

Exploring the Practice of Coaching

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The coaching market is booming. Drawing on a series of interviews with freelance coaches, coaches employed by private coaching firms and internal corporate coaches, as well as on a non-participating observation of two group mentoring sessions, this paper will examine the paradox of a practice that is highly structured – i.e. generally unfolding over ten sessions, including two tripartite meetings involving the coach, the client and a sponsor from the client's company – yet lacking a theoretical grounding (while pulling from a multitude of fields, such as psychology and neuroscience). We posit that the origin of this paradox lies in the commercial nature of the coaching relationship, which would explain why the rigorously structured practice is compatible with a multitude of approaches that coaches are free to incorporate into their work.

In the space of about ten years, the practice of coaching has become widespread in the corporate world. The International Coaching Federation (ICF), the oldest international association of professional coaches, had 1,500 members in 1999, 16,000 in 2011 and 42,700 in 2020, spread across 140 countries. Practitioners produce a vast body of literature to market their coaching services to businesses and potential clients. There is an equally extensive body of critical literature, some of which argues that capitalism increased performance pressure so much that it caused workplace stress to skyrocket, and then put forth coaching as a solution to the very problems it created (Guilhaume, 2009; Fatien & Nizet, 2011; Fatien Diochon & Nizet, 2012). Furthermore, there is a body of scientific literature that tries to find a middle ground, exploring how coaching can be used effectively (Hackman & Wageman, 2005) or to evaluate the impact of the practice (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Theeboom et al., 2014), which provides a functionalist analysis of coaching (Nizet, 2012), or that seeks to establish a solid theoretical grounding for it (Arnaud, 2003; Vanheule & Arnaud, 2016).

The practice itself seems as diverse as the discourse surrounding it (Fatien, 2008), as if there is no consensus on how to define coaching. During an interview conducted as part of our research, one coach described it, rather surprisingly, like negative theology:⁽¹⁾

“Coaching is mostly defined by what it isn't. It's not therapy, training or advice. But at the same time, it's kind of all those things.”⁽²⁾

How, then, to explore the practice as an intermingling of different discourses and actions (Schatzki, 2008; Gherardi, 2019) through its practitioners and their clients? It is a challenge, as the profession's codes of ethics dictate that coaching sessions remain strictly confidential. This means that researchers are only allowed to observe the practice indirectly. Due to these limitations, we conducted a series of interviews with coaches and attended two group mentoring sessions as non-participating observers in an attempt to define the practice. (It should be noted that while mentoring is similar to coaching, it differs somewhat in that mentors tap into their professional and personal experience to guide their mentees, whereas coaches do not dispense advice.)

We analysed the interview summaries and observation notes using the evenly suspended attention technique, and subsequently used a type of thematic coding grounded in this technique (Dumez, 2021).

Our research produced three key findings: (i) Coaching is not a practice with any kind of theoretical basis. Nevertheless, (ii) it is extremely standardised or regulated in that it is structured by a framework, ethics and supervision. Lastly, (iii) analysing coaching as a commercial relationship provides us with a better understanding of it. These three key findings have ultimately allowed us to form a firm picture of the practice.

⁽¹⁾ Negative theology asserts that God can only be described by what he is not, as opposed to by what he is.

⁽²⁾ All interview excerpts have been translated from French.

Research methodology

Our research is based on ten interviews conducted between March 2017 and September 2019 and three additional interviews conducted in September and November 2020. We sought to explore a wide variety of professional situations (e.g. freelance coaches, coaches employed by private coaching firms, internal corporate coaches and mentors) and coaching associations (e.g. SF Coach, the ICF, the European Mentoring and Coaching Council [EMCC], In'Coach and the Professional Supervisors Federation [PSF]). A study of ten interviews may sound insufficient, but we reached a saturation point – which is characteristic of qualitative research – after ten interviews, a phenomenon related to one of coaching's central features: Because it is so regulated or standardised, all of its actors describe it in much the same way. Although the profession's codes of ethics make coaching sessions difficult (and usually impossible) to observe, we attended two two-hour group mentoring sessions, with the permission of the mentors and mentees, as non-participating observers.

We analysed this interview material using the evenly suspended attention technique, followed by thematic coding (Ayache & Dumez, 2011; Dumez, 2021).

We then compared the findings of our analysis of the interview material to the real-world experience of a coach (who we interviewed twice) and a mentor in September and November 2020, based on an approach recommended by Piore (2006).

We decided to quote liberally from the interviews we conducted in this paper in order to give a clear picture of the practice.

An atheoretical practice (due to an overabundance of theories)

In the space of just ten interviews, we were surprised by the diversity of theories used in relation to coaching, as well as the wide range of standing of these “theories”. It all starts with philosophy, and naturally Socrates. But Montaigne also frequently comes up, followed by eminent psychoanalysts: Freud, of course, as well as Jung and Erikson, and Balint and Lacan (Arnaud, 2003). We noted, for one, that coaches often mention the phenomena of transference and countertransference. Also referred to are systems analysis, transactional analysis, process communication, psycholinguistic analysis, *Gestalt* psychology and the Palo Alto School, in addition to Leonard Laskow (Laskow & Chertier, 2015) and clean language (David Grove, see Wilson, 2017), the work of W. Timothy Gallwey (2000), Enneagram, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), nonviolent communication, singular mediation (or *médiation singulière* in French, a practice created by Dominique Lecocq, a professor and psychoanalyst who teaches at the *Conservatoire national des arts et métiers* [CNAM]) and transformance. Neuroscience is also cited, as is the work of Joseph Campbell on comparative mythology and that of Jean-Pascal Debailleul (2010) on the narrative structure of stories.

One of our interview subjects offered the following summary of the various approaches on which the coaching relationship is based:

“None of the key aspects of coaching came out of thin air. The practice draws heavily on Socrates and the Bible; for instance, “God helps those who help themselves”. Other ideas are taken from the Koran or Buddha. Yin and yang. Freud himself was influenced by Eastern philosophy. Jung's archetypes were drawn from Buddhism. We didn't make anything up. Relationship manuals have existed for thousands

of years; *The Knight in Rusty Armor*, *La Voie de l'amoureux* [by French author Arouna Lipschitz]. Some things come from Kabbalah, gnosis and Sufism. You see what works. If you take out the religious aspects, there are still worthwhile things. Also, if you look into the Palo Alto School, that's also completely focused on relationships.”

The practice of coaching thus pulls from a plethora of philosophical, psychological and esoteric sources (in addition to existential coaching, ontological coaching, etc., all approaches presented in Cox et al., 2018). Costa and Garmston (2016, p. 4) describe coaching rather colourfully as “[a] blend of the psychological orientations of cognitive theorists and the interpersonal bonding of humanists”. Some experts extol the virtues of managed eclecticism, an approach which is liberating in the sense that it does not limit coaches to a single approach (Clutterbuck, 2010).

The coaching relationship can be described as follows: A client has a job-related problem (for example, they struggle to delegate tasks) or is starting a new position (an engineer becomes the manager of a team of engineers in their own technical field – i.e. they are looking to continue their career in their field – or, instead, they are working outside their field and thus feel like an imposter). They work on their problem with a coach who is not there to tell them what they should do, but rather to help them find a solution to their problem. This involves working on the unconscious (if the client was perfectly aware of the origin of their problem, then they would be able to resolve it easily on their own), but it is not therapy; the work is focused on changing certain behaviours. As one of the coaches we interviewed put it, coaching is not therapy, advice or training.

It helps people change their professional conduct, but instead of the support coming from their superiors, as is generally the case in the working world, it comes from a third party, the coach:

“Initially, coaching was created to help executives who felt isolated. Who do they have to talk to? An executive can’t really talk to their employees. Some might be able to confide in a romantic partner, but that isn’t always the case. So who can they turn to? Coaching became a way for executives to deal with their isolation.”

Given that this distinctive practice – which is much easier to define by what it *is not* than by what it *is* – is not grounded in an established theoretical framework, on a most basic level we could expect coaching to be a nebulous concept, taking on a variety of different forms depending on whether its practitioners are influenced by Jung, Gallwey, Erikson or singular mediation. But this is not at all the case, as coaching is highly structured.

How the coaching relationship is structured

The practice of coaching is structured by a framework, ethics and supervision.

Framework

The practice of coaching is thoroughly structured: The client begins by choosing a coach, a contract is drawn up specifying the number of sessions, the sessions take place and the coaching engagement concludes with a wrap-up session.

The client must choose to be coached. Typically, the future coaching client meets with several potential coaches and selects the one who suits them best. If the client is being coached within a company they work for, the coaching manager must first make sure that the request for coaching is made by the client themselves, not one of their superiors. Then, a potential coach is put forward and the future coaching client is informed that after their initial meeting with the coach, they can be introduced to a different coach if they have any reservations. In any event, the coaching manager must be sure that the employee chose to be coached, i.e. that it was not forced on them by someone else, even if only indirectly or if they were pressured into it, and that the choice of coach was an informed decision, made on the basis of trust.

The contract is the first, and most foundational, part of the coaching framework:

“What’s the coaching relationship, you ask? It’s structured by a contract; it’s not a hierarchical relationship but a contractual one. From the outset, it’s established what the client needs out of the relationship and what they seek to accomplish through our sessions. I make the client define their expectations. A mutual commitment must be established around a contract and trust. So there’s a contract, a commitment and trust.”

“A lot comes down to the initial meeting. That’s when I show the client the contract and we go over it together. The contract really lays the foundation.”

To establish the contract, a tripartite meeting takes place:

“The coaching relationship exists because the client and the sponsoring company have objectives that they want to achieve with the help of a coach. It serves the intentions and objectives of the coach, who has their own set of intentions, wishes and aims, as well as the interests of the company and the client. A tripartite meeting forms the basis of the coaching contract. It allows us to establish the objectives we’ll be working towards, and the client is the focus of this work.”

The contract is drawn up and filed. The client identifies their issue and sets (themselves) the objective of resolving it by changing their professional conduct. It is made clear that all future face-to-face sessions between the client and their coach will be kept strictly confidential.

The second part of the coaching framework is the end of the coaching engagement: A coaching relationship must come to an end (Freud himself was absorbed by the question of whether or not a psychoanalysis comes to an end, 1985/1937). The coaching sequence is rather standardised, though it does leave some room for flexibility: The coach holds a first meeting with the future coaching client, which is then followed by a tripartite meeting with the coach, the client and the representative of the sponsoring company (e.g. a manager or HR manager), six to seven face-to-face sessions and a tripartite progress review to determine how the objective(s) outlined in the contract were achieved. There are usually a total of ten sessions, which typically last from an hour and a half to two hours each and are scheduled over three to six weeks:

“What works well for me is about ten face-to-face coaching sessions of two hours, plus two tripartite meetings (one at the beginning and another at the end). The client is the one who does the progress review at the end. I think it’s important to take your time. The client must be able to put things into perspective, so two hours isn’t excessive. With just one hour, you feel rushed. As for remote sessions, an hour to an hour and a half minimum, it’s more tiring, they’re more frequent (every two weeks).”

Any materials used, such as flip boards, are photographed before being destroyed. Since coaching is not about guiding the client, the coach intervenes as little as possible, only asking questions:

“The coaching is done by the client alone. That’s important. The more I do, the less successful it is. There’s the masculine energy, which is the active role. The feminine energy is more about making the person feel welcome, creating a sense of security. When the client gets tired, I take over. That’s when I play the masculine role and the client plays the feminine role. If we’re both playing the masculine role at the same time, we’re going to talk over each other and things will heat up. If the client is tired, I’ll give more of myself. If they have the energy for it, they lead the session.”

Clients are assigned homework and exercises to do in between sessions:

“I ask them to keep a journal, which helps them learn to hold a mirror up to themselves. They get into the habit of it and are always supported along the way. These little exercises are very practical.”

“Just a few exercises: When you meet with your co-workers, ask them, ‘What is it you need?’ And you let them speak. You listen. Create a situation where the person comes up against themselves by how they operate.”

These assignments help the coach monitor the client’s progress: If the client does not do the planned exercises in between sessions, the coach knows where things stand. Typically, sessions take place less frequently as the engagement draws to a close:

“There are two phases: The relationship-building phase, during which sessions take place more often, every two weeks, followed by the empowerment phase, which readies the client for the end of the coaching relationship, during which sessions become less frequent.”

A final session then concludes the coaching relationship:

“Ending the coaching relationship is a big deal. Well, maybe not a ‘big deal’... But it’s really important. We take stock of the coaching sessions. Before the last session, I send the client a progress report. During the last session, we discuss the report and assess the client’s progress. I’m not meant to be part of peoples’ lives forever, though I do love it when they give me updates. A healthy coach-client relationship means being there for a certain period of time and then exiting their lives. This assumes that the client now has all the resources they need.”

“Another aspect that makes coaching different from therapy is that we’re not treating a person’s troubles; we’re working on objectives that they set for themselves, for a limited period of time.”

The practice of coaching seems particularly structured – and perhaps even standardised in the way it is performed – given that it (i) is based on a written contract established by a coach and a client, along with a representative of the sponsoring company (who is often from the human resources department), (ii) plans a set number of sessions and homework in between sessions, and (iii) ends with a wrap-up session. Mentoring is also highly structured and sometimes adds another step. Midway through the mentoring process, the mentor brings in a sponsor who is neither a manager of the mentee nor the requesting entity within the mentee’s company, but a person at the organisation who knows the mentee and can talk about how they are perceived in the context of their job and what areas they need to improve. The sponsor takes part in the assessment phase, noting in what ways the mentee has improved over the course of the mentorship.

Ethics

The coaching relationship is also structured by ethics. Coaching associations have drawn up specific, stringent codes of ethics. That means there is a common set of rules shared by all coaching associations and professionals, the first of which being that coaching sessions are confidential:

“What goes on over the course of a coaching engagement is only the business of the coach and the client. Coaches, much like doctors, must respect client confidentiality. Companies don’t always cooperate, but coaches must fully maintain confidentiality. Some HR reps try to get around this by asking you out to lunch, and try to extract information from you.”

The second rule states that coaches have a duty to protect their clients:

“Because they’re the client, and my duty is to protect them. That’s non-negotiable.”

The third rule is that coaches should never agree to an engagement that involves coaching a manager and someone from their team. In addition to having to follow these rules, coaches must at times navigate delicate situations that pose ethical dilemmas (Fatien Diochon & Nizet, 2015):

“A client told me, ‘I want to leave my job, I want to change professions.’ But for 10 or 15 minutes he talked non-stop about his wife and what she thought. I said to him, ‘Coaching isn’t what you need.’ Recognising when to say that... that’s what ethics means.”

“A client said, ‘My objective is for my employees to like me.’ I told them I couldn’t do that for them.”

“While drafting the contract, a client explained one of their objectives: ‘I want people to do what I ask them to do.’ I said no, that’s manipulative. He reconsidered and ultimately modified his objective. We ended up working together.”

The most delicate types of situation are when a company has reached out to a coach as a last resort or when it quickly becomes apparent that the coaching client’s manager is the one who could really use the coaching:

“Coaches are extremely wary of what we like to call ‘last chance’ coaching. That kind of engagement is awful. If it isn’t successful, the client is going to be fired. It’s not always made explicit, but you catch on. Engagements like that are really difficult, because that’s not what coaching is about. And then there are always ways to spoil a good thing, to use it for bad designs. There’s coaching that takes place under false pretences, and situations where it isn’t the client, but the client’s bosses who should be the ones receiving coaching.”

Managing the coach-client relationship, in which both parties often form a strong bond, also raises ethical problems when the partnership goes outside the bounds of a normal coaching relationship:

“There have been rare occasions where I thought I could’ve become friends with a client, with the relationship turning into more of a friendship. But because every coaching engagement has an end date, I don’t try to see my clients once our time is up. I’ve never become friends with my clients, though I’ve had people ask if we could become friends.”

“Becoming friends is a possibility, but that’s not the goal. You might invite a former client out for a drink to check in with them. It’s sort of like after-sales service. Some coaches maintain that becoming friends with a client isn’t allowed and that it’s unethical. If I was a therapist, I wouldn’t do it. But I don’t mind calling someone to get an update on how they’re doing.”

Internal corporate coaching raises a particular set of ethical problems:

“We’re not allowed to talk about our coaching sessions, though we can anonymously pass on things that are said. The company I work for fully complies with these rules. The HR department doesn’t want to know who I’m coaching, but they do want to be informed of early warning signs, such as burnout or lack of well-being. When I was just starting out and I heard about internal coaching, I wondered how you could be an employee *and* independent. You’re being paid by an organisation, there’s a duty of loyalty, so how do you comply with the code of ethics? External coaches

had the worst possible things to say about internal coaching. I discovered the profession and found it to be much more demanding than external coaching. It's so easy to get it wrong."

In addition to a framework, the practice of coaching is also structured by codes of ethics drawn up by professional associations. While these codes may vary somewhat from one association to another, they all share a common core of ideas.

Supervision

Owing to the ethical problems, difficulties and predicaments that can arise in the coaching relationship, coaches must generally be supervised. This is the case for all coaches who have been certified by a professional association, as supervision is a requirement for certification (supervisors may also be certified by coaching associations or an association of coaching supervisors). It is more difficult to say how many uncertified coaches are supervised:

"What makes evaluating coaches so hard is that sometimes what they say is different from what they actually do. People sign the coaching code of ethics with the sincerest intentions. They don't necessarily realise when they don't follow it. For example, when coaches make judgments, they are acting in an advisory capacity, mixing their issue with that of the client's, which is why supervision is needed."

"Supervisors help us when we're struggling with or not making progress on an engagement, and they even give us insight into why an engagement went well. Supervisors are there to point out my blind spots."

Supervisors work either one-to-one with coaches or with a group of coaches. In the latter case, a supervisor meets with the coaches about once per month:

"The coach lays out their problem. Then they sit back. The other coaches talk about what they would have done in their position, while the first coach listens. All of them offer their perspective as coaches and explain how they would've handled the situation."

Internal corporate coaches are supervised by professionals outside their company.

In summary, coaching is a highly structured practice involving a framework, ethics and mandatory supervision. And yet it draws on a tremendous variety of theoretical approaches. Why is this so? We suggest that the answer lies in the commercial nature of the coaching relationship.

Coaching as a commercial relationship

Although reliable figures are not available, it appears that companies initiate 90% to 95% of coaching engagements. But companies are faced with two uncertainties in the coaching relationship. The first is that of the quality of the service provided, as described by the lemons problem theory (Akerlof, 1970). Corporate coaching differs markedly from sports coaching on this point: The quality of the latter is evaluated in a direct, transparent way, based on the performance of the team being coached. The team either wins its games and the coach is praised, or it loses and the coach is fired. In a corporate setting, assessing the outcome of a coaching

engagement is more problematic because it is not as directly apparent, even when performance indicators have been established:

"One day, I was coaching someone to help them improve their delegation skills. This person had a great team and a senior position, but he wasn't delegating enough. I asked the HR manager, 'How will you know at the end of the engagement that Mr So-and-So has made progress?' To which she replied, laughing, 'We'll know that he has learned how to delegate after he uses up all 38 of his banked vacation days'."

Uncertainty over outcomes is heightened by coaching's most fundamental rule of ethics, i.e. that coaching sessions are confidential. A company must not and cannot have any knowledge of what goes on in the context of a coaching engagement. This means that a company can neither evaluate the quality of the service provided nor the manner in which it was provided, even though it must cover the relatively expensive cost of the service, as coaching is not covered by government-funded training programmes:

"Companies include coaching engagements in their training budget, but they must bear the cost since the government doesn't consider them to be a form of training."

And yet there is an overabundance of supply in the coaching market. Upon completing what may be rather ill-defined training in the practice, anyone with a certain amount of business experience can call themselves a coach and sell their services.

It would seem impossible for supply to meet demand in such an environment. The stakes of coaching can be high for companies, particularly where executives are concerned; if they are not able to judge the quality of a given coach, how can they buy their services with any confidence?

Three key elements make this commercial relationship possible: Training, certification (or accreditation) and a structured coaching relationship.

Coaching training programmes have grown rapidly. Many elite institutions of higher learning (including HEC) offer such programmes, along with a number of universities (Paris 8, for example, has a postgraduate degree, or DESU [*diplôme d'études supérieures universitaires*] in the discipline) and private educational institutions. But educational establishments cannot regulate the commercial relationship on their own: Company managers can complete a course of study in coaching in one to two years, but some institutions offer programmes that take just six months. Assessing the quality of such a profusion of programmes proves difficult:

"It sustains the illusion that if you know a little bit about transactional analysis, process communication, psycholinguistic analysis... get some training on how to apply tools and write a short thesis, and you're a coach."

Hence the need for certification. Given the wide-ranging intellectual origins of the practice, it seems virtually impossible to implement a uniform certification programme. The creation of a diverse range of certification mechanisms to ensure quality has filled the void. SF Coach, founded in 1996, was the first coaching

association ever created in France, followed by the French branch of the International Coaching Federation (ICF) in 1999 (the global federation dates back to 1995) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) in 2002 (its predecessor organisation, the European Mentoring Centre, was founded in 1992). The ICF represents the American style of coaching, whereas SF Coach is more steeped in the psychoanalytic tradition. Coaches can thus join whichever organisation they identify most closely with. There are also a number of other, less influential professional associations:

“The goal is to put in place qualification processes to avoid an ‘anything goes’ situation with things like ‘self-coaching’ and all kinds of other nonsense. Not to mention cults. We’re here to prevent unsavoury practices.”

These professional associations have taken different routes: While the ICF has significantly expanded its membership, SF Coach has a very strict, selective membership policy and considerably limits its number of members. Each association has its own code of ethics, although they share the same body of basic rules. Likewise, the EMCC and the ICF have established competence frameworks; once again, they differ but are built on similar core ideas:

“The EMCC has eight competence categories in its framework and the ICF has 11. If you look at them closely, you see that they’re the same, just framed differently.”

In the end, the profession has become structured:

“Coaching has become very well structured. It’s been quite a success.”

When companies work with coaches who have been certified or accredited by an association, they are reassured that they are buying a high-quality service. But above all else, what establishes the commercial nature of the coaching relationship is the fact that it is structured. Companies need to know what they are buying before they purchase a coach’s services:

“It’s a tripartite relationship: the company that is paying for the service, the coach and the client. For everything to go smoothly, you have to establish a detailed contract when you get a coaching request, since it’s the company that pays, so that they’ll be reassured, as under confidentiality rules the company won’t know anything more. They’re buying a service.”

As previously established, coaching has, in this way, become a relatively standardised practice. The nature of the service being sold, if not the content of the service itself, needed to be clearly defined:

“As an external coach, you’re selling six coaching sessions, plus a meeting with the client and two tripartite meetings.”

Interestingly, the coaching contract fulfils two obligations: First, the relationship is a commercial one, and the company must know what they are buying (it is inconceivable for a company to buy a service, for instance, which has no set end date, such as psychotherapy). Second, coaches, who draw on a vast range of intellectual foundations, must be able to carry out their engagements as they see fit, relying on whatever approaches they choose. This is allowed under the contract: The company knows that they are buying nine to ten coaching sessions and that they will be able to attend two of them (one during which their

voice will be heard and another during which the coach will take stock of their experience with the client). With the engagement structured in this way, the coach then has six to eight sessions that they can conduct as they feel appropriate, in complete confidentiality. These two aspects – the non-hierarchical support that coaching provides and the commercial nature of the relationship – have become solidified in the practice’s characteristic *modus operandi*.

Future outlook and conclusion

In this exploration of the practice of coaching we have demonstrated that it should be considered from two angles: as a form of support in the workplace, uncommon in that it is non-hierarchical, and as a commercial relationship, wherein a company is buying a service. The intellectual foundations of coaching are surprisingly wide-ranging, as many authors have remarked, but the way the coaching relationship has been structured gives coaches the ability to use their own approach, in line with the sponsoring company’s requirements, and offers potential clients an array of coaching methods to choose from.

The coaching market has entered a phase of major growth which is likely to disrupt the very nature of the coaching relationship and coaching services. On the demand side, companies began by exposing their senior executives to coaching. After they were satisfied with the experience, coaching spread from the top down, particularly due to the flattening of management structures, which has put greater pressure on middle management (Littler et al., 2003; Hales, 2006):

“Back in 2002 and 2003, I remember giving talks on coaching as ‘punishment or reward’. Coaching was this secret thing and you weren’t supposed to tell anyone that you were being coached. If you were seeing a coach, that meant there was a problem with you or something. Coaching was practically a shameful thing at first, but that’s no longer the case today. Stuff like that might still go on, but it isn’t the norm. Coaching has become one of a number of support structures. In the early days, it was for senior executives and managers. Nowadays, employees are being coached too. The cost varies depending on the client’s position in the company.”

Other types of coaching followed, such as team coaching, project coaching and organisational coaching. The practice of mentoring took the same trajectory, with one-to-one mentoring leading to the emergence of group mentoring (in which several managers from either the same firm or different firms are mentored). One of the companies we reached out to shared that their coaching practice breaks down into one-third one-to-one coaching, one-third team coaching and one-third project coaching. In fact, this expansion occurred rather organically:

“I started coaching teams very early on because I noticed that one-to-one coaching had some drawbacks in certain situations. It put too much emphasis on changing a particular person when in reality it was either the team that needed to behave differently or the manager and their team that needed to change. I felt that one-to-one coaching had limits and that team coaching could sometimes be more relevant.”

Supply has grown to accommodate the rise in demand for coaching. Late-career managers find new meaning in helping others, especially their younger colleagues. And many coaching clients end up wanting to become coaches themselves. Higher education has kept up with the trend, creating a myriad of training programmes that teach the fundamentals of coaching to those wanting to join the profession.

To meet the needs of the rapidly growing coaching market, the industry had to institutionalise, ultimately becoming stratified. At the upper tier of the market, demand for coaching services comes from large corporations for their executives. Demand is met by a supply of highly regarded coaches, working either as freelancers or at coaching firms, who are certified by major coaching associations. The next tier of the market concerns middle management at large corporations. Recent years have seen the emergence of tenders directed exclusively at coaching firms which offer to introduce potential clients to two or three possible coaches so that the client is free to select among several options, for some 20 coaching sessions per year over two or three years, with six months of coaching costing roughly €15,000 excluding VAT.⁽³⁾ Mentoring rates are in a similar ballpark.

In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, a mentoring firm told us that it had set a minimum rate of €12,000 for mentoring engagements of six months. Large corporations often use a mix of external and internal coaches, with internal ones being mid-level employees who devote a portion of their time to coaching (20%). As such employees' working hours are difficult to gauge and frequently open-ended, the cost for corporations is negligible, with training representing the largest burden.

One of the lower tiers of the coaching market caters to small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), among others, and offers a wider range of services which can be provided by less reputable coaches who are not always certified. The bottom-most tier is increasingly occupied by low-cost services, such as three-session coaching packages and online coaching platforms. On the whole, only a small number of coaches make a living from it. Most work as coaches part-time alongside another job, as instructor for example.

Two shifts underway have the potential to upend the market as it currently stands, as well as the practice itself. The first regards the rapid growth the market has seen, as mentioned in our analysis. It is reasonable to wonder whether coaching will become a victim of its own success. As we pointed out, mainstream companies have democratised coaching, making it available to executives, middle managers, teams, projects and entire organisations. Today we are witnessing the emergence of agile coaches, who, more often than not, are coaches in name only. Furthermore, a new form of organisation called the liberated company (Gilbert et al., 2017), or holacracy (Battistelli, 2019), does away with hierarchy altogether:

⁽³⁾ This cost is based on information obtained during interviews. Fatien Diochon and Nizet (2012, p. 28), however, indicate lower costs ranging between €5,000 and €12,000.

"The biggest trend nowadays is that everyone wants to become a coaching manager, as though the organisational hierarchy has been flattened."

But this would barely classify as coaching and is essentially a contradiction in terms, in that coaching is by definition a non-hierarchical relationship. How, then, could such a relationship exist alongside a managerial relationship? How is it possible to introduce something as foreign as a non-hierarchical relationship into the management culture of the corporate world? Are we bearing witness to the "coachification" of companies, at the same time as a form of "coachification" of society? Like every other management fad, coaching may well be destined to decline in a few years after becoming a victim of its own success (Midler, 1986; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999).

One of our interviews raised a second shift – one both dreaded and eagerly anticipated – that of artificial intelligence (AI), at a time when phone and video coaching have become more widespread, largely owing to the COVID-19 crisis, and perhaps one day holograms, making it possible for coaches and their clients to meet remotely in the same "room":

"Ten years from now, it will be the turn of AI. It's going to change things. We're already seeing more and more coaching via Skype and over the phone. AI will take over, for good or ill."

We did not ask any questions on the topic of AI in our interviews, as it was not part of our initial orienting theory, and the above response produced an isolated occurrence, or hapax, during the thematic coding process. We then ran a search on Google Scholar using the keywords "coaching" and "artificial intelligence", and some results came up, including a recent seminal paper published by Clutterbuck (2020). His essay reviews the current state of AI research at the University of Southern California, making reference to the development of AI therapists, a technology that enables real-time analysis of micro-expressions, physical signs of stress and responses expressed by patients during therapeutic conversations. In addition, the technology keeps record of previous sessions and is being tested for use in coaching. The AI's ability to provide "real-time information about what is going on in the conversation", suggest questions, check coaches' intuitions and help them review the way they run coaching sessions could have a profound impact on the practice of coaching.

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