# WORKPLACE COACHING: FROM THE AGE OF DIGITALISATION TO THE AGE OF IDEAS

Today's organisational life feeds on the digitalisation machine. Where can we find workplace coaching and coaching mastery in that, asks Tünde Erdös.

## AT ONE END: WORKPLACE AND ORGANISATIONAL CHALLENGES

The current mood of disorientation and even impending doom around a cascade of ever bigger disruptions is driving one significant emotion: the fear of becoming irrelevant. That fear is paired with a sense of exploitation, which seems to lead to active disengagement.[1]

### From secure base to secure edge

We're losing our secure base of a 'socially-connected-self-for-shared-responsibility' in a digital world in which organisations have lost sight of what it means to have great teams anchored in social contracts. The need for social contracts is essential because it takes collaborative processes to achieve solid buy-ins for high-impact change projects. It's a world in which coaching could help organisations move beyond the paradigm that collaborative decision-taking is at odds with fast decision-making.

However, even though the digitalisation machine is about workforces using AI and virtualisation to work faster and smarter, we end up feeling exploited. We disconnect. We're not equipped to retain a secure edge over digital-tech workplaces that drive digital-process-based efficiency when we need social-contract-based effectiveness. Organisations don't yet recognise their own accountability in offering their workforces the opportunities to feel relevant, connected and accountable.

This isn't to block or deny digital technology. Digital tech can protect people and jobs, for instance in healthcare. Why shouldn't a poor villager in an underdeveloped region enjoy good healthcare via a smartphone to the same level that I receive in my advanced urban hospital? The point is: how ought organisations ultimately use digital tech to enable their workforces to re-engage with organisational life?

## The Mozart in the digitalisation machine

The issue is not about digital tech making humans feel irrelevant, at least not in workspaces that require us to a) use a wide range of skills simultaneously, and b) deal with unforeseen scenarios creatively. Organisations can be the Mozart in the digitalisation machine. Digitalised workplaces have the capacity to reignite workforce engagement. Yet, digital tech has so far only given rise to workplaces that require ever greater emotional and mental stamina to cope with an organisational life of endless upheavals and disruptions, where quick-fix, panacea-induced stress-reduction techniques will no longer do the job.

## What's the challenge?

Organisations are under immense pressure to meet shareholder expectations. It can feel like there is no way to escape the rat race for innovation. That's because, when under pressure, the brain can't produce the energy it needs to be able to see all the options: at best, it will only produce black and white scenarios. So, organisations progress for progress's sake in a world governed by unchecked neoliberal systems and unbounded industrial and financial-market capitalism. What is the end in mind?

Both organisations and workforces argue that they've seen disruptive challenges before and humans haven't become irrelevant yet. But if we work in service of a specific digitalised process just to become more efficient, we are merely dancing to the tune of digital tech. We're taking humans for granted.

Maybe, beyond the fear of irrelevance, what we should be worrying about is the shift in authority from humans to digital tech, as this opens the gates to the rise of digital dictatorship.

### VIGNETTE

In a global not-for-profit organisation where I was supervising professionally trained internal coaches in 2022, coaches believed that they weren't given the opportunity to deliver 'proper coaching'. They felt obliged to give career advice to colleagues. What prompted them to believe and feel that?

They answered: 'We have a digitalised coaching tracking system that defines coaching mostly as some form of career advice. Colleagues must fill the system after each session based on the algorithmic data. We can't work around this. We're expected to perform as internal coaches such that no one is harmed. It's too political. We don't have the time to figure out what to do. We coach on top of our functional roles. We're really very busy.'

The drama of such bureaucratic decision-making in an organisation whose stated purpose is serving greater humanity is ironic. In a universe of work that's turning into a flow of data, with humans called to merge into an all-encompassing data processing system (created by them), the struggle to make 'the right career choice' appears ridiculous.

Do we have models for making sense of such a work life? Who benefits when we stop thinking?

## AT THE OTHER END: WORKPLACE COACHING CHALLENGES

Today we're seeing third-generation coaching.[2] While first-generation coaching focused on specific goal-attainment to drive performance and productivity, second-generation coaching focused on the quality of the coach-client relationship to drive appreciative coaching dialogues towards clients' effectiveness. Although it accentuated collaborative systems thinking[3] as crucial for purposeful impact for/in/with organisations, second-generation coaching didn't account for disruptive changes.

Third-generation coaching fundamentally focuses on coaching for deep purpose and meaning-making in disruptive organisational life. It does so through discursive practice in which coach and client engage as fellow human companions, in collaborative critical reasoning through different dialogue forms.

### Coaching for disruptive changes

It's understood that resistance is life-giving and has the potential to lead to complexification as well as individuation.[4] Specifically, resisting can lead to upsetting a certain order of things, which can render the process of finding answers to issues complex. At the same time, resisting can lead to clarifying boundaries, which helps identify areas where compromise and balance can be achieved. Both concepts are core to our constantly fluid and moving reality. This approach accepts that without resistance everything would collapse. As coach and client engage with resistance in a chamber of resonance shaped by symmetry/asymmetry and equality/inequality, workable realities can arise from the union between difference and sameness. Hence, the power of coaching lies not in asking powerful questions but in actively engaging with asymmetry and inequality as generative forces in a world that can't be sustained through individuated performance optimisation alone.

### Farewell, performance optimisation

Third-generation coaching cautions that supporting clients in doing anything to keep up with self-optimisation, without any critical reasoning, damages the power of coaching.[5] Coaching that supports organisations in pursuing the ill-conceived desire to keep up at all costs means bowing to the mantra that 'you can't stop digital tech'. Brinkmann even suggests that coaches that work to these paradigms should be sacked.

Yet, workplace coaching is often governed by the same pressures as those that govern organisations – faster and smarter:

- **faster** through AI and digital tech (even though we know that purposeful meaning-making in human interaction requires the 'art of lingering in dialogue'[6]).

- **smarter** through easy-to-implement strategies (although for humans to embrace the turbulent flow of change it takes genuine engagement with resistance to 'the new').

### What's the challenge?

Against low coach-education standards (e.g., typically 60 training hours) in an unregulated coaching field, and with coaches still following the mantra that clients provide their own advice without wondering if that advice is any good for generative impact in today's world, the challenge is to hold transformative dialogues as an intensive

co-reflective process – be it one-on-one, team or organisational coaching – in which:

o   clients' self and identity are reflected as serving some social purpose;

o   values are reflected upon to explore their maturity for today's fluid reality;

o   and the dynamics of stability and fluidity of identity are tested for their impact beyond the purpose of individuation in organisational life.

## BOTH ENDS: WORKPLACE COACHING REALITY CHECK

A recent research paper I co-wrote[7] may be a place to start. We studied the role of workplace coaching for clients' self and identity in the process of their authentic self-development (ASD). The findings resulted in four main suggestions for workplace coaches:

- Expand your coaching styles beyond those that focus on goal attainment to include those that reflect process knowledge about coaching.

- Clients don't need more but better self-regulation in their complex workplaces. This is about the rhythm of self-regulation rather than the mechanical regularity of it. Irregularities in rhythm generate a certain degree of adaptability, which is a much-sought-after capacity for dealing with the reverberations of disruptions.

- You need skills that enhance clients' ability to work with goal instability: to grow as self-determined individuals through adjusting goals as a way of a) developing continuity in the face of contradictory behaviours, and b) integrating inconsistent behaviours into a coherent self-concept. As goals are malleable in organisational life, clients need to maintain their stability of goal-directed functioning rather than the stability of any one particular goal.

- Sometimes self-regulation is important, sometimes not. When a goal – organisational or other – matches clients' identities, clients feel self-concordant in their goal pursuit, which doesn't require any self-regulatory resources. Or, conscientious clients don't feel affected by mood swings in their commitment to goals.

Still, I observe an intellectual virus in coaching: reality is treated through magical thinking, with some coaches offering 'life-changing opportunities' to cope with the impact of digital tech on our mental and emotional health. On the one hand, those opportunities promise to solve it all with quick-fix digital tech challenges – the fundamental nature of which we don't fully understand yet – while disregarding our knowledge about the role of self-regulation processes to health functioning in complex organisational life. On the other hand, those offers promote AI and digital tech to cure the impact of those same digital processes.

Most ironically, when coaches claim that we can't deny digitalisation, they deny something more profound – namely that the stakes of coaching effectiveness and reputation are high and prone to at least one serious illusion, that of attention. That is to say that we have no idea what we're overlooking in how we're coaching today.

*Do we take the time for the art and craft of coaching in a world that knows only one thing: bigger, faster, higher?*

## WORKPLACE COACHING: REFRAMING OUR ATTENTION

Reframing our attention means having 'discomfort-zone' conversations about how digitalisation impacts us and how we impact digitalisation. For that, we need to engage in some rigorous self-distanced reasoning around the strategic scaffolding of our coaching mastery.

As jazz icon Miles Davis said: we need to make each other happen! That means strategically scaffolding our coaching mastery in a way that will suit the requirements of a digital new, with openness to being impacted by digitalisation. That's about:

- Being okay with being vulnerable in the digital normal, rather than employing magical thinking.

- Being modest in our mastery rather than coaching to be a hero.

- Remembering that clients feel disconnected through digital tech, and therefore;

- Tapping into our inherent relational skills to stop our and our clients' worlds from disintegrating through how we choose to see reality.

- Collaborating to reflect the powers and pitfalls of digitalisation for our mastery.

This scaffolding invites us to address three key dimensions of coaching mastery:

1.   Our deep intention as a coach.

2.   Embracing what works and what doesn't work in our own digital normal.

3.   Integrating who we're becoming through reflective practice.

## THE AGE OF IDEAS

I have at least five ideas to enable a rigorous reasoning process.

1.   It takes guts to explore to what extent we're anxious to create emotional immunity to stave off, dive through or live with the competitive and disintegrating nature of our digital normal. Anxiety in coaches, like in clients, is produced – through organisations, societies and systems – because of negative bias. The pressures of not getting clients have a more significant impact on our psychological state than the positive effects of courage to challenge digital tech. If we had courage rather than anxiety speaking through our mastery, what would courage have us do?

2. We work in silos, as if we had the knowledge with which to do so. We engage in the politics of the personal prison: 'It's me being a great coach having great clients.' We're persuaded that with more marketing skills and by shouting highest, proudest and wildest we'll get clients. Will we also perform best? We're taking ourselves too seriously: we're having a hard time 'reducing ourselves to zero', and the me business is killing us – as we're killing nature. Do we take the time for the art and craft of coaching in a world that knows only one thing: bigger, faster, higher?

3. There's a paradox about the power of coaching, which is that coaching is powerful but we don't act powerfully. While we're buried in others, we can't see ourselves as part of a greater whole to serve something bigger. Yet, we're not separate experiences. We are dust with consciousness, at least biochemically speaking. What else are we in our power and humanity?

4. We are kind people, but when stressed we tend to not be kind, which is ironic because kindness is the primary antidote to stress. Gearing up to ride the wave of digital coaching, we get caught up in polarised views around going digital: the idea that there's a right and wrong way to digitalise is hardly being kind to ourselves. What are we energising with our thoughts? Our decisions today cast the long shadows of tomorrow. How kind is our long-term decision-making to ourselves, our practice and those whom we serve?

5. We produce powerful questions as part of our mastery: we encourage innovation, we enable clients to have future foresight and we expand horizons of thinking. What happens when change through digitalisation is achieved? What challenges will that pose for people, their contexts, our environments and the stakeholders of coaching? There's always collective and contextual development. Where are we after change has been achieved? Does our mastery include that?

## BEYOND ENDS

What matters is WHO we are WHEN we engage with digitalisation and not THAT we engage with it. That's why we see people doing the same thing with different outcomes.

Our accountability lies in helping our clients realise their own accountability by inviting them to engage in rigorous self-distanced reflection of their 'self in digitalisation'. Once they see who they are in this, they will see what they need to do differently.

We coaches can raise the level in all that we engage in, if we only realise that we too are always just an idea away from a new reality. The ultimate question is: what do we want to role-model?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tünde holds a PhD in business and organisational management and an Ashridge master's in executive coaching and team coaching. Tünde is an academic as well as an ICF MCC coach and a senior practitioner with EMCC. She has authored four articles in high-ranking peer-reviewed scientific journals, three books and a range of articles in professional coaching magazines. Tünde runs her ICF-accredited coach-leader experiential learning set focusing on presence as the key competence at mastery level. Recently, Tünde produced a documentary: *The light and shadow of coaching – in and beyond organizations*, to collect donations to fund coach training for women in Kenya.

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