

## EDITORIAL

### **The blind men and the elephant: using criteria of universality and uniqueness in evaluating our attempts to define coaching**

In our previous editorials we have examined a range of issues that are relevant to coaches, academics and researchers on coaching. We have welcomed wholeheartedly a wide variety of perspectives on coaching in our journal believing that the richness of perspectives contributes to the development of this field. But underneath the diversity of approaches the assumption was made that we all meant reasonably the same thing when we use the word 'coaching'. In this issue of *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research & Practice*, however, we would like to engage you in the conversation – what exactly do we all mean by coaching? Do we have something similar in mind when we use the word? We believe that whether we are involved in theory, research or practice, it will serve us to examine the definition of what we do and how our explicit or implicit ideas about identity of coaching affect us.

A scan of the literature and websites of professional bodies reveals that very different definitions of coaching are suggested (see examples in this text and Table 1). Initially presented definitions seem to be evolving, and new ones surface regularly. We imagine that each coach has some internal working definition of what he or she offers. Sometimes this definition is clearly articulated; other times it still informs the interventions we make, how we describe our sessions, and how we sell our services. Most of us can probably recall an experience of frustration when trying to explain to someone who does not know much about coaching, what it is and what we actually do. What we explore in this editorial is that the challenge is not just semantic or the proper definitions are just difficult to convey. The struggle to describe what we do goes much deeper – in the difficulty to establish a clear identity of coaching *in principle* as a practice or process.

Various authors openly suggest that confusion on the definition of coaching impacts on our professionalism. '... there is a lack of clarity as to what professional coaching really is and what makes for an effective or reputable coach' (Sherman, & Freas, 2004, p. 84). Others suggest that worrying about definitions is not a significant problem; it is the results that count. Cavanagh (interview in this issue) even suggests that 'blurriness' may even foster the development and evolution of coaching as our profession grapples with the crises that the world is facing in economy and the environment.

In this editorial we will try to make issues regarding the process of defining coaching more explicit. Several articles in this issue of the journal are also devoted to this topic offering new research findings and suggesting new ways of identifying coaching. By participating in this conversation we will hopefully increase our understanding of one another and of our experiences thus helping to accumulate knowledge about coaching. We hope this will help to foster the process by which each new professional practice refines its conceptual apparatus which is necessary for

Table 1. A range of definitions of coaching.

Coaching was defined as a collaborative, solution-focused, result-orientated systematic process, used with normal, non-clinical populations, in which the coach facilitates the self-directed learning, personal growth and goal attainment of the coachee.	AC Grant (2002)
Coaching is a collaborative, solution focused, results orientated, and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of life experience, goal attainment, and personal development of individuals, groups and organizations, who do not have clinically significant mental health issues or abnormal levels of distress.	APS coaching psychological interest group, (2005)
Business coaching is the process of engaging in meaningful communication with individuals in businesses, organizations, institutions or governments, with the goal of promoting success at all levels of the organization by affecting the actions of those individuals.	WABC
Professional Coaching is an ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, businesses or organizations. Through the process of coaching, clients deepen their learning, improve their performance, and enhance their quality of life.	ICF
Executive coaching has been defined and described in varied ways, but generally it is a one-on-one, confidential relationship designed to help the client improve job performance and develop professionally.	Newsom, (2009)
... the art of creating an environment, through conversation and a way of being, that facilitates the process by which a person can move toward desired goals in a fulfilling manner.	Gallway, (2000)
Coaching is the process of equipping people with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective.	Peterson, (1996)
... provide an understanding of the coaching process which is defined as a leader-initiated informal discussion designed to bring about a change in employee behaviour, attitudes or actions.	Stowell, (1987)
Coaching is a collaborative process that facilitates the client's ability to self-directed learning and growth, and is evidenced by sustained changes in self-understanding, self-concept, and behaviour.	Stober, (2006)
Primarily a short-term intervention aimed at performance improvement or developing a particular competence.	Clutterbuck, (2003)
Life coaching is a practice with the aim of helping clients determine and achieve personal goals. Life coaches use multiple methods that will help clients with the process of setting and reaching goals. Coaching is not targeted at psychological illness and coaches are not therapists nor consultants.	Wikipedia

mutual understanding and continuing development. This we believe also helps the practice to become accepted by wider communities.

### **Two definitions of coaching – or radically different perspectives**

We want to start with identifying an issue that causes quite a lot of confusion for providers and recipients of coaching alike. There are two significantly different ways



to use the word 'coaching'. In the first of these two ways, the word 'coaching' is applied when we envisage just a special type of a conversation between two people. In the second way 'coaching' is referred to a professional service that is offered by a specialist to a client under an explicit contract. As we describe, the same word can mean very different things.

In the first sense, coaching as a *conversation*, is perceived as an interactive process that unfolds in time and simply describes what happens between two people who are engaged in it, e.g. Starr (2003) defines coaching as 'a conversation, or series of conversations, one person has with another' (p. 109). In this meaning coaching can be seen as very widespread in nearly any setting and between all sorts of different people. One can say that parents, tutors, friends, colleagues, managers may be coaching on a regular basis if in their own way they help another person to process whatever is important for them.

Coaching in this sense is a conversation in which a topic of importance for one person becomes a focus of attention for both. Some people are naturally very good at this type of interaction; others can learn to be better at this with some effort. However, even using this very widest definition of coaching one important element needs to exist: these two people ideally need to agree that one will be coaching and another is willing to be coached. Core of all coaching encounters – both are willing participants and the 'coach' has permission to pursue this type of conversation. Otherwise, coaching becomes an encounter where a self-appointed 'coach' interferes in another's life and choices whether others want it or not.

In contrast, we also use the word 'coaching' when we describe a *service or practice*, offered by a professional with a guarantee of quality ensured by his/her relevant competencies (knowledge of the process, necessary skills for facilitating it, professional attitude to relationship, etc.). An important element of coaching in this meaning is that the parties have an implicit and explicit contract that sets a context, conditions, responsibilities and an initial focus of work. For example, one definition that highlights the difference between coaching as a conversation from coaching as a professional service is illustrated by Kilburg (2000, p. 65) describing coaching in a specific working context as:

a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and consultant (coach) who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to assist the client to achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client's organisation within a formally defined coaching agreement.

These two very different ways of seeing coaching can lead to a wide variety of misunderstandings among practitioners and the public. When we describe coaching as a special conversation using natural or learned skills or as a specialized professional practice, but are not explicit in what way we use it, this can lead to disagreements, confusion and diverse opinions about coaching. One core controversy that stems from these differences of opinion is: 'Anyone can coach'. If you see coaching as a conversation in which a topic of importance for one person becomes a focus of attention for both, then of course anyone can coach. If you see coaching as a professional practice you need to be a professional with all implications that follow from this word and the perspective becomes 'no' – 'Not anyone can really coach.'

