

# **Relational Coaching: Taking the Coaching High Road**

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to elucidate and expand on what is meant by the term 'relational' coaching. Left unexplained, the epithet is bland in the extreme; of course coaching is relational. What could not be relational about two people sitting in a room talking to one another? Life is relational. Heidegger (Heidegger 1978) identifies 'Being-in-the-World-with-Others' as one of the core existential truths, and as Sartre said, 'hell is other people'(Sartre 1955); like it or not, we cannot easily get away from being in relationship.

However we, (that is I and my colleagues at Ashridge Consulting)<sup>1</sup> mean something rather specific by 'relational', which is not just qualitative. In other words we are not talking just about a 'good' relationship, where people observe the social conventions of politeness and consideration, or going further, listen well to one another, take the ethics of mutual respect, diversity, justice and so forth really seriously. Of course such ethical principles are important and it is usually important to be polite, although not always.

'Relational' in this context means, for us, acknowledging the inherently mutual nature of all social process, and therefore prioritising the importance of the co-created, 'here-and-now' relationship as the central vehicle for development and transformation.

This article elaborates on how we are using this word 'relational'. I am not attempting to create a theoretical integration, provide a theoretical critique, or articulate a specific method; rather I have selected a number of perspectives from different fields of theory and research, which I think are broadly compatible, to support my claim that relational dynamics are core to effective coaching practice.

Coaching is an activity which usually takes a dyadic form, with the coach being primarily contracted to be in service of his or her individual client. I start therefore with a psychological perspective, as it seems important to 'ground' a discussion of such a process in a basic understanding of human need and human personality. This itself is radical in the sense that coaching is normally located in

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<sup>1</sup> Ashridge Consulting developed a programme called 'Coaching for Organisation Consultants' which at the time of writing has been running for some 6 years and has also been developed into a Masters Programme. Both these programmes are based on the argument that the central focus of coaching needs to be relational.

a business context, or at least one where efficiency and effectiveness take precedence over psychological considerations.

Most psychological approaches focus on the importance of early relationship, and many business people are fairly sceptical about the relevance of psychological theory, and wary of what they see as excessive introspection. However I have found attachment theory resonates with reflective coaches who find it accessible and useful, and I think it articulates in 'simple' terms something that most people recognise nowadays as core to the human condition.

## **Bowlby and Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory is now a well-established body of work in developmental psychology, based on the study of the patterns of connection and communication between parents and infants and how they shape the infant's cognitive, emotional and social development (Ainsworth, 1991), (Bowlby, 1973), (Bowlby, 1969/1982)

Infants' developing brains instinctively drive them to seek physical closeness and connection with the people closest to them, usually beginning with the mother. The adaptive patterns that are established early on, based on the responses and infant experiences, shape the unique ways in which his/her parasympathetic nervous system moderates the once dominant sympathetic nervous system's drive to reach out and connect (Badenoch, 2008).

John Bowlby argues (Bowlby, 1988), that certain 'basic' types of behaviour, such as sexual behaviour, exploratory behaviour, eating behaviour, and, of particular interest to this article, attachment behaviour and its reciprocal, parenting behaviour, are to some extent pre-programmed and biologically rooted, but also to a large extent 'learned'. In outlining this position he observes that keeping these types of behaviour conceptually distinct from each other is in contrast with traditional libido theory that treats most types of behaviour as the "varying expressions of a single drive" (Bowlby, 1988 p.5).

He goes on to say "the modern view of behavioural development contrasts sharply with both of the older paradigms, one of which invoking instinct, over-emphasises the pre-programmed component and the other of which, reacting against instinct, overemphasised the learning component" (Bowlby, 1988p.5).

He thus, helpfully in my view, collapses the nature versus nurture argument which continues to polarise much discussion about the extent to which coaching and other 'helping' professions can really make a difference, and observes of parenting behaviour, that while it has strong biological roots, "all the detail is learned, some of it during interaction with babies and children, much of it through observation of how other parents behave".

Bowlby is arguing that human beings have a primary need for attachment, in both the physical and the psychological sense. He says:

*“A feature of attachment behaviour of the greatest importance clinically, and present irrespective of the age of the individual concerned, is the intensity of the emotion that accompanies it, the kind of emotion aroused depending on how the relationship between the individual attached and the attachment figure is faring. If it goes well, there is joy and a sense of security. If it is threatened there is jealousy, anxiety and anger. If broken there is grief and depression”.* (Bowlby, 1988 p.4)

He is asserting that attachment, or relational needs will always configure in one way or another how we live our lives and that our relational patterns and ‘attachment style’ is formed in our earliest relationships. I am suggesting that this primary need is bound to configure a coaching relationship, for when a coaching client meets his or her coach, he/she brings into the encounter, both consciously and unconsciously their experience of primary relationships, their expectations of someone who is supposed to be ‘there for them’.

By analogy with parenting it seems reasonable to suggest that a skilled coaching process developed from a profound understanding of relational needs is capable of contributing to human growth. It also seems safe to suggest that coaching which does not take account of the relational dynamics inherent in the coaching process may well be ineffectual and at the worst potentially harmful.

Bowlby’s ideas, although radical and controversial at the time he proposed them have become fairly mainstream in psychotherapy and are now more or less unchallenged, and at the heart of many developments in the understanding of personality development. However, they still seem fairly controversial in the field of coaching, as evidenced by the number of times during the course of our coaching programmes we are asked to define the boundary between coaching and psychotherapy. This question is predicated on the assumption that there either **is** or **should be** a clear boundary between the two, and a simple means of knowing when to ‘refer’ a client to a psychotherapist.

It seems to me to follow from Bowlby’s assertions that to make such a distinction is impossible. Clearly coaching and psychotherapy have different purposes and take place in different contexts, but in both cases the relational dynamics will configure outcome and this is unavoidable.

This is evidenced by psychotherapy research and recent coaching research into effective outcomes. Of all the variables within the coaching encounter that have an effect on successful outcome, by far the largest impact comes from the coaching relationship itself, rather than from any particular method or technique (see for example (Asay and Lambert, 1999) and (Wampold, 2001)).

## Research emerging from the neurosciences on 'Limbic Resonance'

Recent research in the neurosciences into how our brain works seems to confirm most of the ideas of Bowlby as well as much of the Gestalt approach which I go into later.

In *A General Theory of Love* (Lewis et al., 2000) which combines science with elegant prose, the authors – three doctors - describe the development of the 'Limbic Brain' which they claim distinguishes mammals from reptiles with their ancient reptilian brain.

The reptilian brain is a bulbous elaboration of the spinal cord controlling vital functions such as breathing, swallowing and heartbeat and also the primitive 'fight or flight' response. The mammalian evolution described as the limbic brain wraps itself around the reptilian brain and contains regions such as the hippocampus, fornix, amygdala, septum, cingulate gyrus, perirhinal and perhippocampus. The final evolutionary move is of course the neocortex bestowing on humans the ability, among others to speak and reason.

These three major brain areas interact in complex ways, but as Lewis, Amini and Lannon put it, 'there seems little doubt that nurturance, social communication and play have their home in limbic territory. Remove a mother hamster's whole neocortex and she can still raise her pups, but even slight limbic damage devastates her maternal abilities (Lewis et al. 2000 p.32).

So it would appear that the limbic region is the seat of our emotional needs and impulses and is the primary mediator between human beings and the sensory world in the sense that it intuitively or 'reads' emotional states in others **before** our neo-cortex gets in on the act.

*'A mammal can detect the internal state of another mammal and adjust its own physiology to match the situation – a change in turn sensed by the other, who likewise adjusts. While the neural responsiveness of a reptile is an early, tinny note of emotion, mammals have a full-throated duet, a reciprocal interchange between two fluid, sensing, shifting brains.*

*Within the effulgence of their new brain (limbic) mammals developed a capacity we call **limbic resonance** – a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaptation whereby two mammals become attuned to each other's inner states.*

*..... babies continuously monitor their mothers' expressions. If a mother freezes her face, her baby becomes upset and begins to cry in short order.*

Lewis et al. 2000 p.63

Our limbic brain confers on us a sophisticated but largely **unconscious** ability to read emotion and relate to others which exists in babies long before their neocortex has started to function. This is an innate part of our survival kit; as Bowlby put it a 'pre-programmed' need and capability for relationship.

Further research has shown that the number of neural connections are dependent on the quality of early nurturing so the development of our limbic brain and hence our relational capacity is actually influenced by the extent and quality of the relationship with our early carers (usually mothers). At the infant stage this is largely through cuddling, playing, eye contact, the whole physiological demeanour and responsiveness of the mother, and there is evidence that this continues into adulthood with the quality of adult relationships continuing to affect brain development.

In another delightful little book on brain function Curran (2008) describes the interaction of two chemicals, glutamate and dopamine, required to activate a synaptic connection in a specialised synapse found in the corpus striatum concerned with learning and memory. Glutamate is released from the cortical (neo-cortex region) side of the synapse and is required to excite the striatal nerve cell. Dopamine is a neurochemical released from the substantia nigra compacta (limbic region) that is required paradoxically to calm down the effects of the glutamate. This is the important point; “dopamine release is predominantly under the control of the limbic brain”. He says “you must have dopamine release in your brain to learn anything - it is the main synapto-genic chemical in your brain”. In other words it is essential to the creation of synapses. Learning is therefore largely directed and controlled by your emotional limbic brain...(my bold)**if you have made good emotional connection with the person who is trying to learn from you, you have dramatically increased the chance of them learning that thing from you “** (p61)

The implication for coaches is that we can potentially have a significant impact on the emotional well being of our clients, and that creating a relational context conducive to learning and change is a pre-requisite of effective coaching practice. In the remainder of this paper, I look at ways that this conducive context can be established.

### **Constructivism as a philosophical underpinning**

Hitherto I have been arguing that relationship is core to the coaching process from a psychological and neurological perspective. Now I am suggesting that relationship is also core from an ontological perspective.

The worldview known as ‘social constructivism’ (Glaserfeld, 1995), (Vygotsky, 1978), is the philosophical perspective on which I intend to draw. Within this broad church there are a range of ontological positions, from the Limited Realism of the cognitive psychologists (Ellis, 1998), (Beck, 1976), to the Social Constructionist view and the primacy of the relational, advocated in particular by Gergen (Gergen, 2003).

While it is not the purpose of this chapter to explore constructivism as an ontology, it is important to note that among those who advocate this world view there is much argument as to whether an objective reality actually exists out there to be known (the ‘weak’ view), or whether we are actively creating ‘reality’

through our own participation in it (the strong view). The former view, which sees reality existing independently of human agency, is closer to received wisdom, and the latter view, which sees reality as a dynamic, emerging, participative **process** which humans both create and are created by, is a much more radical perspective.

Either way, all parties to this argument adopt a shared epistemological position that 'reality' cannot be known objectively because human beings bring their categories of knowledge, their experience, their subjectivity to the phenomena they encounter. Meaning making is inherently therefore, a relational process.

This philosophical underpinning to the word 'relational' has fundamental implications for coaching; it implies that coach and client are in a sense creating one another; meaning arises in the process of relating so the coach does not act **upon** the client as an instrument in service of the client. This tends to be the way many executive coaches think of themselves, as neutral problem solvers. Instead I am proposing that coach and client are engaged in a process of **reciprocal influence**, whether they like it or not. If such a process is to be generative, I am suggesting that the person of the coach must be fully involved; to attempt to withhold him or herself in the interests of impartiality or detachment merely attenuates the creative possibility inherent in the process of fully relating.

Thus the coach puts him or herself fully at risk 'on the high road' of coaching. The low road consists of a rather dry and instrumental coaching process that keeps both parties relatively safe and protected from the risk of fully embodied relational engagement. The high road requires the coach to be capable of self-awareness and reflexivity, to allow themselves to be subject to the process of relating rather than to be in control of it and hence to be open to being changed by the interaction

I intend to continue this exploration of 'relationship' in the coaching process with an overview of some principles drawn from the field of Gestalt, which to a large extent underpin our practice of relational coaching at Ashridge. I choose this field not just because I spent many years training as a Gestalt therapist, but because I think there is something 'right minded' about its core principles, and because I find that it appeals to, and resonates with coaches who are in the business of enabling human flourishing at the same time as contributing to organisational effectiveness.

## **Gestalt Perspective and Principles**

'Gestalt' is a largely untranslatable German word that broadly means 'wholeness', 'form' or 'shape'. It was originated by a group of psychologists (Koffka, 1935), (Köhler, 1969), (Wertheimer, 1944) who were disenchanted with the scientific 'atomistic' and reductionist methodology which largely prevailed at the time (and still does to a large extent) and advocated a more 'phenomenological' methodology with the purpose of discovering the 'wholeness' of things. They also studied the nature of perception, and discovered

that individuals tend to seek **pattern** in perceived phenomena and hence fill in the gaps when presented with an 'incomplete' pattern.

This discovery that people make meaning by **creating** pattern is of profound philosophical significance; it challenges the positivist assumption that 'reality' can be determined through systematic and rigorous observation by a detached observer. Instead it appears that people make their own reality through interacting with the phenomena they encounter.

Thus early Gestaltists join with the Social Constructivists in discovering that we literally make our own worlds, that it is in our interacting or relating with our environment, that we create meaning.

Yontef (Yontef, 1980) uses three principles to define Gestalt as a practice, which seem to me to be particularly helpful in understanding the role of the practitioner.

*Principle one:* Gestalt practice is phenomenological; its only goal is 'awareness' and its methodology is the methodology of **awareness** (the Change principle).

*Principle two:* Gestalt practice is based wholly on dialogic existentialism, that is the I-Thou relational process of contact and withdrawal (the Process principle).

*Principle three:* Gestalt therapy's conceptual foundation or worldview is based on holism and field theory (the Holism principle)

These principles are of particular relevance to my argument for the primacy of the relational in coaching, which for the sake of the flow of this article, I want to take in reverse order.

### ***Principle 3: The Holism principle***

This principle locates the dyadic encounter in a 'field' of communicative interaction. Our clients simultaneously shape and are shaped by the matrix of relationships that constitute their organisational context. For example, when I coach a member of an executive team who complains about his boss, I ask him how he and his colleagues contribute to the dynamic. Initially he is somewhat nonplussed, and slightly angry, but I point out that a boss does not exist without subordinates; both need each other to be respectively boss and subordinate.

A field of interaction, such as a management team, is shaped not just by concrete behaviour but also by unconscious projections and expectations. This complex relational dynamic needs to be appreciated as part of the coaching context, as it is always evoked in some way as soon as the client starts to talk about it, and the coaching process is bound to be influenced by it. I return to this theme later in the article when discussing George Mead's (Mead, 1967) views on 'communicative interaction'.

## ***Principle 2: The process principle***

This principle flows directly from the constructivist position, namely that change occurs in the crucible of a relationship, or in **dialogue**, to use their preferred term. The dialogic approach of the early Gestaltists was in contrast to the somewhat impassive stance adopted by classically trained psychoanalysts, often seated behind their patient who was lying on a couch. Indeed, Fritz Perls who had trained in psychoanalysis, was very sceptical about the nature of the relationship they tended to create, the potential power it gives to the analyst and the dependency it can bring about. Psychoanalysts sought to offer interpretations of a patient's free associations in their presence, and hence put themselves in some authority over the meaning to be ascribed to their outpourings. The Gestaltists sought a more mutual and reciprocal relationship as described above.

Nowadays of course, few coaches seek to explicitly arrange the coaching encounter so as to maximise their power. Nevertheless it is possible, by taking up an 'objective' and 'detached' stance, by seeking to solve the client's problem or by offering them advice, to unwittingly adopt a stance which takes power over their client.

The dialogic relationship is one in which power and influence is fluid, being continuously negotiated both consciously and unconsciously. The implication for coaches is that they need to pay continuous attention to the dynamics of the relationship they and their client are creating, and to do this they need to understand the dynamics of relating, be aware of their own patterns and habits, and to take the risk of reflecting on these dynamics **with their client**.

## ***Principle 1: The Change Principle***

In simple terms the essence of this principle is the focus on the present. It emphasises the utility of paying attention to, and raising awareness of what is happening **now**, rather than what happened 'then'. It does not deny the influence of our past experiences and conditioning; it takes account of the powerful effect of early attachment patterns (c.f. Bowlby), but it is primarily interested in how these experiences are being manifested in the present interaction on the basis that we cannot change the past but we can change the present. Clearly the most present thing going on in the room, in an encounter between coach and client, is the dynamics between them, and this is a powerful reason for paying attention to it. This is easy to say and not so easy to do; it takes courage: the following vignette may bring to life what I mean.

### *A Moment of Courage*

I was coaching the Director of a government body. He was a senior figure who had recently been knighted (a uniquely British form of honouring somebody), and was entering the final stage of his career as leader of this organisation.

He was a confident, articulate, charming and powerful man, with considerable interpersonal skills; rather an archetypal, male leadership figure. I had worked



with him over a number of years, and had always been rather in awe of him. I was eager for his approval and tried not to show it; I was aware of the transferential pull of my old relationship with my father.

In the past, I had often worked with Sir K. and his various leadership teams so this coaching assignment was a departure from the usual form of my relationship with him. He had asked for a year's coaching in order to help him change his leadership style. He knew people found him intimidating, and he wanted to grow people rather than scare them, and shift the leadership culture of the organisation.

He paid me in advance, and wanted to hold the sessions in his London flat. We were on about the third session; I had been 'trying hard' to reflect back, ask insightful questions, notice themes – all good coaching stuff, but I did not feel I was making an h'aporth of difference. I found myself feeling rather inadequate, with a growing sense of anxiety that I was not living up to his expectations. Everything I said he appeared to have already thought of, and at this particular moment he had been saying:

"You know, I don't know why people think I'm intimidating; I think I listen rather better than most people. I said:

"Yes, you are a very skilled listener, as indeed you are a very persuasive talker. But let me tell you how I experience you; either way, whether you are listening or persuading, you are **so** skilful, that I feel I have absolutely no impact on you. I do not feel I can influence you, surprise you, offer you anything new at all, because you appear to already know or have anticipated anything I say"

"What", he said. "I don't understand"; he looked rather bemused. I knew in that moment by the change in his demeanour, that I had disconcerted him. I wondered aloud whether my experience might echo that of his team. Slowly, we began to explore how his very experience and skill might be affecting the people he led.

I had taken a personal risk with this 'big' man, whom I so wanted to impress, and it changed the dynamic of our relationship. Although I could have no idea whether this exchange would impact on his style of leadership, I certainly held a hypothesis that it might.

In that moment I took the risk of paying attention to what I thought was going on between us. I believed that the dynamic that we were co-creating would be relevant not only to our own relationship but also to Sir K's relationships with his colleagues and employees.

Working relationally in that way is something we can all learn to do but it requires us to be courageous. There are, in my experience, usually three elements to this kind of intervention; first I make an observation about what I am noticing in the 'here and now' encounter; secondly I declare my experience, and thirdly I may offer a hypothesis. For example; "I notice you have been telling me about a number of your problems, and that I have been doing my best to offer you possible solutions (observation). I am beginning to sense that none of my

attempts quite hit the spot, and I am feeling a little ineffectual (my experience - takes courage to say this!). Maybe you don't really believe that I can help you, or possibly that anyone can help you?" (Hypothesis - more courage required!).

This orientation puts the dynamics and quality of the relationship at the forefront of the coach's attention. Most coaches tend to be preoccupied with their client's story and problems, which are clearly important, while the relational dynamics sometimes pass without notice and are rarely commented upon.

I was recently working with a new client that I had never met before. I noticed that the man was mumbling and muttering and looked away from me, to my right and down. After twenty minutes I said, "You tend to look at the floor and mumble when talking, are you aware you do this?" The man said he was aware of it, yes. I continued, "If you and I are to work together, I'm going to have to ask you to make an effort to speak more loudly to me so I can hear." The session ended, and it being the introductory meeting, I asked whether he wanted to continue working with me. "Yes," he said, "No one has ever said anything about my speaking before."

What I am proposing is that 'the relationship' between coach and client is at least as important as any 'problem' the client chooses to bring, and is often the means to the most important learning and change.

The final perspective on which I propose to draw, both elaborates on the philosophy of social constructivism and complements Gestalt principles. This is the principle of communication as described by George Mead, a sociologist writing in the 1930's. Gestaltists discovered the way human beings make meaning by creating patterns and hence **creating** reality. Mead investigated in close detail how **social** meaning in particular emerges in the process of communicative interaction. If we are to be effective as coaches in consciously working with relationship, it behoves us to understand how 'relating' works.

## **Communicative Interaction**

George Herbert Mead described this process of communicative interaction rather succinctly by saying that "The meaning of a gesture by one organism is found in the response of another organism " (Mead, 1967 P.14)

He used the word 'gesture' to mean any communicative move, verbal or physical, towards another. While as humans we gesture with intention - for example I want to convey some information to you, ask you to do something, scare you, convince you or whatever - it is only in your response that the 'meaning' of the interaction emerges. Imagine that I move to shake your hand at the end of a quarrel, but you respond to it as an aggressive gesture and move away, and I run after you... . So in a series of gestures and responses, patterns of meaning emerge. This is a spontaneous dance of meaning making in which neither party

can predict the other's response. They can anticipate but not predict, and in a conversation of gestures during which each party is well attuned to the other, the gesturer will be modifying her gesture even as she gestures and notices the respondent's shift in expression, or body posture.

This way of understanding the basic communicative process seems to resonate with most people's lived experience. The most important proposition to get our heads round is that this process, while it may appear otherwise is **non-linear**. One person does not transmit a message to another person like a broadcasting signal. The process is simultaneous; as one gestures, the other is making meaning **at the same time** and the first gesturer is also simultaneously responding so that meaning emerges in the interaction.

This non-linear process is complex, witness the myriads of misunderstandings and surprises that arise in any conversation, and we have to contend with two further important factors. The first is particularly important for the coach, namely, that much of the gesturing and responding is influenced by unconscious motivation. We cannot always take a gesture at face value and neither can we take our own response at face value.

There is not space in this article for a full discussion of unconscious process, but most of us are familiar with the notion that oftentimes patterns of behaviour and feeling, which are conditioned to some extent by early experience in our families, schools and so on, are triggered in response to certain here and now situations (we act out the past in the present). While we may understand this as a consequence of being human, we are usually unaware of it at the time a particular pattern or response is evoked. This is a rather simplified description of what is generally meant by 'unconscious relational process', but it will suffice, and a coach who practises relationally needs to have some understanding of the nature and implications of such unconscious processes.

### **The Relational Context of Coaching**

The proposition that communicative interaction is simultaneous and non-linear has a major implication for how we understand organisational life. This is the realisation that this complex process of communicative interaction is **clearly uncontrollable by any one person**. The implication of this for a coach in a dyadic coaching relationship has already been substantially covered in this chapter, but what about the wider implications for organisations, the context in which most of our clients live? The implication is that while managers may be in charge, they cannot be 'in control' of a fluid and dynamic process of interaction, what we normally call 'the organisation'. Most managers have experienced not being in control, but will have been unlikely to admit it, as it is against the prevailing nostrums of effective leadership.

*“We are all participants”*

What I am suggesting is quite radical; I am suggesting that an organisation is not a fixed entity or thing, but a constant, self-referencing process of gestures and responses between people. The members of this process of organising are all participants in creating a social process, which continuously evolves into an unknown future. We cannot, by definition, get outside it; as participants we simultaneously create and are created by the process of engaging together in joint action. You ask your subordinate to do something, and she responds in some way that will inevitably be informed by her values, assumptions, preconceptions and interpretations of your ‘gesture’. She will not respond like a robot; she will make her own meaning of your request.

The interactions that we have with each other simply create more interactions. Our interactions do not add up to a *whole* because they continuously evolve. Neither is any stable or bigger *thing* behind peoples’ interactions. There is not *the company* that does something to people: there are only individual people relating to each other. Managers, and indeed consultants, may perceive themselves as standing ‘objectively’, outside of *the system* in order to work *on it*, but this is an illusion, as there is no system to be outside. Power differentials are of course constructed between manager and subordinate, but there is no *away from* the constant process of relating; we are all participants forming it and at the same time being formed by it.

People in organisations (and, of course, in society at large) achieve very complex tasks by coordination and cooperation which is possible due to our ability to communicate with each other through language and other symbols (e.g. bodily gestures, writing). Thus, the organisation is not a purposeful *entity that enables* this joint action, but the joint action itself *is* the organisation (Stacey, 2000 p.187).

What generally prevents social processes from spiralling out of control is that as interdependent humans, attempting to live together in the world, we evolve ‘rules’ whereby we can go along together. Because we **need** other human beings in order to survive we are inevitably constrained by each other’s needs and wants so we are simultaneously free and not free.

What we are learning from complexity science is that there appears to be a self-organising principle in nature whereby order emerges from apparent disorder. The order cannot be predicted from the initial starting conditions but pattern emerges through interaction.

The implication for society is that it is in itself a self-organising process. Living in tighter knit communities like organisations this self-organisation manifests itself as ‘rules’ which emerge over time and are constantly evolving, taking the form of hierarchy, systems and procedures, and all the informal codes and conventions which constitute an organisational ‘culture’. Often these ‘rules’ feel, to those lower down in the hierarchy, imposed, and rather impervious to influence. In practice they have emerged over time in the on-going process of communicative interaction; they did not come down as ‘tablets of stone’ from any mountain.

I notice how many times in the above paragraphs I have used the word relating, and what I am suggesting is that 'relating' is **the core social process** and hence coaching is not just relational in itself, but it is part of a wider relational process which is the essence of what constitutes organisational life.

## Conclusion

In this article my intention has been to demonstrate, through drawing on John Bowlby's pioneering psychological work, the profound importance of the relationship itself in any coaching encounter. Through the intimate and sometimes intense exchanges that take place over time, the coach is likely to become a 'significant other' to their client for better or for worse. As coaches we thus take on a significant responsibility with ethical implications, of which we need to be thoroughly aware, and for which we need to be well prepared.

I have also drawn on some findings from neuroscientific research which both confirm Bowlby's ideas and offer some further insights into the role that relationship plays in the development of human personality and particularly in how human beings learn.

I have located coaching within a social constructivist, inter-subjective ontology, which sees learning and change emerging in the crucible of relationship. This challenges quite fundamentally the economic and instrumental paradigm within which the majority of management thinking and practice, and hence coaching, is conventionally located. I suggest that paradoxically, while the aim of the coach must be to create a relationship **in the service of** the client, it is nevertheless an inter-subjective and interdependent relationship in which coach and client participate.

Informed by this ontological perspective, I have elaborated on some Gestalt principles which I think are core to relational coaching practice.

I draw on the ideas of George Mead, a sociologist, to explore the dynamic of communication as a simultaneous movement of 'gesture and response' in which meaning is **created** in a communicative dance by two people, giving further weight to the proposition that coaching is inherently a non-linear, non-instrumental, dynamic relational process.

Finally I draw on some ideas from complexity theory to suggest that the organisations in which clients work are 'processes of communicative interaction' in which 'relating', in its broadest sense, is the core process. I am suggesting that 'organisations' are social through and through and that coaching is thus not just relational in itself, but is part of a broad web of relating which constitutes what we have come to call 'organisation'.

In our use of a noun to describe a fluid dynamic process we tend to lose sight of one of the few certainties of organisational life, that they cannot be managed like machines, and are in the long run unpredictable.

In my view, these perspectives from philosophy, sociology, psychology, and neuroscience constitute a coherent view of the relational nature of organisations and hence the practice of coaching, which have some major implications for how we conceive our role as coaches and how we develop an effective and ethical coaching practice.

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