

# Non-verbal synchrony in coaching: the pinnacle of emotion regulation

## SO, WHAT?

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**INTRODUCTION** Coaching is unthinkable without using verbal language. Verbal interactions appear to be the channel through which coaches support clients in reaching their goals. What if we eclipsed the verbal element of communication in coaching? What

if we studied how 'two bodies talked' as a form of non-verbal communication in coach-

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ing: what would we notice about the way in which coach and client relate where they synchronise their movements? What would we notice about how clients achieve goals through non-verbal synchrony? Today, we know that the coaching relationship is the biggest contributor to successful outcomes. So, to what extent does synchronous non-verbal communication through body movements play a role in how coaching relationships are effective?

A comprehensive longitudinal study conducted in affiliation with VU Amsterdam (NL), Ashridge Centre for Coaching (UK) and Case Western Reserve University (US) explores these questions. It looks into the possible effects of non-verbal synchrony on how clients self-regulate emotionally in the coaching relationship, that is how clients balance their emotions moment by moment and ultimately how that affects how they achieve self-directed goals.

## NON-VERBAL SYNCHRONY

Non-verbal synchrony is one form of interpersonal synchrony (IS; Feldman, 2007). In principle, when we hear both what's said and what's not said by someone – the verbal and non-verbal elements of communication – and respond spontaneously to that person's need in that moment – that's when we are most likely to be in synchrony. Generally, IS can show in how *a)* our nervous systems align, *b)* the way we adopt someone's way of speaking, *c)* we perceive a thing or a person similarly, *d)* we mutually miss each other, *e)* we can literally feel someone else's pain or joy in our body; and *f)* how we respond with similar or same movements to one another.

Researchers in various areas of behavioural science have explored IS either through

word use or by measuring blushes, heart rate, shrugs, eye movement, facial expression, eye gaze, vocal pitch and breathing patterns. They found that when people synchronise with each other, they show more compassion and are more socially conscious.

Specifically, the way we respond to each other with body movement shapes and is shaped by how synchronous our relationships are. This does not mean that movements are similar or even the same in synchrony but rather that there is a non-verbal response to our conversation partner's experience in the moment. How come? Body movements transmit empathy and emotion. They are a gateway to instinctive, candid and honest expression of ourselves. Research on movement synchrony in physics, chemistry and biology found that animals tune in with each other by adopting each other's movements and energy and objects (e.g. clocks) start swinging in unison after just a very short while. In biology, attunement is found to generate safety and self-regulation. For example, the dynamics of a school of fish shows how moving in synchrony with each other protects the fish for survival.

For coaching, we argue that when our responses show in the spontaneous and timed coordination of body movements between coach and client in sessions, that's when coach and client are attuned with each other. Without any conscious effort. Unlike conscious imitation as practised through neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), attunement through spontaneous body movements implies that the non-verbal interactions between coach and client are effortlessly dynamic and ongoing: coaches' body movements are just as much potentially shaping how clients respond spontaneously to coaches as the other way around. What

might be the effect? We claim that it is through the spontaneous rather than imitated coordination of body movements that clients will start feeling safe in the coaching relationship. So, non-verbal synchrony through body movement is one fresh way of investigating how coaches and clients grow to show similar behaviour, similar ways of thinking and similar emotion over time through effectively hearing what is not said.

#### HOW IS NON-VERBAL SYNCHRONY THROUGH BODY MOVEMENT RELATED TO COACHING?

We do not yet know. This gap in our knowledge triggered our curiosity to investigate non-verbal synchrony in coaching. What we know is that similar behaviour between therapist and patient strengthens the therapeutic relationship in psychotherapy research (Ramseyer & Tschacher, 2016). We also know that psychotherapy differentiates between body signals when it comes to therapeutic outcomes. Unlike head synchrony, which leads to overall therapy success, upper-body synchrony is found to lead to session-level success. This difference suggests that body parts have different functions when it comes to feeling attuned and safe.

Elsewhere, in social and cognitive sciences (e.g. Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001) there is increasing evidence that when conversation partners show coordinated body movements, they perceive rapport, empathy, smoothness of conversation and connectedness. These perceptions lead conversation partners to become more involved in their interactions. In a nutshell, findings in social and cognitive sciences imply that how we perceive others is linked with how we interact with others.

#### WHY RESEARCH NON-VERBAL SYNCHRONY IN COACHING?

Non-verbal synchrony is found to be relevant in interpersonal relationships inside and outside psychotherapy. For coaching, this relevance implies that non-verbal synchrony is giving us a whole new language with which to interpret our interactions with our clients. We might extend our understanding that non-verbal synchrony is: *a)* the product of our interactions, and *b)* the contributor to our interactions (Stel & Vonk, 2010). We might also find that non-verbal synchrony fosters common understanding and emotional sharing in coaching because we gain access to what is going on for each other, feel safe with each other and therefore manage to self-regulate emotionally. Ultimately, self-regulating emotionally, that is balancing our emotions moment by moment might be a prerequisite for rewiring our mental processes before change can happen.

To date, there has been no emphasis on the possible benefits that non-verbal synchrony might contribute to bringing new insights to coaching engagements. This is unfortunate because researching non-verbal synchrony in coaching might provide us with some answers to the question why having a goal, setting a goal and planning behaviour are not enough to achieve goals and effective results (Gollwitzer, 1999). Contrary to Gollwitzer (1999), we argue that intending to implement a goal as a second 'will power' will not do so either. We sometimes see this happening in coaching when clients come to sessions without their action plans being implemented. Therefore, the research question that emerged based on our understanding of non-verbal synchrony above is: To what extent does non-verbal synchrony through whole-body movements drive how clients self-regulate and achieve self-directed goals?

#### WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT EMOTION REGULATION AND SELF-DIRECTED GOAL ATTAINMENT?

Generally, psychological literature for mindfulness training (Bishop et al., 2004) emphasises that self-regulation takes place when we are able to *a)* monitor what is going on emotionally moment by moment, *b)* refocus our attention in a difficult situation, *c)* manage our mental processes in the 'here and now', and *d)* show curiosity, openness and acceptance.

These four components are important because having and setting a goal, intending to implement a goal and planning a certain behaviour do not automatically result in effective goal attainment.

In coaching as a systematic goal-focused process (Grant, 2003), the coaching relationship is perceived by both coach and client as the most important success factor. Yet, we know little about the processes that relate the coaching relationship to how clients self-regulate. Nor do we understand the mechanisms that affect clients' capacity to self-regulate emotionally to achieve their goals effectively.

#### Emotion regulation

In our study, when we look at the aspect of emotion regulation (Hayes & Feldman, 2004), we want to explore how clients balance what's going on emotionally moment by moment. We are interested in how emotional reactions are amplified, attenuated or maintained through non-verbal synchrony. In principle, emotion regulation has been shown to reduce tendencies to avoid experiences. It has also been found to help individuals express their thoughts in the face of experiencing worry. So, people ruminate and over-generalise less. We want to know what happens in coaching when clients internally

regulate emotional states through non-verbal synchrony: how will this internal regulation impact on how they can regulate behavioural exchanges in their interactions with coaches? Links between the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of synchrony were initially found between caregiver and infant in developmental research. Where caregiver and infant were interacting synchronously, infants developed emotion regulation skills as adolescents. Similar links have been found in close relationships, where IS was shown to result in some healthy exchange of emotional responses rather than a mere matching of the same or similar emotional responses. A mere matching of emotional responses implies only excessive arousal rather than a healthy equilibrium of emotions. Yet, the particular link between non-verbal synchrony through body movements and emotion is not well-established in the adult literature. This is not surprising as emotion regulation is not a 'switch-on' or 'switch-off' phenomenon but a process of self. It reflects the quality of long-lasting adaptation. It is this long-lasting adaptation that coaching might need to provide to be effective. Therefore, looking into emotion regulation appears to be important when it comes to reaching goals in coaching effectively and in a self-directed manner.

#### Coaching relationship and emotion regulation

It is widely accepted today that goal agreement, task assignment and bonding, as well as other collaborative elements between client and coach, are associated with how clients attain goals. The relationship is a key success factor when it comes to achieving goals. However, the link between coaching relationship and emotion regulation has re-

mained unexplored. To start making sense of how the coaching relationship might be associated with emotion regulation, we look into how some more well-established related fields like psychotherapy have addressed the link between the quality of the collaborative therapeutic relationship and emotion regulation to date.

Psychotherapy literature suggests that non-verbal synchrony through body movements improves the quality of the therapeutic relationship (Sharpley et al., 2001). The In-Sync Model (Koole & Tschacher, 2016) serves as the systematic framework with which psychotherapy research addresses the connection between synchrony and the patient-therapist relationship objectively. Additionally, the automated movement algorithm motion energy analysis (MEA; Ramseyer & Tschacher, 2006) helps interpret findings.

According to the In-Sync Model, the strength of the therapeutic relationship emerges from the coupling of the neural activities of the patient's and therapist's brain. Inter-brain coupling facilitates complex social-cognitive processes which help form goals and intentions that patients can maintain over time. However, inter-brain coupling is achieved only indirectly. It takes the mutual coordination of patient's and therapist's behaviour and experiences to achieve this coupling. And this coordination is developed through synchronous activities. So, synchrony helps establish a strong patient-therapist relationship, which in turn promotes emotion regulation in the patient and thereby good therapeutic outcomes. It also seems that emotion regulation has an adaptive property: it arises to responses, exchanges and mutual sharing but does not have to do so unless the interactions meet the patients' needs in the moment. As a result, psychotherapy re-

search claims that the strength of the patient-therapist relationship is tied to emotional processes (Greenberg & Safran, 1989). Theory so far suggests that a strong patient-therapist relationship will improve clients' self-regulatory capacities and enable clients to deal with their emotions.

What does this mean for coaching? Potentially, the coaching relationship involves interactional processes (e.g. simultaneous behavioural reactions to the same stimulus) that will enhance clients' emotion regulation capacity to attain goals, as this has been shown in psychotherapy and behavioural sciences. More than that, it appears likely that clients will adapt emotional responses to challenging moments utilising their self-regulatory resources beyond sessions to engage in attaining self-directed goals.

#### ***Self-directed goal attainment***

In coaching, one way to define the coach's role is to view the coach as the vehicle that helps clients move through a self-regulatory cycle (Grant, 2012). The coach's role is also to support clients in reaching self-directed changes on their path to goal attainment. The goal is to avoid that clients relapse into old ways of being in this world and foster well-being or sustained functioning. When clients achieve self-directed change, it means that they manage to work on material that is at the heart of their development. They do not work on material or goals that were imposed on them by someone else (e.g. 'should' goals either present, past or future). As such coaching can be viewed as a transformative learning process (Mezirow, 1999) rather than as a one-off goal-achievement engagement. Yet, the question when and why coaches should apply which coaching strategies to strengthen clients' self-regulatory

capacities and attitudes remains a black box in coaching. This is unfortunate, as it is essentially the clients that are the recipients of coaching and who engage with their coach in the changing.

A competency that may be linked to this form of learning that integrates goal attainment, self-directed changes and sustained functioning beyond coaching engagements is emotion regulation. To date, there is only one study that looks into how, for instance, enhancing mindfulness in combination with coaching is more effective for goal attainment than coaching alone (Spence et al., 2008). So, mindfulness training literature appears to be the only area where we can look for guidance so far. This is not surprising as mindfulness requires self-regulatory knowledge, skills and attitudes for effective change. It involves the four components that Bishop et al. (2004) emphasise as being key to how self-regulation can take place, as discussed in this section above.

How does movement synchrony relate to self-directed goal attainment? Studies conducted in behavioural sciences reveal that spontaneous coordination of simple incidental rhythmic movement is associated with goal-directed behaviour. This association is based on the theory of dynamics of self-organisation of coordinated action (Fowler et al., 2008). In essence, this theory sustains the principle of 'behaviour before brain' (Van Dijk et al., 2008), or movement before meaning making for the purposes of our study. It claims that our thinking mainly emerges because we move rather than the other way around. For our study, this position suggests that clients who are attuned with their coach in the way they move are more likely to engage in mindfully reflecting their goal-direct-

ed behaviour. This in turn supports their capacity to engage in higher levels of self-directed goal attainment.

#### **WHAT DOES OUR STUDY ON NON-VERBAL SYNCHRONY WANT TO SHOW?**

In research terms, our comprehensive longitudinal study takes a fresh perspective on how coaches can facilitate clients' emotion regulation capacities in coaching. We predict that non-verbal synchrony through spontaneous whole-body movement coordination will drive clients' emotion regulation capacities. Ultimately, clients' emotion regulation will support how they achieve self-directed goals. In coaching terms, we want to show that coaches' way of 'being with clients' (Strozzi-Heckler, 2014) more than their out-of-the-toolbox way of 'doing coaching' session by session is likely to make a significant difference in how clients feel capacitated to attain self-directed goals. This approach is unique in that it wants to show that clients' capacity to balance their emotions moment by moment through non-verbal synchrony is the pinnacle of goal attainment in coaching. In line with findings in psychotherapy and social sciences, we want to show that where coaches are present by being more and doing less – and this presence is evident in how their movements respond spontaneously to their clients' needs as reported by clients – clients will reach effective and long-lasting performance levels in coaching. When clients can tap their inner regulatory resources through synchrony, this is when long-lasting shifts happen for clients beyond changes in motivation alone. Changes in motivation carry the risk of clients relapsing into old habits when their intention to implement newly planned behaviours proves difficult. ♥

**KEY PARAMETERS OF THE STUDY** We observe 189 coach-client pairs from all over the globe. Each coach-client pair engages in up to ten coaching hours over a period of six to eight months. Coaching sessions are recorded on video and analysed using Motion Energy Analysis (MEA; Ramseyer & Tschacher, 2006), which provides codes of spontaneous whole-body interactions between coach and client.

We evaluate non-verbal synchrony in association with the coach-client relationship, coaching outcome, and coaching engagements that ended earlier than scheduled. MEA coded data is compared with clients' self-reports after each session. Self-reports measure clients' perception of the coach-client relationship and the way they balance their emotions moment by moment. Additionally, a pre-coaching and post-coaching questionnaire obtain results on *a*) clients' goal attainment, and *b*) the extent to which the coach-client relationship strengthens or weakens the effects of whole-body movement synchrony on clients' goal attainment. Data for 189 coach-client pairs was collected between October 2018 and August 2019. The recruitment phase lasted six months and ran from June 2018 through to January 2019. To recruit the 150 coach-client pairs, the project design was presented at several professional conferences.

**SO, WHAT?** Video-based measurement methods are new to coaching. They provide new opportunities to investigate mechanisms of change related to movement coordination between coach and client. In particular, these methods provide us with an opportunity to look into coaching as a process to start an-

swering the question 'how and why coaching works.' Better understanding of how and why coaching works is likely to support coaching sponsors, professional bodies and coaching educators in making deeper sense of what coaching implies as a transformational change initiative. Additionally, such knowledge can help improve practice in service of our clients as the recipients of coaching who engage in the changing. We know that coaching is effective. Now, it is time to study how and why it is effective in coaching process research. In this study, we might find answers to how and why coaching is effective in exploring whether and in what ways the amount of time spent on coaching modifies how clients' emotion regulation impacts results.

What is also new is that we focus our efforts on exploring the coaching relationship through non-verbal synchrony rather than specific techniques associated with any particular coaching method. This approach implies a new direction for coaching process research as we connect coaching relationship research with other scientific disciplines, for instance complex adaptive systems theory (CAS; Stacey, 2011), which has been well established in sports coaching and is becoming increasingly relevant for organisations as complex and dynamic learning entities (De Haan & Burger, 2005). In this view, the coach-client relationship is more than the sum of the individual contributions (De Haan, 2008) of client and coach. It emerges from the interpersonal interactions between them as they influence each other as a relational phenomenon. Measuring these objective, physical phenomena might complete our understanding and scientific analysis of the coach-client relationship. ▲

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