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THE INTUITIVE COACH: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

Penny Mavor, University of Surrey, UK

*Eugene Sadler-Smith, University of Surrey, UK**

David E. Gray, University of Surrey UK

**Corresponding Author: Eugene Sadler-Smith, School of Management, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey, UK. GU2 7XH. Email: e.sadler-smitt@surrey.ac.uk*

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Structured Abstract

Purpose: examine conceptual and theoretical links between intuition and coaching; investigate accomplished coaches' practical experiences of intuition; identify skill set of an intuitive coach; discuss implications of findings for coaches' learning and development.

Method and Sample: in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews with 14 accomplished experienced executive coaches (eight males and six females) averaging 14.5 years as a coach.

Findings: outline of core attributes of an intuitive coach.

Implications: immersion in experience, a reflective approach to practice, effective feedback and supervision, and attending to personal well-being are likely to enable coaches, HRD practitioners and line managers to take a more informed and intelligent approach to 'going with their gut' in coaching situations.

Keywords: coaching; competence; intuition; human resource development

Type of Paper: Research

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Introduction

There has been increased interest in intuition in management decision-making research in recent years (Burke and Miller, 1999; Hodgkinson, Sadler-Smith, Burke, Claxton and Sparrow, 2009; Miller and Ireland, 2005; Sinclair and Ashkanasy, 2005) and also in the role that intuition occupies in human resource development (HRD) (Burke and Sadler-Smith, 2006; Sadler-Smith and Burke, 2009). Researchers have made pleas for greater emphasis to be placed upon intuition in HRD so as to complement or offset the exclusive reliance upon linear, rational models which are the norm in management in general (Mintzberg, 2004; Sadler-Smith and Shefy, 2004; Schoemaker, 2008). Such exhortations are not meant to impugn analytical approaches; simply that intuition merits a place in HRD and management alongside analysis as this may lead to a “better balance within the individual and the organisation” (Korthagen, 2005, p.380).

Whilst HRD practitioners and learners are very likely to experience and deploy intuition, they are in all probability naïve intuitors - unlikely to be well-versed with regard to its nature, significance, and how they may cope with its pitfalls and exploit its potential. Indeed, there is little to suggest that HRD acknowledges or accommodates the development of learners’ skills in intuitive judgment in learning and development interventions either in-company or in educational programs in business and management schools (see: Mintzberg, 2004). This state of affairs ought to be a matter of concern to HRD practitioners in light of the fact that intuitions are involuntary and pervasive in work and personal life, are undoubtedly used (skilfully or unskilfully) by employees in organizational decision processes, and when

informed by experience and expertise represent a rare, valuable and difficult to imitate cognitive asset for individuals and business organizations. Intuitions are involuntary and arise in a wide range of scenarios and settings, including the coaching arena. There are signs that professional bodies are acknowledging the significance of and role played by intuition in learning and development. The UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) included intuitive/creative thinking in its 2002 Professional Standards (described as "deployment of intuitive/creative thinking in order to generate innovative solutions and proactively seize opportunities"). More latterly, coaching professional bodies also are beginning to acknowledge coaches' intuition, and against the backcloth of these significant developments the aims of this paper are to: (1) present a rationale for the relevance of intuition to the theory and practice of HRD based upon recent developments in cognitive and social psychology; (2) focus on the relationship between one of the most important developments in HRD practice in recent years, coaching, and intuition; (3) explore the attributes of an intuitive coach and suggest ways in which intuition might be incorporated into coaches' learning and development..

Coaching

Coaching is one of the most important of contemporary HRD practices, especially at senior manager and executive level (Joo, 2005) to the extent that recent years have witnessed a "rapid growth in an emergent coaching industry" (Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie, 2008, p.287). In the CIPD's learning and development survey published in 2008 it was reported that 71 per cent of organisations undertake coaching activities, with a similar proportion (72 per cent) finding coaching to be an effective tool, and with the bulk of responsibility for coaching delivery vested in line managers (36 per cent). Clearly therefore, at least in the UK, coaching is a vital part of HRD practice (CIPD, 2008). What it takes to be a competent coach is not authoritatively documented, but a picture is beginning to emerge (see: Ellinger, Hamlin

and Beattie, 2008), and self-awareness of cognitive and affective states appears to be an important aspect of a coaches' skill set (Griffiths, 2008).

The European Mentoring and Coaching Council's (EMCC) competence standards (on which a growing number of coach training programmes are benchmarked and approved by EMCC) call on coaches to demonstrate an ability to manage their own 'state of mind' through processes such as review and self-reflection. The International Coach Federation (ICF) is more explicit about the role of intuition: in their Core Competence Standards identified intuition as part of 'Coaching Presence', defined as the ability to be fully conscious and create a spontaneous relationship with the client by employing a style that "accesses own intuition and trusts one's inner knowing – 'goes with the gut'"¹. Over and above such attempts to capture coach intuition narrative accounts of coaching episodes have affirmed the significance of intuition in the dynamic interplay between coach and client: "empathic resonance, intuition, pattern recognition, inquiry skills, and listening strengthen and deepen our understanding of what has been happening and how our clients are managing their lives and circumstances" (Kilburg, 2004, p.259).

In addition to developing its own identity as a profession, coaching is also a necessary area of expertise for HRD practitioners who are not coaches *per se*, and that the intended purposes and processes of HRD and coaching are "virtually the same" (Hamlin, et al., 2008, p.287). Joo (2005, p.476-477) suggested that the most important qualifications for a coach are "character and insight" developed through personal experiences (the "richer and deeper" the better), allied to acute perception and sound judgement. With these issues in mind the role of intuition and intuitive judgement in coaching is a vital issue not only for the profession of coaching itself but for the practice of coaching in organizations (thus representing a potential learning and development need not only for professional coaches but also for line managers who find themselves engaged in coaching). This prompts a number of questions, for

example: how do experienced coaches recognise and deploy intuition; on the basis of the latter, what are the intuitive coaching skills needed by the HRD generalist if s/he is to recognise and response to intuitive episodes which are likely to occur in their own coaching activities; can these skills be developed and, if so, how?

Intuition

Recent developments in social cognition, cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience have led to the widespread recognition that non-conscious cognitive processes have an important, if not crucial, role to play in many complex, judgemental decision choices. Intuition is of primary significance in this regard given the unique position that it occupies at the nexus of cognition and affect (Sadler-Smith, 2008). The process of intuition has been described as non-sequential information processing “which comprises both cognitive and affective elements and results in direct knowing without any use of conscious reasoning” (Sinclair and Ashkanasy, 2005, p.357). Intuition leads to judgments that are made “with no awareness of the rules or knowledge used for inference and can *feel* right despite one’s inability to articulate reason” (Shapiro and Spence, 1997, p.64 emphasis added).

The word intuition is drawn from the etymological Latin root *in-tuir* which is often translated into “looking, regarding or knowing from within” (Hodgkinson, Langan-Fox and Sadler-Smith, 2008, p.2). Recent attempts at theorizing intuition have focused attention on dual-process theories of cognition. Whilst there is no consensual definition of intuition, most scholars’ views converge on the following attributes: (a) intuition has an affective or somatic component, referred to colloquially as ‘gut feel’ or ‘hunch’; (b) speed of operation is a distinctive feature of intuitive judgements (analytical processing, on the other hand is comparatively slow and effortful); (c) intuiting is non-conscious to the extent that only the outcome (intuition) of the process (intuiting) are available to conscious awareness. Even though the term “intuition” is often used to describe both the process and outcome, Dane and

Pratt (2007) argue for a clear distinction to be drawn between intuiting (process) and intuition (outcome).; (d) informed intuitions are the outcome of holistic associations founded upon expertise in a specific domain, and pattern matching is the basis of informed intuition; (e) intuition is distinct from insight².

In sum, intuition, the central concept of our study, may be defined as an “affectively-charged judgment that arises through rapid, non-conscious and holistic associations” (Dane and Pratt, 2007, p.40). Recent years have witnessed significant advancements in the understanding of the psychological and neuro-biological mechanisms that underpin intuitive judgment which make it possible to theorise regarding the process of intuiting in a variety of contexts, including intuition. These developments are in the areas of: dual-process theory, and most notably Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory (CEST); naturalistic decision making (NDM), and in particular the Recognition-Primed Decision (RPD) model; and the Somatic Marker Hypothesis (SMH) derived from clinical research in the field of neurology. Intuition, in its own right and as an aspect of coaching, is eminently theorizable.

Cognitive Experiential Self Theory (CEST)

In Cognitive Experiential Self Theory (CEST) Epstein and his colleagues (Epstein, 1994; Epstein, Pacini, Denes-Raj and Heier, 1996) postulated the existence of two parallel and interacting information processing systems: (a) the cognitive (rational) system which is intentional, analytic, primarily verbal and relatively emotion-free, and which encodes information in abstract symbols; (b) the experiential (intuitive) system which is automatic, holistic, primarily non-verbal, associated with emotion and feeling, and encodes information in concrete forms. Conscious thought and behaviour are a function of two systems; their interactions can be seamless and integrated, but they may also conflict in a struggle between “feelings and thoughts” (Epstein et al., 1996, p.391). CEST is but one of a family of dual-process theories (Chaiken and Trope, 1999) the respective functions of which may be labelled

generically as System 1 processes (including intuitive) and System 2 processes (including analytical), in keeping with the broad System 1/System 2 architecture proposed by Stanovich and West (2000).

Recognition-Primed Decision Making (RPD)

In the Recognition-Primed Decision making (RPD) model Klein and his colleagues (Klein, 1998; 2003) argue that intuitive decision making operates on the basis of: (a) the presence of and perception of cues that enable an experienced and informed decision-maker to recognize patterns; (b) the activation of action scripts on the basis of pattern recognition; (c) the evaluation of the viability of action scripts by means of mental simulation. The process of mental simulation is driven by mental models built-up by experience and learning (Klein, 2003). The antecedents of this model are to be found in Barnard's (1938) notion of logical and non-logical processes and intuitive pattern recognition as variously described by Simon (1987). To the extent that expertise is acquired through focused effort and deliberate practice (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986; Ericsson and Charness, 1994) the effectiveness of intuitive judgment is determined by learning (explicit and implicit), domain expertise, focus of attention, and feedback (Dane and Pratt, 2007). Moreover, given that organizational decision making is context specific, the effectiveness of intuitive judgment is moderated by environmental uncertainty (i.e. the extent to which the necessary parameters may be quantified) and the nature of the decision task (i.e. the extent to which it is 'judgmental' or 'intellective') (Shapiro and Spence, 1997).

Somatic Marker Hypothesis (SMH)

The Somatic Marker Hypothesis (SMH) was proposed by Damasio and his colleagues (Bechara and Damasio, 2005; Bechara, Damasio, Tranel and Damasio, 1997; Damasio, 1994) and provides a systems-level neuro-anatomical and cognitive framework for explaining the

roles of non-conscious processing and affect in decision-making (Bechara, 2004). The SMH contends that when a bad outcome associated with a response to a given decision comes to mind “however fleetingly”, an unpleasant gut feeling is experienced (Damasio, 1994, p.173) and is associated with a biasing step the reasoning process which guides choice non-consciously. For a fuller description of the neuro-biological mechanisms involved and the effects of impairment in the relevant neural substrates, readers are referred to the findings of the various ‘Iowa Gambling Task’ studies (Bechara et al., 1997). In sum the SMH suggests that the process of decision-making depends “on neural substrates that regulate homeostasis, emotion, and feeling” (Bechara, 2004, p.30) as much as it does on consciously-derived rational choices.

Intuition in HRD and Coaching

Given that intuition is a fundamental aspect of a dual process system of human cognition it is both inevitable and ubiquitous in a wide variety of organizational processes (for example decision making, creativity, and moral judgement), and there are several practical consequences of this for HRD, namely HRD should endeavour to: firstly, develop learners’ and HRD practitioners’ knowledge and understanding of intuition; secondly, enable learners and HRD practitioners to make a more informed use of intuition in relevant aspects of their work (see Sadler-Smith and Burke, 2009). Given that, as noted earlier, coaching is one of the most important HRD methods (CIPD, 2008) and that intuition has a role to play in coaching (see the International Coach Federation’s professional standards), it is appropriate to examine in more detail the relationships between intuition and coaching. We aim to do this by means of an empirical study of coaches’ practical experiences of intuition, with a view to how intuition and coaching might be better connected in HRD practice via the skill set of an effective coach (be they professional coaches or others involved in the coaching process). Intuition is relevant both to the practice of coaching and the experience of being coached

(see: Phillips, 2006). For example the International Coach Federation notes that coaching asks certain things of the individual, all of which begin with intention but which also required that clients should listen to their intuitions, assumptions, and judgments³. However, there are as Murray (2004, p.204) notes “real risks attached to intuitive approaches [in coaching]. These risks need to be managed and kept under constant review through honest self-assessment”. Researching the role played by intuition in coaching is a vital part of systematic, informed inquiry and critical reflection both on the part of individual coaches and the coaching profession. Following this line of argument, empirical research was undertaken with accomplished executive coaches in order to explore their experiences and perspectives on intuition in coaching. Our research sought to answer the following questions: (1) what is intuition in coaching; (2) what are the factors that help coaches access and apply intuition in their work; (3) how might coaching intuition be developed?

Sample and Method

We undertook semi structured individual interviews with 14 accomplished experienced executive coaches (eight males and six females) averaging 14.5 years as a coach. The interviews took place over the phone or in person, and always with the same interviewer, over a three-week period. An invitation was sent inviting them to take part in the research. They self-selected on the basis of interest and availability. Coaches were asked to retrospectively report on intuitive experiences in 1:1 and / or group coaching situations. Each interview was an exploratory conversation centred around 15 broad questions. These questions were based upon the intuition literature and designed to draw on experiences of the coaches around their use of intuition in coaching. Each interview took approximately two hours and was recorded and transcribed, and interview notes were taken.

Data Analysis and Limitations

The preliminary results are from a thematic analysis of interview notes which are supported by interview audio files. Illustrative quotes were selected on the basis that they best encapsulated or illustrated the theme or offered an interesting point of view. There are however some limitations to the research, which may be summarised thus: (1) lack of ‘objective’ data: the challenges associated with measuring and researching intuition are well documented, due to the fact that intuition is a non-conscious process and hence difficult to verbalise and capture (see: Harteis et al., 2008; Dane and Pratt, 2009); (2) self-selection: coaches choose to take part in the research after an initial invitation to do so, hence it is likely that those who were favourably disposed towards intuition and the research would step forward; (3) retrospective self-reporting: coaches were asked prior to the interview to think about their intuitive experiences in coaching, and encouraged to fill out an intuition log prior to the interview to raise their personal awareness of ‘intuitive moments’ and hopefully allow them to access their experiences of intuition more readily during the interviews (half of the coaches interviewed chose to use the log); (4) priming: the decision was made up-front that it would not be a ‘blind’ interview but we would be explicit about our premise and what we wanted to explore, that is intuition is an important aspect of coaching, and one which often lies at the heart of courageous coaching moments.

What is intuition in coaching?

The research we undertook would suggest that coaching intuition has much in common with the generic definition of intuition as provided by Dane and Pratt (2007) along a spectrum from ‘out of the blue’ and what clients would say was ‘pure intuition’ at one end to ‘pattern / sense-making’ at the other. For example one coach described a situation where without knowing or talking about it in the coaching session, offered a seemingly random intuition “is this about your daughter?”(Coach L), and which subsequently served to uncover

the real issue for the client. Coach G intuited that her client had not had a conversation on the particular issue with her/his boss through noticing what he wasn't saying. In describing their experiences of intuitive coaching, coaches typically recorded physical reactions (such as the feelings in the stomach, chest, and a 'prickly head'). Furthermore many would talk about their intuition as "coming from nowhere" (Coach B), "I don't know where it came from" (Coach G), and coming fast "it literally appeared" (Coach A). Significantly coaches gave more examples of the positive effect of using and applying their intuition for the benefit of the client, than negative instances. Examples included how an intuition helped opened up a dialogue; raised awareness; challenged the client and helped to create shift. Since what is most relevant in coaching is what happens to the client "the thing about intuition and coaching is that intuition always forwards the action and deepens the learning, even when it lands with a clang instead of a melodious ping" (Whitworth et al., 2007, p.60).

What helps coaches to access and apply their intuition?

Having explored the issue of coaching in general terms, the research sought to explore the factors which enable coaches to access and apply their intuition in a coaching situation. Several inter-related factors emerged in the interviews, namely: self belief; one's coaching beliefs and values; state management; permission; being in rapport; objective offering; and courage.

Self Belief

Overwhelmingly, coaches would refer to the existence of self belief or self confidence as being critical to being able to access and apply their intuition. There was a strongly held belief that "what I offer is useful" (Coach G) and a real sense of trusting oneself, one's own purpose, experience, expertise and skills to the extent that coaches talked of being prepared to be stupid, clumsy or vulnerable. One coach commented that "everybody is a 10 [i.e.: highly

intuitive]...it is the confidence and trust to access it that varies” (Coach L). The emphasis on self belief and confidence is consistent with the literature which suggests that intuition is characterised by confidence (Hodgkinson et al., 2008; Dane and Pratt, 2007).

Coaching beliefs and values

There are beliefs and values which are conducive to accessing and applying intuition in that they provide the coach with permission and confidence. As may be expected, coaches would talk of a client-centred approach and the coach’s duty to offer the client their intuition and indeed that in a coaching situation the coach’s intuition “would only be offered for the benefit of the client” (Coach H). Furthermore coaches would cite values such as “I am paid to do my job” (Coach L), “I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t [use all what I had to offer including intuition]” (Coach M) and that “I care enough to go there [to intuition]” (Coach N). These findings are consistent with the coaching and intuition literature: “client’s count on your intuition. When you hold back, you withhold a crucial source of information and sensing” (Whitworth et al., 2007:58).

Other beliefs that seem to liberate and provide the openness to access intuition were a recognition that there it is not always necessary or desirable to rely solely on rational analysis, “you can’t always explain everything” (Coach B) and that intuition can arise from the dynamic between coach and client, “people generate energies and energies in relation to each other” (Coach B), and the need to be open and honest with clients, “if something is around I have to deal with it”. (Coach N). There was an acknowledgement and acceptance that you can’t call on intuition, which is often characterized in the literature as involuntary (see: Hodgkinson, Sadler-Smith, Burke, Claxton and Sparrow, 2009). Intuition is non-volitional to the extent that “looking too intently for it makes it more difficult to find. If you are working too hard to find your intuition, your attention is on you and your efforts...the key seems to take a soft focus, be open. Your intuition is there, giving your messages or clues,

just below the surface. This is the paradox of intuition; an open hand will hold it; it will slip through a fist” (Whitworth et al., 2007:56-57).

State management

Every coach talked about, what could be summarised as, getting themselves into an appropriate physical, mental and emotional state to help them access and apply their intuition. This would include their: attention to their own well being; preparation prior to a session; rituals or routines in starting a session; ability to stay present and focused during the session. This included the state of being well rested, making sure they got a good night’s sleep, ate well and didn’t drink alcohol the night before a coaching session. The particular approach taken to preparing for a session depended upon the individual coach, for example some coaches would read through notes of previous sessions, think about the client, and/or look through various models and frameworks. Some would prepare by reading an inspirational book, for example one coach referred to the importance of reading Joseph Jaworski’s *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership* (Coach K).

Although some coaches felt that they did not always coach in the most conducive of environments (for example, hotel lounges, lobbies or offices), the external environment was less of a concern, than looking after one’s own state. Coaches talked of leaving plenty of time to get to the location so as to leave space to collect their thoughts and get centred before the start of the session. At the start of the session, some would use a ritual/routine as a way of getting them ‘into the zone’ through the use of key phrases such as “calm and happy” (Coach J), following a particular order of doing things for example taking out a notepad, or having a particular ‘contracting rote’. Whatever the technique, it was about the coach becoming grounded, letting go of analytical thoughts, and quietening their mind. It was about “not being in my head”, (Coach B) and being present, congruent, receptive, fresh, attentive and

calm. As one coach said “the more I go with the moment and more calm I am, the better I am” (Coach N).

Some coaches talked of the need to have a certain level of pressure such as emotionally charged moments (and which is different from willing an intuition to happen – see above), “It is difficult to be intuitive when you don’t have that intensity. I need the pressure moment” (Coach D). One of the distinguishing features of intuition highlighted by researchers is that intuition is often deployed by experts in time pressured situations in which it is impossible to retreat into analysis and weigh up the pros and cons of a situation (see: Klein, 2003). Exceptional performers in many different domains find performing in the face of intense demands to be a highly intuitive experience giving them a sense of meaningfulness, fulfilment, self-validation, richness and joy, referred as by the psychologist Csikszentmihalyi as ‘flow’ (see: Schindehutte, Morris, and Allen, 2006). By way of contrast coaches volunteered what was going on for them when they were at their least intuitive, “when I am stressed” (Coach N), or “when I am in my head” (Coach C). The findings are consistent with the literature. For example, in their empirical study of the application of mindfulness techniques to developing intuitive awareness, Sadler-Smith and Shefy (2007) commented on the dynamic interplay between the inner context (‘quieting the analytical mind’) and the outer context (external environment) and its effect on intuitive processes. People are more likely to trust and use their intuition when in a positive mood state, whilst stress or anger can be major obstacles to accessing intuition (see: Dane and Pratt, 2008; Harteis et al., 2008). Finally it is crucial to draw a distinction between intuitive feelings and emotional feelings, and that intuitive feelings are not of the same type, duration or intensity as emotional feelings (for example, the subjective experience of being happy, sad or in a state of fear are distinct from the subjective experience of gut feel) (see: Sadler-Smith, 2008). In terms of effective coaching, Ellinger, Hamlin and Beattie (2008) identified “becoming too intense and

emotional” as one of several ineffective managerial coaching behaviours. Hence, it is important that coaches, HRD practitioners and line managers are able to distinguish between their emotions and their intuitions, and also are aware of the impact that mood may have on intuitive feelings.

Permission

A further factor in accessing and applying intuition was having an internal and external source and sense of ‘permission’. Internally, it was about the coach giving themselves permission because they considered intuition to be an accepted and fundamental part of their coaching skill set, “to give ourselves permission to acknowledge worries, unformed opinions and untidy data” (Murray, 2004, p.206) and as one coach said “we have permission to be intuitive because of our job...people are looking for insight” (Coach M). Externally, it was also about having permission from the client, and was best when the coach explicitly contracted with the client that they would offer their intuition.

Being in rapport

The extent to which coaches access and apply their intuition is dependent on the coach-client relationship, which does not necessarily mean needing to know the client well. Rather it is about having a high level of rapport where transformational conversations can happen. It is a key skill of a coach to be able to establish and maintain rapport and talk at a deeper level of communication about beliefs, attitudes, emotions and feelings: “it is easier to have an intuition when you have a connection” (Coach N). In accessing and trusting intuition it was important that the coach felt in-tune with the client and was noticing the energy of the client, relational energy between them, and was fully listening and observing. As Murray noted, it is through awareness and attention that a skilled and experienced coach “...can pick up mood

change, facial expression, intakes of breath, eye movement and other clues...[coaches] can notice hints, hunches, half ideas, doubts and fleeting concerns” (2007:206).

Objective offering

Coaches talked about the importance of having a level of detachment or objectiveness in accessing and applying intuition, in order to hold no judgement and to give it as an offering as opposed to an objective ‘truth’. This aligns well with the notion of clearly labelling it (“I have an intuition”) and not being attached to it, whether it is right or wrong. As one coach said, this means being “willing to put it out there and willing to get it wrong” (Coach B). Whitworth et al., (2007, p.54) reminds us that “the important thing to remember in coaching is to be open to intuition – trusting it, being aware of it, and unattached to the interpretation. In the end, intuition is valuable when it moves the client to action or deeper learning. It is irrelevant, really, whether the coach’s intuition is correct”. Consistent with this coaches reported offering their intuition to: direct the flow of questioning; check what was being said matched with behaviour and reactions; try to understand what the client was thinking and feeling but may not be actually saying; intrude or interrupt; blurt; know when to speak and when to stay silent; challenge one’s own and the client’s ideas, opinions and assumptions; detect patterns against a background of ‘random noise’.

In offering their intuition, coaches talked of typical expressions they would use to offer it in a way that would help it ‘land’ and be useful for the client and in such a way that “the client can hear them) (de Hann, 2008, p.126). Examples included: “I have had a bit of a thought. Would it be ok to share it with you?”; “What do you think about this?”; “Just check this out for me...”; “Is it ok if I offer you an intuition that has come to me?”; and even “this may be ***** and feel free to disregard it”. These offerings augment the intuition ‘crib sheet’ suggested by Whitworth et al., (2007, p.60): “I have a sense...”; “May I tell you about

a gut feeling I have?"; "I have a hunch that..."; "Can I check something out with you?"; "I wonder if...?"; "See how this fits for you..."; and "My intuition tells me..."

Courage

We went into our research with a premise that intuition is a key coaching skill, and one that often lies at the heart of courageous moments in coaching. In allowing coaches to talk about their intuitive moments the sense of courage or the risk 'to go there' emerged. As Philips (2006) wrote, it is about not only the what (the intuition is), the how (you raise it) but also the whether (to raise it at all), and whether it will be of benefit to the client. We did not define what is a 'courageous moment' since this is likely to differ between individuals for example, some would talk of a "huge risk", "huge payoff", "going where nobody else would go" and knowledge and skill of what to do and what not to do. A strong relationship between intuition and courageousness emerged from the interviews, for instance, coaches reported that their most intuitive state would also be their most courageous i.e.: being grounded, open and positive. It would seem that by being intuitive, we can be courageous; similarly it takes courage to listen and express our intuition. Indeed, a coach often shows most courage when s/he listens and uses her/his intuition and by doing so, encourages the client to be courageous also. The following comments were offered in this regard: "You can't be courageous without using your intuition. Being courageous is using your intuition" (Coach L); "The alternative to finding your intuition would be structured, formulaic. [This] may lead to courageous moments or transformation. But it would get there by chance, whereas intuition would lead you directly there. Like a scatter gun. Intuition allows you to zoom in. I think you get there more consistently and quicker with intuition than you would be by following a process" (Coach C); "[intuition and courageous moments of coaching are] completely inseparable. To make a leap you need something more" (Coach K); "[they are] "completely

linked because I think the things that you are daring to talk about are the things you intuit” (Coach B).

How do we develop this essential skill as coaches?

There was overwhelming consensus amongst participants that intuition is developable, as Coach I said, “Intuition is native and natural to all of us...we all know what is true...but we practice ignorance”. Even though it did not seem that coaches explicitly set out to develop their intuition, they talked about particular activities that they believed can contribute to its development.

Knowledge, experience, practice and feedback

As one coach said “you have to know your stuff”. (Coach H); a corollary of this which is consistent with the view of intuition-as-expertise (see: Sadler-Smith and Shefy, 2004) is that inexperienced coaches are probably less likely to make effective use of intuition and as novices are more likely to consciously use tools and techniques (see: Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986). Expert coaches on the other hand operating at an unconscious competence level are more likely to use tools and techniques in a more nuanced and intuitive fashion. This is consistent with de Haan’s findings that whereas relatively inexperienced coaches did not mention intuition in their critical coaching moments, expert coaches did (de Haan, 2008).

Cognitive schemas must be domain relevant to generate accurate intuitive judgements (Dane and Pratt, 2007), since experience enables people to chunk information so that they can be stored and retrieved easily and used in a recognition and pattern matching process (Hayashi, 2001; Simon, 1987). As far as the profession of coaching and coaching expertise is concerned important question may be asked about: what is meant by ‘expertise’, what patterns and actions scripts is an expert coach likely to be storing, and what theoretical principles are these based upon? Within the literature there appears to be little in the way of

consensus as to what theoretical principles underpin executive coaching, but it is clear that aspects of executive coaching draw on the principles and processes of psychotherapy (Gray, 2006, p.477). However, an eclectic and integrative approach that combines different and complementary paradigms offers the potential for more patterns to be available, in which case “the easier a sense of familiarity [may] arise in challenging situations and thus, the more opportunities exist for an intuitive decision” (Harteis et al., 2008, p.76).

Individual reflective practice

The willingness and discipline to critically reflect upon and capture relevant aspects of using intuition is critical to its development (see: Hogarth, 2001). Coaches talked of the interplay between experience and reflection being crucial, and of trusting and playing with intuition and seeing its effects and thereby building one’s confidence in using it more. This is one way for getting a feel for your ‘batting average’ (Sadler-Smith and Shefy, 2004) and the ability to benchmark intuitions and get a sense of how reliable they are and how they might be improved on. The participants in our research who used a log found it helped to focus their attention on how they intuit, in what situations, the confidence and accuracy and the resultant impact on the client/the outcome, “without the log I wouldn’t have reflected on what changes I saw in him [the client]” (Coach J). This process is what Gray (2007) refers to as using a learning journal through which professionals can explore their beliefs and assumptions in order to promote self-reflection. It enables a coach to sensitize self-to-self in an intra-personal dialogue.

Dialogue and supervision

The interview process itself was a learning experience for a number of our participants, and by being encouraged to talk through their experiences of intuition coaches acknowledged, reflected on and, hopefully, made more sense of their intuitive capabilities.

When asked to self rate themselves on an intuitive scale, a number of coaches expressed the view that it was difficult to judge “because nobody talks about intuition”, but feedback from coaches on the interviewed itself included “I know more about my intuition than I did before the interview”, and “I feel more intuitive now than I did before the interview”. Coaches singled out the value of discussing issues through the practice of supervision, and indeed supervision or the coach being coached, was commonly cited as a key development technique. Not only was supervision seen as important to help the coach raise their awareness and make sense of their intuitive moments but useful in testing out their intuitive moments. Furthermore skilled supervisors could serve as role models. Three coaches mentioned how their supervisor used their intuition ‘on them’ and the transformational effect that this had. As Phillips (2006, p.26) points out supervision gives and opportunity for third party intuition by the coach’s supervisor “...using his intuition to speculate on what might be happening between two other people”. As a result of the interview, one coach said the interview “has triggered me to use my supervisor to reflect on my own intuition” (Coach G).

Well-being and creativity

A number of the coaches referred to the importance of personal well being, and the need to build in space for relaxation, meditation, and exercise and that it was important to take time out to reflect and contemplate, to relax and re-energise and clear one’s head, and seek congruence and alignment. For example one coach said that they bring more to their coaching if the day before they ride their horse (Coach N), or walked their dogs (Coach J), or danced (Coach B).

Summary of Findings

This study explored the experiences of intuition of a number of accomplished executive coaches. On the basis of these data the construct of intuition as defined by Dane and Pratt

(2007) (affectively charged judgements that arise through rapid, non-conscious and holistic associations) was applicable and appropriate in a coaching context. The research also suggested that in coaching there is a spectrum of different types of intuition and that the construct itself might benefit from further conceptual elaboration or a disaggregation (see Dane and Pratt, 2009). Experienced coaches had the skills and confidence to help create the conditions for accessing and applying their intuitions. Courage to use intuition had greater prominence than the literature suggested and this, allied to the concepts of intuitive self-efficacy and intuitive ability, are issues worthy of further investigation. There are individual practices that had a particular value to developing coaches' intuition such as reflective practice, supervision and dialogue. From the perspective of intuition-as-expertise a number of issues arose, for example: what is the expertise that an accomplished coach possesses and how can this be developed in building the skill set of novice coaches and line managers, or others who practice coaching as part of their job role? As noted earlier, according to the ICF's Professional Standards an intuitive coach accesses their own intuition and trusts their inner knowing and 'goes with the gut', but little is provided by the ICF in terms what this means in practice. On the basis of our findings it is possible to elaborate upon the ICF's notion of 'going with the gut'. Based on our interview data an intuitive coach: (1) is self-confident and client-centred; (2) gives themselves permission to access and use intuition; (3) listens to their body; (4) is mentally and physically prepared; (5) is disciplined, focused and organised; (6) is responsive to challenges in the moment; (7) seeks permission from the client to use intuition; (8) establishes and maintains rapport with the client; (8) is unattached to their intuitions; (9) is objective about their intuitions; (10) is courageous in their engagement with intuition. Clearly, several of these attributes are not unique to the concept of 'the intuitive coach' rather they are generic attributes of an effective coach (for example, client centred) and align with aspects of the EMCCs competence standards for coaching, such as "self-belief

in their ability to coach”, “self-management and self-awareness”, “whole body listening”, “emotional intelligence”, and “establishes rapport”. Nonetheless, the attributes we have identified do provide important detail, and also link intuition to more general coaching competencies.

In terms of the systematic approach to HRD what we have outlined above corresponds broadly to a needs identification and analysis for intuitive coaching (needless to say the attributes we have identified require further validation). In terms of the next logical step in the systematic approach (that is developing coaches’ intuitive self-awareness to enable them to access their intuitions), previous research has indicated that a variety of techniques may prove to be beneficial in this regard. For example, Sadler-Smith and Shefy (2007) conducted a qualitative evaluation of the effects of intuitive awareness (for example, listening to the body via focusing) and mindfulness training techniques (including various types of contemplative exercise) and reported beneficial impacts on participants’ self-confidence, inter- and intra-personal sensitivity and meta-cognitive awareness and skills. The latter are valuable attributes of an effective, and intuitive, coach. Such techniques allied to educating potential coaches about the psychological basis of intuition (for example, dual process theory, somatic markers and recognition primed decision making – see above), immersion in experience, a reflective approach to practice, effective feedback and supervision, and attending to personal well-being (all of which are factors which emerged from our data) are likely to enable coaches, HRD practitioners and line managers to be more informed and intelligent when choosing to ‘go with their gut’ in coaching situations.

Coaching is one of the most important methods in contemporary HRD, there has been increased interest in the role that intuition might occupy in human resource development, and coaching and intuition are inextricably linked. Coaching is a relational and unstructured activity which involves complex, and sometimes time-pressured judgements and therefore

lends itself to the use of intuition. Intuition in coaching is a vital issue not only for the profession of coaching but for the practice of coaching in organizations. A key issue both for the coaching and the HRD professions is how intuition may be incorporated into the coaching curriculum. In this research we took a bottom-up, inductive approach by asking accomplished executive coaches themselves about the role that intuition plays in their work. The data we gathered suggest that as far as developing the intuitive coaches' tool kit there are several attributes which are vital (and which we have enumerated above). Moreover, there have been numerous calls for coaches to ground their practice in theory (Hamlin et al., 2008) and be able to not only demonstrate an understanding of the basics of relevant cognitive and affective processes, but also understand how such knowledge can build personal coaching capacity (EMCC, 2007). In so far as intuition is concerned a broad consensus has emerged regarding the conceptualisation and theorisation of its cognitive and affective dimensions, and as such it represents an aspect of coaching which has a robust theoretical basis upon which improved professional practice and scientifically rigorous research may be founded.

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¹ International Coach Federation: 'Core Competencies'. Retrieved on 28th September 2009 from <http://www.coachfederation.org/research-education/icf-credentials/core-competencies/#A>

² Insight is typically associated with a 'Eureka' moment whereby the logical relationship between parts of the problem become clear and can be explained. Hence, when insight occurs, it is possible to 'see' connections; on the other hand when intuition occurs it is possible to 'sense' possible connections and coherences.

³ International Coach Federation: 'What is Coaching?'. Retrieved on 28th September 2009 from <http://www.coachfederation.org/find-a-coach/what-is-coaching/>