

# **“I doubt therefore I coach”**

## *Critical moments in coaching practice*

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## ***Abstract***

How can coaches learn from moments and incidents in their own practice, particularly from moments that somehow feel critical? How can they improve working with the tension and anxiety that such moments will generate, and how might they even make use of such tensions? This is the first report of a research project into critical moments in coaching practice, which looks at critical moments of relatively inexperienced coaches. The second report, which looks at critical moments of much more experienced coaches, can be found as a companion article in this same issue. The sample size of the inexperienced coaches was 65 and 49 coaches responded communicating a total of 56 critical moments. Analysis of the moments revealed that they were all somehow related to a *doubt* that the coach had, so doubt seemed to be the overriding form of tension for the inexperienced coach. The type and nature of doubts are analysed and the possible impact of (in-)experience is studied.

## ***Introduction***

Since November 2002, Yvonne Burger and I have been running a five-day *Coaching!* module for management consultants and executives who already have experience of conducting individual coaching conversations and want to develop their coaching skills further. The module invites participants to compare alternative coaching approaches, to gain a better understanding of their own preferred styles and to develop a more distinctive, unique coaching style. The third preparatory assignment for the module is:

*Describe briefly one critical moment (an exciting, tense or significant moment) with one of your coachees. Think about what was critical in the coaching journey, or a moment when you did not quite know what to do.*

In the course of the module, participants learn on the basis of their own critical moments and coaching issues, by means of a variety of exercises in the form of coaching conversations.

Around three-quarters of the participants are professionals who have recently completed a full-year of training to become management consultants, while a quarter are independent coaches. Very few hold a diploma or are accredited as a coach or therapist. The module has now been run five times and 49 of the more than sixty participants have sent in detailed preparatory assignments, leaving us with a treasure trove of accounts of 'critical moments' as experienced by aspiring coaches, numbering 71 to be precise. After five editions of the *Coaching!* module, it seemed a worthwhile

exercise to undertake a systematic review all of these critical moments. 15 of the 71 were discarded at an early stage because they did not take place in a 'pure' coaching relationship but within a hierarchical relationship or between immediate colleagues. The 56 remaining moments proved to be very recognisable, even for more experienced coaches, and appear to complement each other rather than point in different directions. All former participants in the module gave permission for their critical moments to be published. In this article I attempt to identify recurring patterns within the sample and investigate how coaches can handle these critical moments.

### ***Overview of 56 real-life critical moments***

The following is a random selection of 42 of the 56 critical moments, translated from the Dutch. The moments fall naturally under the headings that describe aspects of the coaching process, but they could also have been classified differently, and many critical moments can be categorized under a number of different headings. I have already carried out an initial *interpretation*, therefore, by choosing both order and headings. The selection of the 42 moments took place by keeping up to the first three moments per heading, and deleting the others to trim the article to a standard size. This makes it straightforward for the reader to check how many reported moments there were under each heading. Also, the full dataset can be obtained from the author.

#### **1. All moments are critical**

(i) "I can't describe one critical moment; all of my coaching sessions to date have been very critical. Especially the uncertainty about the course the proceedings will take, even though feedback shows time and again that the coachees view the sessions positively. They say they find tools they can use to make progress in their work."

#### **2. The very beginning - acquisition**

(ii) "Taking on a coaching assignment: discussion with the main client in the organization, which may or may not be in the presence of the coachee."  
(iii) "I found it difficult to propose coaching to someone in the first place, to ask whether individual coaching by me might be a solution. How do I know, or sense, whether a potential coachee would appreciate a coach? I find entering into a coaching relationship difficult, so I don't quite know how to approach it."  
(iv) "I find getting to know new coachees the most critical part, time after time, because you don't know how people will react. Perhaps they're not willing, or not open to coaching and it often turns out that those are the very people who need coaching."

#### **3. The very beginning – the first conversation**

(v) "The first conversation with my client was my most critical moment. How do you prepare for it? How will he react to your approach? Will it all be over inside of half an hour? And so on."  
(vi) "I had the first contact with my coachee this week. A first 'rendez-vous' like that is always critical: what will she look like, how will she come across, what will she think of me?"

#### **4. The very beginning – building a relationship**

(vii) “Gaining the coachee’s confidence so that essential problems can be discussed. She knew me as a member of the management team with a reputation for being demanding and straight-to-the-point. Now I was to be her coach. In the beginning she said her main problem was lack of time. That was true, but it was hiding something more important: the fact that she was facing burn-out and had come to a deadlock in her project and was unable to break through the impasse. So we had to develop a common idiom at the start and I had to discover where she was experiencing problems. The moment when she stated that she had a problem and that she trusted me was indeed a breakthrough in a sense. Now she is very happy with the coaching and gives me too much credit for it.”

#### **5. Am I good enough?**

(viii) “The fact that the coachee chose me gave me a lot of confidence and room to work. I do experience some pressure because she has a lot of experience of therapy and because she took a personal effectiveness training course recently.”

(ix) “I find it difficult to coach senior people, who have so much more work experience than I do.”

#### **6. Am I doing it well enough?**

(x) “What I find difficult as a coach is the fact that I sometimes attach too much importance to knowledge. Whereas, if I know about something, I also want to come up with solutions. Something else I find myself wrestling with as a coach is the question of whether you mainly go along with the coachee’s needs, or whether you can also give feedback off your own bat, even if the coachee isn’t expecting such feedback or is not yet ‘ready for it’.”

(xi) “My most critical moment was when I followed my coachee entirely in what she was saying in a coaching conversation, and kept ‘playing back her words’. In the end, this left little scope for a solution to her problem. I always had the feeling, up to and including the next conversation, that I had forced something. And so I was afraid that my approach had disrupted the coaching process towards her longer-term goal. My ‘not quite knowing what to do’ left me at a crossroads: giving back what she said or bringing the conversation back to her original question. The latter didn’t seem like something a coach should do – I was afraid the conversation would get bogged down. This example shows that, even if I don’t know what to do, I often decide just to do something. But perhaps I can still change that during the conversation and then ask for feedback about my approach. “

(xii) “When I don’t understand what the question is or how to tackle it. People frequently confide their issues in collaborating with each other to me in confidence and as yet I am not always effective enough in coming up with tools to achieve a solution. The awareness of the problem and the potential contribution of the manager himself in that respect and the overriding importance of bringing about further change and development within the division in partnership. To put it briefly, the welding together of individual experience and objectives to create a common interest of greater value. A critical example was a direct request to contribute towards the team coaching of a management team in the form of a workshop where, besides the naming of individual and collective objectives, questions such as personal relationships and how to optimize such relationships also came into play. I felt rather powerless in the face of such dilemmas.”

#### **7. There’s something there ...**

(xvii) “A critical moment is when I can tell there is something going on behind all of the information being communicated to me, but I can’t yet put my finger on it. In that case I’m not

quite sure what to do. In hindsight I think I should have reflected that fact back, but in the heat of the moment it didn't occur to me."

(xviii) "Critical moments are moments when you have to be very open yourself in order to coax someone out of his shell. You point something out, such as an awkward response, and mention it directly which makes me feel like working on the edge."

## **8. There's nothing there ...**

(xix) "I find it difficult when I have absolutely nothing to go on, or when the question is very open."

(xx) "A critical moment is when my coachee doesn't give an example, or not until late in the conversation."

(xxi) "The people who see it as something compulsory are difficult."

## **9. What do I unleash?**

(xxii) "The impetus was my coachee's current inability and desire to learn how to set better boundaries, and to be more assertive in certain work and other situations, so that the effectiveness of her efforts would lead to improved results. During the conversation we acted out a sort of role-play where I reflected the potential feared reaction of the 'adversary', as soon as she expressed her opinion openly. Gradually I unearthed all sorts of irrational, obstructive convictions that were deeply rooted (in her youth) and were imposing many restrictions on her, both at work and in her private life. This was a critical moment because I could see she was becoming very aware for the first time of her way of thinking, preserved for so many years, and seemed to be determined and inspired to change it. That this would directly affect her position in family relationships was inevitable. In the end things only improved, but I wondered whether and how I could find a balance, as a coach, between objectivity and responsibility."

(xxiii) "I am currently coaching a woman who works as a consultant to a non-profit organization. She was at home for a few months at the start of this year due to overwork. She has now returned to work and wants to get off to a good start. Objectives of the coaching are (1) to strengthen her understanding of her strong points, needs and stress factors; (2) to deepen her understanding of the sort of work that suits her best, and (3) to formulate an appropriate career strategy within the current organization.

A critical moment for me was when we reached a sort of personal core after two sessions. On the one hand, I felt we were really getting to the root of her problems and that was great, but on the other hand I found it scary that I was getting into something that I did not know how to handle. And what then? Where does the coach end and the therapist begin?"

## **10. The coachee's emotions**

(xxiv) "The coachee in question was sent by his manager for coaching and for referral to an programme in the area of assertiveness. After a conversation with the coachee I told him that, on the basis of his story, I had a feeling that something else was the matter. The coachee started to shake all over and burst into tears, then it all came out about how he had been feeling in recent months. At that moment I didn't know what to do as the coach, apart from showing concern, and I asked the coachee if he was happy for me to refer him to the company doctor. In hindsight, that was a good decision. At the time, however, I was pretty nervous about it."

(xxv) "With one of my coachees I conducted a reintegration programme. It was only partly voluntary. In one of our sessions the man became very emotional. It was the first time I had seen that side of him, he is generally a very rational man. He threatened to stand up, walk out the door and never come back. I could feel I was getting pretty warmed up and quickly asked myself what that would mean for him and for the organization. I asked him very calmly what would be the point of that, apart from getting him out of a difficult situation at that moment in time. That surprised him and he took time to think it over and reply. We both saw that moment as a turning point in our sessions. It gave him the space to return to the organization in a new position. The course of sessions was completed successfully."

(xxvi) “A new project worker in an organization where job losses were likely felt threatened by a number of workers who were jealous because she did have a job. She was very distressed by this, and I didn’t know how to advise her.”

## **11. Your own emotions**

(xxviii) “Moments when I experience a degree of resistance or irritation in myself. For example, I remember a conversation with an internal coachee that took place in response to her desire for further personal development. In accordance with her wishes, she was given the opportunity to expand her range of duties and thus the responsibility to shape and interpret those duties herself, with help from others. She made no initiatives to take ownership of those duties but waited until I asked how it was going and then reported that nothing had happened. She didn’t feel responsible for her own development. That irritates me and I have to take care that my irritation doesn’t form a barrier in subsequent conversations.”

## **12. Your own doubts**

(xxix) “Sometimes I’m afraid I have communicated too much of my own doubts, for example about a situation raised in a conversation.”

(xxx) “Moments when I don’t know what to do are when my coachee says he is faced with a delicate issue. I always ask him to describe the situation and then ask why it is a delicate issue for him. We then analyse the possible consequences of doing A or B and look at what he feels comfortable with. So far so good, but then he always asks what I would do. I never know to what extent I should share my own opinion, so as not to influence him. The factors I consider in reaching a decision might be completely different from his own and not necessarily any better or worse.

This coachee also says that I act as his ‘conscience’. That is very flattering, but it also puts me on a pedestal, by which I mean that he expects his ‘conscience’ to be infallible, and I am certainly not that. Plus you can only fall off a pedestal! So I don’t know how to handle this situation.”

## **13. Deferring your opinion**

(xxxi) “I can’t cite one critical moment right away, but I do frequently experience tension between consulting and coaching. It is difficult not to offer an opinion but to allow the coachee to arrive at his own conclusion on how to handle the situation raised in the conversation.

I also have trouble with objectifying situations presented by my coachees who are part of the same organization. I notice that I have my own ‘opinion’ on the situation. This is because, in many cases, I know the people and the organizational culture in question. Plus, my coachee often knows in advance what I think about it all.

As a result of my consulting and judging, I am often afraid of coaching too much in one specific direction.”

(xxxii) “A difficult point that frequently recurs is when I am discussing with someone how he could tackle something. Because I work in the same field, I often already have a clear idea of how things should be done or what the end result should be. However, the fact that someone else is working on a job means of course that the result is not always the same as if I were to do it myself (leaving aside the issue of whether they do it better or worse). I find it difficult to let go.”

(xxxiii) “At a particular moment the coachee opted for a strategy that I personally did not support. I found it very difficult to remain objective and not to air my own opinion, for example by asking leading questions. I saw the solution in front of me but the coachee clearly couldn’t see it, or not yet.”

## 14. Breakthroughs

(xxxvii) "Critical moments are when someone's awareness is raised as the 'penny drops'."

(xxxviii) "Seeing, hearing and feeling that the other person has suddenly arrived at an understanding, so that everything is different from that moment on."

(xxxix) "There are many critical moments, especially in a positive sense. I mean the feeling of satisfaction when things are going well, and you have helped someone achieve what they wanted to achieve."

## 15. Directing the conversation

(xl) "The moment when you feel you have to start to create structure in the conversation still gives me cause for doubt. What is a good comment or question? And questions arise such as: what will come out of this conversation? What should I offer, or should I offer nothing at all?"

(xli) "Individual coaching: striking a balance between business context and personal growth."

## 16. Matching coach to coachee

(xlii) "I am fairly extrovert myself. My coachee, on the other hand, is fairly introverted. Time and again, I find it exciting to be able to see during conversations whether or not my comments are hitting home, or whether or not he agrees with them. Usually I don't find out until later, when he comes back to it. I ask about it directly on a regular basis, but I still have the feeling that I don't know exactly what is going on in him and whether or not I am helping him."

(xliii) "When and how to make the transition from more substantive matters to personal matters. I find that particularly difficult with introverted coachees who have little, or very subtle, expression."

(xliv) "Someone who didn't want to change or develop himself, or denied suggestions for development. Or someone who wanted something that I seriously doubted he could do. Or someone who wanted something I was sure was impossible."

## 17. Limits of coaching

(xlvi) "Coaching often goes unnoticed, and is not connected with a coaching contract or explicit coaching conversations. The disadvantage of this is that I sometimes don't realize until later that I'd have done better to have tackled it differently."

(xlvii) "My coachee, who is also a colleague because I am an internal coach, was clearly in a jam in terms of workload. I wasn't sure whether to tip off his manager in order to support my coachee."

(xlviii) "I find it a challenge to learn how a coach can best handle the 'professional distance' between coach and coachee. My most critical moment was when the coachee confessed that he had feelings for me. I didn't quite know how to handle that situation."

## 18. Impact of the organization

(liv) "The most critical moment was when an employee, my internal coachee, broke off his training, stopped it after a year and then wondered where to go from there. It turned out that a traumatic experience within the organization was his reason for stopping. As a result of the coaching conversation that helped him to handle that experience, he is now continuing his studies. I find it very difficult, when the organization has laid down guidelines, to induce employees to set in train a development process themselves."

(lv) "Recently there was a 'what next?' moment with a manager who is having problems with his department and the management of the company. While technically very capable, he frequently has angry outbursts that reduce his effectiveness. He is deeply affected by the fact that some people don't like him, and is keen to do something about it. During the sessions we

look at how things could be different, with a bit of positive thinking, visualization and NLP, but not long ago part of his department was transferred to another manager. So we're back to square one. I think that's a shame. A moment when I am not sure how to help him from here, and whether it makes sense generally."

## 19. Team coaching

(lvi) "Team coaching: bringing different interests in team conflict on to the table and making them workable."

### *Summary in the form of a 'doubtful' story*

As the next step in listening to these coaches and interpreting their critical moments, all 56 critical moments were summarized as follows.

"Who am I to think I can do this work?", is the first question asked by every coach. Presuming that you can coach someone else, and at the same time finding that presumption very presumptuous. That makes it so difficult to recommend yourself, or to explain your own contribution to a potential new client. Even after that, this doubt is tense and exciting: "when does it start, how does it start, what is going to happen, and will I be capable of saying something back?" And then, when something happens, when the coaching relationship is entered into, when something is said or something is contributed in that relationship, new doubts immediately set in: "Do I understand, how do I respond, and is it good enough?". Then, the question "What should I offer?" at the same time as the question "Do I have to offer something?"<sup>1</sup>. Sometimes, you even start to have doubts about your own doubts, for example, in the form of the question "Should I contribute my doubts, or not?"<sup>2</sup>. Doubts can also extend to the activity of coaching itself, as in "is this or that still coaching?", a different expression of "am I doing it right?".

Difficult confrontations with your own doubts are the moments when your client asks you what to do, or when you yourself take the initiative to advise the client. But there are also more subtle confrontations with those doubts, when the client takes them away, for example by putting you on a pedestal, flattering you or 'learning an awful lot from you'. That turns out to feel so good that you want that good feeling more often and start to say things that stand you a greater chance of attracting such compliments.

But there are also times when the doubts are relieved, and coaches actively seek out those critical moments: when the 'penny drops' or the 'breakthrough takes place'; that is, when your client starts to feel, think or act differently.

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<sup>1</sup> As described in critical moment xl above.

<sup>2</sup> As described in critical moment xix above.



The coach who is aware of this frequently realizes the extent to which coaching is in fact a single, long succession of critical moments, often in the form of doubts: “do I have something to offer as a coach, am I good enough, am I doing it right, what is going to happen, and if it happens will the client and I be able to handle it, where are the boundaries and can we avoid overstepping them?” These questions follow each other in many different variants. There is the oppressive feeling that something may happen at any time, something that will have important consequences, but we don’t know what, which consequences, when or to what extent we will be involved ourselves.

When all of the doubts about coaching as a conversational form fade into the background a little, more specific doubts arise about the situation. The doubt whether the coach will be able to handle this specific client. ‘Difficult’ clients appear to be those who have false expectations, shirk responsibility, or are quiet and introverted. And if the doubts about the coaching situation turn out to be manageable, there are still external influences to contend with. Internal coaches in particular often feel pressure from the client or others within the organization to achieve results or to take action in a particular direction. Results and actions which are often either outside the scope of the contract or cannot be guaranteed. Team coaching is a special case, in which the various options and dilemmas are more visible to the various people around the table.

All in all, a story full of doubts, doubts about yourself, your professional interventions and the boundaries of your profession. To summarize even more concisely, coaches are mainly feeling two things in many situations: “what is going on?” and “do I have an answer to it?”, or: “what do I see?” and “how do I respond?”.

One coherent story emerges clearly from this summary, a story I will call the “critical story of the coach and his/her client”. However different all of these coaches may be, it appears on further examination that they experience very similar tensions in their work. It is also noticeable that experience and training as a coach does not lead to different tensions in their coaching work: when I ask more experienced coaches about their critical moments, very similar aspects come to light. This brings to mind Rogers’ famous pronouncement ‘The most personal is the most universal’ (Rogers, 1961): in other words, the critical moments in coaching point strongly to a general human experience with a certain form of conversation, namely a “helping conversation”. This is an experience familiar even to children, without them being aware that they are coaching or being coached.

## ***How to handle these critical moments and doubts?***

### **Analysis**

The following contains a transcription of all 56 critical moments in almost as many doubts, worded as concise questions. The original critical moments often lead to more than one of the doubts. I take the process of interpretation a step further here, by proposing brief essentials that I see recurring in different critical moments. As in real coaching conversations, I reformulate the critical moments ‘contributed’ above and provide them with summarizing headings. To each of the resulting groups of similar doubts, I also give a short personal response.

The concise questions below, however, are not strictly doubts in themselves. The doubt arises only if they cannot be answered straightforwardly – if the coach cannot or does not dare to ask the question openly, or if the answer is ambivalent. Doubts and tensions therefore go hand-in-hand, just as above.

### **1. Doubts about every coaching conversation, and every moment in a coaching conversation**

1. What is going to happen now? (i, iv, v, xxvii, xl)
2. How is the coachee coming across? (vi)
3. What will I be able to say about this? (v)
4. What is going on in my coachee? (xlii)
5. Do I understand enough of this? (xii, xlii)
6. Is this the actual / real problem? (vii, xvii, xxiii)
7. Is this coachee willing? (iv, v, xxi)
8. Does my coachee take responsibility for his/her own issues? (xxi, xxxvi, xxviii, xlv, liv)
9. Does my coachee want to change? (xlv, xlv)
10. What will come out of this conversation? (xl)

If these doubts don’t run through the coach's head in every conversation, how can s/he be a good coach? These doubts indicate that the coach is interested in the coachee, in the coachee’s issue, in the coaching, and in the results of the coaching, so they must be vital to good coaching. Annoyingly, of course, these doubts and the lack of a definitive answer also make the coach uncertain, and permanently unfulfilled. This first set of doubts already shows clearly how important something like ‘containment’ (Bion, 1963) is for the coach: remaining calm, open and authentic even in a situation of pregnant, even existential questions and doubts.

### **2. Doubts about the coaching relationship and transference**

11. How do I recommend myself? (ii, iii, iv, xxxvi)
12. Will I be accepted? (iii, vii, viii, ix, xxxvi, xlv)
13. What does the coachee think about me and my interventions? (v, vi, xliii)
14. Does the coachee have confidence in me? (vii, viii, ix)
15. Does the coachee have confidence in the coaching? (xxv, xxxvi)
16. What to do if the coachee becomes emotional about the coaching? (xxv)

17. How do I handle undermining of the coaching by the coachee? (xxv, xlv, xlviii)
18. Am I being seduced by my coachee? (vii, xxx, xlix)
19. What to do if my coachee puts me on a pedestal? (xxx)
20. What to do if my coachee tempts me to 'join in the grumbling'? (xxxv)
21. What to do if I myself become emotional about the coaching? (xxvii, xxviii)
22. What if I doubt my coachee's abilities? (xxxiv, xlv)
23. What to do if my coachee irritates me? (xxxvi)
24. How do I handle introverted coachees? (xlii, xliii)
25. How do I handle awkward, egocentric coachees? (xlv)
26. How do I bring up the relationship itself? (xvi, xviii, xxxvi)

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of the relationship between coach and coachee. First of all, the coachee needs a minimum of confidence in and acceptance of the coach in order to work with him or her (11 – 15). This leads to confidence in the results and hope of improvement, a 'placebo effect' which has been demonstrated to account for 15 % of the outcome of therapy – entirely independent of the actual therapeutic work (see Lambert, 1992). Second, in 16 – 20 we see the enormous importance of *transference* and in 21 – 25 the equal importance of *counter-transference* to the results of coaching. Transference is the phenomenon whereby relationship patterns from outside the coaching relationship influence that relationship itself, where something can be learned from those patterns. In this case, friction in the relationship between coach and coachee provides insight into the coachee's other relationships. Quite rightly, the contributing coaches to this research point out that the people who are not open to coaching interventions are often precisely the ones who need coaching (see iv), and that these critical moments between coach and coachee are precisely the ones that are seen as turning points in retrospect (see xxv, for example). An important and daring task of the coach is to raise the subject of the coaching relationship itself and the possibility of transference (26).

### 3. Doubts about guiding the coaching conversations

27. What to do if there is no issue? (xix, xx)
28. What to do if the issue is entirely open? (xix)
29. How to raise the subject that there is 'something' wrong, an uncomfortable reaction from the coachee? (xvii, xviii)
30. What to do when I come across deeper layers and stronger emotions? (xxii, xxiii, xxiv, xxv, xxvi, xxvii, lv)
31. How to handle a 'breakthrough', and the subsequent feeling of satisfaction? (xxii, xxv, xxxvii, xxxviii, xxxix)
32. What to do with my *esprit de l'escalier* (xvii)
33. Is listening and summarizing enough? (xi)
34. Can I offer my own interpretation (without being asked)? (x, xi, xlix, li)
35. How can I give my more critical interpretation? (x, xiv, xv)
36. How to voice my opinion? (xxxi, xxxii)
37. Can I offer advice (without being asked)? (xv, xxii, xxxi, xxxii, xxxiii, xxxiv)
38. What to do if my coachee asks my advice? (xiv, xxx, xxxiv)
39. Can I ask for feedback about my approach? (xi)
40. Do I have to structure the conversation or guide it and, if so, how? (xi, xxvii, xl, xli)

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| 41. Team coaching: how to involve and coordinate different interests? (xii, lvi)<br>42. How do I find a balance between objective and personal themes? (xli, xliii)<br>43. How do I find a balance between my objectivity and joint responsibility? (xxii)<br>44. How do I find a balance in terms of timing, i.e. when and how to say something? (xlv) |
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Dealing with emotions and the suspicion that ‘something’ is going on in the coachee is high on the list of a coach’s critical moments. You never know for sure: is there ‘nothing’ there or is there ‘something’ there? And how do you bring ‘it’ up in a way that is not too controlling and does not put the relationship under unnecessary pressure from your side? In coaching the coachee should be central, so coaches do not wish to over-direct the conversation. However, they notice that a summary has a certain directing effect, as does the question of whether there is ‘something’ going on here, or an interpretation, or feedback, or giving advice.

In many of the doubts above, we can see that coaches feel very responsible for direction, for the balance between different topics during the conversation and for when something is said. Although this is understandable, in my view it is primarily the client who should be responsible for those things: coaches should reconcile themselves to the fact that quite fundamentally they cannot direct or plan their coaching conversations. Direction is an illusion, sometimes on the part of the coach, sometimes on the part of the coachee, and oftentimes both. The illusion of being able to direct coaching is one of our defenses against the presence of unpleasant tensions and doubts. Coaches may indeed ask what aim or result the coachee has in mind, but they cannot derive certainty from that question about what will happen next. Indeed, objectives set by coachees often mask underlying, more essential needs.

#### **4. Doubts about the boundaries of coaching conversations**

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| 45. Where is the boundary with therapy; when to refer? (xxiii, xiv)<br>46. How to work without an explicit contract? (xiii, xlv)<br>47. How to work without the explicit label coaching? (xlv)<br>48. What if my coachee has ‘feelings’ for me? (xlviii)<br>49. What if I myself become attached to the coaching? (liii)<br>50. How to coach if a result is demanded by a third party? (xiii)<br>51. What if I also have other roles with respect to the coachee, such as colleague, adviser, or manager within the same organization? (xlvii – lii, for example)<br>52. What if I want to ‘tip off’ the coachee’s manager? (xlvii, lii)<br>53. What if the coachee’s manager ‘tips me off’? (xiii, xlix, li)<br>54. What if my coachee starts talking about a common colleague? (I, lii)<br>55. What to do with information that I have from elsewhere in the organization? (li, lii)<br>56. What if I myself want to use information from the coaching elsewhere in the organization? (I, li, liii)<br>57. What to do if the organization has a negative impact on the coaching? (liv, lv) |
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Doubts 45 – 50 show the importance of explicit coaching contracts and codes of conduct to which coaches not only adhere and refer, but of which they themselves are

conscious during the coaching itself. With the aid of ethical rules (such as those described in Chapter 15 of De Haan & Burger, 2005), these doubts can be answered with relative ease. Other doubts concern examples of transference, such as strong feelings for the coach on the part of the coachee, and vice versa. These are times when, provided it is used properly, the coaching itself can achieve a lot. Doubts 51 – 57 have as much to do with ethics and the boundaries of the coach's role, especially as they apply to internal coaches. It appears to be even more critical for internal coaches than for external coaches to agree explicitly that everything said in coaching sessions is completely confidential and will not go any further. The answers to doubts 52 – 57 are therefore quite clear in my view: don't let it happen!

## **Synthesis**

How can coaches learn from their own critical moments? How can they better handle these tensions and doubts, and perhaps even make use of the most critical moments in their practice? Here are some suggestions and ideas that follow on from the analysis above.

### **1. The critical moment says something about the coach, and about the coaching**

The tension of the coach at any moment in the coaching process says something about the moments he or she experiences as critical, i.e., the most sensitive aspects of his or her own activities as a coach. The key question in identifying one's own tensions and doubts is "what comes from whom?", i.e. what part of these tensions comes from the client and what originates from the coachee. Tensions arise partly due to a specific sensitivity and/or susceptibility on the part of the coach, partly due to what the coachee does in the conversations with the coach. A good coach tries to distinguish carefully between the transference brought in by the client and the transference that s/he him- or herself contributes to the coaching situation. This enables the coach to use his or her own counter-transference as an antenna alerting him or her to what the coachee triggers in the coach (see Heimann, 1950).

### **2. Critical moments are breakthrough moments**

Coaches themselves often describe their critical moments in retrospect as breakthrough moments (consider, for example, moment xxv above, or xxxvii – xxxix). Critical moments are very often a blessing for the coaching process, because they are moments where deeper layers and ways of viewing and assessing things differently are found. Take, for example, the moment when an awkward silence descends because the coach

is still pondering what to do, or the moment when the coachee suddenly comes out with something delicate that he or she didn't dare to mention before.

### **3. The more critical moments, the better the coaching**

It would be lovely if coaches could seek out their own blessings. Although critical moments are potential breakthrough moments, this does not mean that all the coach needs to do is create as many critical moments as possible in order to generate an equal number of breakthroughs. The only coaches who might well subscribe to this assertion are those who work provocatively (see, for example, Farrelly and Brandsma, 1974). They use their coaching conversations to 'deliver' critical moments to the coachee, although this means that the critical moments can become more those of the coach than those of the coachee.

A provisional conclusion is, therefore, the more critical moments the better, but only if they can come from the coachee. Coaching is about getting the coachee to share and (re)experience his own critical moments. For the coach, this means being available, asking questions, listening, exploring, and building up a relationship in which critical things can be expressed and critical transitions can be felt. Most of all, it means not avoiding or repressing critical moments when they occur. Our coachees do enough of that themselves. The art is to use those moments in the coaching process itself, by contemplating them and asking questions about them, together with the coachee. To this end, coaches need a unique combination of warmth and daring, sensitivity and an awareness of boundaries. The best short description of these two almost diametrically opposed characteristics that I have found is in the title of the book by O'Neill (2000): *Coaching with backbone and heart*. Strength, daring and containment (*backbone*) to examine the critical moment, and acceptance, readiness and warmth (*heart*) to welcome and support it. This leads us back to the vital aspecific or relational aspects which have been shown to account for as much as 30 % of the outcome in psychotherapy (specifically, Lambert (1992) shows in his classic article that hundreds of outcome studies of therapy indicate that hope and expectation account for 15 %, aspecific, relational factors for 30 %, factors external to the therapy for 40 % and specific, technique- or approach-related factors for only 15 % of the effectiveness). The relational aspects were first studied by Rogers (1961) who hypothesized they consist primarily of empathy, acceptance, warmth and authenticity.

### **4. Coaches can only continue to learn thanks to their critical moments**

It is an all too human, and ultimately biological, reaction to want initially to eliminate tension, doubt and ambivalence by fighting or fleeing. Our coachees display such

‘flight’ impulses – often called defenses – when confronted with tensions, but of course we cannot deny them in ourselves either, not even in the role of coach. Before we know it, we are skirting around or ignoring our tensions, or pinning them down with a firm interpretation. And the more we coach, the more we ourselves build up long-term defenses against our tensions and existential doubts without realizing it. This is perhaps the main reason why inexperienced therapists often appear to perform better than experienced ones (see Dumont, 1991). They have fewer long-term defenses and can therefore set to work with more enthusiasm, involvement, vulnerability and openness. In a companion article (De Haan, 2007), differences between the more and less experienced coaches in this study are examined. In the sample in this first study, it can be noticed that these relatively inexperienced coaches do already cover a full range of critical aspects of coaching.

What are the actual benefits of experience in coaching? Just to show how subtle and complex a question this is, here are some contradictory statements that one may defend with regard to coaching experience:

1. It is evident that more experienced coaches become both calmer and more sensitive as a result of training. However, they may also become more jaded and lose their edge at the same time!
2. Experienced coaches may sense critical moments sooner, and develop a ‘suspicious’ antenna that alerts them to such moments. However, critical moments are always most critical for those encountering them for the first time!
3. A process of self-selection probably takes place: the coaches who remain receptive and continue to ask questions about their coachees and themselves will stay in the profession while others will seek a change of career. However, it may also be the very people who are susceptible to flattery or suffer from a ‘helper’s syndrome’ (Miller, 1979) who tend to stay in the profession!

All in all, therefore, the value of experience in the coaching profession is not unambiguous. Only by very careful experiential learning and ongoing supervision can coaches translate experience into more effective action or even retain their initial involvement and open mindset. What is more, in the 56 critical moments described here, a number of subtle forms of transference remain implicit or are lacking, forms that more experienced coaches would probably identify more explicitly, such as working hard for the coach, competition with the coach or ‘using’ the coach for non-learning purposes or ‘flights into health’ during the coaching where a coachee’s problems suddenly and miraculously ‘fix’ themselves (For a more detailed exposition

of these phenomena, see De Haan & Burger, 2005). We are presently collecting new data from experienced coaches, to check these hypotheses.

Due to the phenomenon of transference, everything a coachee does during coaching conversations is relevant to the coaching. Equally, everything the coach feels is relevant to the coachee. Critical moments for the coach are therefore of the utmost importance for their coachees. What is the situation, then, with the critical moments described in this article? Do they also tell us something about the clients of these coaches? My experience of facilitating and participating in supervision groups of external coaches tells me that they do. Time after time, a critical moment as reported by the coach says something about the contribution made by that coach's client. As in the supervision of coaches, the purpose of the coaching for the coachee is often not to repress, deny or avoid that tension – or whatever defense the coachee wants to apply to it. The main question in the coaching of critical situations is “how do I keep this tension in the room?”, or, in other words, “how do I keep my coachee in doubt?”, or “how can I extend the time to examine this doubt as a doubt and continue to learn from it?”

## ***Conclusion***

As other research confirms (see, for example, Miller, 1979) good coaches are greatly impacted by the experiences of helping conversations gained early in life. In a sense, everyone has the experience of such conversations, so everyone is ready to coach other people. But only if those experiences have made them receptive, sensitive and slightly suspicious (but not paranoid) do they stand a chance of becoming excellent coaches. My analysis of 56 real-life critical moments of coaches led to the following conclusions:

- Critical moments go hand-in-hand with doubts;
- Those doubts usually come down to “what is going on?” and “do I have an answer to it?”, or: “what do I see?” and “how do I respond?”.
- Doubts and critical moments, provided they are used properly, form a starting point for significant learning experiences (‘breakthroughs’) on the part of coachees;
- It helps when coaches have more critical moments, have more doubts and are suspicious, although it is probably better if they do not generate the critical moments themselves;



- Preparing oneself for critical moments implies coaching with “backbone and heart”.

In conclusion, the effectiveness of coaches seems determined primarily by their ability to doubt, not to know what is coming next, and to greet what comes next with questions. Like Descartes in his famous *Meditations* (Descartes, 1641), the coach experiences a significant turning point when he shifts his own attention away from the many doubts and uncertainties that assail him during the coaching and towards the activity of doubting itself, which can be regarded as the starting point and *raison d'être* of his own professional behaviour. Descartes' famous saying can therefore be rephrased for coaches as “I doubt therefore I coach”, and I encourage coaches to coach with that ongoing and deliberately maintained doubt as their only certainty.

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