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Developing coaching cultures: an exploration of the enacting practitioner perspective

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Nick Kapoutzis

Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK

Lilith A. Whiley

University of Sussex Business School, Brighton, UK, and

Rachel Lewis and Jo Yarker

Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK and

Affinity Health at Work, London, UK

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite the popularity of facilitating coaching cultures, very little is known about this phenomenon, especially from the perspective of different organisational stakeholders. We aim to add the enacting practitioner perspective in developing coaching cultures that has not yet been explored through empirical research.

Design/methodology/approach – We interviewed 20 organisational development and coaching practitioners who work in or with organisations to develop coaching cultures.

Findings – We apply Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (TA) and unpack four intersecting themes: (1) "It flows through the veins of the organisation"; (2) "More powerful than anything else is having that one-to-one time"; (3) "The roadmap emerges"; and (4) "Means to an end and an end in itself". We construct a coaching culture as an ever-evolving, psychologically safe, and empowering dialogic "container" or subculture that is developed and sustained by change agents with first-hand experience of coaching.

Originality/value – The findings add to our understanding of coaching cultures by offering a conceptualisation of coaching culture based on practitioners' perspectives and constructing a framework of assumptions, values and behaviours that underpin them. We conclude by setting an agenda for further research in the advancement of coaching culture theory and practice in coaching psychology.

Keywords Coaching, Coaching culture, Organisational coaching, Workplace coaching, Organisational culture, Reflexive thematic analysis

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

"Coaching culture" has become a popular term to describe the deployment of coaching interventions with the intention of developing organisational culture. Various definitions and models have been proposed; despite its widespread use, there is no agreed shared definition (Kapoutzis *et al.*, 2024). Some definitions focus on "coaching" and present the defining feature as coaching behaviour (Hart, 2005) or working style (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2005), whereas others focus on "culture" offering a systemic view that explores multiple stakeholders. These may describe it as a coaching approach being integral to leadership, management, stakeholder, or customer engagement (Hawkins, 2012) or a

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coaching mindset and approach that people use “with each other . . . and beyond into relationships with external stakeholders” (Passmore and Crabbe, 2023, p. 14).

Various models have been offered to describe the development process, giving practitioners useful insights into maturity stages that build up to create embedded, mature coaching cultures. Some describe how commitment to coaching approaches moves from ad hoc, to managed or tactical to coaching becoming a strategic enabler (Clutterbuck *et al.*, 2016; Hawkins, 2012; Megginson and Clutterbuck, 2006). Others describe the maturity of coaching from intervention to human resource (HR) function to leader capability and finally embedded in culture (Knowles, 2022). Finally, some recent models emphasise the levels of coaching interventions’ maturity in organisations (Passmore and Crabbe, 2023; Whybrow and O’Riordan, 2021).

Despite the increase in the deployment of coaching in organisations and the development of coaching culture programmes, little empirical evidence exists on how these are developed or benefit organisations (Clutterbuck *et al.*, 2016; Knowles, 2022; Milner *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, both Gormley and van Nieuwerburgh (2014) and Kapoutzis *et al.* (2024) contend that our understanding of coaching cultures is still in its infancy.

Several stakeholder roles interact in organisations to embed coaching cultures. Scholars in the field have identified a number of roles such as the chief executive officer (CEO), director of HR, leadership and management development, coaching and organisational development, managers, coach trainers etc (Hawkins, 2012). Whybrow and O’Riordan (2021) identify three distinct roles: senior sponsors, internal change agents and external partners such as coaches or consultants. Finally, a more recent categorisation by Knowles (2022) distinguishes enacting stakeholders (i.e. organisational leaders and developers of people) from the receiving stakeholders (i.e. organisational members).

We consolidate the stakeholder groups that emerge from these well-known models as follows:

- a. leadership*: decision-makers or sponsors such as CEOs or HR directors,
- b. enacting stakeholders*: organisational developers and coaches,
- c. implementers or “amplifiers”*: managers-as-coaches and internal coaches and
- d. receiving stakeholders*: organisational members, customers and external stakeholders.

The perspective of the “implementers” has been explored through research on interventions that aim to develop managers as coaches (McCarthy and Milner, 2013, 2020; Milner *et al.*, 2018, 2020, 2022). This seems to be the dominant intervention employed to develop coaching culture and some evidence links managers adopting a coaching approach with increased engagement (Crabb, 2011), improved performance (Agarwal *et al.*, 2009), or empowerment (Fong and Snape, 2015). There is some evidence on the role of the leader in introducing coaching cultures (Anthony and van Nieuwerburgh, 2018), and to champion and role model coaching behaviour (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2005; Hamilton, 2019; Milner *et al.*, 2020) and some initial evidence on the views of “receiving” stakeholders (Boysen *et al.*, 2021).

Kapoutzis *et al.* (2024) observed a gap in academic research that delves into the experiences of practitioners who develop coaching cultures. Hawkins (2012) notes how those working in Organisational Development have become more “relevant because of their role in developing strategy, leadership engagement, organisational agility and culture change” (p. 8), whereas Clutterbuck *et al.* (2016) call them “the unsung heroes of coaching culture” (p. 185).

Finally, there is little-shared understanding of the normative elements (e.g. behaviours, values and assumptions; Schein, 2010) that underpin coaching cultures. We contend that practitioners in enacting roles play a pivotal “change agent” role, as interpreted from a

complex adaptive systems perspective (Eoyang, 2001), in establishing cultural norms in organisations. Therefore, understanding the behaviours, values and assumptions these practitioners hold and facilitate the embedding of, would give us access to these elusive cultural foundations of coaching cultures.

This study explores the perspectives of enacting stakeholders, and our guiding research questions are: “How are coaching cultures developed?”, “What is the role of the enacting stakeholders in developing coaching cultures?” and “What behaviours, values, and assumptions underpin coaching culture?”

Method

Design

We employed a qualitative interview design to explore participants’ experience of coaching culture development; the data were analysed with reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2022), used inductively and underpinned by a critical realist ontological framework (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Ethical approval was granted by Birkbeck, University of London Ethics Committee (code: OPEA-22/23-04).

Participants

Participants worked in or with organisations in the United Kingdom (UK) that use coaching to develop the organisation or have coaching culture programmes. The recruitment inclusion criteria are presented in Table 1.

Group	Category	Responsible for	Examples
A	Organisational developers	strategy and coaching programmes	organisational developers or psychologists, consultants
B	People developers	delivery of coaching services and training	coaches, coaching psychologists

Source(s): Authors’ own work

Table 1.
Criteria for recruitment

Due to specialised experience required, purposive sampling was the primary sampling strategy. Subsequent participants were recruited via “snowballing” where participants nominated others from their networks to take part in the study. A total of 20 participants, 10 per practitioner group, met the criteria for recruitment (Table 2). The sample size enabled us to balance depth with diversity of experience and facilitated the development of robust themes across the dataset and meaningful analysis of the research question. This is also in line with the sample size of 10–20 participants that Clarke and Braun (2013) recommend for published research. Participants worked in a variety of sectors, such as Healthcare, Education (higher and post-secondary), media, banking, charity sector, etc and the average years of coaching experience was 15.3 years, ranging from 5 years to 28 years.

Data collection

Semi-structured interview questions were developed to provide insights into the research area of foci. They followed the question format developed by Anthony and van Nieuwerburgh (2018), who explored leaders’ experiences of coaching cultures and explored three topic areas:

- (1) Participants’ experiences in coaching culture development

Pseudonym	Group	Current role	Previous or secondary role	Years of experience	Sector
1. Annie	B	Coach	Academic	10	Education
2. Bryony	A	OD Professional	Coach (internal and external)	21	Charities; Education
3. Carol	B	Coach	Supervisor (OD lead)	21	Financial services; Education; Healthcare
4. Diana	A	OD Professional	Coach (internal)	25	Education; Housing Associations
5. Evelyn	A	OD Professional	Coach (internal)	12	Education; Healthcare
6. Freya	A	OD Professional	Coach (internal)	15	Charities; Education
7. Georgia	A	OD Professional	Coach (internal)	7	Education; Charities
8. Ingrid	B	Coach	Coach (internal) and OD Professional	13	Education; Housing association
9. Jenny	A	OD Professional	Coach (internal)	5	Local Authority
10. Kapila	A	OD Professional	Coach (internal)	14	Education; Healthcare; Legal Services
11. Laura	B	Coach		25	SMEs; Start-ups; Financial Services; Education; Retail – global brands; Pharmaceutical; Consultancies; Biotech
12. Mona	B	Coach	OD Professional; HR Director	23	Healthcare; Education; Banking; Legal sector; Third sector – Charities
13. Norah	B	Coach	OD Consultant	28	Housing; Financial Services; Charities; Membership Organisations; Media
14. Oprah	B	Coach	OD Professional	24	Education
15. Prisha	B	Coach	L&D Professional	5	Media; Technology startups; Professional Services (Training and Consultancy)
16. Rita	A	OD Professional	Coach (internal)	18	Education, Healthcare
17. Stella	A	OD Professional	Coach (internal)	10	Banking; Retail
18. Tina	B	Coach	Academic	10	Education; Financial Services
19. Vicky	B	Coach	HR/L&D Professional	5	Professional Services (Training and Consultancy)
20. Zsofia	A	OD Professional	Coach (internal)	15	Education

Table 2.
Participants

Source(s): Authors' own work

(2) Critical incidents that demonstrate positive and negative examples of coaching culture

(3) Reflexivity on practitioner role and sense-making of coaching culture

Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and lasted between 45 and 60 min. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using the Microsoft Teams functionality.

Data analysis

We chose reflexive TA (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2022) to analyse the data due to the exploratory nature of the study's aims and our underlying intention to give voice to the unexplored practitioner perspective. Analysis was informed by a critical realist perspective, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) positioning of reflexive TA and followed the six phases of analysis they recommend in a recursive and iterative process. We started our analysis by first watching and then listening only to each participant interview a few times to become familiar with the data; we made initial notes. We coded 461 snippets into 61 initial codes from the transcripts using the Delve platform based on what, in our opinion, carried meaning. Sometimes this involved going back to the recording to check understanding through the actual voice of the participant to capture both the meaning and spirit of each quote. Codes were semantic and latent (Braun and Clarke, 2022) reflecting the participant accounts. Then, we noted down patterns of shared meaning between participants. We moved codes around in Delve and grouped them in initial preliminary themes. Some themes, such as the stakeholders' underpinning experience of coaching, felt more robust than others, in that there was a clear unifying central concept that underpinned them. For others, the central concept did not feel as strong, and we held these lightly and remained open and curious.

At some point, we had too many themes (approx.12) to form a coherent story grounded in the data. We realised that we became attached to some of the themes, and we had to rebuild the story in a way that clearly showed each theme's contribution. We generated thematic synopses with themes, subthemes and quotes that supported the essence of the theme and its underlying concept. We changed and refined the themes over time with definitions and names through discussion and a reflective toing-and-froing process within the research team. A thematic map was also generated during this phase to visualise the relationship between the themes, which informed the next phase of writing.

Researcher reflexivity

At all stages of the data generation and analysis process, we saw our own subjectivity and reflexivity as a valuable resource when interviewing, coding, theming and exploring shared meaning among the participants' stories and relating that to our own experience as researchers and practitioners who played similar roles in organisations as them. We were conscious of the ways we shaped and impacted on the research by relating to our own phenomenology and unpacking awareness and assumptions of our own experiences. For example, we started the journey thinking that stakeholder roles would be clear cut, but as we advanced in interviewing, we began to realise that all participants changed roles during their careers across the professional disciplines, their group identity (i.e. either organisational developer OR coach) converged and evolved. This made differentiating between the two groups less meaningful and we iteratively and fluidly evolved our study aspirations too.

Findings

Through our analytic process, we developed a structure of four themes (Table 3). We present these themes as "assumptions" or cultural patterns that practitioners hold, grounded in how they make sense of their experiences of working in or with organisations that use coaching to impact organisational culture. We finally constructed a critical additional theme that unpacks the perspectives of "insider" and "outsider" practitioner roles.

Theme	Unifying central assumption	Description
1. "It flows through the veins of the organisation"	A coaching approach is embedded in "the way things are done around here"	Coaching cultures are organisational "containers" where a coaching approach is embedded in organisational artefacts, people processes and interactions, underpinned by principles of psychological safety and empowerment
2. "More powerful than anything else is having that one-to-one time"	Coaching is a powerful intervention, and you need to experience it to believe in its power to deliver development and change	Coaching cultures are grounded in first-hand experience of coaching, which fuels practitioners' passion for coaching, leaders' commitment to champion coaching and the promulgating role of communities of coaching practice in organisations
3. The roadmap emerges	Coaching cultures are developed by a network of interventions that emerge through circumstance	Coaching cultures support wider organisational aims and utilise a network of interventions that emerge, adjust and respond to organisational or external changes
4. A means to an end and an end in itself	Coaching culture is a change process, but it can also describe a destination	Coaching impact is obvious at the individual or team level but less obvious at the organisational and cultural level. It is a change process but describing the destination focuses organisational effort

Table 3.
Thematic synopsis

Source(s): Authors' own work

Theme 1. "It flows through the veins of the organisation".

Participants articulated an organisational environment and culture where a coaching approach is embedded in "the way things are done around here" (Carol), a commonly used phrase as a shorthand definition for organisational culture.

Participants referred to visible organisational "artefacts" that refer to coaching explicitly or align to a coaching approach. These could be strategy documents, frameworks that support attraction, recruitment, or performance management, such as competency frameworks or performance criteria. For example, Rita mentioned that coaching is "a cross-cutting theme in their People Strategy". Prisha and Vicky explained that coaching and "coachability" are embedded in the competency framework that prospective employees are assessed against during the selection process.

Embedding a coaching approach in frameworks is however, not enough and a coaching approach needs to be experienced in behaviours in order to infiltrate the culture. This concept of "embeddedness", when it comes to behaviours or cultural patterns, was articulated by participants in the form of eloquent metaphors such as "It's in the fabric of the institution (Kapila), "Coaching had become part of the currency and the language" (Ingrid), and "You need to live and breathe it" (Evelyn). It is about "helping people to be more comfortable, to be transparent and authentic with each other because then that would flow through the veins of the organisation" (Carol).

Two distinct sets of principles, values and behaviours that underpin coaching cultures were constructed through participants' stories: *psychological safety for genuine inquiry and learning and growth through empowerment*. The concept of psychological safety describes

the first cultural pattern of behaviours, values and assumptions that we constructed through participants stories. The underlying assumption was that like coaching itself, coaching cultures create “spaces” for genuine inquiry where it is safe to question and challenge. A psychologically safe culture gives permission to people to voice their views and ideas and becomes a shared organisational learning behaviour grounded on principles of non-judgement and openness to learning by taking risks. It was described as a thinking space for constant inquiry where questioning assumptions is encouraged and that creates “a compassionate, caring and supportive culture” (Tina).

The second cultural pattern that we constructed from our participants accounts is that of learning and growth through empowerment, which is enabled by the first pattern of psychological safety and is amplified by strong values and practices of empowerment. It was underpinned by the “underlying belief that we are capable” (Vicky) and assumptions such as “Seeing others as adults with the solutions already within their gift” (Evelyn) and “Everyone is able to thrive, understand their worth and their value, and feel empowered” (Jenny). It was described as an environment that encouraged “ongoing learning, evolution and growth, with an orientation towards strengths and reciprocity” (Vicky) with a “strong feedback mechanism” (Prisha). Participants described the inherent power of coaching to empower others and this is replicated in coaching cultures through leadership or colleague behaviours such as: “reading the room to draw out the strengths” (Evelyn) where the leader “puts learning front and centre” (Mona) where discussions are about “possibility and progress” (Georgia) and where there is “generosity of spirit” (Kapila) where leaders and colleagues give time and space to enable other people’s learning and growth.

These patterns are exemplified by the following account of a line manager’s approach to when things went wrong:

They only had two questions: how do you think that went, which is immensely powerful and empowering . . . and what would you do differently next time. There was no blame so then you could take risks and you could risk being high performing (Ingrid).

Theme 2. “More powerful than anything else is having that one-to-one time”

The underlying assumption that underpins participants’ accounts is that coaching is a powerful intervention, and you need to experience it to believe in its power to deliver development and change.

We can pay thousands of pounds for people to go on amazing courses, but actually that one to one interaction . . . it is so powerful, more powerful than anything else is having that one-to-one time . . . it’s hugely rewarding (Kapila).

A theme that connects the participants stories is personal experience with coaching, either being coached, coaching others, developing their own coaching practice, or getting inspiration from others on the proposition of coaching cultures. For example, Oprah shared how she introduced the idea of a coaching culture to her organisation. She went to an event where a known scholar in the field spoke about developing a coaching culture and “thought it was phenomenal” and motivated her to research and establish how this proposition would help deliver her organisation’s new strategy and the new leader’s vision: “So, I made a big business case, got the funding and we established an external coaching bank that would help us to experience good quality coaching and . . . to develop some internal coaches so that more people can experience coaching” (Oprah).

Participants in internal roles positioned their role at the start of their journey, as the “architect” (Stella) or “the organiser, the instigator, motivator” (Oprah), and expressed their

desire to promulgate this way of working. They become evangelists for coaching because of their passion for it, which is based on personal experience and that makes them a critical change agent to “pollinate” coaching behaviours in their settings: “Coaching helped me considerably in a number of things in my career, my personal life . . . It was really powerful and it’s something I would like to mirror for other people” (Freya).

The importance of leadership buy-in, commitment and role modelling of coaching behaviours was commented on by all participants. They provided examples of leaders who had experiences of coaching, and how that experience cemented their role in, and commitment towards, developing a coaching culture. These leaders display behaviours that are aligned to a coaching approach, and which create a ripple effect in the people and settings they interact with: “It was how it changed the room [. . .] how it changed their patterns of thinking, how they then sort of almost co-inquired into what was going on . . . So, there was a ripple in the room in those examples that I have observed” (Oprah). The leaders who exemplify a coaching approach integrate it authentically into their leadership presence: “It just seemed to become part of who they were and how they are” (Oprah).

These patterns of relating are then sustained by communities of colleagues who have been “enlightened” with the coaching approach, managers-as-coaches and internal coaches. “If enough people are doing enough of it, then and it becomes more of the way that we do things, and it trickles down through the layers” (Carol). Following the initial development intervention, these communities are supported either through “coaching academies” (Evelyn, Diana), group supervision, or other coaching schemes. Some of these enlightened change agents go on to develop their own local schemes (Kapila).

Theme 3: The roadmap emerges

Participants stories supported the view that coaching cultures are not developed in isolation. There needed to be an intention, a direction, a wider programme or strategy. These could be implicit objectives such as helping junior colleagues develop communication skills or explicitly creating a coaching culture. When the wider aim was explicit, there was also a deliberate planned approach to using coaching interventions. This could be to support the implementation of a new strategy (Oprah) or support culture change programmes (Ingrid, Kapila, Evelyn, Freya). Mergers were another common reason that necessitated, “bringing the leadership team together . . . to develop a way of doing business that was more humane” (Byrony), or “they were aligning it to a restructuring . . . it was tied to very particular organisational outcomes in terms of progression up the (sector) rankings” (Laura). Participants described an ideal planned approach that requires a systemic conceptualisation of interconnected interventions linked to achieve the expected outcomes. This becomes the “roadmap” (Zsofia) that utilises a number of planned interventions to affect change across various levels of the business.

These examples are, however, rare: “I think the X (organisation) example is an extreme example because it was a huge culture change programme” (Ingrid) or “There was a big investment in programmatic coaching . . . introduced at scale to develop particular competencies linked to improvements in organisational performance . . . this was one of very few times when it was linked to an OD strategic intervention” (Laura).

Most of the time this conceptualisation is not pre-planned but emerges over time and reacts to individual or collective motivations. It starts with coaching schemes that offer coaching to leadership teams and a programme to develop internal coaches or managers as coaches. As the organisation and the programme mature, the need for other interventions emerges to sustain the culture. Some of these interventions are team or group coaching (Evelyn), the establishment of coaching academies (Evelyn, Georgia) or communities of practice (Zsofia), action learning sets (Zsofia, Rita), supervision (Ingrid, Freya, Rita), or group

supervision (Tina). In most cases, coaching becomes an underlying compass for all development work for individuals, leaders, or underrepresented groups (Kapila, Jenny, Tina).

In these scenarios, the roadmap emerges and develops from individual motivations, for example, when leaders want to embed a coaching culture in their own functions (Kapila). These interventions are prone to changes or critical moments in development. The changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic in ways of working caused many changes in coaching programmes. It shifted the focus from the team, group, or organisational long-term benefit to the individual and the immediate return (Evelyn). The most obvious change, however, was the move to virtual coaching that took away the opportunity that external coaches had to connect with their clients and understand the organisational culture: “Pre-pandemic I felt more connected to the organisations where I was working . . . I had a sense of what was going on in the organisation more, I think, which I have lost” (Laura).

Theme 4: A means to an end and an end in itself

Participants articulated the benefits of coaching interventions to individuals and teams. This power of coaching to drive growth and development in individuals has been expressed with clear examples: leaders advancing their careers, having more impact in organisations, or taking on more challenges as an outcome of investment in coaching. The evidence of impact at the organisational or cultural level was however, less clear. Those working as independent coaches had little evidence of the impact of their work in spaces outside the coaching “room”. Those closer to the organisation and the programme articulated impact other than that on individuals, for example in performance, wellbeing, or organisational health. These were either measured by engagement surveys (Stella, Diana) or through the implied diversity benefits that come from empowering underrepresented groups. Even some of those who initiated coaching culture programmes found it hard to articulate evidence beyond the individual or team and they talked about the difficulty in creating change in complex organisations: “It’s powerful for individuals, it can be made powerful for groups, I’m not sure it has the same (.) once you get to organisations” (Bryony).

The intention is to impact on the systemic, relational level, but it gets dented when it collides with entrenched, ingrained systems. Participants commented on the systemic change coaching needs to effect but how difficult that is: “If you think about nested systems, the system that they manage within the organisation, they’re doing what they can to create a coaching culture . . . and trying to protect their sphere of influence from the toxicity that’s outside” (Mona). Participants offered examples of working with clients who made personal transformations through their coaching work but who then had to operate in a dysfunctional system: “If coached individuals go back to toxic teams, the impact is not going to penetrate back in the workplace” (Freya).

Participants grappled with whether the term “coaching culture” is even helpful. “Is it about the intervention or is it about the culture?”, pondered Georgia. Rita wondered if the word coaching “gets in the way” as people need to unpack what coaching is, “when it is just about conversations that are not limiting” (Rita). Indeed, Bryony had strong views that the term “coaching culture” might do a disservice to coaching.

Yet, others thought that coaching culture gives intention, focus and clarity to the change they are trying to create but recognised that it is more suited to organisations or sectors where this way of working is already in their “culture”, otherwise it requires a difficult “sea change” or “fundamental mindset shift” (Rita). Irrespective of whether the term “coaching culture” is used with colleagues in organisations, it could be both a means to an end and an end in itself: “It is about the striving not the arriving but there has to be a purpose, there has to be some kind of vision for it, because otherwise we don’t strive in the first place” (Oprah).

Critical additional theme: insider/outsider status

Participants' current roles in coaching culture programmes spanned through the internal and external practitioner continuum. Most participants occupied several roles throughout their careers across this continuum (e.g. external coach, internal coach, organisational development practitioner, leader) and their experiences were described as an amalgamation of these perspectives. We observed how participants in internal roles were responsible for creating the business case and the development of coaching culture programmes. They had access to resources and played a coordinating, decision-making role in planning the programme, selecting interventions and those who will become the enacting stakeholders: leaders in sponsor roles, external coaches, developers of coaching practice and participants to develop an internal coaching practice. Zofia explained how an internal community of coaching practice helped "break down organisational barriers" and Diana as an "insider" ensures to "embed" organisational values in her work. External coaches on the other hand were somewhat separate from these internal goings-on and had less access to power brokerage. They lacked the "internal context knowledge" (Ingrid) and opportunities to connect (especially in a post-COVID era) were limited.

Discussion*How coaching cultures are developed*

The focus of this research was to explore how coaching cultures are developed through practitioners' experiences. Their rich experiences come from different organisations, sectors and their roles span interventions focused on the individual, team and organisational level.

Accounts of "ideal" coaching culture programmes describe a planned approach to introducing coaching interventions to support a strategic intention or programme of organisational development or change. These idealised accounts reflect popular models of coaching culture where this planned, incremental approach requires developing a common mindset about the role of coaching, champions in the form of leaders and a campaign to communicate the role of coaching in delivering business outcomes (Passmore and Crabbe, 2023). Our participants, while they recognised and supported this view, commented that these examples were rare. In most cases, they described dysfunctional contexts that coaching cultures need to emerge from. As a result, most coaching culture programmes are messy and emergent (Whybrow and O'Riordan, 2021), and react to events (e.g. pandemic, leaders departure from organisations, etc.) in line with complex adaptive systems (CAS) theory (Eoyang, 2001), which recognises the messy and complex nature of adaptive challenges where there are too many variables to consider. The strategy, therefore, that is proposed in leading emergent change, and which is similar to our participants stories, "requires mobilizing stakeholders to self-initiate action, then monitoring and embedding the most promising initiatives" (Bushe and Marshak, 2016, p. 43). Enabling or allowing this emergence to occur, amidst challenging or dysfunctional operating environments, creates the opportunities for new interventions to spring up from the motivations of other "enlightened" change agents in the system, leaders or practitioners who have been exposed to coaching interventions, attended a coaching programme, been coached, etc.

The impact of coaching cultures has been discussed by participants who claimed that coaching schemes or interventions enabled positive organisational or cultural outcomes. The evidence comes from indirect sources, such as engagement surveys or organisational performance indicators. However, evidence of the role coaching culture programmes play in organisations is not well documented. This, as well as the fact that culture as a term seems intangible and therefore difficult to define and measure, probably taints the view of a few practitioners who call for stopping using the term coaching culture in a global sense. Even though this was only expressed by a couple of our participants, we decided to give voice to

this position as it brings us back to the lack of a shared definition of coaching culture. It also goes to the heart of the debate as to whether it is about coaching or about culture; is it a process, a means to an end (Hawkins, 2012), or a destination, an end-in-itself? We contend that it can be both and the term could be used mainly amongst academics and practitioners to give focus to people or organisational development programmes but unpacked, explored, or even co-created when used with the recipient stakeholders in organisations.

The role of the enacting stakeholders in developing coaching cultures

In developing coaching cultures, three “enacting” (Knowles, 2022) stakeholder roles were discussed by participants: first, the role of the organisational development practitioner and coach, described as the architect, instigator and developer; second, the role of leadership, as the driver and champion of coaching cultures; and third, the role of coaching communities of practice, internal coaches or managers as coaches, who become those who promulgate and sustain coaching cultural patterns.

These three roles become the agents for behaviour change, which according to CAS theory is socially and culturally situated (Gomersall, 2018). They generate rules and assumptions, as seen in the coaching principles discussed earlier, that “govern social action” (Gomersall, 2018, p. 405). They become a system in its own right nested in their wider organisational, complex adaptive system that exhibits emergence and continuous adaptation.

The underlying experience of coaching seems to be a strong foundation for enacting stakeholders’ motivation (Anthony and van Nieuwerburgh, 2018). In fact, experience of coaching is a common frame shared by all participants in their enacting roles, as well as those in implementer or amplifier roles (e.g. managers-as-coaches, internal coaches). They become change agents (Passmore and Lai, 2020) and pollinators of this way of doing and being. They become “passionate” and “evangelistic” (Whybrow and O’Riordan, 2021) and integrate it into who they are and practice from a position of “self-as-instrument” (Cheung-Judge, 2001).

Those with current or previous experience in learning and development or organisational development roles overlay frames and concepts commonly seen in organisational change and change management literature, including the role of leadership (Kotter, 2012). The transfer from individual learning through coaching to collective learning has been observed, “through enacting behaviours, enacting a coaching approach and embedding collective learning processes” (Swart and Harcup, 2013, p. 337) and leaders have been discussed as “owners” of culture in organisations (Passmore and Crabbe, 2023).

The importance of the leadership role in championing and role modelling coaching behaviours has been a consistent theme identified in empirical research (Anthony and van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Hamilton, 2019; Milner *et al.*, 2020; Vesso and Alas, 2016) as well as case studies and book chapters on coaching culture (e.g. Whybrow and O’Riordan, 2021). It is also a common and consistent theme identified in evidence reviews of coaching cultures (Gormley and van Nieuwerburgh, 2014; Kapoutzis *et al.*, 2024). Those who have first-hand experience of coaching or witness the transformation it can create in individuals are likely to evidence the kind of leadership that is akin to a coaching culture, creating a coaching “ripple effect” (O’Connor and Cavanagh, 2013). The way the ripple effect manifests itself, and its impact is still unclear, and it would benefit from further exploration.

The communities that are created with those who have engaged in developing a coaching practice, become an important vehicle through which the coaching “gospel” can proliferate and is used in organisations to capture tacit knowledge and develop organisational capability (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Members of these communities proliferate, alongside a coaching approach, organisational values (Gormley and van Nieuwerburgh, 2014; McKee *et al.*, 2009) and are driven by an altruistic motivation (most internal coaches are voluntary roles) to share their practice and do public good, add social value.

Behaviours, values and assumptions underpinning coaching cultures

Coaching cultures were constructed as organisational settings that have embedded a coaching approach or mindset. The concept of embeddedness is tied into theories and definitions of organisational culture, where behaviours, norms and values become ingrained in the system and shape organisational behaviour (Kotter, 2012). A coaching approach becomes a style or cultural pattern that is based on coaching principles.

We constructed two sets of behaviours, values and assumptions (or cultural patterns), as presented in Table 4. Participants’ accounts presented coaching cultures as psychologically safe (Edmondson, 2019; Newman et al., 2017) dialogic containers, “Intangible yet real spaces in which the potential and possibility of a group can unfold” (Corrigan, 2016, p. 31), and where growth and empowerment can take place. Psychological safety seems to be an outcome of coaching cultures (Egan and Kim, 2013) and is centrally tied to learning behaviour (Edmondson, 2011). Behaviours such as listening, questioning, being curious and allowing time and space for genuine inquiry to occur alongside trust, create supportive and compassionate subcultures (Knowles, 2022) and the conditions for a “coaching culture for learning” (van Nieuwerburgh and Passmore, 2018).

Learning and growth through empowerment was a central theme in participants’ accounts, which also features in the Milner et al. (2020) definition. These coaching principles are integral to a diversity perspective (Filsinger, 2021) and support diversity and inclusion objectives, giving voice and an invitation to members of under-represented communities to develop and present themselves and their contributions in organisations.

Conceptualising coaching culture

We offer a thematic map or visualisation of our themes (Figure 1). We also add our findings to the Kapoutzis et al. (2024) framework (Figure 2) to strengthen the evidence of the building blocks of coaching culture based on the enacting stakeholder assumptions/themes that were generated by our study. Our findings show good congruence with the defining characteristics produced by Milner et al. (2020), such as the use of multiple types of coaching, formalised process, leadership involvement, and alignment with organisational values such as empowerment and learning.

	Psychological safety	Learning and growth
Assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An environment that feels safe encourages voicing opinion, giving feedback, questioning and challenging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological safety enables taking risks and consequently learning, growth and innovation
Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust • Respect • Compassion • Non-judgemental stance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowerment • Generosity of spirit • Learning orientation/growth mindset • Possibility and progress
Behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening in depth • Posing questions rather than directives • Being curious • Showing vulnerability • Engage in open conversations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Putting learning front and centre • Strengths-spotting • Giving voice, encouraging, empowering others • Allowing risk-taking • Experimenting and innovating

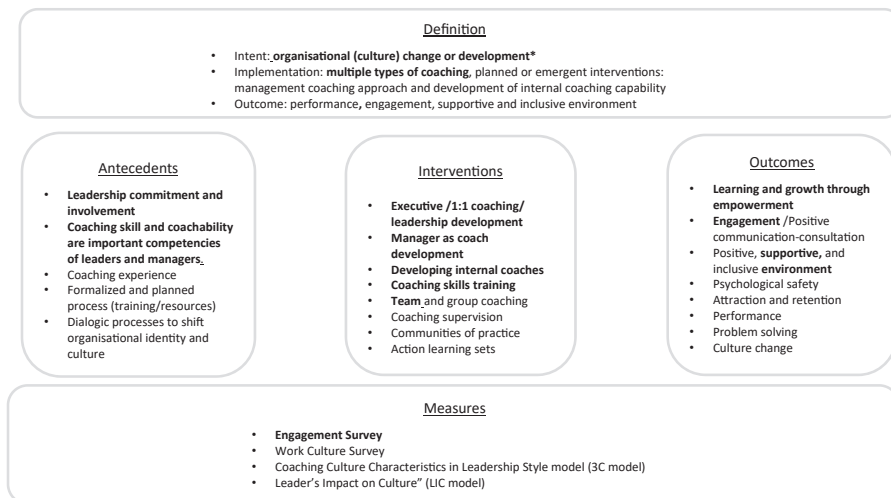
Table 4. Cultural patterns underpinning coaching cultures

Source(s): Authors’ own work



Source(s): Authors' own creation

Figure 1.
Thematic map –
visualisation of
coaching culture



Note(s): in bold: Findings from both this study and Kapoutzis *et al* (2024)

Source(s): Framework courtesy of Kapoutzis *et al.* (2024) and extended by authors' own work

Figure 2.
Conceptualisation of
coaching culture as per
Kapoutzis *et al.* (2024)
framework

Practice implications and further research directions

Our study contributes to our understanding of coaching cultures by giving voice to the practitioner perspective, which has been overlooked by empirical research. It provides a nuanced understanding of the coaching principles and behaviours that underpin coaching cultures and highlights the role of the enacting stakeholders as change agents operating in complex and dysfunctional systems. The education and training of these agents needs to reflect, and prepare them for, the challenges of operating and effecting change in dysfunctional organisational settings.

We call for further research to explore the phenomenon of coaching cultures focussing on organisational members and how they experience and benefit from organisations that have mature coaching culture programmes. Further research on the interaction of the “enacting” and “receiving” stakeholders would offer insights into the embedding process of a coaching approach in organisations. Finally, more research on the benefits of coaching cultures, for example on retention and performance, would strengthen the business case for investing in this type of organisation development strategy to create organisations that are human-centric, healthier and development oriented.

Conclusion

Coaching cultures are psychologically safe dialogic “containers” where a coaching approach is embedded in organisational artefacts, people activities and interactions, and where exploration and growth can take place. They are grounded on first-hand experience of coaching and are developed through planned or emergent interventions to develop internal coaching capability in the form of managers-as-coaches, internal coaches, or communities of coaching practice. The coaching “way of doing and being” is then promulgated by them as they interact with others in their organisations, with the aim of improving engagement and creating a supportive and inclusive environment.

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About the authors

Nick Kapoutzis is a chartered occupational and coaching psychologist and an organisational development practitioner working in the fields of coaching, talent, leadership, organisational development and culture change. He completed his doctoral research at Birkbeck College, University of London. Nick Kapoutzis is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: nkapoutzis@hotmail.co.uk

Lilith A. Whiley is a senior lecturer at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom. Lilith is an interdisciplinary researcher, bringing together psychology and human resource management, and is interested in the intersection of marginalised identities, health and work.

Rachel Lewis is reader in occupational psychology at Birkbeck College, University of London and Managing Partner of Affinity Health at Work, an occupational psychology consultancy and research group. Rachel and Jo work and research in the area of wellbeing at work and are committed to building evidence-based practice in the field of occupational psychology.

Jo Yarker is Professor in occupational psychology at Birkbeck College, University of London and Managing Partner of Affinity Health at Work, an occupational psychology consultancy and research group. Jo and Rachel work and research in the area of wellbeing at work and are committed to building evidence-based practice in the field of occupational psychology.