

Learning from dialogue: review of a review of the first three minutes of a coaching conversation

David Megginson

Introduction

At the sixth meeting of the Collaborative Research group at CEL in London in July 2006, we examined the first few minutes of a DVD of the fifth coaching session between one of the group (DM) and a client. The group member who was the coach on the DVD took notes of the comments made and included these in the minutes of the meeting. These are included below. He then went on to review these review comments, by asking the question, 'What is the reviewer privileging in their analysis of the interaction?' Patterns of privileging emerge in phases of the conversation – one comment privileging process by A, for example, elicits a comment also privileging process by B; A meta-comment by C presages further meta-comments by A and again by C. However, there are also strong preferences – all 5 of D's comments privilege education, 3 of E's 4 comments privilege autonomy of the coachee. From a learning point of view, these data raise the question for this reviewer of a review of practice as to where issues arise in a conversation. Is it from the prior commitments made by individuals, or is it from the direction that a conversation happens to take. Process awareness offers a means of making choices among these and other causal factors.

The review comments

- B.** The process sets the agenda. Focus is instrumental not development. Where's coachee? What's in it for coachee? He seemed anxious round his meeting with D&S. (1).
- A.** He held it at a safe distance from himself – focused on the organisation not himself. (1).
- C.** He showed anxiety (leg 'going') when he spoke. He talked about we/us, not me; about over there, not in here. It felt very busy. (2).
- B.** His boss is going to watch this; he needs to look at how he's developing into his new role. (3).
- E.** Coach stuck with what coachee wanted. The phrase, 'hurtling towards the end' reset his focus. 'Big win' was also a big statement. They agreed what was and wasn't an outcome. (4).

D. Neither did much work – both stayed in a frame. What is the coaching culture? I would ask about self-grounding questions. I feel he would be thankful to follow if the coach led. (5).

B. Agenda for coachee is projects. (1).

E. He may be talking about IIP, but it may help him address his issues. (4)

A. The coach worked hard at summarising. (6)

B. Coachee descriptive – coach probes him. (6).

E. Exercising influence rather than working. (3?)

D. He needs a strong style – intervention: more help on focus. He looks at his life from the stage, he needs to look at how the play is constructed. (5).

E. It may be the first time he ever reflected. (4).

D. He may need more comments on process. (5).

A. 'Who's influencing?' is an interesting question; then we can ask 'What is the nature of that influence?' (3)

D. Look at coach's style and coachee's learning style – do they match or form an alliance? If you got better at this, how would your life be better for you? Where are you in this? How might your boss notice? (5)

C. There is a multiplicity of interpretations/lenses. (7)

A. Is 3 minutes from the relationship enough? (7)

C. It depends on your research question. (7).

D. He has a specific style; with soft and small interventions he won't shift his approach. Is an educational approach within the coach's range or should he find out for himself? Give him homework and check with him. (5).

E. List 20 things that have worked for you since last time. He was working – giving information, being very prepared, staying with it, turning up, answering questions, giving lots of information. (4).

The privileging categories

- 1) *The individual and their development over the organisation agenda.*

Both B (twice) and A see the interactions as lacking the valuable personal focus – the emergence of the striving, feeling, inquiring individual.

- 2) *Interpretation – what do ticks and tropes mean?*

C in her first comment focuses on two much loved features of behaviour for interpreters – apparently involuntary leg movements and failure to use, 'I' language, allegedly blurring personal responsibility by talking about 'we' and 'us'.

- 3) *Context and power relations*

B switches focus from privileging individuality to explaining why the coachee does not do this, by examining the context and power – the coachee's boss will be viewing the DVDs as a member of the collaborative research group.

- 4) *Autonomy of the coachee*

E mostly stays focused on what the coachee wants in this interaction and whether and how the coach respects this. These observations by E greatly heartened the author/coach, as they seemed close to my impulse in behaving as I did, and left me feeling recognised, appreciated and not judged in the way I felt I had been by previous observations (however cogent and salient these judgements might have been).

- 5) *Education of coachee by coach-examining process*

D makes a series of internally coherent observations about the strength and nature of interventions necessary from the coach in order to shift the coachee into a learning/development stance from being on the stage of his life, to directing this from the stalls or the wings.

- 6) *Coach behaviours*

A and B make comments about the coach's individual behaviours – summarising, describing, probing.

7) *Meta-commentary*

C starts a cluster of meta-comments by recognising the multiplicity of lenses through which we have examined this short excerpt of a coaching interaction. A wonders how much of an interaction is needed to capture what is privileged.

Another theme in these comments, which overlays many of the above was,

8) *Who does the work?*

Some commentaries (D particularly) observe that not much work is being done; others see the coach as doing it (A, B); yet others see the coachee (E).

Commentary on the commentaries

I am conscious as I write these re-descriptions of my colleagues' descriptions of me – that I am exercising the ultimate freedom described by Richard Rorty (1989), and taking back some personal power, which I experienced having been taken away from me by my friends' comments, and, to an extent, by the intractable nature of the interaction with the coachee, who will not bend to my preferences, but remains, obdurately and magnificently, himself. I reflect, not for the first time, that it is a good job that humans have this inertia. If they didn't, then all the good work that I did, changing people for the better, might be immediately undone by the next person they met, who would change them again to suit the new helper's preferences.

References

Rorty R 1989 *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.