

## Coaching and therapy - challenging the orthodoxy

**Aubyn Howard** - Director at Psychosynthesis Coaching Limited

Published Jan 10, 2018

When running courses on coaching, we are frequently asked questions about the relationship, boundaries and differences between therapy or counseling and coaching. This topic is fraught with difficulty and complexity and is prone to trite or superficial treatment, so I want to have a go at shedding some light on it and set it within the larger context of shifting sands within the therapy and coaching worlds.

### The prevailing narrative

If you google “what is the difference between therapy or counseling and coaching?” or something similar you will find plenty of mostly superficial answers to the question that seek to delineate territory in ways that end up limiting the scope of both counseling and coaching to fit the authors agenda (disclaimer – I too have an agenda for this piece! See later).

Michael Bader in Psychology Today ([The difference Between Coaching and Therapy is Greatly Overstated, April 15, 2009](#)) identifies this problem pretty well from stories he often hears from coaches, e.g. they work with the future and therapists with the past, coaches work to make healthy clients better, therapist work with pathology and problems, etc. He suggests “*that this is a mythic narrative that aims to insulate coaching - a profession in its infancy - from claims that it's therapy without a license. It seeks to protect the egos and wallets of coaches while appeasing therapists on the same grounds*”. He goes on to lay some of the blame for this at the door of the therapy profession for practicing “*a model of psychotherapy that is so ridiculously narrow and theory-driven*”.

A good example of this ‘dodgy’ narrative can be found on [Tony Robbins’ website](#) – “*life coach vs therapist, learn the difference*”, in which although he acknowledges overlaps, he then proceeds to define coaching in very narrow terms of client agendas (e.g. working to improve

communication skills or work-life balance) that fit his target market of “ambitious achievers” (e.g. Laloux’s *Achievement paradigm*).

Even worse offenders (which I won’t name) of this dodgy narrative make sweeping distinctions (in addition to the common *future* and *past* delineation), along the lines that coaching deals with the conscious mind, rational behaviors, measurable goals, involves positive thinking and focusing on solutions (i.e. all the good stuff), whereas therapy or counseling works with the unconscious mind, with emotions, subjective goals, pathologies and problems (i.e. all the murky stuff). This narrative is usually espoused by coaching schools that offer a very prescriptive method for young or inexperienced coaches on the basis that if they follow the method this will keep them (and their client) safe from straying off the path and into deep waters. The problem with this very delineated approach (*this* belongs to coaching, *that* belongs to counseling) is that people (i.e. all clients) are whole human beings who bring the good stuff as well as the murky stuff with them, their light and their dark, their conscious goals and their unconscious drives, whether to coaching or counseling. There is another fundamental problem with any attempt to separate rational and emotional domains – all the recent neuropsychological research (e.g. Daniel Kahneman’s *Thinking Fast and Thinking Slow*) points towards a much greater role of the unconscious and our emotions in all our behavior and decision making than previously acknowledged by the modern western worldview. Particularly in business and organizational life where the rational and individual agency has been elevated at the expense of the emotional and the human system, a new awareness is beginning to be established (a topic for another blog).

Some better approaches (from my google search) tackle the distinction by working through themes such as; the objectives, agendas or focus (of the activity); education, training and qualification (required of practitioners); ethics and governance (of the profession); approaches and methods (e.g. psychologies) used. The most useful commentary along these lines I found at <http://www.sacap.edu.za/blog/coaching/whats-difference-counselling-coaching/>, describes the relationship between professional counsellors and coaches as comparable to that of step-siblings. The author goes on, “*The emphasis in a coaching relationship is on goals, action and accountability, although an experienced coach will know when to look at the past should it inform the present and help pinpoint limiting belief systems. So, while counseling is geared towards understanding and resolving the past for healing, coaching works with functional people and uses the past only insofar as it provides a context in which future goals can be set.*” This goes some way to teasing out the subtleties needed, but is still part of a static approach and as such has limitations.

## A Dynamic Practitioner Framework – the Four C’s

I suggest a more dynamic approach for differentiating counseling and coaching that will (i) help us understand differences *within* coaching and counseling practice as well as *between* coaching and counseling and (ii) also help coaches and counsellors alike think critically about how they frame the work they do. We have developed an orienting framework called the Four C’s:

- **Context** – *what is the context of the relationship? How has it come about? What is the wider systemic context? Are other parties involved?*
- **Contract** – *what formal or informal goals or outcomes are the focus of the work? How is the relationship structured and what agreements are made? What is the understanding between practitioner and client?*
- **Client** – *what needs, issues and agendas are they bringing? What is their ego strength and stability? What is their level and depth of personal development, self-awareness and self-responsibility?*
- **Capability** – *what is the coach’s level of education and training, professional and personal development? What is their experience and level of confidence of working in different domains or dimensions or with different types of client?*

This framework further breaks into two parts:

**Part One: Context and Contract** determine the nature of the professional relationship or the ‘*container*’ – whether counseling or coaching, or what kind of coaching, e.g. life coaching within an individual or personal context or leadership coaching within an organizational context, along with a more complex multi-party contract.

Context and contracting are all important in any practitioner relationship. We are not just saying that coaching and counseling will have different contexts, but that the practitioner (i) needs to be

aware and able to hold the context of the relationship and (ii) needs the skills to contract with the client (or client system) in a way that is congruent with the context. This doesn't mean that everything needs to be written down and formally agreed, but the practitioner and client relationship does need a level of clarity or problems may occur. Having established these principles, we can start to distinguish how the context and contract might differ between coaching and counseling. This is where we will generally characterize the coaching context as forward looking and outcome oriented in purpose, although this can involve working across temporal dimensions, past present and future.

I like to hold Sir John Whitmore's ([see the 5th edition of Coaching for Performance!](#)) principles of *awareness* and *responsibility* as part of my coaching context with clients. There is something of paradox here, in that the coach can take responsibility for holding the context that the client is responsible for their own process, actions and outcomes. One thing we stress as a possible difference with counseling is that the coach doesn't need to diagnose the client's issues, rather they are helping the client reach an understanding or diagnosis for themselves with a view to finding solutions or taking actions. As psychosynthesis coaches our focus is on Self (who is this being most essentially and what is emergent for them?) and finding available Will – what small steps or actions will take the client forwards and release more will? Something we notice with counsellors making the transition to coaching is the tendency to over psychologize and want to fully diagnose the client's issues for themselves (and therefore spend too long in sessions working on their understanding rather than the coachees). This doesn't mean the coach shouldn't be curious or formulate hypotheses, but that they hold these lightly and leave the primary responsibility for understanding with the client.

Contracting is a major topic in itself and Peter Bluckert's '[Psychological dimensions of Executive Coaching](#)' is a good place to start. Most coaching contracts involve regular monthly or bimonthly meetings and work with repeatable contractual cycles (e.g. of six sessions or three months) but leadership coaching can also allow for ad-hoc meetings or calls in response to emergent situations or crises. Counseling contracts tend to involve more frequent meetings (e.g. weekly) at the practitioner's premises and be open ended in terms of duration. But again, there are no hard and fast rules, providing there is congruence across the four C's.

**Part Two: Client and Capability** define the scope and nature of the work that can potentially take place within the professional relationship, the '*contents*' – as determined by the openness,

development and availability of the client as well as the nature of the needs and issues they bring, *coupled with* the professional capability and personal capacity of the coach. Different coaches can work at a greater or lesser level of depth, involving emotional, personal and psychological ground, depending upon their training, skills and experience.

The key boundary concerning the **Client** that we hold in coaching, is that we only work with functioning people with sufficient ego strength. Another way of saying this is that we work with healthy neurotics who are able to function in the world (i.e. get to work, hold down relationships, pay their bills). However, this doesn't mean that successful leaders don't have psychological problems or pathologies – increasingly our leader clients bring issues of anxiety, stress, addiction or depression alongside their leadership development and organizational agendas. This doesn't mean we shouldn't work with them or we should pack them off to a therapist as soon as one of these issues emerges. Nor does it mean that we will work with them as a therapist would in the area of the past traumas and unresolved history. The coach can help clients become aware of how past trauma and mirrors of the past are influencing or impeding their objectives, and help them take responsibility for healing or resolving these. The key here is that the coach is helping the client find their own strategy and way forward to dealing with their past at the level of the pre-personal unconscious (or psychodynamic). Sometimes this can involve referral to a counsellor or therapist for specific work alongside the coaching, sometimes working with the coach in a boundaried context (if the coach has the experience and training), as well as engagement with all manner of other personal development and therapeutic resources or solutions (e.g. group work, somatic work, systemic work, healing, retreats, etc.).

I draw again ([see previous posts](#)) from Julia Vaughan Smith's 2015 APECS paper ([What has trauma got to do with coaching? Or coaching to do with trauma?](#)) to add insight into how the coach can work in relationship to past trauma: “*coaches with understanding and experience of this field (trauma and personality splits) can bring something additional to the coaching work, a greater transitional space between the inner and outer worlds, which allows for deep transformation without working directly with the traumatized self or with the past. It needs a slightly different tool kit, perhaps, particularly for those clients who are clearly under the control of their survival strategies, if they wish to address some underlying issues within the boundaries of the coaching relationship and contract.*”

## Mapping the territory

So, how do we describe the *nature and the scope* of the work that takes place with a coach or counsellor in an inclusive and expansive way, that then allows for specific emphasis to be made between counseling and coaching and between different approaches within these?

In psychosynthesis coaching, we make the distinction between the client's inner and outer worlds and agendas that they might bring to coaching. Alongside this, we can map the different temporal domains of past, present and future, with a further distinction between near and far future.

Below we map out the territory more explicitly using these distinctions:

<b>Orientation and domain</b>	<b>Inner world and agendas/ <i>Being</i></b>	<b>Outer world and agendas/ <i>Doing</i></b>
Past	Healing <i>Trauma, reflection, understanding (prepersonal)</i>	Resolution <i>Sense making, acceptance, completion</i>
Present	Inner crisis and change <i>Self, personality, awareness (personal)</i>	Outer crisis and change <i>Systems, relationships, solutions</i>
Near future	Personal development <i>Will, capacity, growth</i>	Performance development <i>Behaviours, skills, actions</i>
Far future	Self-realisation <i>Purpose, meaning, values (transpersonal)</i>	Self-actualisation <i>Potential, career, leadership</i>

In simple terms, we might expect conventional behavioral coaching to lean to the right hand side/ outer world and counseling/therapy to the left hand side/inner world and focus more on the past than the future. As psychosynthesis coaches, we seek to hold awareness of all these domains and are open and free to work across them as needed in response to the Four C's; the context we hold, the contract we establish, the client's needs and issues and our capability and skills.

However, it is extremely important to add that our capability and effectiveness to work across these domains is predicated on drawing upon a core coaching psychology (or combination of psychologies) that is holistic – one that enables practitioners to work with both the inner and outer lives of their clients, navigating the past present and future. This translates into pre-personal, personal and transpersonal levels, which are embraced within psychosynthesis psychology.

## **Choices and challenges**

Let us remind ourselves why this topic (of distinctions *between* and *within* coaching and counseling) is important. It is key for the choices of both people seeking help from these professions, as well as those seeking to train and develop in these professions, i.e. for both potential coachees and coaches. With this in mind, I want to end this piece by challenging two conventional assumptions or orthodoxies:

1. ‘That coaches need to train as therapists if they want to work at depth’ – twenty years ago it was assumed that any organizational practitioner who was serious about working at the most meaningful and important levels with their clients would need to go down the arduous route of therapy training. Besides the time and cost commitment, the practitioner also then needs to deal with the baggage that comes with the therapeutic paradigm (more on this another time).
2. ‘That leaders need to go into therapy if they want to heal and resolve their past’ – rather we need more coaches that are equipped to help clients frame the healing and resolution of their past within wider context of ongoing personal and leadership development, and can support leaders to take responsibility for their own healing process, whichever resources they might draw upon.

There seems to be a long-term shift taking place from *Therapy* to *Coaching* in both the life/personal as well as the leadership/organizational environment. Many people find coaching more acceptable, accessible and available than counseling or therapy. The coaching profession needs to respond to this and find ways to develop and enable coaches to broaden their spectrum and deepen their reach. ...

