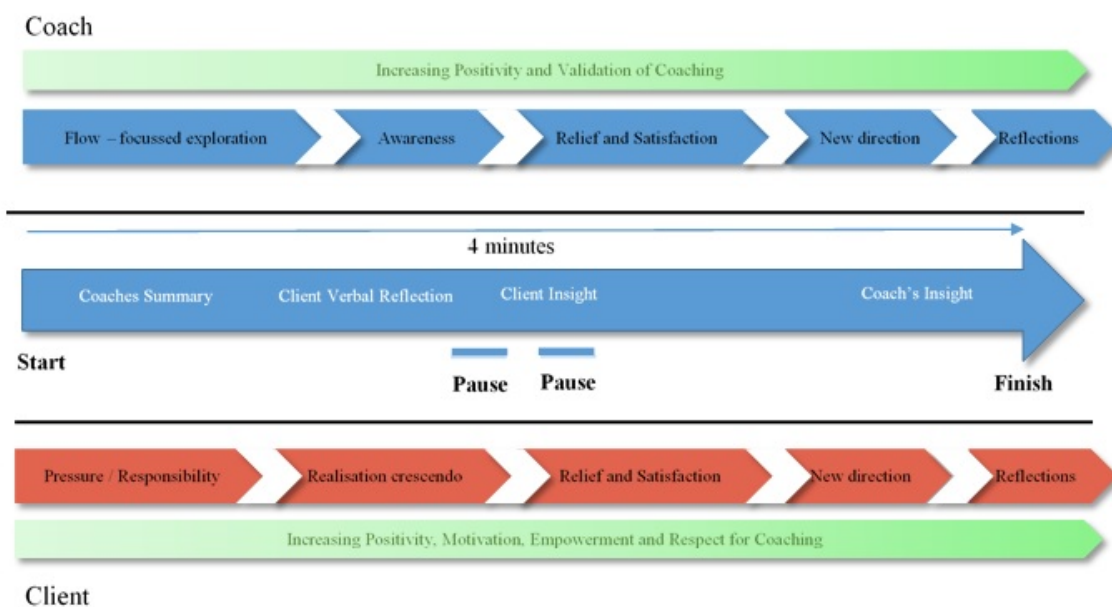
Due to the 100% correlation of the clients and coaches agreeing and identifying the most significant moment in the coaching session, a thematic analysis of the session was carried out. The various interactions within the identified events were then coded using the descriptors of the coaching waterline (Fillery-Travis and Cox, 2018). A graphical representation was produced and when compared, the themes (similarities) were seen. Thus a description of the event containing the significant moment developed:

The Coaching Session

The coaching sessions lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, with the moment of insight occurring between 20 and 25 minutes into the session. This insight event lasted for around 4 minutes. Prior to the moment of insight, a pause of between two and five seconds. The moment occurred and it was followed by a similar pause of equal duration.

The descriptions of the coaches and clients experience together with the description of the insight events from within the coaching session was synergised to provide a representation of the combined sessional analysis (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Combined representation of coaching sessions



Once the event was shown graphically, it became easier to observe, analyse and interpret. It is proposed that the moment of insight is akin to a mirror (The Coaching Mirror) due to the way in which both the coaches and clients' session become faithfully paralleled. The event begins when the coach and client are engaged in the flow of exploring the presenting issue. As the client begins

the process of realisation, so the coach begins to become aware of the approaching moment of insight. From this moment, the dyad is synchronised in their collective journey within the event. Both parties feel satisfaction and relief, albeit for differing reasons, and then comes a sense of knowing, a new direction and a motivation and a desire to understand more about themselves and this moment of insight. Both coach and client are left with a feeling of increasing positivity and increased validation for the coaching process.

Discussion and Conclusion

It appears that a coaching session, rather than being one flowing conversational narrative, is more constructed of many discrete events. The insight event causes learning in the client, providing a new direction and a desire in the dyad to explore further the new learning. Insight events can be recognised due to their inherent accompaniment of both physiological responses and bracketed pauses. An insight event can, therefore, be recognised by its unique structure:

1. Coach provides a summary.
2. Client verbally reflects.
3. A pause occurs.
4. Client insight manifests.
5. A second pause occurs.
6. Coach insight manifests.

This structure can be broken down into a number of phases. These phases emerge as similar to that proposed by Kets de Vries (2013), i.e. Incubation; Illumination; Verification. A coach who is aware of these phases may well be able to drive the session towards insight. What is difficult in this suggestion is that to aid the manifestation of insight, the coach and client should be in a state of flow. Therefore, by definition when a coach becomes aware of being in flow they no longer are because they are then more consciously aware. It is suggested that a coach should practice allowing intuition to take them through the journey toward insight. As the coach begins to 'feel' the realisation crescendo, they should trust their instincts and have confidence in being on the 'right track'. Another skill which is propositioned is that of insight listening. This is a different type of listening to the normal active techniques, it involves listening, interrupting and asking for fresh thoughts and even offering examples and experiences from themselves.

From the data and results, it is suggested that insight events may well be continually present in coaching sessions, but they may be missed by the coach or dismissed. These significant moments may be being missed due to their nature of being tiny snippets of realisations. Aha moments are described as being big meaningful moments and smaller moments of insight considered to be less significant. However, smaller insight moments should be explored due to their ongoing influence in the client's journey towards realising the answers they are seeking. In the results of this project, five of the six participants had significant moments that they took new learning and direction from, however, one participant had a moment they described as a 'light-bulb' moment. Due to their subjective nature, it is suggested that aha moments are particularly difficult to define. What is important is that all insight is considered to be new learning which can provide a positive influence on the coaching outcomes.

Insight is a key part of the coaching session and multiple insight moments an important part of the coaching assignment. The underpinning philosophies and the attributes of the coach undoubtedly have an effect, yet it is not yet known just how much. Metaphor and the experiences of the coach appear to be more important than the right question, although the right question is key in building a picture and taking the dyad to a point where the fusion of internal narrative and experience brings the insight moment. More research is needed, but I suggest that coaches can now understand that they should put more of their life's experience into the coaching session through stories and

metaphor, allowing the incubation of understanding before the illumination and verification of insight. Perhaps new studies may choose to follow the coach and client dyad alliance throughout the entire coaching assignment, armed with the results of this research, to grow understanding of how insight manifestation may be increased by (or differs from) the data gathered in this research.

Implications for theory and practice

There is very little information regarding the structure and processes of coaching, i.e. the coaching waterline (Fillery-Travis and Cox, 2018). Understanding these activities are important because once coaching has identified the events inside the coaching, then they can be studied and analysed to make them more effective and perhaps efficient. By understanding what the triggers and mechanisms are which allow insight to manifest in coaching's significant moments, coaching can seek to replicated them over and again. What has appeared important from the analysis is the crucial point when the insight event begins. At this moment the coach imparts a summary, often an example or a glimpse of their own experiences. From this moment the client seemingly assembles the pieces of information, placing them together and then connecting them to known information. At this point, insight manifests and the client and coach have a new direction.

Coaching as an industry has been keen to remain 'pure' in the coaching session in order to prevent the influencing of clients to make decisions or manipulate their actions, yet, experienced coaches tend to offer more of themselves into the session. It is this experience which is considered to be the catalyst for the insight manifestation, clients seek coaches who they can obtain answers from. Coaches are therefore urged to consider if there is a new direction that the industry should be heading toward. Could the best coaches be simply mentors who have an extensive knowledge of coaching techniques and tools and an expert ability to coach?

Suggestions for future research

At this time, there is more research needed in the coaching waterline areas in order to ascertain what happens in the coaching session. Research could explore the following areas highlighted by the research project:

1. Researching a coach and/or client dyad from initial contact for the duration of the coaching assignment. This is an opportunity to present a fuller more complete picture of coaching in terms of individual experience and in understanding of insight events and events that make up coaching sessions.
2. Identify the events within the entire coaching sessions to ascertain if there are repeating patterns in a session and wider assignment.
3. Conduct research over a number of sessions to identify how insight may affect and influence the coaching as it progresses in terms
4. Begin to identify the plausibility of the claim that the most effective coaches may well be mentors who are experts in their areas, and the use of coaching.
5. Research coaching in a way that tests interrupting and asking for fresh thoughts to understand the potential of insight coaching.

The main focus is to continue to build upon the research that has been conducted, which adds to the overall picture of coaching activities. Research has concentrated for a long time on providing a validation of coaching efficacy; perhaps now it is time to know more about the phenomena, and the actuality of the coaching moments and events.

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Following a successful military career, **Iain Lightfoot** established himself as a coach and hypnotherapist based in London's Harley Street and on the Avenue in Southampton. As an associate lecturer at Solent University he is passionate about the synergy of academia and real world implementation. His research was born out of the desire to continue to learn and seek the very best interventions for his clients in order to provide the best change outcomes.