A NARRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW OF COACHING APPROACHES: TAKEAWAYS FOR MANAGERS

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Abstract

Practitioners, educators, and researchers have shown interest in coaching as a human development intervention. As such, coaching has been under the scrutiny of evidence-based methods of development for a while. However, research and theorizing coaching are underway due to its foundational interdisciplinarity and even transdisciplinarity. Coaching presents diverse approaches, usually influenced by multiple disciplines. In this direction, in the coaching literature, we can identify studies and classifications that pertain to psychology, organizational and management theories, philosophy, education, communication, and neuroscience, to name the most known. Predominantly a non-directive practice, coaching can also employ directive aspects. In this direction, we ask, what disciplines contributed to the body of knowledge in coaching, and what approaches evolved from these disciplines? The study explores these questions through a narrative literature review.

Keywords
coaching practice; coaching approaches; coaching disciplines; directive coaching; evidence-based coaching; non-directive coaching.

Introduction

Human development has flourished in the last decades, encouraging the development and adoption of professions and practices known as *helping professions*, such as *training, coaching, mentoring, counseling, and psychotherapy*. The proliferation of these development paradigms is due, at least in part, to the emergence of the knowledge-based economy and its emphasis on human capital. This way, coaching has evolved along with societal challenges, such as globalization, hypercomplexity, self-reflexivity, burnout, and exhaustion (Stelter, 2016, p. 332).

Recently, the debut of a global health crisis marked the end of a "pandemic century," signaling the dangers of an interconnected world (Honigsbaum, 2020, p. 439), followed by a predictable economic crisis and an unexpected socio–political conflict in Europe. De Haan (2022) attributes this crisis-prone environment to a "crisis in leadership" (p. 10). This necessity to invest in leadership competencies becomes apparent as "the new business conditions require different ways of leading" (Clutterbuck & Devine, 2022, p. 2), coaches being familiar with the matter of leadership crisis (De Haan, 2022, p. 10).

Literature review

Even though the coaching practice started to flourish as a profession in the 1980s (Passmore & Woodward, 2023, p. 60), research in coaching, known as evidence-based coaching (EBC) (Spence, 2007, p. 255), has been through a tremendous journey to date. From a non-existent body of knowledge (Downey, 2003, p. viii) and no established typologies of coaching (Jackson, 2005, p. 47), coaching research stalled because it missed on learning from historical events (such as the surge and decline of the Human Potential Movement (HPM)) (Spence, 2007, p. 256).

Today, coaching has been examined through evidence-based methods (Grant, 2006; Passmore & Woodward, 2023; Spence, 2007; Stodter & Cushion, 2019), coming forth as a dynamic field of inquiry with development phases of coaching research (Graf & Dionne, 2021; Passmore & Evans-Krimme, 2021) and education (Passmore & Woodward, 2023).

Defining coaching

Definitions of coaching vary in their approach, whether they facilitate direct instruction or self-learning (Grant & Stober, 2006, p. 2). With a focus on performance, John Whitmore (2017) defines coaching as "unlocking people's potential to maximize their own performance"(p. 13), where people learn similarly to how children naturally know how to walk without being disrupted through instruction (Whitmore, 2017, p. 13). Coaching is also about "the art of facilitating the performance, learning, and development of another" (Downey, 2003, p. 21). Thus, apart from the goal of performance, coaching creates change through learning (Starr, 2003, p. 2), but how learning takes place and how the potential is "unlocked" can be a matter of coaching directiveness or non-directiveness.

Coaching is an "intervention" (Passmore, 2010, p. 2) within different perspectives. Stressing a non-directive direction and focusing on goal attainment, "coaching is essentially about helping individuals regulate and direct their interpersonal and intra-personal resources to better attain their goals" (Grant, 2006, p. 153), where "the coachee [the receiver of coaching] does acquire the facts, not from the coach but from within himself, stimulated by the coach" (Whitmore, 2009, p. 9).

In its simplest form, coaching is "a conversation in which a topic of importance for one person becomes a focus of attention for both (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2009a, p. 98). Furthermore, "people ideally need to agree that one will be coaching and another is willing to be coached" (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2009a, p. 98). Ultimately, the receiver of coaching can establish whether coaching has occurred (Starr, 2003, p. 3).

From a philosophical perspective, Stelter (2016) presents coaching as "an art of lingering or the process of slowing down to think and reflect," presented through the concept of "contemplative life" (*vita contemplativa)* (Starr, 2003, p. 333). This view contrasts with the strict following of goals in coaching, as long–lasting change cannot be achieved by short-lived goals (Stelter, 2016, p. 333).

However, older definitions stress a directive nuance in coaching, as in „equipping people with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities they need to develop themselves" (Peterson & Hicks, 1996, as cited in Ives, 2008, p. 104) or being "directly concerned with the immediate improvement of performance and development of skills by a form of tutoring or instructing" (Parsloe, 1995, as cited in Ives, 2008, p. 104), and coaching seen as "guidance from an expert with a view to align the student's performance with that of the teacher" (Druckman & Bjork, 1991, as cited in Ives, 2008, p. 104). Closer to the 21st century, definitions start to incorporate the "facilitating" attribute while still carrying the directive aspect of "guiding," such as in the remark, "A coach is a facilitator but also a guide (Hudson, 1999, as cited in Ives, 2008, p. 104).

Notably, there is a difference between "unsolicited" and solicited transfer of knowledge, which can be a mentoring aspect. However, offering advice is not encouraged by today's approaches, where part of the process is that the client finds the answer or the solution within themselves, helped by the coach. With two more directive influencers – management and sports – some definitions can have more "instructional" language.

Coaching is also a dialogical (Stelter, 2016, p. 332) and "dialectic process that integrates experiences, concepts, and observations to facilitate understanding, provide direction, and support action and integration" (Cox et al., 2014, p. 148). When the coach's role is "helping the coachee clarify their thinking, challenge their views of the world" (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2009b, p. 109), who or what provides direction - the coach or the coaching process? While the more directive definitions include knowledge transfer, those focused on facilitation (non-directive) seem to center on the cultivation of self–knowledge.

Because of its interdisciplinary nature, finding a definition for coaching has been a "struggle" for professionals, researchers, and theoreticians alike due to the "difficulty to establish a clear identity of coaching in principle as a practice or process" (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2009a, p. 95). The multiple paths emerging in coaching, together with the crises and events facing the world, are an opportunity for coaching to define its role (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2009b, p. 111).

Chronological inquiry into coaching

One can trace many sources of origin for coaching. Some sources go back to ancient Africa or even to prehistoric records of cave paintings (Koopman et al., 2021, p. 139). Passmore & Evans-Krimme (2021) acknowledged this era as "peoplisation" (50,0000–5,000 years ago), where "coaching remained a hidden communication form" (p. 5) and when people as hunter-gatherers were conversing about new hunting scenarios as a pattern of "sophisticated communication which is highly efficient and effective at enabling learning" (Passmore & Woodward, 2023, p. 60).

References to ancient Greek philosophy have sustained the test of time. The Socratic Method - known as Socratic Questioning, the Socratic dialogue, or maieutics – is often associated with the coaching technique of asking open-ended questions that create reflection and access to the knowledge of the self, helping the coachee navigate their barrier (Neenan, 2009, p. 250). The literature identifies this era as "purposisation" (5,000-50 years ago) when coaching introduces explicit learning goals (Passmore &

Evans-Krimme, 2021, p. 6). Moreover, Aristotle's notions of *techne* and *phronesis*, translated as practical knowledge (Bratianu, 2023, p. 100), are often discussed in the coaching literature (Hardman & Jones, 2010).

Before the 1900s, coaching mainly focused on the physical aspect, compared to mentoring, a similar practice involving knowledge transfer (Koopman et al., 2021, p. 140). The late 20th and early 21st centuries mark the "professionalization" of coaching (Passmore & Evans-Krimme, 2021, p. 6). This way, coaching shifts from a physical to a mental, inner focus (Gallwey, 2015, p. 8). Consequently, the popular coaching models GROW and Co-Active Coaching develop between the 1980s and 1990s (Tee & Passmore, 2022, p. 13). The 1990s marked an industrious decade for coaching, serving as an inflection point that led to the diversification of coaching approaches.

In the new millennium, various therapy and psychology-based approaches emerge, such as cognitive behavioral (CBC) and solution-focused coaching, while post-2010s specific models evolve (motivational interviewing (MI) or Gestalt, e.g.), along with those that draw on organizational development and change management (Tee & Passmore, 2022, p. 13). Today's stage, "productization," enabled by technological advancement, will continue with "popularisation," highlighting that more people will have access to the service thanks to coaching's industrial development (Passmore & Evans-Krimme, 2021, p. 6).

Coaching education goes through a similar journey, with stages such as "pre-profession" (characterized by non-systematic training), "practice-based professionalization" (powered by small-scale coach providers and professional body competencies), "evidence-based professionalization" (powered by university-based coach education and evidenced-based training), and the present day "productization of coaching" (powered by large scale digital coaching providers) (Passmore & Woodward, 2023, pp. 64-65). Technology development impacted the coaching field and its adoption by specialist organizations, contributing to the "democratization of coaching" phenomenon, where AI plays a critical role, especially with more simplistic coaching (Terblanche et al., 2022, p. 1).

Graf and Dionne (2021) highlight the phases of research development in the coaching field, such as the *interest in the effectiveness of coaching* (phase one), *interest in contributing factors to coaching success* (phase two), *interest in the processes involved in coaching* (behavior of the coach and coachee) (phase three), and critical reflection (phase four) (Graf & Dionne, 2021, p. 40). In retrospect, coaching has been on its way to developing evidence-based solid foundations. As we advance, we explore contemporary disciplines that contribute to the foundation of evidence-based coaching (EBC).

Bodies of knowledge in coaching

Recognizing the multiple influences that form its body of knowledge (Bachkirova et al., 2010; Grant & Stober, 2006), coaching emerged as "the leading personal development strategy for the 21st century" (Passmore, 2013, p. v). Amidst existing ripples of mistrust, the "open discourse" value of coaching, conducive to theorization (Grant & Stober, 2006, p. 1), has endured into coaching theory development (Bachkirova, 2017, p. 35).

Moreover, research in the helping professions often draws on similar literature, as with the "parallels between coaching and psychotherapy, research designs and questions in the former often replicate available settings in the latter" (Graf & Dionne, 2021, p. 39). However, they are presented as different fields, as is also the case with coaching and mentoring (Hobson & Van Nieuwerburgh, 2022, p. 1).

Two directions seem to have influenced the roots of coaching: sports coaching and the Socratic dialogue. In Cox et al. (2014), we find that coaching has been initially more focused on performance, thus, presumably, on its sports influencer rather than on dialogue, which is probably a more valued instance nowadays. For example, research shows that coaches from the US were more inclined to goal attainment, whereas European coaches were more focused on the conversation in coaching (David et al., 2013, p. 45).

The "sports–coaches–turned–management–coaching–gurus," with the famous example of former car racing driver John Whitmore, was a visible entry of the concept of coaching from sports into a broader spectrum of practice, such as management, guided by new associations of professional athletes and sports psychologists "to consolidate further the connection between sports coaching and a notion of best practice management" (Parsloe & Leedham, 2017, p. 5). Unlike sports coaching, the coachee solicits the coach's services in individual coaching. In organizational coaching, both instances can occur.

Even though modern coaching may draw some of its best practices from sports coaching, it is difficult to observe similarities between coaching and sports coaching as the technicalities of the latter are too ingrained in the sports context (Stodter & Cushion, 2019, pp. 1–2). Thus, sports coaching is a standalone type with its characteristics.

Within modern-day coaching, Cox et al. (2014) provide a rich description of bodies of knowledge: counseling and psychotherapy, organizational psychology, training, leadership development, HRD (Human resources development), mentoring, sociology, communication studies, education, ethics, philosophy, psychology of individuals (p. 146).

Thus far, psychology studies have been pioneers in coaching research, "taking a leadership role in the professionalization of coaching" (Spence, 2007, p. 256). As such, coaching psychology, positive psychology, adult learning theory, motivational interviewing (MI) (Bachkirova, 2017, p. 22), along with psychoanalytical therapy, cognitive and behavioral psychology (Grant & Stober, 2006, p. 1) and social psychology (Peltier, 2010, p. 175) have contributed to EBC. Grant and Stober (2006) add, "social sciences, organizational change and development, business and economic science (p. 1). Emerging fields such as neuroscience (Bachkirova, 2017, p. 22) add to evidence-based coaching research.

One crucial context that contributed to the emergence of coaching is the influence of humanistic psychology (Spence, 2007, p. 255) through The Human Potential Movement (HPM)(Brock, 2019; Passmore & Evans-Krimme, 2021; Spence, 2007; Wildflower, 2013), which occurred between the 1940s and 1970s. The social

consequences of World War II in the United States and the "adverse sociocultural forces, such as an increasing sense of depersonalization and social isolation, and a growing need to protect one's public image within a competitive market–driven economy" gave birth to HPM and Carl Rogers'[1] encounter groups (Spence, 2007, p. 257), which developed "like wildfire from being therapy, to being the ultimate personal growth experience, to being a fully–fledged social movement" (Weigel, 2002, as cited in Spence, 2007, p. 258).

Stressing the earlier social context in the US, Wildflower (2013) argues that contemporary coaching is not only a result of Carl Rogers's theory of person-centered therapy or organizational theory. As such, during The Great Depression, today's–known self–help authors, such as Dale Carnegie[2] and Napolitan Hill[3], along with other movements like the Alcoholic Annonymous (AA)[4], have influenced the coaching practice (Wildflower, 2013, p. 10). Other influences are the creation of the Esalen Institute, the development of psychometric testing, and the influence of the social environment on the individual (Wildflower, 2013, pp. xvi–xvii).

From a management perspective, "coaching is the leadership style of a transformed culture, and as the style changes from directing to coaching, the culture of the organization will begin to change" (Whitmore, 2017, p. 24). Likewise, the coaching practice can evolve from an instrument of control at the organizational level to a social process conducive to change (Shoukry & Cox, 2018, p. 1). Terms such as *process reengineering*, *total quality management*, *customer service excellence*, *employee empowerment*, and *the learning organization* were signaling the end of the *command and control* type of management in the US and the start of a new era where notions of coaching were encouraged in respect to subjects such as *people management* and *development literature* (Parsloe & Leedham, 2017, p. 4).

In situational leadership (Situational Leadership II (1985) "S1–directing", "S2–coaching", "S3–supporting", and "S4–delegating"), *S2-coaching* signifies "High relationship and High Task in the leader–follower relationship" (Arenas et al., 2017, p. 10). However, the initial meaning of "a way of leading and *persuading* staff to adopt a manager's solution to the situation" differed from today's understanding of the term (Parsloe & Leedham, 2017, p. 4), carrying a central directive nuance.

Methodology

The current article proposes a narrative literature review of coaching approaches. Since coaching deals with broader foci than clinical situations, the rationale of conducting a narrative literature review (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Green et al., 2006) is justified in this context. As such, considering secondary data, the study investigates

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[1] Carl R. Rogers (1902 - 1987) is one of the founders of humanistic psychology. He developed the person-centred, also known as client-centred, approach to psychotherapy and the concept of unconditional positive regard while pioneering clinical psychological research. https://www.apa.org/about/governance/president/carl-r-rogers, retrieved on 17.09.2023).
[2] Popular self-help book author.
[3] Popular self-help book author.
[4] Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is a fellowship of people who come together to obtain sobriety through peer help.

coaching approaches and how they are informed by different disciplines at different stages of development, following a directive and non-directive thread in analysis.

Consequently, the study departs from the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the main disciplines that study the field of coaching?

RQ2: What approaches to coaching inform the directive and non-directive coaching practices?

The research strategy considered relevant studies in coaching (mainly non-sports and non-medical sources), consulting the EBSCO database for peer-reviewed, full-text articles written in the English language, and a manual search in Google Scholar for keywords such as "coaching approaches," "coaching approach," "directive coaching," non-directive coaching" and "online coaching." Other techniques employed were *citation mining* and *library consultation* on the topic.

As a narrative literature review, the paper only acknowledges important milestones of coaching development. For an in-depth analysis of coaching approaches in different contexts, such as internal, life, or executive coaching, a systematic review or meta-analysis of the directive and non-directive approaches to coaching would be the next inquiry step. Also, the study used mainly theoretical sources written in English only.

Findings

Coaching approaches

Even initial coaching practices were mainly directive, with some partially directive, a non-direct understanding of coaching has evolved (Ives, 2008, p. 105). In Kauffman & Bachkirova (2008), John Whitmore underlines the importance of a holistic approach in coaching as "the future it is going to be essential for a skilled coach to have the *transpersonal skills* because one of the issues that come up in coaching is a spiritual one: a desire for a sense of meaning and purpose in life" (p. 13).

Coaches' "academic background and intellectual traditions" (Feldman & Lankau, 2005, p. 838) influence the coaching practice. For example, Peltier (2010) classifies coaching from the following perspectives: psychodynamic, behaviorist, person-centered, cognitive therapeutic, and system-oriented. They can also be philosophical–inspired approaches (including Existential Coaching and Protreptic Coaching) and narrative–collaborative approaches (Third-generation coaching, e.g.) (Stelter, 2016, p. 331).

With the necessity to better understand the diversity in the coaching landscape (Feldman & Lankau, 2005, p. 844), reviews have classified coaching into three non-exclusive perspectives: directive and non–directive approaches; personal development and goal–focused, therapeutic, and performance–driven (Ives, 208, p. 100). For example, goal-oriented coaching meets the criteria from each cluster: a non–directive approach, goal-focused, and performance-driven.

As somehow opposed to the goal–oriented approach, developmental coaching addresses the goal at the end of the coaching process as the need for clearly assessing

the worldview and the individual's positioning are foundational (Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2009b, p. 110).

In organizational contexts, the client (the organization) may require the coach "to provide specific technical expertise to executives" (Feldman & Lankau, 2005, p. 841), possibly involving a more directive approach. However, when knowledge transfer takes the form of advice, it sits at the "borderline" of coaching. On a case–by–case basis, depending on the coachee's needs (Cox, 2003, as cited in Ives, 2008, p. 104), and where the coach possesses expert knowledge, the coach can choose "on a continuum" to apply non–directive and "directional" techniques, including offering advice (Stober & Grant, 2006, p. 363).

Conversely, non–directive coaching "does not rely on the knowledge, experience, wisdom or insight of the coach but rather on the capacity of individuals to learn for themselves, to think for themselves and be creative" (Downey, 2003, p. 9).

With the advancement of technology and as a consequence of postmodern society, scholars proposed the pluralist approach to coaching (Utry, 2015; Pendle, 2015), where diverse coaching approaches can offer more effective results. Alternatively, as coaches and coachees tend to experience one type of coaching (Feldman & Lankau, 2005, p. 844), instead of comparing the approaches, it is better to focus on the elements that make the coaching relationship effective (Feldman & Lankau, 2005, p. 844). Moreover, as the coach's training evolves, the coaching process becomes more complex (Passmore, 2010, p. 161). However, the outcome is more important than the approach (Downey, 2003, p. 10), though the outcome may be determined by the payer of the service (Boyatzis et al., 2022, p. 206).

Discussions

The study identified a diversification of coaching approaches. Many approaches focus on introspection rather than performance, without forgetting goal-setting, in both directive and non-directive approaches. The dialogical perspective in coaching draws on philosophy and psychology and has stood the test of time. Thus, coaches and managers who act as coaches can use diverse approaches without abandoning the outcome-focused approach. Nonetheless, to be effective, it is necessary that coaching takes place under a contract, implicit or explicit.

Also, clarifying which disciplines inform the non-directive approaches to coaching and which fields influence the more directive ones remains to be answered - is it psychology versus management or organizational theory discussion? How do we integrate the approaches? And in which contexts?

AI contributes to coaching development; however, more complex coaching contexts require human-to-human relationships versus human-to-machine.

In an era where employees search for meaning in their work, the availability of organizational coaching resources, both online and in-person, can provide excellent resources for both employees and managers. In the knowledge-based economy, coaching can enhance professionals' efforts to obtain new competencies adapted to our times' needs.

Conclusions

The current study has explored the disciplines and approaches that contributed to the field of evidence-based coaching. Also, the proposed review followed a directive and non-directive thread.

In the digital transformation era, the work environment and how managers lead change. Compared to classic coaching focused on performance, the focus on dialogue, reflection, and contemplative acts are tokens of more non-directive coaching. It could be a new territory for managers to explore. However, the manager-coach can choose "on a continuum" to apply non–directive coaching in situations where knowledge transfer enhances the coaching process.

The literature draws attention to transpersonal skills in coaching. As such, the modern manager who acts as a coach should pay attention to the whole person as employees try to find more meaning in their lives. Coaching becomes a value conducive to change in organizations' transformation processes.

The current inquiry did not consider the human resource development perspective (HRD) in coaching relevant to organizational coaching. Moreover, the study suggests a systematic literature review to assess the directive and non-directive nature and coaching aspects comprehensively.

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