Clients' Critical Moments of Coaching: Toward a "Client Model" of Executive Coaching

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Sixty-seven past and present clients of executive coaching wrote to us about the critical moments they experienced, and we interviewed eight of these. Our analysis indicates that for clients critical moments are not obviously essential to all good coaching. When critical moments do occur, they are positive and linked with important outcomes for clients, unless clients had been provoked by what they see as unhelpful or insensitive actions by coaches. Critical moments frequently appear to involve new realizations, evidenced both by explicit reference and by metaphors used. We explore what these findings indicate about clients' experiences of executive coaching, and we propose a new model of coaching based on the client's perspective.

Executive coaching—the professional development of executives through one-to-one conversations with a professional coach—is a growing discipline within the broader field of organization development (OD) consulting. All indicators tell us that the executive coaching business and education are on the increase, as well as professional bodies, codes of conduct, and research publications in the field (Stober & Grant, 2006; De Haan, 2008a).

The growing interest in executive coaching, exemplified by a wealth of publications, has provided us with a plethora of coaching models, describing, for example,

- Basic ways of approaching the conversations (see, e.g., Kilburg, 2000; Downey, 1999);
- Basic ways of structuring the conversations (see, e.g., Whitmore, 1992; De Haan & Burger, 2005);
- Basic ways of intervening within the conversations (see, e.g., Heron, 1975; Clutterbuck, 1985).

All these helpful frameworks, categories and taxonomies, and many more, give us insight into how professional coaches (may) think about their work. However, even if we know a great deal about what coaches do and how coaches conceptualize, what do these models actually tell us about how their clients experience and view the coaching work?

We are also beginning to know something about the effectiveness or outcome of coaching (for overviews of outcome research articles, see Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Waldman, 2003; Feldman & Lankau, 2005). Coaching seems to be generally a highly effective undertaking, and perhaps this is partly what is attracting so many professional managers and consultants to this form of OD consulting. However, even if we know a great deal about general outcome, what does this type of research actually tell us about how effectiveness is (can be) achieved, or about outcomes at each moment of a coaching conversation? For this we would have to look at the outcome at the level of particular client–coach interactions or sessions of coaching.

We set out to find some preliminary answers to these three open questions in the executive coaching profession:

1. How do clients experience executive coaching interventions?

2. What outcomes are generated for clients in the real time of coaching?
3. What model(s) do coaching clients therefore operate on?

We realize that we can only undertake a first exploration of this relatively uncharted territory, so our answers will have to be preliminary and tentative. We do believe, however, that this is important territory for broader research programs. After all, the whole coaching journey is undertaken for the benefit of the clients, so it is certainly worthwhile to understand their perspectives as deeply as possible. From our own experience, we know that our outlook is completely different depending on whether we are in the client's or the coach's position, that is, whether we are the learner or the facilitator of learning. We believe that all coaching outcome is rooted in so-called *suboutcomes* (Rice & Greenberg, 1984), that is, those outcomes achieved moment by moment. In order to begin to understand how the various outcomes of the whole journey are achieved, it is therefore essential to have some understanding of suboutcomes, or coaching's effectiveness from moment to moment. Moreover, we believe that it is probably easier to describe *suboutcome* than it is *outcome*, because there are likely to be fewer variables involved.

To the best of our knowledge, this study into the client's experience of coaching moves into new and uncharted territory of the literature of executive coaching, although it is not without important precursors. We have been inspired by thorough investigations in the fields of psychotherapy and narrative psychology, which we briefly summarize here.

It is interesting to note that the study of "moments" or "events" of effectiveness (suboutcomes) started relatively late in all professions that focus on change through helping conversations. The first important contribution to this study in the general field of professional helping conversations took place in group psychotherapy, where Irvin Yalom (1970) started the systematic study of the nature of helpful events for clients, by asking clients to classify these events with the help of a preconceived classification. Later, Bloch, Reibstein, Crouch, Holroyd, and Themen (1979) abandoned the preconceived classification so that they could inquire more deeply into the clients' experience of "most important events" in psychotherapy. Llewelyn (1988) undertook a major research project in individual psychotherapy, interviewing 40 patient–therapist pairs and collecting 1076 critical events (both helpful and unhelpful) from 399 sessions. She found highly significant differences between therapists and patients in the selection and description of the events. These differences turned out to be greater when the outcome of the psychotherapy was relatively less helpful. Llewelyn used Elliott's (1985) taxonomy to classify the events, and found that

- Patients valued "reassurance/relief" and "problem solutions" more highly,
- Therapists valued "gaining of cognitive / affective insight" highest,
- Both patients and therapists valued "personal contact" highly.

Llewelyn (1988) concluded that patients seem to be more concerned with solutions to their problems, and that they value advice and solutions more, provided they feel free to reject them. Therapists, on the other hand, seem more concerned with the etiology of the problems and potential transformation through the patient's insight.

Related research into significant, helpful, and nonhelpful events in individual psychotherapy has also been conducted by Elliott (1985); Elliott, James, Reimschuessel, Cislo, and Sack (1985); Mahrer and Nadler (1986); and Llewelyn, Elliott, Shapiro, Hardy, and Firth-Cozens (1988). Mahrer and Nadler (1986) provided an overview of "good moments in psychotherapy" found by various researchers, and the other articles looked at the nature of therapist/ counselor interventions that clients rated as being more and less helpful. All these researchers were able to make comparisons between helpfulness of specific events and outcome, providing links between "suboutcomes" and "overall outcomes." The discrepancy between therapist and patient perspectives is replicated in this research. One clearly positive finding was that coding of clients' accounts can be rated reliably by therapists/ researchers, something we also found in this research.

Critical moments in individual change processes have also been studied in the discipline *biographical studies*, where, for example, significant events in the lifetime of a famous person have been examined or where sociological field research into critical moments of groups of individuals that are known to be in transition, such as adolescents, has been undertaken (see, e.g., Thomson, Bell, Holland, Henderson, McGrellis, & Sharpe, 2002; Mandelbaum, 1973). Interestingly, the retrospective definition of *critical moments* can here be established more objectively: in terms of the importance the moment demonstratively has on the ensuing biography. In other words, a moment often becomes "critical" when we see in retrospect that it "proved to be" significant. Critical moments have been elucidated theoretically in a variety of ways,

for example, as "turning points" (Mandelbaum, 1973); "epiphanies" (Denzin, 1989); "fateful moments" (Giddens, 1991); or "social career breaks" (Humphrey, 1993) in narrative sociology, and as "turning points" (Carlberg, 1997) or "moments of meeting" (Stern, 2004) in psychotherapy.

Our own earlier research focused on the coach's experience of critical moments (De Haan, 2008b, 2008c; Day, De Haan, Blass, Sills, & Bertie, 2008). By *critical moment* we have come to understand a sudden shift or interruption to a coaching journey: one that feels significant and urgent, exciting, or disturbing. It seems that coaches frequently find these critical moments to be turning points in their work with clients; either they are generative or they lead to a deterioration in the coaching relationship (Day et al., 2008).

Our first investigations with executive coaches (De Haan, 2008b, 2008c) have shown that critical moments are usually:

- Unexpected and unforeseen by the coach;
- Associated by the coach with heightened emotions for the client and the coach;
- Experienced as tension provoking in the relationship between coach and client;
- Associated by the coach with feeling doubt or anxiety about how to proceed or respond in the moment.

Coaches often reported that their clients were experiencing insight and learning during or after these moments, although in a minority of cases they led to the breakdown of the relationship and even the termination of the coaching. When comparing moments that resulted in learning and insight to moments that resulted in the breakdown of the coaching relationship (Day et al., 2008), we observed that the key difference seemed to be presence or absence of shared reflection at the point of tension. When coach and client were both able to reflect on what was happening in the moment or on what had just happened, learning and insight was often the result. When, however, either the coach or the client allowed their anxiety to escalate into for example, aggression or withdrawal, a breakdown in the relationship often resulted.

From a theoretical perspective the research demonstrates the importance of the dynamics of the cocreated relationship between coach and client and the importance of what is called *reflexivity* in coaching: the ability to experience and reflect on one's own inner world at points of heightened emotion.

Our research study on critical moments in coaching took as its purpose to investigate whether coaching clients are aware of critical moments and, if they are, in what ways they experience these moments. The two central research questions are therefore: "*What critical moments do clients of coaching experience, and what descriptors do they use in their reports of those moments?*"

Although we realize that there are important differences between psychotherapy and executive coaching (Spinelli, 2008), we hypothesized that the perspectives of clients and coaches could be significantly different, similar to what is known about critical events in psychotherapy (see, Llewelyn, 1988, or the review study by Weiss, Rabinowitz, & Spiro, 1996). To begin the enquiry, we set out to explore the basic language of the client who engages in coaching conversations. We were interested in how clients would describe their experiences of coaching, and the attitudes, thinking, or sense-making that their words might reveal. Clients could employ a language that closely matches what we have found from the inexperienced or experienced coach's perspective (see, e.g., Heron, 1975; Kilburg, 2000; De Haan, 2008). But equally, if the clients' perspective or frames of reference prove to be radically different, this would emerge in a different way of describing events, and so a different model of the coaching experience may be called for to describe their experiences.

METHOD

We embarked on two different inquiries in order to get firsthand accounts of clients' experiences of critical moments in coaching relationships. The first stage was a short survey asking participants whether they had experienced a critical moment as a coachee and, if they had, to provide a short description of it. The second stage consisted of interviews with selected individuals that had described a critical moment and some who had indicated they had not experienced one.

We opted for a "fresh" set of clients that did not form part of any of our previous research on critical moments, and that we had not coached. For this reason, we offered our short survey first to all members of the Ashridge alumni network. The Ashridge alumni are all ex-participants of educational programs of the Ashridge Business School (14% MBA graduates and 86% from one of our other open enrollment leadership programs). We do not teach on the Ashridge MBA or leadership programs, so we did not have previous contact with these participants. There were 3015 alumni on the Ashridge Alumni Register, mostly leaders and managers working in the fullest range of industries, with the largest subsets from Financial Services (16%), Consulting, Professional & Business Services (13%), and Pharmaceuticals, Chemical and Biotech (9%).

Twenty-five percent were female and 75% were male. We asked these alumni the following research question, once as an advert in the alumni monthly bulletin, and once in the form of a more personalized e-mail:

> Our earlier research into coaches' perspectives focused on the frequent experience during the coaching process of what we are calling "*critical moments.*" These moments often turned out to be important times in the coaching journey, so we are very interested to know if clients also have these experiences. Our definition of a *critical moment* is "an exciting, tense or significant moment," and it could be either an actual moment or a period of time. Our questions to you are:
>
> 1. Have you ever experienced something that felt like a critical moment (an exciting, tense or significant moment) during your coaching? [Yes/No]
> 2. If so, please describe briefly one (or more) critical moment. What was it about this moment that made it critical for you?
> *Note.* In our research report we will take away all identifying elements from the descriptions, so we can promise *complete anonymity*. Please let us know if you'd like to receive our report before publication. We will be more than happy to share our findings.

This short written inquiry was sent out to all 3015 members of the Ashridge alumni network. When response rates turned out to be a little low for analysis, we topped up the dataset by sending the same e-mail to 166 graduates of the Ashridge Coaching-for-Organisation-Consultants program (another group who had not been involved in individual coaching with us) and to 20 current coaching clients of Ashridge Consulting (with permission from their coaches). The response rates were 51 from Ashridge alumni (1.7%); 10 from coaching program participants (6%); and 6 from current coaching clients (30%). So the full dataset consisted of 67 completed responses. This set comprised 20 (30%) "no-moments" (participants reporting they had not had any critical moments during their coaching) and 59 critical moment descriptions from the remaining 47 participants.

From this dataset our enquiry proceeded as follows:

1. Using grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) we came up with 40 short codes describing critical aspects in the critical moment descriptions.
2. All in the research team (the authors) coded the dataset using as many of these codes as they deemed relevant per critical moment. Following Elliott (1985), we thought a sort method would have oversimplified the actual complexity by imposing mutually exclusive classification. The findings by the four coders were correlated for interrater consistency, and first conclusions were drawn from the frequencies of codes.
3. We held in-depth interviews with five participants that had described a critical moment and with three participants that had indicated they had not experienced any critical moments.
4. From the initial critical-moment descriptions and the interview transcripts, we analyzed the use of metaphor by extracting a grand total of 252 metaphors from this extended dataset.
5. The full set of metaphors was categorised by two of the authors (AD and CB), first into piles and then into 15 clusters, by extensive conversation and a Q-sort method (Smith, 2003).
6. On the basis of the patterns that emerged in the content analysis and in the metaphor analysis, we devised a simple model of the language that these clients most often employ to describe their critical moments.
7. Finally, we tested this model by having two of the authors (EH and CB) again categorize all metaphors, this time on the basis of the eight dimensions opened up by the model. For this, the 15 original clusters were abandoned, the metaphor cards reshuffled, and the metaphors were placed by agreement between EH and CB on a two-dimensional field with 8 categories (4 on the axes, 4 on the diagonals), again a Q-sort method (Smith, 2003). Only two metaphors seemed too vague and imprecise to cluster distinctly.

RESULTS

Overview of the 59 Real-Life Critical Moments

The following shows half of the full dataset. It is a random selection of 28 of the 59 critical moment descriptions, with only minor changes made by us, in terms of style and spelling. We have left out the longest descriptions, which in some cases went up to 500 words, that is, about one page of typed text. Other than the critical moment descriptions, we also show six of the (longer) "no" responses. The full dataset can be obtained from the authors.

Examples of Critical Moments

1. "Realisation that my future career progression was in my own hands, and that I have the ability to influence its direction and also the ability to say 'no' if my aspirations don't match those of the company."
2. "The realisation at the beginning of my coaching that I was more than capable of writing plans and strategies which in turn helped me realise I

was very capable of being successful in the new position I had been promoted to. It was critical because it gave me the confidence and belief in myself and my strategies, which in turn made the presentation of the strategies to my team very powerful."

3. "I had a tense moment which was both significant and exciting when after a lengthy communication with my coach I came to the realisation I had to make a significant change to the structure of my team, which would entail having to make a very difficult decision which would negatively affect one person but positively effect the rest of my team and the company as a whole."

4. "A telephone coaching session close to a bereavement in which the coach took me into a visualisation to look into the future as to how I saw myself in, say, 5–10 years' time. It was a tense and distressing experience as all I could see was coloured by the powerful experience of sitting in the home of the person who had just died and seeing myself in the same position—living and dying alone. Now there is nothing bad about either as the individual led a creative, independent life, but the session brought me to tears such that it was difficult to continue. The coach was unsure where to take this and soon after I decided not to pursue further sessions with the coach. This was a critical moment because it brought into question the experience of the coach and clearly my emotional readiness for that type of exercise."

5. "It was related to my confronting a very challenging issue and both being very concerned about my ability to deal with it and also the sense of liberation I felt to be able to navigate my way to a resolution. It was very charged and quite emotional as I had to face up to an issue that in the past I have chosen to avoid, but the process of expressing it verbally helped enormously, coupled with the positive and supportive environment created by my coach."

6. "Something that had been holding me back suddenly seemed such an easy thing to overcome. My fear, of several things, was stopping me."

7. "The moment was the realisation that there is a point that a person will not step or move beyond. My particular case centred on the lack of support of my line manager taking specific action to report inappropriate behaviour of a project partner. From then on I realised the limits to my line manager."

8. "I would describe the critical moment as 'significant' in that it was a moment that really enabled me to clearly visualise the situation I was in (by relating it to disembarking from a small rowing boat!), and through the visualisation, to understand the issue I was creating by not focusing 100% on my goal (but instead hesitating between two options)."

9. "Very briefly there was a glimpse into how other people view me as a business person—and of course they see a quite different view that one sees of oneself. Knowing what they see allows a very different interaction with them, of course, and it made me behave (in certain circumstances) in a completely different way."

10. "Simply the recognition (realisation) that I had successfully evolved to a competent (not necessarily expert) manager. It was at a time when I had been asking quite challenging questions of myself in terms of career and life decisions and my coach (a retired business director) encouraged me to look at what I had achieved and what that meant in terms of potential for the future. Through the conversation it became clear that while I might not have recognized it consciously, I had accrued a significant amount of management experience and competence through quite varied and broad activities and could therefore justifiably call myself (generically) a manager."

11. "When asked by my coach to consider what would happen to my newly created unit if key people left and what effect that would have on me. It had never occurred to me before that this team I had spent time putting together would want to do anything other than stay! The same day one of my staff told me they have been approached by someone else about a job. I have now started to look at the current unit structure as less of a 'sacred cow' and to think about options for different, more flexible models and about how I would fill short-term gaps."

12. "In solving a problem that was causing some doubt in my ability. A breakthrough in understanding that my approach to this situation was based on previous experience and that an alternative was out there which could stretch me as an individual and achieve better long-term results. This gave greater confidence in tackling other issues without a preset agenda."

13. "When working with a 'new ventures development' organisation I worked closely with a very experienced businessman who had been assigned as a mentor. In putting together a business plan for a new product my company wished to launch I would spend some time reviewing objectives and progress with him. In this particular case the 'critical moment' was the understanding of what would work as a business venture. What works is an idea; a service or an offering which has value must be simple to communicate if it is going to succeed. If it cannot be simply expressed, if the

venture takes a lot of time and thought to write down in an executive summary, then it is likely to fail. In this case my particular idea was just taking me too long to express in the business plan and therefore was doomed to failure unless there was another way of packaging the product or bundling it with other services."

14. "A critical moment for me was in my second coaching relationship. My coach had done a note of our discussions including some things which I did not want shared with a third party. He sent the notes of the discussions to me and copied in his own coach. He did not know I rather had that issue not shared, so did not ask my permission ahead of time. I considered ending the relationship after this, but later relented."

15. "Through an awareness exercise looking at plusses and minuses of my current role I became aware of critical factors that I had taken for granted about my role. Once I became aware of them and discussed their importance I realised that the decision I was just about to take was the wrong one."

16. "The most recent of these was this week. It was like a kind of 'chiropractic click'. I had been struggling with having meaningful 'value' conversations with my clients. Through the coaching I had realised that I had been 'unhelpfully' focusing on getting the business rather than helping the client. The 'click' came about when I was really challenged on my primary intention when I said it was to help the client. Bringing this into my consciousness allowed my rational brain to see that this will build trust with the client and business will more naturally flow as a strong relationship develops. Also, if it doesn't, it is more likely to be because they do not need my help rather than my not being able to help if things were different. That's fine with me too as I only want to work on work that needs to be done. This insight is foundational to many aspects of my work at present and I have a sense of relief now."

17. "Sorting why I was finding it hard to think about and plan for an event in a positive way, even though it was one I would normally look forward to. What made the moment significant was that through the use of metaphor I was able to recognise an unhelpful pattern to my experience which was connected to previous events and people in my life. As a consequence I was able to go on and 'de-couple' these for the future. And the event was great!"

18. "Following a discussion on my response to an individual that I was having extreme difficulties managing, it became clear to me that my response was one that I had been repeating through-

out my career. Changing that one response has changed my entire management style over time. The results have been very tangible."

19. "Whenever the coach asked questions which touched issues, which were critical, unpleasant or pleasant to me and were relative near to the core of my personality."

20. "It was when my coach directly challenged me to be bolder and give more of myself as a management team member. 'I'm sure you have more to give to xxx.' I had been reflecting on this for a while and his challenge was what was needed. The timing was right."

21. "Another one was when I was wrestling with how to end a relationship, and my coach asked a very pertinent question that I had not thought to ask myself, and it made me go deep into myself and reflect. She asked 'what do endings mean to you?.' I may have been hiding it through my recent bereavement."

22. "Facing up to moments of truth, realisation that I could have handled situations differently. One time I was being badly treated (verging on bullying?) by a senior peer and it was exciting to be able to explore with an impartial and trusted 'other' options available. I executed the planned course of action and gained help to mastermind each of the next steps—an exhilarating opportunity to 'not feel alone' and have guidance to step outside of this situation (unemotionally) to consider the risk/options. Being able to speak with my coach over the phone for 10 minutes just to gather my thoughts and gain perspective has been a critical aspect of my development."

23. "Years later another coach really 'gave me a piece of her mind.' I was close to a heavy burn-out and had not realised it myself then, but still identified with being very busy and important. After trying many things and ways of getting to the point with me she spoke more than frankly and engaged. During that session we also made a list covering 7 areas of (my) life which indicated the focus and attention that went (or did not go) into the special areas. This list underlined her words quite impressively and the results of our session kind of shocked me. After the session I really changed many things in my life and until today several findings of this session have become part of my everyday life. Still the 'critical' thing about it was not the list or visualisation, but her very clear words and her absolutely unvarnished opinion."

24. "I listened to myself describe a reason why I hadn't done something and realised that there was no factual basis for it at all and in fact it was a deeply flawed way of thinking. It was critical

because it made me understand that in fact I can be very good at making excuses for inaction and that in turn made me realise that that has always been the case for me. I suppose though that it will only be truly critical if I use it to make changes to my approach. It felt strange and almost as though time had slowed down while I thought this through, although actually it probably was just a moment!"

25. "Yes, I have had that 'critical moment' as described above, although I referred to it as the moment 'I saw the path clear.' It was so profound; I wanted to end the session immediately so I could take action. I specifically remember that the issue I wanted to deal with appeared not to have any solution, and even to the point of me being unable to imagine a beginning to resolve the issue. When questioned about advice I might offer to someone in a similar situation, or what advice I would give to a colleague who had posed a similar question to me, it was after a moment or two completely obvious, and according to my coach I then spoke freely for 20 minutes, offering up multiple suggestions. This moment was critical, as from then onwards I was able to put a plan together which I later used to resolve the issue."

26. "I can recall two such moments. One involved making a connection between an aspect of my professional behaviour as a manager and my personal emotional profile, i.e. recognising how a cause of my personal anxiety was prompting a specific (unhelpful) approach to people I managed."

27. "The second was recognising the significance of a simple analysis of how I spent my time which helped me understand why I was making limited progress on important objectives."

28. "Probably the moment of naming my constant conflict with my boss and the realisation of my repetitive nature of dealing with it by reinforcement and substantiating my opinion rather than finding a way to deal with it."

Examples of No Critical Moments

29. "No, more of a feeling of being generally comfortable with the concepts, and an understanding of the position at the time. Not a *eureka* moment but a steady gradual realisation."

30. "No, that is why I stopped the process after four sessions. I felt that through the coaching (and the little 'tasks' I was given by the coach) the pressure was rather increasing than decreasing . . ."

31. "No, I have never felt exhilarated by anything that happened in a coaching session, it was more a sense of support. I certainly haven't crossed

any critical barriers in such sessions, although I have only had a few."

32. "Ah, how I was looking for those critical moments! If they did happen, they have alas now escaped my consciousness. On reflection, for all my coaching, I think any benefits stemmed from the amalgamation of the various talks, discussions and training I undertook."

33. "I cannot say that I have had a critical moment. There have been occasions when there is a gradual realisation which when further observed, has contributed to making a change. These can be inside or outside of a coaching experience, or through mentoring, peer mentoring or timely, clear, appropriate feedback."

34. "No, all my coaching experiences have been vague and not very fulfilling."

The phone conversations gave more background detail for some of the critical moments, and more understanding of the absence of critical moments in other submissions. Three individuals who had experienced no critical moments were interviewed. Each reported positive experiences of coaching. They felt it had been useful in helping them tackle issues and problems in their work roles. They did not experience an "abrupt" or "sudden" moment of insight or learning. Instead, they reported experiencing a gradual process of insight relating to their issues during the coaching process. They felt that upon reflection they had learned something about themselves as a result of the coaching experience. Compare the examples 29, 31 and 33, above.

Content Analysis of the Critical Moments

We coded each critical moment to identify themes and significant participant comments. The whole team took part in the creation of the codes as well as in the coding itself (each individually) in order to be able to check for consistency. We arrived at 40 codes that described for us the whole dataset (see Table 1). The four observers (the authors) together used combinations of these 40 codes a total of 788 times to code the 59 moments, which amounts to an average of 3.3 codes per critical moment description. All codes were used at least once. Table 1 shows the frequency of use of the codes, for all four observers.

To determine interrater reliability, we computed Cohen's Kappa (Cohen, 1960) and also Fleiss's Kappa (Fleiss, 1971) which gives a multirater statistic. The scores are in Table 2. As is well known (Dollard & Auld, 1959), Cohen's and Fleiss's kappas are very sensitive to the number of codes and can-

TABLE 1
Codes for Clients' Critical Moments

Codes	Typical Experiences Related by Clients	Frequency (%)
	Personal realizations (about issues); New knowledge/understanding/insight	
1	Content/facts	4.6
2	New action/behavior that can be used	4.8
3	New strategy/approach to adopt	4.4
4	Working with others/their behavior/work roles	4.6
5	About others and their personalities (about self)	0.8
6	Revelations/blind spots	10.4
7	How others view me	1.3
8	Own defensiveness/excuses	0.9
9	Consequences of own behavior	2.5
10	Hidden motivators	0.9
11	Influence of old patterns/past experience (about this coaching)	3.9
12	The coach/coaching not being supportive	0.5
13	The coach/coaching leaving me to my own devices	0.9
14	The coach/coaching not being good enough	1.1
15	The coach/coaching breaking confidentiality	0.5
16	The coach/coaching being unsure	0.4
	Experiencing personal change	
17	Acceptance	1.5
18	Change of style/behavior decisions	9.4
19	Reaffirming current decision/position	1.0
20	Making a new decision	3.6
21	Revoking a decision	0.5
	Other experiences through the coaching	
22	Relief	1.6
23	Growing confidence/self-belief	5.3
24	Overcoming fear	1.0
25	Just speaking/talking during the coaching	1.3
26	Just partaking in the experience of it	0.6
27	"Elation"	1.6
28	Sensation of time slowing down	0.6
29	Working through challenges or 'training in' new behavior	1.5
30	Painful awareness/realization	5.8
	Actions by coach, who offers	
31	Tools/experiences	5.3
32	Pertinent or insightful questions	3.8
33	Quality of listening	0.1
34	Personal feedback	1.3
35	Advice	2.5
36	Suspension of advice/judgment	1.1
37	Metaphor	1.3
38	Direct confrontation/challenge	3.4
39	Tangible support	1.4
40	Space/freedom	1.6
	Total:	100

Note: The table shows all 40 codes, divided into four clusters (Personal Realizations, Experiencing Personal Change, Experiences Through Coaching, Actions by the Coach). Right column shows the frequency of use of each code as a percentage of the total usage by all four coders, adding up to 100%.

TABLE 2
Kappas for Interrater Reliability in the Coding of the Critical Moments

	Rater CB	Rater CS	Rater EH	
Rater CS	0.46			
Rater EH	0.48	0.49		
Rater AD	0.32	0.40	0.47	
Multirater agreement (Fleiss's Kappa):				0.24

Note: Landis & Koch (1977) suggest any Fleiss's Kappa over 0.24 should be regarded as "fair agreement," even with a much smaller number of codes than we use here.

not be expected to be very large with such a high amount of codes. However, the average Kappa from Table 2 is 0.44, and therefore, the average improvement over chance was 45-fold. We may safely conclude that our codes have been most reliably used by the four observers to categorize the critical moments. High reliability between coders of "helpful events" was also reported in psychotherapy research (Llewelyn, 1988; Elliott et al., 1985).

In reading through the critical moments and looking at the result of our coding, our first conclusions were as follows: Across the 59 reported critical moments, respondents were most likely to assert that the critical moment contained an instance of increasing awareness, whether relating to themselves, their pattern of behavior, or the consequences of their behavior in their organizations. Many participants referred to a "realization" or "revelation" (the words *realize/realization* appeared 24 times in the dataset, *recognize/recognition* another eight times, and revelation once; these aspects accounted for 16 of the 40 codes and took an amazing total of 43% of our usage of codes; see Table 1). Elliott (1985) reports something very similar in his collection of "helpful events" from psychotherapy: By far the largest of his clusters is the one he calls "new perspective," which is defined very similarly to our "personal realization." One of our participants says "Yes, I have had that 'critical moment' as described above, although I referred to it as the moment 'I saw the path clear'" (example 25, above).

We noticed two major areas of personal realisation:

1. Personal realizations about issues (18% of assigned codes; see Table 1). This includes new knowledge, understanding, or insight into a situation, understanding of others, or ideas about strategies. See, e.g., critical moments 5 and 12, above.
2. Personal realisations into and about self (20% of assigned codes; see Table 1). This includes

recognizing unhelpful patterns of relating, personal "hang-ups," or impact on others. See, e.g., critical moments 6 and 18, above.

These realisations or insights were often accompanied by strong emotions, including "painful awareness," "elation," "liberation," "relief," and "boost in confidence." Similar to our earlier findings with coaches (Day et al., 2008), the realizations often emerged in the process suddenly or abruptly.

We were surprised that very few of the respondents who described "positive" critical moments referred to anything the coach had done around this time. This is in marked contrast to the earlier research with coaches (see, e.g., De Haan, 2008b, 2008c), where the participants nearly always described their own actions and their clients' responses before, during, and after the critical moment. At the same time it was interesting that in the case of "negative" critical moments, all participants did mention the coach, specifically (in their view) the unhelpful or insensitive actions by the coach that damaged the trust in the relationship and led to the negative outcome. Therefore, in the negative critical moment the coach was mentioned incomparably more often (see, e.g., descriptions 4 and 14, above).

The Use of Metaphor

We became intrigued by the way participants used metaphors to describe their experience of critical moments. Frequently, they used images or ideas from another area of life or conceptual domain to help them to describe their emerging experience during or after coaching (Lakoff, 1993). In total we found 252 metaphors across both the 59 critical moment descriptions and the transcripts from the 8 in-depth interviews.

We grouped all metaphors used by participants into 14 clusters, each representing a common conceptual domain. Fourteen clusters were enough to capture all metaphors except for a singular one which had been used 10 times by a single participant (the word *gremlin*). The following are the 14 clusters of metaphors that capture the remaining set of 242 metaphors, in order of decreasing occurrence (the full dataset of metaphors can be obtained from the authors):

1. Journey (e.g., "Sort of *avenues* that were open to me"): 36 occurrences.
2. Physical Space (e.g., "*Point* in time"): 35 occurrences.
3. Revelation (e.g., "*Light bulb* moments"): 26 occurrences.
4. Visual (e.g., "the pathetic *façade* I thought I was *projecting* to the world was completely *see-through*"): 25 occurrences.
5. Agency (e.g., "In *charge* of your own destiny"): 20 occurrences.
6. Release (e.g., "the sense of *liberation* I felt"): 18 occurrences.
7. Resources (e.g., "'*Toolkit*' to explore options"): 15 occurrences.
8. Frame (e.g., "A Different *framework*"): 14 occurrences.
9. Challenged (e.g., "*Stretch me*"): 13 occurrences.
10. Connecting (e.g., "*Decouple* events"): 13 occurrences.
11. Tackle (e.g., "*Take the trucks across the bridge*"): 10 occurrences.
12. Fight (e.g., "Your *platoon* is just a single unit in a larger group"): 9 occurrences.
13. Hearing (e.g., "*Listen* to myself"): 4 occurrences.
14. Money (e.g., "*Value* offering"): 4 occurrences.

Metaphors have a richness that our earlier coding could not convey. At the same time, we were struck by the overlap in the results of these two very different ways of analyzing the data. "Realizations" dominate the coding categories, and very similar "revelations" (including visual and hearing insights) are prominent in the collection of metaphors. It seems worthwhile to explore the possibility of a coaching model that covers a substantial part of both codes and metaphors.

DISCUSSION

Although the 59 longer descriptions of critical moments comprise a broad dataset for study, we have to keep in mind that (1) this is as far as we know the first research of this kind in executive coaching so we have no comparison data; (2) the response rates have been very low, particularly in the group of alumni: Executives that did not know us and were responding to a "direct mailing" request; (3) 20 of the 67 clients who did respond (i.e., 30%), report that they experienced no critical moments. We cannot know whether some of the low response rates are due to the fact that clients don't remember experiencing any critical moments. Points (2) and (3) together may hint that not experiencing critical moments is the rule rather than the exception for clients, although 70% of our respondents did report at least one critical moment. As we proceed to study the 69 critical moment descriptions in more detail, we realize that only further research can establish how relevant critical moments really are for clients of coaching. Our detailed discussion below is therefore intended primarily to guide future research. We will conclude with a summary of

recommendations for other coaches and researchers in this area.

The following summarizes our findings from the data provided by 67 clients of executive coaching:

- *Clients report very different phenomena from coaches* in response to literally the same question about critical moments in coaching. For one thing, clients seemed to be less interested in discussing the interpersonal challenges of coaching as compared to the coaches in our earlier studies. Coaches spoke a lot to us about their doubts and their anxieties (De Haan 2008b, 2008c; Day et al., 2008), while clients mostly speak about their personal realisations and (self-) understanding. In other words, the relative focus of coaches on emotions and anxieties contrasts with the relative focus of clients on outcomes and insight.
- *Clients report many fewer critical moments* than coaches: 30% of the participants in this research had not experienced critical moments. One participant summed this up by "Only once did I experience a critical moment, which considering I have had many hours of coaching, seems that this may be a bit overestimated." Lower prevalence of critical moments can also be explained by the fact that professional coaches do have many more than a single client and thus spend many more hours in coaching conversations than their clients.
- *Clients' critical moment descriptions are more diverse* than those of coaches, e.g., many of the descriptions relate to the outcome or "harvest" of the moment and not to the moment itself. Clients seem less interested in making sense of what was happening in the relationship and more focused on what was happening for them and for their issues. This relates to the next point as well.
- *Clients mention much less often the coaching process and their counterparts in the relationship*, while realization, insight, and awareness come much more to the fore. In other words, clients are not recognizing explicitly that their coach played a direct role in this process. The coachee may find it difficult to identify specific interventions or behaviors of the coach leading up to or during a critical moment. Also, clients will be focusing so much on their own issues that the process or the coach's contributions may not be as figural as are their own reflections, realizations, and breakthroughs. In this we confirm another conclusion of Llewelyn (1988): "[I]t is clear that clients were more concerned with the results of the procedure than with the process by which it occurred." Indeed, one definition of *good coaching* is that it should facilitate the client to find his or her own solutions and that the coaching process should therefore appear relatively seamless and invisible to the client, and perhaps that is partly what emerges from our data.

A Tentative Coaching Model of the Client

These preliminary findings, even if based on a limited dataset, seem to call for radically new ways of understanding the client's experience of coaching, as distinct from the coaches' experiences that have been studied before (De Haan, 2008b, 2008c).

A number of models used in the coaching profession introduce distinctions that may guide the coach in approach and intervention. Frequent examples are

- The distinction between *directiveness* and *nondirectiveness,* alternatively presented as a distinction between "push" and "pull," or between "advocating" and "exploring," or "advice" and "question."
- The distinction between *challenge* and *support,* alternatively presented as a distinction between "confrontation" and "invitation," or between "overcoming weaknesses" and "building on strengths."
- The distinction between *content* and *process,* i.e., between the topic matter of the conversation and the conversation itself; alternatively, between expert contributions and metacommunication.
- Distinctions between *past* and *future*, between *closeness* and *distance*, and between *accepting* or *changing* (and many others; for an overview see Appendix A of De Haan & Burger, 2005).

Some of these distinctions or polarities may speak to the client as well, but we would surmise most are less relevant for the client than for the coach. On some of these dimensions clients may not feel as if they have equal freedom of choice as a coach (take, e.g., push/pull or content/process), on others the client simply has or wants both (take, e.g., past/future or challenge/support). From our (albeit limited) data it seems that the main distinction or polarity for the client is bound to be between *issue/problem* and *issue/problem resolution*. The agenda of the client is in most cases none other than that: to find new answers to old queries. So, while our data on critical moments for coaches invite many of the above distinctions (see De Haan, 2008c), these first data on critical moments for clients call for quite new and different distinctions. It is time that client distinctions are taken up as a field of both empirical and theoretical investigation.

From the nature of the codes and particularly those that were more prevalent in coding of the client critical moment descriptions (Table 1), we inferred that the main distinctions that these clients are making are around realizations, change, tools, and decision making or agency. About half the realizations are about the client's issues, and

the other half are about self. Similarly, the experience of change seems to be internal in some cases and external in others. The image of a voyage of discovery emerges from the descriptions and the codes, with some discoveries more internal, others more external, some incremental or step-by-step, others in-depth and into uncharted territory. Based on this interpretation of our data and the most prevalent codes, we identified two main client distinctions or polarities, both having to do with personal change, and both having been studied before in other contexts:

1. *Alteration versus generation/destruction*. We were reminded of Aristotle's distinction between two fundamentally different forms of change (1984). He argued that change can consist of:

a. A change in attributes, such as movement from A to B, or acquisitions (whether quantitative or qualitative), sometimes called progress or journey. This form of change is basically an alteration and is often referred to as accidental or incremental change. Examples are critical moments 2 and 25, above.

b. A change in nature or substance, sometimes called transformation. This form of change is basically generative or destructive and is often referred to as substantial change or transformational change. Examples are critical moments 16 and 23, above.

2. *Internal processing versus external processing*. We were reminded also of Jung's (1921) distinction between introversion and extraversion, taken up by Kolb (1984) in his model of experiential learning. This distinction relates to two types of personal learning, as a prerequisite to change:

a. Internal processing (introversion, intention) means moving inward to generate by concentration and reflection a different perspective. Examples are critical moments 9 and 19, above.

b. External processing (extraversion, extension) means moving outward by experimentation and action to generate a different perspective. Examples are critical moments 6 and 25, above.

The 2-x-2 matrix spanned by these two polarities has been drawn up in Figure 1.

For us, the diagonals in the model are also clear polarities:

1. (left-top to right-bottom). Tools and ways of being can be seen as complementary ways of defining oneself: an ontological coaching dimension (Sieler, 2003), distinguishing between "appearing" and "being" (*phenomenon* versus *noumenon*).

2. (right-top to left-bottom). Action and insight can be seen as practice and theory in behavior: a hermeneutic coaching dimension distinguishing between *theory-in-use* and *espoused theory* (Argyris, 1991).

Using the Tentative Model as a Taxonomy of Client Metaphor

Once we had generated a model that covered much of the content of our clients' critical moment
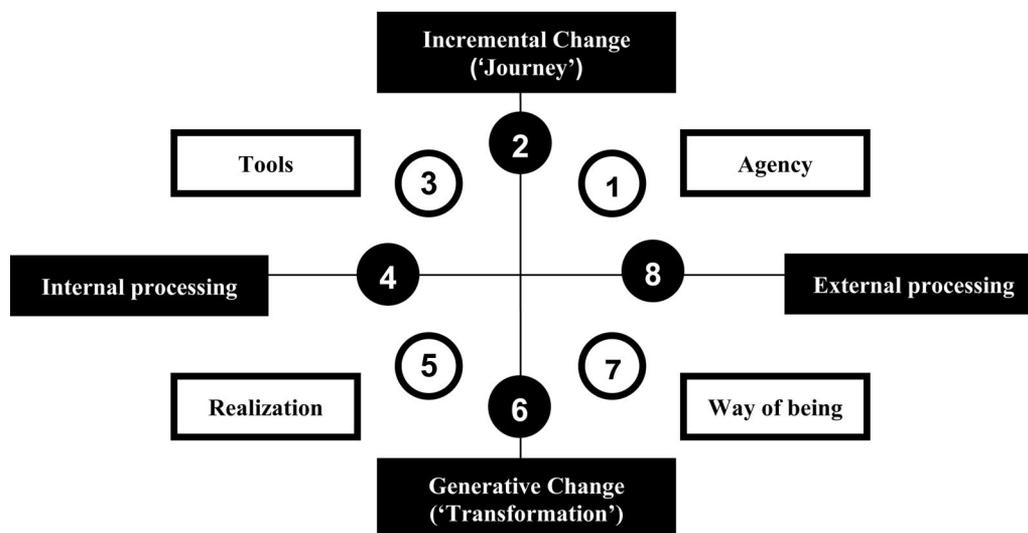

FIGURE 1

Mapping of Vocabulary Executive Coaching Clients Used to Describe Critical Moments. The two polarities (incremental vs. generative change and internal vs. external processing) and the four dimensions they map out between them (agency, tools, realization and way-of-being) have been based on the 59 descriptions of critical moments, and on the codes that we used most frequently to capture those descriptions (see Table 1).
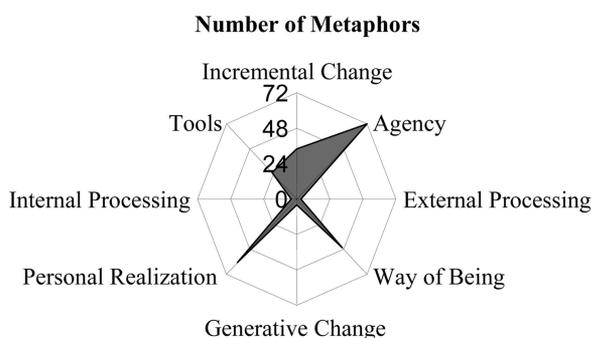
TABLE 3
Occurrence of Metaphors in the 8 Dimensions of Model of the Ways a Client May Experience Executive Coaching

No.	Description of Dimension	Total no. of Metaphors Assigned	Patterns in/Examples From Metaphor Data
1	The acquisition of new *action* (Agency)	72	Fighting, Revisiting/Evaluating, Constrained, Controling, Choosing/Altering Facing up to/Owning, (Dis)Connecting/(De)Constructing
2	*Incremental change* (Journey)	34	Start→ Route → End, Quest(ing), Nautical passage (gentle), Traveling companion Sudden easing of the way
3	The acquisition of solutions and *tools*	25	Framing/structuring; Making sense; Conceptual domain/context; Foundations/base Reality/Truth/Authenticity, Measurables, Tools, Experience
4	*Internal processing* (focusing inward)	4	Pattern, Structure, Organization
5	*Personal Realization* (Enhancing insight)	61	Revelation, Realizing, Perspectives/Context, Visualising/Focusing, Thinking patterns/styles, Building conceptual resources
6	*Generative change* (Transformation)	4	Sudden "coming together," Expansive thinking
7	*Way of being* in the world (Becoming a different person)	47	Reviewing one's foundations and personal context Adapting to what comes along Striving and enduring against challenges Making sense and clarifying meaning in interaction
8	*External processing* (focusing outward)	3	Creating, shaping, offering (packaging and bundling product)

descriptions, we wanted to check if it would express their use of metaphor as well. For that purpose, we took out the same 252 metaphors, and checked how well they fit into the "tentative model." To our satisfaction, we concluded that only two metaphors were not quickly placed on the 2-x-2 matrix in Figure 1 ("Summer Umbrella" and "Critical Factors"). Table 3 shows how many metaphors were linked with each of the eight dimensions in Figure 1, as well as specific patterns for each dimension mapped by the metaphors. In Figure 2, these results are plotted to show the spread of metaphors that emerged in the research. It is noteworthy that participants' metaphors seem to be most prevalent on the diagonals: the fields of "Tools," "Agency," "Personal Realizations" and

"Ways of Being" have the highest occurrence of metaphors. Only one of the four axes, the "Incremental Change" dimension, captures a similar amount of metaphors.

The above approach of the rich content that the coaching clients have shared with us, does remind us somewhat of . . . coaching. First we have tried to understand the content of what the clients have communicated, by summarizing it in our own words and in short "codes" that subsume various clients' descriptions. Then we based a heuristic model on our understanding of what clients have said, and finally we used the model to increase our understanding of *how* they said it (their choice of language, their metaphors). Our sense-making has endeavored to bring together various levels of understanding, content, and metaphor. As so often seen in executive coaching, strong connections have appeared between what was said and how it was said, between message and language, between content and metaphor.

Number of Metaphors

FIGURE 2
Metaphors Attributed to Ways Clients Experience Executive Coaching in Figure 1 (using data from Table 3).

CONCLUSION

Many clients do experience moments that they would describe as "critical," although many do not. When clients do report a critical moment, their description is often essentially about a new personal realization, whether this is issue- or self-related. They describe how these realizations are often accompanied by emotions such as elation or relief, or the sensation of a confidence boost. In this

regard they are close to the epiphanies that Denzin (1989) surmised.

By allowing clients space to tell their full stories in detail, we also learned more about the occasions where coaching did *not* work, occasions that are so often obscured by the many apparently successful assignments and by the overall encouraging results on effectiveness of coaching. We have found several participants reporting negative coaching experiences, both linked to critical moments and to their absence (four negative experiences in the critical moment descriptions, and two explicitly negative experiences in the "no" responses).

It is not so very surprising to us that coaches and clients' answers to the same question about a critical moment in coaching differ. One has only to consider the essentially complementary nature of the coach–coachee pair, a pair that can be compared to, on the one hand, a "container" or "vehicle" (the older meaning of coach!) and, on the other, the "contained" or "passenger" (De Haan & Burger, 2005). Executive coach and coaching client perform very different roles during the coaching. Clients concentrate on themselves and their issues or queries, and coaches are focused on the other and on being helpful with those issues and queries.

More research into the experience of moments of coaching is needed, both with coaches and with clients, and most urgently also bringing together clients and their coaches in the same paradigm. We are at an early stage, but some preliminary recommendations for coaches can be drawn from this research into clients' critical moments:

- Critical moments, breakthroughs, or epiphanies may not be so relevant or important for clients. Sometimes creating a sense of support and reflection is adequate.
- Through critical moments, clients primarily (hope to) find personal realizations, such as new perspectives on their issues, new self-understanding, or understanding of others (see Table 1).
- Coaching is about both incremental change and transformative change, which appear to be achieved through personal realizations. Perhaps it is more true than we realize, that clients "value advice and solutions, when free to reject them," to quote Llewelyn (1988).
- Clients in this study often relate their positive outcomes to an increase in insight and realization, which is not a trivial conclusion as many approaches in executive coaching are geared toward other outcomes (such as problem solving, strengthening of existing solutions, remedial help or active support). It would appear that the *insight-focused* approach to coaching (see De Haan & Burger, 2005, or Brunning, 2006), would be the one most favored by these clients

of coaching. However, in view of the broad range of clients' experiences (Table 1), we would have to make the definition of insight broad enough to encompass new facts, tools, strategies, decisions and understanding of others, as well as insight into self, own motivation, resistance and hidden assumptions that are normally associated with insight-focused work.

Our main recommendation, however, is to conduct more research and to collect more clients' descriptions of critical moments of coaching, to resolve some of our outstanding questions, such as:

1. Are the low response rate and the high proportion of "no" responses artefacts of this inquiry or are they in fact related phenomena? On the one hand, the low response rate and high proportion of "no" responses may be due to the fact that participants received a direct-mail e-mail message and were not really involved in the research program—nor did they have any relationship with the researchers. On the other hand, the high proportion of "no" responses may be unrelated to the low response rate and itself due to the fact that clients experience coaching as more gradual than coaches, with no particular moments standing out for them. In fact, we have research in psychotherapy which confirms that clients view the relationship as more smooth and stable than do their therapists (Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000).

2. Do clients and coaches perceive coaching conversations fundamentally differently? This is what this first client dataset seems to indicate. However, we are aware that we collected the various datasets (De Haan, 2008b, 2008c; Day et al., 2008; and this article) from different people, under different circumstances, and by different means. What is needed is an investigation similar to Llewelyn's (1988) that explores client and coach views on the *same* coaching conversation.

3. Why do clients mention the person of the coach and the relationship so little if things are going well, even if other research (summarized in Wampold, 2001) shows these "common factors" are highly relevant?

We have recently completed a research program that compares coach and client descriptions of critical moments directly (De Haan, Bertie, Day, & Sills, 2010).

In summary, it appears from the present study that these coaching clients find the question about critical moments less straightforward than have coaches previously. For these clients of coaching it appears something critical will happen when they start looking at their issues differently, find new insight, or can take unanticipated decisions. Just

like the Greek mathematician Archimedes, these senior leaders report a *"eureka"* experience when in the warm bath of their coaching conversations they are able to find new answers to old questions.

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