

# *Understanding the coach-coachee-client relationship: a conceptual framework for executive coaching*

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Accepted Version

Correia, M. C., Dos Santos, R. N. and Passmore, J. (2016) Understanding the coach-coachee-client relationship: a conceptual framework for executive coaching. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 11 (1). pp. 6-23. ISSN 2396-8753 Available at <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/81935/>

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Published version at: <https://shop.bps.org.uk/publications/publication-by-series/international-coaching-psychology-review/international-coaching-psychology-review-vol-11-no-1-march-2016.html>

Publisher: British Psychological Society

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# Understanding the Coach-Coachee-Client Relationship: A conceptual framework for executive coaching

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** There is a need for a more comprehensive understanding of how coaching processes psychologically operate. This paper presents the findings from a study aimed to characterize the coaching process experience and to identify how specific experiences contribute to coaching outcomes.

**Design:** A qualitative design was adopted. Data was analysed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 2008).

**Method:** Data were collected by interviewing coaches (n=4), coachees (n=5) and 1 commissioner three times along the coaching process (total 30 interviews).

**Findings:** Coaching outcomes can be generated by three essential mechanisms: Projection of Future Self, Perspectivation of Present Self, and Confirmation of Past/Present Self. Each mechanism's name represents a particular effect on coachee's self and may evolve diverse coaching behaviors. Although they all can be actively managed to generate sustainability of outcomes, each mechanism tends to contribute differently to that sustainability.

**Conclusion:** The study provides a comprehensive understanding of the different methodological and experiential ingredients of the coaching process, and its implications. While most coaching research is focused in identifying coaching results based on a retrospective analysis, this is one of the first studies accompanying longitudinally the coaching process and capturing an integrative understanding of its dynamics. Moreover, the study provides evidences of how coaching can differently deliver sustainable outcomes and be used as a valuable developmental tool in organizations. The study contributes to our understanding of theory building and raises questions for further research on the uniqueness of coaching interventions.

## Introduction

Coaching aims to help individuals and organizations to become more effective, by reaching positive and significant results, through making intentional changes in behavior, thought or emotion (e.g. Joo, 2005; Kilburg, 1996; Peltier, 2001; Peterson, 1996; Zeus & Skiffington, 2004). The popularization of the term coaching, the growing success of professional bodies responsible for certifying coaches and the high number of individuals practicing as coaches, indicates that the activity involves a shared identity. However, in spite of this our knowledge of many aspects of coaching remain unexplored (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Maher & Pomerantz, 2004; Palmer & McDowall, 2010; Zeus & Skiffington, 2004). The emergence of coaching psychology since 2000 has significantly contributed to the development of an evidence-based approach and a desire for a stronger theoretical framework (e.g. Grant, 2009; Latham, 2007; Peltier, 2001).

According to Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh and Parker (2010) review, the study of coaching outcomes has been one of the most popular research issues. In general, the results from coaching research show that coaching; enables previous classroom learning to be transferred to real work situations (Miller, Yahne, Moyers, Martinez & Pirritano, 2004), positively impacts leadership (Kampa-Kokesch, 2002; Thach, 2002), enhances goal-attainment, promotes resilience and workplace well-being (Duijts, Kant, Brandt & Swaen, 2008; Grant, Frith & Burton, 2010; Spence, Cavanagh & Grant, 2008), increases self efficacy (Evers, Brouwers & Tomic, 2006), and improves manager performance (e.g. Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker & Fernandes, 2008; Luthans & Peterson, 2003; Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas & Kucine, 2003). More recently meta-studies (Theeboom et al, 2014 & Jones et al, 2015) have found an Effect Size that further supports the efficacy of coaching, as a comparable intervention to training and appraisal.

Studies assessing coaching outcomes do not clarify, however, what actually happens in the coaching process. Several authors have reinforced the importance of understanding the coaching process by focusing on coach behaviours that influence

coaching outcomes (Boyce & Hernez-Broome; De Haan, 2008a, 2008b; 2011; Grant et al, 2010; Joo, 2005).

However given the multi-disciplinary nature of coaching, and the intimate nature of the coaching relationship, coaching processes are a particularly challenging subject of study (Kauffman & Bachkirova, 2008). The coaching use of a specific approach or models (i.e. CBT, MI or Systemic) can depend on diverse aspects, such as the theoretical and conceptual perspective of the coach, the coachee's readiness to change, the characteristics of the issue being addressed, or contextual aspects (Grant, 2011).

The diversity of coaching approaches may be expressed in terms of the aim of the coach's intervention and in terms of the specific session and the overall process. The aim of coaching can be external or internal. In an external, or output focused coaching intervention, coaching is focused on bringing about external changes, such as the development of a new behavioural skill or achievement of a statement goal. In internal focused coaching, the principal focus of the session is on personal development; the development of self-knowledge or self-reflective. The literature suggests that coaches must take greater care with internal focused coaching when working in organisations, as organizational clients may impose time restrictions for the number of sessions or seek clear measurable outcomes (Whiterspoon, 2003, Peltier, 2001; Thach, 2002). How the session is structured provides direction and thus shapes the coach-coachee interactions across the coaching relationship. Session structure is recognized as a fundamental and positive attribute of the coaching process, providing guidance to the coach-coachee conversational interaction and helping the coach and coachee to stay focused (Bush, 2005; Grant, 2001; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005). Research, however, has not explored how individual sessions are structured throughout the life of the coaching relationship; which typically can involve 4-12 individual one to two hour sessions or meetings (Boyce & Brome, 2007; Grant, 2011). For instance, one relevant aspect is to clarify what factors might determine the sustainability of coaching outcomes (Joo, 2005; Smither, 2011).

There is some evidence that coaching can create sustainable impacts (see Grant (2001, Green, Oades and Grant, 2006, and Libri and Kemp, 2006) over six months, 30 weeks

and 18 months, respectively. But so far, no research provides evidence as to how this is achieved. As suggested by Smither (2011), compared to psychotherapy, research on the effectiveness of different coaching approaches is still in its infancy.

So, even though the diversity of coaching approaches may be interesting, these studies do not explain how coaching works, and research on coaching results has so far failed to provide a detailed explanation as to the how these outcomes are achieved.

Accordingly, as Grant, Frith and Burton (2009) suggested, retrospective approaches to evaluation, where participants are asked their views once the intervention is completed, result in multiple biases, such as recall errors and demand characteristics. As a result in designing future research studies it is important to carry out research considering the dynamics of processes while doing so using a longitudinal perspective (Baron & Morin, 2009; Boyce & Hernez-Broome, 2011; Grant et al, 2010).

What is also missing in the research to date are the multiple perspectives from the different participants in the coaching process. In executive coaching, this includes the coach and coachee, but also often includes the commissioning client/manager, who may be a more senior executive or the HR director. While studies have looked at coachee experiences or coach perceptions, few studies have involved all three stakeholders in the process; coach, coachee and commissioning client (Wanberg et al, 2003). Besides the lack of research, the organizational commissioner's perspective represents the interests of the organization and thus has an important role in the process.

The objective of this study was to characterize the experience and perceptions of the coaching process according to coaches, coachees and commissioners. While undertaking it, the research team aimed to generate new insights on the complex phenomenon of coaching processes. Specific research questions were: 1) what happens 2) why is that happening, and 3) what that is going to lead to, during the coaching process?

## **Method**

Several authors have noted the value of qualitative research in helping to understand the complex human processes involved in interactions such as coaching (Coe, 2004; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007; Grant, Frith & Burton, 2009). The primary aim of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is to explore how participants perceive and make sense of their experience, and understand the meanings of that experience (Smith, 2008). As Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggest, IPA explores experience in its own terms and that's why it is phenomenological. IPA assumes that there is a relationship between individual's verbal accounts and their cognitions and emotions (Smith & Osborn, 2003). According to this, IPA research implies a dynamic process of interpretation in which the researcher attempts to get an insider's perspective of the participants' experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Due to its characteristics, IPA is especially useful to approach aspects such as complexity, human processes or novelty (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Considering the aspects described above, IPA was considered an adequate approach to explore individual experiences of the coaching process.

## **Data Analysis**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis provides guidelines that can be adapted by individual researchers in light of their research aims (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Stages used throughout analysis in this study first included using the left-hand margin to note descriptive and linguistic comments that appeared of interest. Next, the same margin was used to note the first conceptual comments resulting from the first reflections, questions or interconnections of the researcher, from a psychological perspective. Secondly, the right-hand margin of each transcript was used to transform the initial note into more specific themes or phrases, evoking psychological concepts and abstractions (Smith, 2009). This reflective process involved a vice-versa movement between inductive and deductive positions that enabled the first steps in conceptualization of the content. In the next step, the data was further reduced by establishing connections between the preliminary themes and clustering them

appropriately, according to their descriptive and conceptual nature. Interviews were first analyzed independently and then grouped according to participant and the number of interviews. The first procedure facilitated the identification of themes across the interviews. The second procedure enabled the identification of the dynamic experience of the process. After the individual analysis for each participant, connections between participants were established until a set of super-ordinate themes was produced. Data of different types of participants have been combined because the purpose of this study was to characterize the coaching process according to participants' perceptions and experiences per se and not to explore differences between them.

### **Participants**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis usually implies a fairly homogenous sample, i.e., a purposive sampling to attempt to find a more closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant. This homogeneity makes it possible for subsequent studies to be conducted with other groups and to gradually make more general claims (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). A sample size of one can be adequate, although generally studies have tended to use between 5 and 10 participants (Smith, 2009). Given the bi-partite or tripartite nature of the executive coaching relationship, research needs to include the perspective of not only the coach, but also the coachee and the organizational commissioners (Wanberg et al, 2003; Grant et al, 2010).

The study involved ten participants of coaching processes: four coaches, five coachees – two of them were simultaneously coachee and responsible for the commissioning decision – and one organizational commissioner (HR director). The age of participants ranged from 38 to 63. Participants corresponded to three triads coach-coachee-commissioner and two dyads coach-coachee (both coachees were also responsible for the commissioning decision). The three triads and one of the dyads were organizational commissioning and the other dyad was an individual commissioning. All coachees were experienced in their professional activity and held management responsible positions in their organizations. The purpose of the coaching processes was to help coaches improve their performance at the workplace, including managing



their teams under “crisis”, in decision-making, and enhance communication skills. Table 1 identifies and characterizes participants in the study.

**Table 1: Distribution of participants according to the respective triads and diads**

<b>Diad /Triad</b>	<b>Coach</b>	<b>Coachee</b>	<b>Commissioner</b>	<b>Type of commissioning</b>
Triad 1	C1	A	Com1	Organizational
Triad 2	C1	B	Com1	Organizational
Triad 3	C2	C	Com1	Organizational
	<b>Coach</b>		<b>Coachee-Commissioner</b>	
Diad 1	C3		Com2 = D	Organizational
Diad 2	C4		Com3=E	Individual

### **Procedure**

The research team employed an opportunistic sampling, one of the most common procedures of sequential sampling (Teddlie & Yu, 2007), which is frequently used on qualitative studies (Bernard, 2004). The procedure consisted of a formal meeting with professional coaches (all accredited by International Coach Federation). The meeting agenda consisted of a presentation of the study objectives, general procedure and ethical considerations, and invitation to participate. Criteria for coaches participation in the study were: a) being a certified coach; b) having recently initiated or are about to initiate (within the next nine months) a coaching process; c) respective coachee and commissioner are willing to participate in the study (both, preferably); d) organizational commissioning involving the triad coach-coachee-commissioner were

considered preferential. Other relevant criteria for selection of eligible coaching processes were: a) coaching objectives related to work and professional issues; b) processes involving external commissioning of coaching services; c) coachees with management positions (preferential). All participants were informed of, and signed, the Research Protocol which established the research proceedings. All participants were given a copy of the signed the Research Protocol.

### Interviews

Data was collected through three semi-structured interviews with each participant during the coaching process. As Grant, Frith and Burton (2009) noted, retrospective approaches to evaluation, where participants are asked their views once the intervention is completed, can result in a number of biases including recall errors and demand characteristics. Thus, it is also important to carry out research considering the dynamics of processes from a longitudinal perspective (Baron & Morin, 2009; Boyce & Hernez-Broome, 2011; Grant et al, 2010).

Interviews, ranged between 41 minutes and 1 hour and 37 minutes. They were audio recorded and conducted by the same individual. Participants were previously informed about the purpose of the research. All interviews were conducted in person, except one that was conducted over the telephone. Although as Weinberg, Butt, and Knight noted (2001), the use of different forms of interviewing is equally valid and in this study revealed no differences in research findings.

### Evaluating the Analysis

The analysis and interpretations of previous interviews were validated by each participant during their second and third interviews. Participants agreed with the interpretations provided by the research team in terms of how previous descriptions fitted in the preliminary emergent themes. The process allowed participants to complete previous descriptions and/or to add to it with other new information.

Considering the subjectivity of a qualitative analysis it is also important to note that research team members inevitably influenced the course of the study with their personal and professional perspectives. In this study, the researchers' interpretations

were influenced by their experience in training in behavioural issues and HR consultancy, and previous research experience in coaching and work and organizational psychology. Nevertheless, an effort was made to minimize bias during interviews and during the interpretative process.

## **Results**

Three main themes emerged as part of the super-ordinate theme 'Mechanical Philosophy' of the coaching process. The three themes were 'Projection of Future Self', 'Perspectivation of Present Self', and 'Confirmation of Past/Present Self'. The three themes were interpreted as mechanisms that operate during the coaching processes. Each mechanism relates to a set of quotations (referring to individuals' experiences and the identification of coaching behaviours) that evoke a certain structural organization of the coaching procedure and/or coaching sessions. Also, each mechanism evokes a particular aspect of the "experienced process", both in terms of its action on the self, and in terms of the changing management process. The expression coaching mechanics has been previously suggested by Boyce and Brome (2007), and reported as one relevant aspect to investigate in coaching process. The term 'Mechanical Philosophy' was chosen by the authors to represent the coaching process as a changing and dynamic interaction between coach and coachee, in which both parties engaged in thoughts and reflections about events and how the process helped them plan or make sense of the past, present and future.

### *Projection of Future Self*

The theme Projection of Future Self can be defined as the exercise of developing an imagery achievement (projection) of a goal (future self). It consists of generating motivation for action by decreasing the perceived distance between the coachee's aspirations (future self) and his/her reality (present self). This implies the movement of aligning the coachee's individual action with the objective(s) aimed for. The projection can be understood as the result of two cycles of reflection, carried out in sequence. In the first movement the use of imagery achievement (IA) of the self projected to the

future, allows identification of the results the coachee intends to reach through the process. In the second movement the selection of actions (SA) is stimulated and involves identifying actions that will be useful in moving towards the results the coachee intends to achieve. As coach C2 describes:

*This exercise is done placing C very far in the future and then approximations are created (C2, I).*

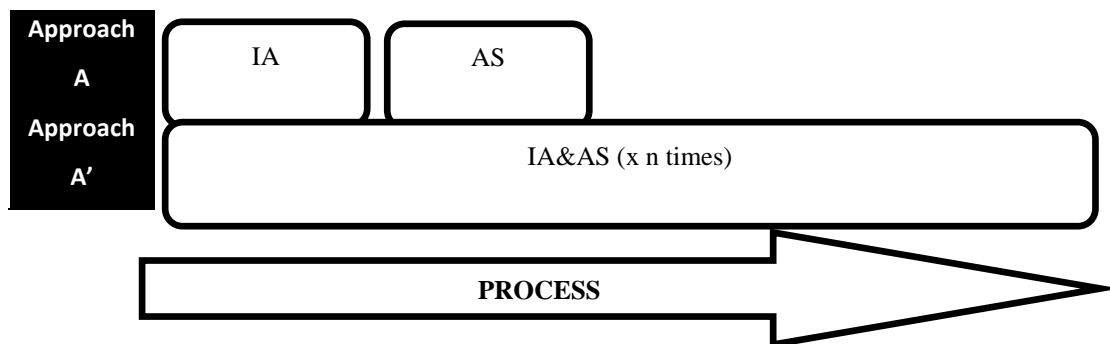
The mechanism of Projection of Future Self gives structure directivity to the sessions through the two reflection cycles. However, that directivity of structure can vary in terms of when it is placed in the process and in the sessions, and also in terms of the depth and duration of each reflection cycle. This variation let us identify two approaches to this mechanism, which are illustrated in Figure 1. In the approach labeled as A, the projection is represented by dedicating one or more complete sessions, in sequence, to each reflection cycle, which gives structural directivity to a set of sessions at an early stage of the process. In this more exclusive dedication to each reflection cycle, structural directivity is also added to the first reflection cycle through carrying out exercises that are also structured and imply the coachee's imagery positioning in a scenario in the distant future. As coach C2 describes:

*It's as if, by placing very far off, in the future, what is kept are the basic pillars that are important for that person, what they are, what their structure is, we're speaking for example about principles that are present throughout that person's life and which guide him (C2, II).*

Turning to the second cycle, structural directivity comes from an elaboration of a detailed and formal plan of action. This approach provides structural directivity to the set of sessions (typically 4-12 sessions) at an early stage of the process. In Approach B, there is less differentiation of the reflection cycles, through their more frequent use and also shorter duration, throughout the process. In this case, structural directivity is offered at specific moments during the process. As an example of this approach, coachee-commissioner Com2=D describes his coach's frequent use of metaphors,

thereby mobilizing (and assuming) the knowledge that the projected self has of himself and the process to reach objectives:

*The way this coach works is with a lot of metaphors, with a lot of metaphorical games... Imagine which would be best, let's see... which would be your dream? my dream is... going from where the company is now to going as far as that position in the company. OK, now imagine you're in that position... what would that Com2=D say to this Com2=D? (Com2=D, I).*



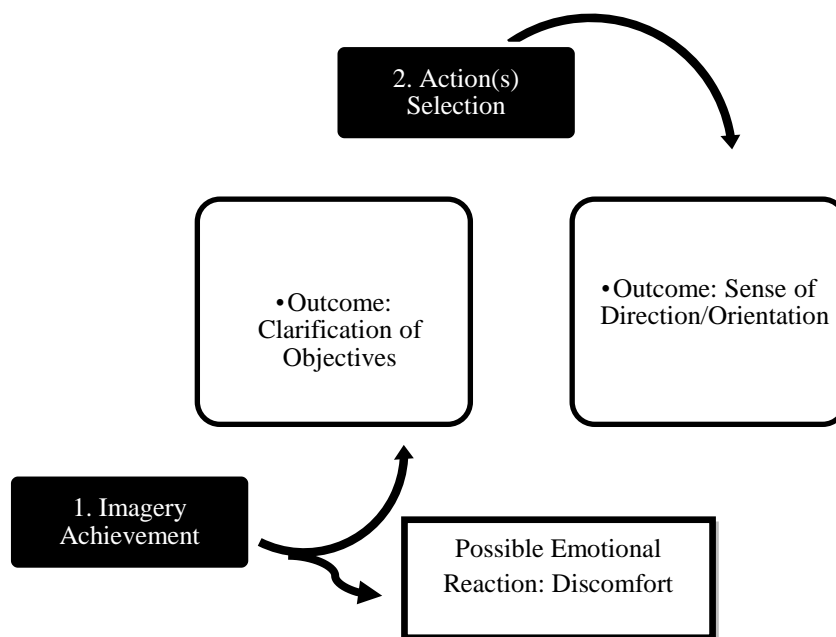
**Figure 1: Approaches to Projection of Future Self**

In the following excerpts, from his first and second interviews, coachee C shows his differentiated experience of the two cycles involved in this exercise. In the first interview, C highlights the usefulness of the imagery achievement of results in terms of clarifying his objectives:

*We understand that we want to get somewhere, OK... but often we don't even have a clear goal, where we want to go, and it's in this sense that I'm saying... that reflection... I think that C2 has helped me in some way... ah to think and become aware and in some way express those values, those objectives, those ambitions, all those things (C, I).*

Besides the specific outcomes identified above, it is also possible that the Projection, particularly during the exercise of imagery achievement, is mediated by an emotional reaction of discomfort, since according to coach C2, this exercise implies that the coachee focuses on the future, going against his tendency to focus on a reading of the current situation. As she describes:

*Sometimes it's difficult for us to leave the present time, and the obstacles we have and place ourselves in the distant future... eh... because that causes us a certain discomfort not knowing very well... having to let go of a set of things, some of which we like, others not so much, but we know them all, when we do this exercise of going off into the future it's as if we've nowhere to give us support, isn't it? (C2, II).*



**Figure 2 : Projection of Future Self mechanism and outcomes**

### *Perspectivation of Present Self*

Perspectivation of Present Self consists of focusing and identifying beliefs, and reframing, re-construct or changing them in order to provide a more effective

perspective. It involves helping the coachee to access the assumptions inherent to his/her present actions with a view to increase self-awareness and learning. Through perspectivation, the coachee is invited to question his/her own assumptions and to construct new possible assumptions, making him/her more able to assess and make his/her current action more appropriate and more favorable to obtaining results. According to coach C1, this experience of self-awareness and a change in self-perception is a determinant aspect and a guiding principle of his intervention:

*It has a lot to do with self-awareness, with deepening self-knowledge, with the perception that mental models, or the way I considered my unity might not be the only one and very likely it isn't, more suitable to ensure better eh better results (C1, II).*

Perspectivation can be activated through assessment and/or through the coach-coachee conversation, both at an early stage of the process. In the case of assessment, the 360-degree emerged as an instrument particularly suited to perspectivation, in as much as it offers the coachee multiple perspectives of his performance, allowing him/her to compare others' assessment with their own self-assessment. In processes where assessment was made using the 360-degree, the choice of instrument was, in fact, made based on obtaining new possible readings of the coachee's action. As highlighted by commissioner Com1:

*What's the first conclusion that you can make during a coaching process...? Are people seeing me the way I think they are? (Com1).*

In the following excerpt, coachee A confirms the importance of that feedback in learning about himself, in this initial stage of the process:

*one thing I think is fantastic is knowing what others think about us... isn't it? Because usually it's something that... we think about ourselves and believe what we think about ourselves is also what others think about us... Wrong, isn't it?*

(A, I).

Also, by implying the adoption of a fresh perspective, coachee B points out the challenging nature of the perspectivation experience generated by the assessment:

*understanding what reading people make of us, helping me to know better... eh... it was good, I felt there was a challenge there (B, II).*

Besides 360-degree assessment, the use of other instruments, such as public identity questionnaires and personality psychometrics, can create the perspectivation experience.

As C4 describes, in their last interview:

*Ehhh... look, this project had a very special characteristic for me which was, eh, the big push was given by the assessment through the PCM [Process Communication Model]. What... I don't know if I can consider it accidental, I don't know... it had never happened to me, not that the PCM was that clear, concerning that person... and comprehension of the situation loosened the knot (C4, III).*

Besides the aspects identified above by coachees A and B, it is also possible that perspectivation implies an intense and contradictory emotional experience, associated with the coachee's learning about himself. In the following excerpt, coachee-commissioner Com3=E describes her own experience generated after getting back the assessment results:

*a mixture, on one hand, of happiness, because of many competences I have and also a mixture, initially with some difficulty in accepting all this, particularly, this this... that I'm a person above all who's not big on relationships, am I? (Com3=E, I).*



Perspectivation as a mechanism activated at the core of the coach-coachee interaction, consists essentially of directing attention to the assumptions and beliefs underlying the coachee's present action, and through that reflection, gaining access to different understandings of the same situations. As coachee A describes:

*People when they speak follow a line of thought, don't they? And sometimes, the coach's intervention is exactly for the person to ask himself about the line of thought he has, that he's taking and that intervention is going to... sometimes see that really I could change my line of thought and that line of thought doesn't need to be the only way, perhaps there are more, more pathways, more ways... different ways of looking at, at our thought (A, II).*

According to coachee B, this questioning can even reveal itself to be effective in producing changes in the coachee's behaviour right from the initial sessions of the process:

*in an instant, a great calmness came over me, he would take my own words and lead me to think about them and make me reflect... .. questions that made me think, that did me good,... reflections I got back, I'm sure, change some of my behaviour (B, II).*

Another relevant aspect of the Perspectivation of Present Self approach is stimulating the coachee's capacity for self-transformation, though the exercise of continuous self-questioning. This capacity for self-transformation provides the opportunity for greater self awareness, reflection and thus the maintenance of performance. In this sense, perspectivation contributes to the coachee's capacity to continually manage internal change, particularly once the process ends. As coachee B stresses, it is this exercise of self-questioning that gives her experience of the process a perception of sustainability of results and not learning directly associated with the specific objectives established in the process:

*That is my biggest fear... that what I have learned can somehow fade away a little, now the reflection, looking inside, questioning what it is I can do, what can I do, what can I do, I think that exercise and its benefit is here inside... one of the great benefits of the process is learning to do this or make this very automatic (B, III).*

Further on in the same interview, B also highlights the contribution of this exercise in giving the capacity to become autonomous with regard to the process:

*essentially he was a figure, a person who gave me, who helped me to orientate myself towards going alone, set me on a difficult path which is the path of self-assessment and going alone... (B, III).*

As we can also observe in the words of coachee C, the capacity for transformation via perspectivation comes from the coachee's focus on efficiency, as a transversal aspect of his action:

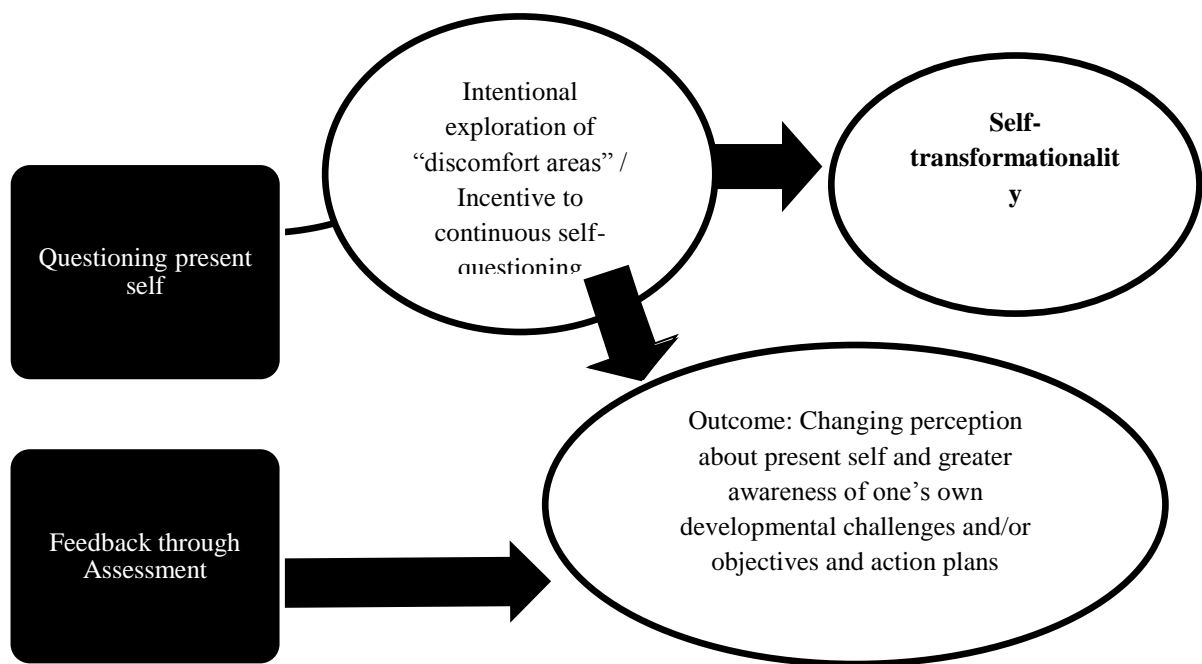
*if we question all these processes, both ourselves and the processes through which we are involved and also try somehow to always organize things so as to gain more efficiency, we are always somehow managing with a view to continually obtaining better results, gains and bonuses and get things working better. More efficient, at least (C, II).*

By developing the capacity for self-transformation as a lasting and sustainable result, the same exercise meets the expectation of Com1 in terms of assessment of the process:

*What I hope for is that each one involved, each coachee is aware that the company has just given him a tool. A tool for evolution, a tool for improvement and development. Because I know that some of the commitments taken on in the PDP will not yet be complete [...] (Com 1, III).*

This capacity for self-transformation is also what sustains or meets the expected return on the organization’s investment. Also in his third and final interview, commissioner Com1 describes how the process can even have a determinant effect on strategic decision-making in terms of HR:

*Ah, what I feel is that, point number one, we have to be more demanding with whoever was in the process [...] the demands increase, today we are more demanding with the directors involved in this process. All that will have, at a first stage... one issue or another could be tolerated, at this moment it’s no longer tolerated. There has to be a return and... it’s normal... [...] a decision can be made with a view to continuing or not continuing in the position, that can happen (Com1, III).*



**Figure 3: Perspectivation of Present Self mechanism and outcomes**

### *Confirmation of Past/Present Self*

Confirmation of past and/or present self can be defined as the recognition and development of beliefs and actions that strengthens ones own’s behaviours and/or

attitudes, which are useful in reaching goals. This process can be developed in two ways: through identification and mobilization of the coachee's existing behaviours, competences or abilities, or through positive reinforcement of new behaviours shown spontaneously by the coachee during the process. The first approach consists of identifying other situations in the coachee's life with which the present situation he or she faces can be compared, or which in some way could activate the coachee's memory towards identifying competences and/or resources he/she has and that help him to manage the present situation. In the following excerpt, coach C3 describes the usefulness of this approach in making the coachee aware of his existing capacities. In this sense, a significant and recurring part of coaching work may consist of evoking other situations in the coachee's life that can help him to identify behaviours he already exhibits and which in some way can be applied to current specific situations in his professional life:

*one thing that I learned... I've discovered with him, or confirmed with him... is the importance of finding ourselves in what the person knows how to do, and specifically in the extra-professional setting, ah... good examples and good practices of what could be possible in the specific case, good leadership practices, and that the coachee realizes he already has those competences and that he already uses them in another setting and so it'll be relatively easy, or that practice could be inspirational for application in the professional setting (C3, 1).*

For his coachee-commissioner, Com2=D, this approach contributes to increasing his perception of self-effectiveness, in this case, in the professional context:

*as you can make the maximum use of an idea, how to find, perhaps a situation that's difficult to manage, find a similar situation in your private life, take examples of how you were able to manage a situation in your private life and take it to your professional life... If you're able to manage much more complicated situations in your private life, how are you going to manage the situation in the world of work, which doesn't stop being the world of work*

(Com2=D, I).

In addition, confirmation of the present and past self can relate to behaviours and/or attitudes that the coachee shows spontaneously, supporting him at an initial stage of adaptation to the coaching work and his active role in the process. For example, coachee-commissioner Com3=E emphasizes the importance of her coach's reinforcement during the initial stage of the process:

*At the beginning there was an effort to give me a lot of reinforcement... as if through reinforcement I was finding an answer to my questions... (Com3=E, II).*

Also, the feedback from others (for example, colleagues) regarding the very changes being implemented by the coachee during the process can serve as reinforcement of those changes. This aspect is described by coach C1, concerning the development of listening behaviour by his coachee A, one of the actions included in his plan of action:

*from where he least expected major contributions, when he listens to people, he's receiving significant contributions... and that'll help him (C1, II).*

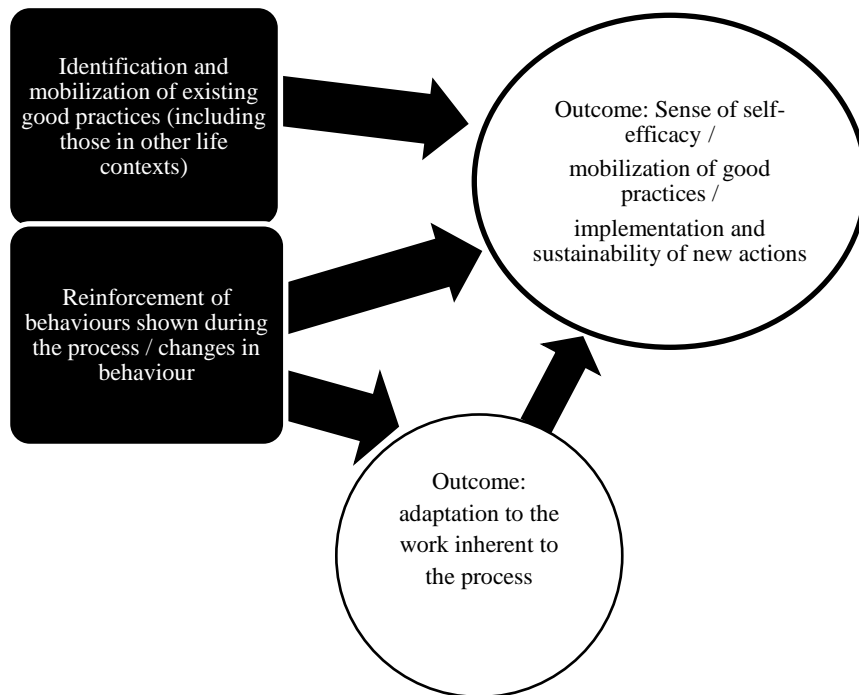
This consolidation work favored by feedback from others contributes to the coachee taking possession of and gaining expertise in behaviours that are useful in following up the objectives. Confirmation of present self by consolidation of new behaviours are also part of coaching conversations. As coach C1 describes, this work aims to stimulate maintenance of the coachee's investment in implementing actions previously identified by himself as those allowing him to reach his goals:

*Accompaniment can be important, above all because there are things that in the design of a plan I say "promote conversations between the two of you to listen to my collaborator, to ask him how he's feeling, what areas of improvement he proposes to work on, what help I can give him"... but imagine that four or five conversations like that have no effect, and he begins to get...*

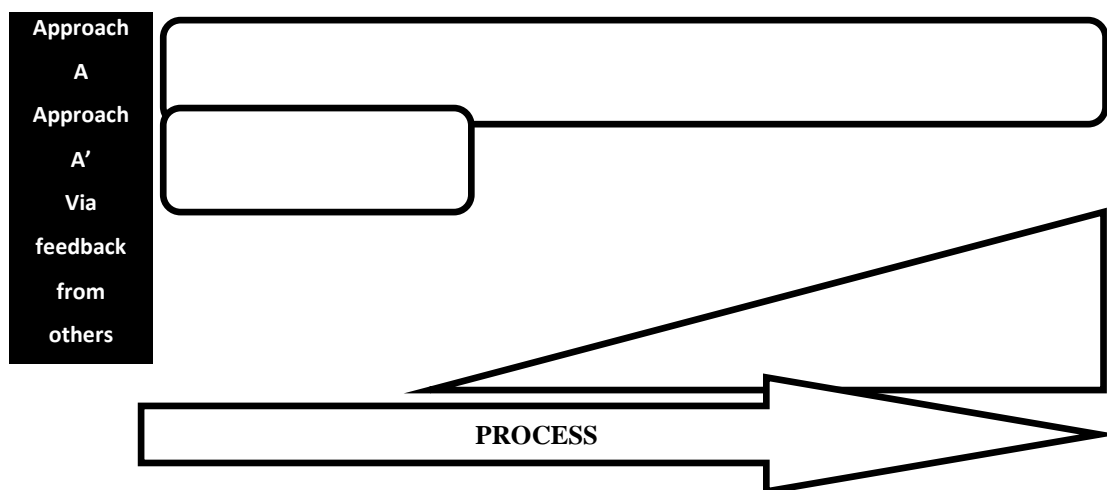
*then the day-to-day pressure is very heavy...so... here the sessions feed the flame a little... (C1, II).*

Underlying this work, as coach C3 highlights, is the importance of the process promoting the sustainability of change actions which are being identified and implemented by the coachee:

*Often what happens is that you have a quick win, that is to say, you leave the coaching session empowered and you carry it out and then you call the coach to say you managed it, but to create conditions of sustainable behaviour you need to work on it over time. Because you advance and then fall back. There are habits that are set and habits take time to pass...We need at least six months to sustain a change of attitude (C3, II).*



**Figure 4: Confirmation of Past/Present Self mechanism and outcomes**



**Figure 5: Approaches to Confirmation of Past/Present Self mechanism**

## Discussion

The mechanical philosophy of the coaching process can vary according to the temporal positioning of the self in the future, present and/or past. Analysis revealed that each mechanism implies different specific coaching behaviours and approaches, and varied in terms of its presence and relevance among processes.

The use of different approaches for establishing objectives, such as Projection of Future Self and Perspectivation of Present Self, shows however, different positioning by the coach in relation to the methodological objectives of the process. If on one hand, Projection of Future Self sets out from imagery of fulfillment of the coachee's objectives to construct action, Perspectivation of Present Self primarily concerns the creation of awareness of self in the current situation, leading to subsequent construction of the coachee's objectives, which tends to invoke changes in his or her present behavioural pattern. The emergence of these themes offers, therefore, clarification in expressing the external and internal coaching aims in methodological management of processes. In this sense, coaching behaviours may be easier to characterize according to their position in one approach or another. For the same

reason, the array of procedures and experiences specific to each approach form eclectic scenarios that can be adopted by the diversity of existing coaching models. This discussion agrees with previous findings that coaching behaviours do not express self-designated coaching models (Passmore, 2008), suggesting therefore an understanding of those behaviours based on analysis of the identified mechanisms. In addition, accompaniment of the processes allowed confirmation that there may be quite diversified use of these mechanisms, both in the coach's specific approach within each mechanism and in exclusive or mixed use between mechanisms. From the methodological point of view, the use made of the above mechanisms seems to be the most determinant aspect of coaching processes, namely in terms of their effectiveness in work with different coachees and the sustainability of outcomes.

At a first glance, Projection of Future Self seems to be a mechanism indicated for more immediate identification of change actions. This mechanism offers structure to the process in two ways. In Approach A, the Projection of Future Self can offer structure to sessions throughout the process; in Approach A, the mechanism offers structure to an (undefined) set of sessions at an initial stage of the process, culminating in formal elaboration of an action plan. However, the coach's regulating focus on the temporal depth of objectives and outcomes - through the invitation he or she makes to the coachee to project the future self to a distant temporal scenario (including the end of his or her life) - stimulates intrinsic motivation by evoking the fulfillment of the coachee's personal values. This might offer an empirical evidence of the applicability of Self-Determination Theory to the understanding of coaching practices, as suggested by Spence and Oades (2011). In this sense, it would be relevant to investigate if temporal regulation of objectives can generate a greater promotion of well-being and vitality in individuals (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

In turn, Perspectivation of Present Self focuses on stimulating the production of a change in the coachee's internal vision of himself and the context. This mechanism, which can be activated more or less intentionally by the coach, offers structure to the process through the assessment and through the coach-coachee interaction, the latter being especially expressive during the first undefined number of sessions in the process. By being integrated in the coach's methodological approach, through promoting self-questioning by the coachee, the mechanism of Perspectivation of

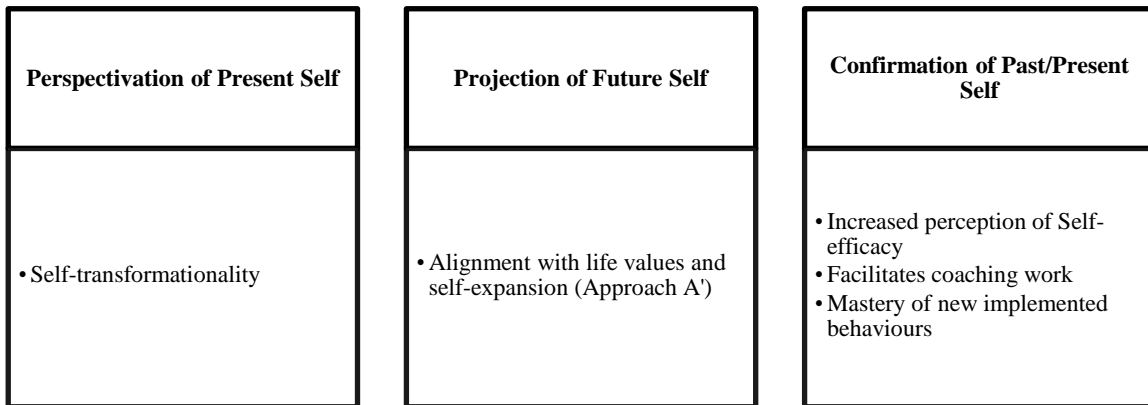


Present Self tends to promote the phenomenon of sustainability of the process outcomes through developing its self-transformationality, according to coachees and coaches. Therefore, self-transformationality is identified as a distinctive outcome of the process, occurring irrespective of the coachee's specific objectives. It is important to mention that attributing the name of self-transformationality arises from confirmation of the level of change this mechanism is able to stimulate in the coachee. In our view the process can be compared to transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991), but is also applicable at an organizational level, for which the term 'double-loop learning' has been applied (Argyris & Schön, 1978). According to Mezirow (2003), transformational learning occurs when structures of reference are transformed in order to be "more inclusive, discriminative, open, reflective and emotionally apt to change" (p.2). As a result of critical reflection, transformational learning can occur in the transformation of values, beliefs and attitudes (Mezirow, 1991). Accordingly, by stimulating coachee's autonomy in generating his or her own change, i.e., in the generation of a new purpose, Perspectivation of Present Self enhances the sustainability of coaching outcomes, providing evidence for the suggestion of Gray (2006) that coaching can contribute to transformational learning. As evidenced in this study, this is highly valued by the organizational commissioner, who perceives coachee's transformation as a desired and expected change during the coaching process.

Perspectivation of Present Self can also be understood as a mechanism that favors the development of the coachee's *autopoiesis*; a system capable of reproducing and maintaining itself (Maturana & Varela, 1973). In this sense, individuals, as autopoietic systems, exist simultaneously with their regenerative capacity, through the change in perspective and the relationship between their components. These assumptions are found at the basis of some coaching models, such as ontological coaching (Sieler, 2003) which is focused on increasing the coachees' capacity to observe their own way of being and create purposeful changes in language, emotion and/or physiology.

The two described mechanisms favor development of the integrity and congruence of self, a phenomenon identified previously by authors such as Grant (2006), and Griffiths and Campbell (2009). Complementary, Confirmation of Past/Present Self acts as an agent facilitating the coaching work and motivating implementation of actions through mobilizing knowledge, competence and/or resources the coachee possesses and/or

discovers during the process. This mechanism consists essentially in the identification and reflection about the coachee's strengths, i.e., authentic behaviours, thoughts or feelings that energize the individual and contributes to optimal functioning and performance (Linley & Harrington, 2006).



**Figure 6 : Type of outcomes according to mechanisms activated during the process**

Generally, sustainability of coaching outcomes seems to be determined by internality of change, which can be generated in two ways: by stimulating the internality of the established objectives – observed in the mechanisms of Projection of the Future and Perspectivation of the Present – and by Confirmation of Past/Present actions representing optimal performance levels. Nevertheless, mechanisms seem to have different functions and determinants. On one side, the development of self-transformationality in Perspectivation of Present Self contributes to the coachee's capacity for adaptation and co-creation of the scenarios in which he or she is involved and, thus, confers efficiency to the coachee's action. On the other side, Confirmation of Past/Present Self involves identification and development of specific actions by the coachee which, through their progressive sedimentation, represent the development of capacities for action that are useful to accomplish specific objectives. This suggests the relevance of differentiating non-circumstantial from circumstantial coaching outcomes, respectively. The former seem to be particularly relevant in scenarios of

change or instability. The latter, are suitable and functional for specific scenarios.

## **Practical Implications**

Characterization of coaching processes, particularly coaching behaviours and techniques, and the implications of coaching interactions, allows comprehension of the methodological characteristics of the activity, serving as a basis for reflection on the training and the very activity of professional coaches. Although the overall purpose of coaching professional bodies is to define guidelines for coaching practice and regulate the training of professionals, coaching is still a non-regulated activity and is fertile terrain for practitioners without the appropriate training (Joo, 2005). Similarly, the proliferation of coaching models creates more space for diversified attitudes and behaviours, and potential client confusion. The methodological characterization of coaching processes and the understanding of its implications in coaching outcomes provides evidences of coaching identity and uniqueness as a developmental practice across models, clients and time.

## **Limitations and Further Directions**

This study aimed to unite a set of perceptions of participants in coaching processes, namely coaches, coachees and commissioners. Although we have accessed those perceptions, and with them obtained diverse experiences of coaching processes, we consider it would have been enriching to have joined a more uniform and balanced group of participants from the point of view of representation of each figure: coach, coachee and commissioner. In this case, it would be relevant to gain access to the perceptions of more organizational commissioners. In this connection, we also consider that bearing in mind the active role of the researcher in studies of this nature (Smith & Osborne, 2003), the analysis made represents a possibility for conjugation of data.

It is nevertheless important to stress that the information gathered from participants represents a considerable volume of data, which could originate subsequent studies. There is a need for a deeper characterization of the three identified mechanisms, including the analysis of their application, their specific coaching behaviours and

results. In addition, these findings suggest a need for a more critical review of the return on investment (ROI) evaluation method, using both circumstantial (ROI of circumstantial sedimentation) and non-circumstantial (ROI of transformationality) outcomes. Finally, further research should also focus in identifying other possible coaching processes mechanisms.

## **Conclusion**

This article provides evidence of how coaching processes involve different methodological mechanisms, which represent the use of organized coaching behaviours. It demonstrates how those mechanisms activate change in the coachee and contribute to sustainability of outcomes. The study revealed the emergence of two types of sustainable outcomes: those arising from progressive sedimentation (circumstantial) and those resulting from generating self-transformationality (non-circumstantial).

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