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"You Coach Coaches?" A Rationale for the Coach Developer Role and Practical Guidelines for Effective Working Relationships with Coaches

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ABSTRACT

There has been an increased focus on the role of the coach developer within the academic literature and coaching frameworks. However, limited attention has been given to the practical workings of the coach developer and coach relationship. Therefore, in this article, we share practical lessons learned from two coach developers who have worked extensively one-on-one with coaches.. This article contains seven developed themes from our experiences as coach developers in the field: (1) The Value of an Outside Opinion, (2) Payments and Contracts, (3) "Down the Rabbit Hole:" Recognizing the Complexity of Problems, (4) Practical Use of Theory, (5) Impact and Transformation, (6) Coach Development Conversations as a Therapeutic Experience and, (7) Disengagement. The practical lessons within this article demonstrate the value of coach developers in helping, supporting, and working with coaches. Finally, we assert that the coach developer role requires expertise, knowledge, and resources, which should be fairly compensated, as in other jobs.

KEYWORDS

Learning facilitator; coach; sports; learning; coach-learning

Coaching practice demands that practitioners operate in a multidisciplinary fashion with many different roles and responsibilities (Horton, 2015). Examples include serving as a visible member of the public, substitute parent, mentor, friend, educator, leader, and disciplinarian (Nash, 2023; Pearson & Baghurst, 2020). The breadth of the role is reflected in the alternative schools of thought that exist within the ever-growing field of literature. Disciplines such as pedagogy (e.g., learning theories, pedagogical approaches, and assessment), psychology (e.g., decision-making, support strategies, and perception-action coupling), sociology (e.g., micropolitics, power, and habitus), strength and conditioning (e.g., periodization, overloading, fitness testing, and training) reflect the diversity and complexity of the coach's role. Added to this list of roles and responsibilities is perhaps the most important societal expectation: coaching and winning (Pearson & Baghurst, 2020).

Furthermore, coaching requires knowledge and expertise across many subdisciplines, such as biomechanics, sports psychology, teaching and learning, motor learning, sports management, sports nutrition, and so on (Baghurst, 2020). The coach must have the

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professional knowledge and skills necessary to perform their job, combined with the many other skills determining their effectiveness in working with people (Gamble, 2018).

The academic literature describes coaching as context-dependent and goal-orientated and includes an array of psycho-social processes (Nash, 2023). Put simply, coaches do not have the luxury of applying one-size-fits-all solutions to coaching situations. Often, coach education provides a suite of formal learning opportunities, intending for coaches to engage and learn something from the experience (Piggott, 2011). The analogy is that of a buffet, where enough options are provided within the training so the coach can take away something they like or can use.

This type of education exists in many forms, ranging from short presentations, half-day workshops, weekend clinics, weeklong programs, or more comprehensive programs such as academic certificates and degrees. From personal experience, we have observed coaching certifications ranging from intensive yearlong training requiring regular (e.g., UKCC Level 4 Coaching Qualifications), continual refresher updates (e.g., to maintain coaching licenses) to one-off short videos followed by completing multiple choice options (Nash & Sproule, 2012). For example, one of us achieved an international coaching license by completing a multiple-choice test as many times as necessary until an 80% pass rate was achieved. The organization provided no training content for the test.

Stone et al. (2020) commented that coaches often learn in different ways that more closely reflect the complexity of their role. Other informal methods exist outside of formalized coach learning programs, such as peer-to-peer observations (likely by coach request and arrangement), mentorship (perhaps provided by their organization, club, or national governing body), and experiential learning (i.e., learning by doing). Milistetd et al. (2018) presented the notion of narrative collaborative coaching, whereby coaches work with a "Personal Learning Coach" (p. 7) to find solutions together mutually. This is a powerful and pertinent example of how knowledge can be constructed between individuals. Coach education literature strongly suggests that informal methods of coach learning are the most influential on coaching practice (Piggott, 2011; Stoszkowski & Collins, 2015).

Coach education is described as problematic, decontextualized, and removed from the day-to-day practice of coaches (Webb & Leeder, 2021). However, for coaches with minimal prior experience, coach education has an important part to play in educating them about issues of player safety, safeguarding, and working with children (Nash & Sproule, 2011). Notably, there are differences between providing large-scale formal education, for example courses provided by National Governing Bodies (NGBS) and other formal opportunities. For coaches wishing to work their way up the coaching ladder, their quickest route is to gain NGB-accredited qualifications.

The value of a coach developer

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on the role of the coach developer. Organizations such as the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (CIMSPA, UK), the United States Centre for Coaching Excellence (USCCE, USA), and The International Council for Coaching Excellence (ICCE, International) all refer to and recognize the role of the coach developer. Indeed, a coach developer's profile and requirements vary and include roles such as educator, leader, mentor, assessor, qualification designer, and evaluator. Although there is a breadth of roles

bestowed on the term "coach developer," the primary function is to improve coaches by using a variety of mechanisms and within the specific coaching contexts in which practice occurs (Jones et al., 2024). Considering the multi-faceted requirements outlined, coach developers must understand the different subdisciplines and appropriate frameworks to guide their practice (McQuade & Nash, 2015). Undoubtedly, coach developers can significantly impact coaches' success and development.

This article shares the experiences and learning of two coach developers who have worked extensively with coaches *in situ*. This one-on-one approach requires significant time and emotional investment, yet, as we will share, this dyadic relationship facilitates a depth of learning inaccessible by other learning approaches. We present seven themes that stem from our series of coach-development interactions and ongoing work, which serve as a resource to coach developers and those with leadership responsibilities in sports organizations.

Purpose of the coach developer and their relationship to the coach

For coaches to consider engaging and working with a coach developer, there needs to be perceived value to the coach. More broadly, there are several underpinning reasons why coaches work with coach developers (Jones et al., 2024). We acknowledge that a coach's motivations for working with us depend on their unique situation. Stemming from our experiences, we present four of the most common reasons we have encountered.

First, performance improvement may lead to increased success, such as a promotion or pay raise (Bykova & Coates, 2020). Although coaching is domain-specific (Lyle, 2018) and goals inevitably vary depending on the participants and level of competition, in many cases at the high school level and above, coaches are more often than not judged on their wins and losses. This pressure may come from internal stakeholders and external entities such as the media or fans (McLean & Mallett, 2012). Therefore, coaches seek to exhaust all options to gain an advantage over their competition.

Second, some coaches have an intrinsic desire to improve; for example, coaches typically express comments such as, "I just don't know what I don't know." From our experience, the coach's personality is the key factor that determines how open-minded they are. For coaches, though, no singular coach education course can adequately prepare them for all eventualities. Therefore, it is natural that coaches reach a point in their careers where they realize they need to upskill and gain more knowledge in certain areas. This is perhaps most apparent in high-level sports, where there is an increased technical and tactical complexity and pressure to win (Olusoga et al., 2011). However, from our experience, not all coaches have a deep-rooted intrinsic desire to improve, and the notion of improvement depends on the coach's personality, aspirations, and organizational culture and not on the level at which they coach.

Third, coaches may wish to develop expertise in a specific area (e.g., team building, developing culture, communication skills). The desire to do so often arises because of team needs or because they have a self-perceived weakness. Some become frustrated with being unable to change the status quo (e.g., unhelpful team habits or micro-management from within the organization; Norman, 2012). In these instances, coaches identify the exact areas they wish to develop and articulate their reasons for wanting to improve. In one case,

a coach stated, "I'm leading my team, and I need to be better; I can't expect them to communicate better if I don't learn first."

Finally, working with a coach developer provides coaches with additional confidence from having a support system. Coaching can sometimes be a lonely endeavor, particularly when coupled with leadership responsibilities that require difficult decisions (Cooper & Quick, 2003). Feeling supported by someone who is not within the organization and is neutral can provide coaches with a perceived non-judgmental perspective (Gilbert et al., 2006). For coaches who work with this type of supportive system, it facilitates an environment for open discussions, often allowing them to feel their decisions are validated.

The practicalities of the working relationship

The first step in establishing a working relationship is to ensure that coaches know you are accessible and available. For coach developers to find work, they must market themselves effectively. This could be through a personal website, social media, or institutional homepage. Most often, work is found via word of mouth and personal connections. Recommendations are made by satisfied coaches who are happy to share contact details with their close coaching networks. However, it is important to realize that we offer support designed to help coaches gain any advantage possible. Therefore, not all coaches wish to share information! "I'm not telling anyone else about you! Why would I give away my secret?" is the kind of statement we have heard more than once. Regardless of how marketing is done, coaches need to understand who and what is available to support them.

The working relationship between the coach developer and the coach varies significantly. In our experience, they have ranged from one month to those that have been ongoing for several years, depending on the needs of the coach or, at times, the organization's budget. As we will explain later, these relationships are complex and multi-faceted. The array of interactions with the coaches includes observing coaching practice for future discussions, conducting open-ended interviews, informal reflective conversations that integrate experience and theory, and simpler forms of communication such as online messaging, text messages, and short phone calls. The work may also include discussions with ancillary personnel, such as athletes, coaches, and management with whom the coach works. These interactions provide the foundational basis and an initial element of shared experiences for our conversations.

Coaches work many hours a week, and finding time to meet with them can be challenging. While ideally, we would prefer to meet coaches in person, as this provides a sense of connection with the coach and their environment, it is not always practical. Consequently, meetings are often dictated by the coach's availability and schedule, and there is a need to be flexible and meet online (e.g., Zoom). For example, some sessions are held in the mornings in the coach's office before practices commence, and coaches have some cognitive space to engage in critical, deep thinking. Alternatively, other coaches require afternoon appointments to accommodate employer schedules and family commitments; meetings occur when it is most convenient for the coach and not vice versa.

Taking notes is necessary during sessions as they provide reference points for us to revisit during the meeting or later in the season. Typically, a follow-up e-mail or text after sessions is sent to the coach that summarizes some key points and includes a series of further questions that encourage reflection before the next session. Setting an agenda is essential if

meetings are to remain on track. We ask coaches to share a brief agenda before the meeting so that we can consider what information might be helpful to share. Sometimes, the agenda is as simple as "can we talk about some stuff I'm thinking of implementing over the next week?"

Occasionally, we mutually agree on an event that informs the conversation. This could be, for example, a recording of the coach's session that the coach developer observed in person. These shared experiences are incredibly valuable as they provide real-world and context-specific examples of the coach's practice. We use this material to inform a series of questions based on our observations. Working in this fashion requires significant planning and time, which must be factored into any agreements and pricing at the outset.

Within the context of this research, coach developer and coach dyads arose due to a request from a coach or management, from conducting research, speaking engagements, and often consultancy. The objectives of the relationship (from the coach's perspective) often varied and were highly dependent upon the context and underpinning reason for the pairing.

In summary, the coach developer role is complex yet garnering more academic and practical attention. Given the value, practicalities, and purpose of the coach developer-coach relationship that has been described above, this study aimed to unpack the intricacies of the relationship critically to help coach-developers understand their value and how to operate, as well as reinforce the significance and value of a coach-developer to practicing coaches.

Methods

This research examined the experiences of two coach developers in the field and identified key themes that can act as lessons for other coach developers and the field more broadly. This approach has many similarities with duoethnography (e.g., experiences served as the site for this research) and autoethnography (e.g., personal experiences were systematically analyzed to connect and explain a broader phenomenon) (Breault, 2016; Wall, 2006). However, while we acknowledge the parallels between this research and ethnography (e.g., immersion in the field, duration of time, reflexivity, theme development), we do not consider it to be a true ethnographic approach as the findings arise from the experiences of two researchers who have practiced separately but in the same profession and with similar coaches. Data presented in this study was acquired through approved data collection research by the University Ethics Committee.

Participants

In the present study, participants were comprised of both researchers (i.e., coach developers) and coaches. We both possess a physical education and pedagogy background with coaching experiences ranging from the grassroots to the international level. We have an array of formal coaching qualifications/certifications spanning 15 sports. Both of us have trained, qualified, and worked as schoolteachers. We share 50 years of coaching experience across multiple sports and 16 years as coach developers.

Working relationships with approximately 30 coaches are drawn on to inform this research. These coaches have worked in various settings (e.g., high school to Olympic

level). Developmental relationships were established in various formats, including research arrangements, organizational contracts, personal contracts, and personal connections. For inclusion purposes, only coaches we had worked with for a minimum of three months were selected. In all cases, coaches worked in the performance domain where wins/results were essential to their job role.

Procedure of theme development

First, we discussed our experiences more broadly as coach developers in the field. This initial discussion included aspects such as our years of experience, the level of coaches we have worked with, the level of athletes we have coached, and general biographical information. This was an important aspect as it allowed us to identify common elements that would serve as potential points of interest for discussion. In the next phase of discussion, we began to verbalize and share our specific experiences as coach developers and the challenges that we had experienced. These experiences were informed by the first conversation, which acted as a frame to guide the discourse. Following these meetings, e-mails and video conversations were exchanged, which promoted reflexivity and further evaluation of what we considered priorities. In addition, four meetings took place to facilitate discussion of the data and analyze what was most pertinent and common to both researchers. From these meetings and e-mail exchanges, themes (i.e., lessons learned from the field) were developed, refined through conversations, and populated with quotations from coaches we had previously worked with. The theme development process was iterative, whereby both research team members scrutinized reflective experiences. In some cases, it was initially unclear how specific experiences could be grouped into more abstract themes. As an illustrative example, we shared our experiences in different settings of helping coaches reduce their stress and identify bespoke coping strategies. In addition, it was clear that coaches enjoyed our meetings and expressed a sense of calm. Over time and with further refinement, we established that the "common ground" between our experiences was *how* coaches felt in the meetings. Consequently, these reflective examples were classified under a "therapeutic" theme.

Results and discussion

In this section we present seven themes that were developed from our analysis of the data. For context, each theme begins with quotations from coaches who we have worked with. This is intended to provide a flavor of what questions and comments we have heard. Following this, each theme is unpacked in terms of the practical working and value of the coach developer. Finally, where appropriate, our lived experiences are shared as examples.

Theme 1: the value of an outside opinion

Quotation 1: "You aren't a gymnastics coach, but I don't need you to be. You've coached and understand coaching, and I can learn from you."

Quotation 2: "I just need someone to talk to someone who doesn't work here."

Less experienced coaches often seek inspiration and ideas to develop their drills and coaching activities to expand their repertoire. However, as coaches develop and assume more responsibilities, they realize that other forces are at play, impacting their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the coaching arena (Becker, 2013). Coaches may be prone to seek guidance from within their organization or sport to reflect more deeply, change behaviors, or learn. Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that coaches might seek advice and support from other individuals with a similar body of professional knowledge (i.e., coaches in the same sport and at the same or higher level) or a superior (e.g., athletic administrator).

Regarding coaching behaviors, habits often form within organizations, and behavioral norms are reflected in day-to-day actions. Over time, these actions become engrained and more difficult to change (Cassidy et al., 2023). Therefore, a coach developer (i.e., an outsider) can challenge the status quo and test the degree of congruence between the coach's beliefs and actions. In academic terms, the alignment between espoused theory (i.e., what is said to be believed) and theory of actions (i.e., what actions are taken) is a cornerstone of ethical coaching (Hochstetler, 2019). Nevertheless, it is often difficult for coaches (and one might argue their superiors such as a manager, owner, or athletic director) to self-assess due to cognitive bias and emotional investment in their methods and situation.

Unfortunately, and at many levels, a coach request (or management-enforced pairing) for help from an external agent may create anxiety and stress (Griffin et al., 2025). Examples may include fears of inter-organizational gossip, concern over evaluations, and uncertainty about their competence. External relationships provide coaches with a distanced viewpoint from which there is arguably greater clarity and unquestionably less susceptibility to bias. Coach developers who work with coaches and organizations are more likely (and able) to question cultural practices.

Outsiders will likely possess relevant knowledge or resources that can be shared with coaches over time (e.g., understanding of training methods, practical documents, and experience with similar challenges). However, the primary benefit of an outsider is their position in relation to the coach and organization, as they have no personal agenda. To this end, outsiders can, without prejudice, pose questions and offer solutions that unassumingly challenge the status quo. We believe this to be significant and essential in moving from "We have always done it this way" to "We are open-minded to exploring new ideas."

Theme 2: payment and contracts

Quotation 1: "How much do you want to come in and do some work?"

Quotation 2: "Can you tell me what you could offer so I can share it with management?"

We have found that the relationship is not one-way. There is something on offer for both individuals, but it is a process that takes time and considerable effort. In practical terms, a coach developer might gain new insights into practical coaching challenges while the coach benefits from the developer's expertise and support. Coach developers

may also gain an improved reputation for having worked with a coach or team of note. Indeed, one might argue that we have gained from our experiences with the publication of an article.

In speaking with other coach developers who contract privately, it has become clear that there are no fixed rules for charging clients. Some charge per hour (with amounts ranging widely), some per half day or day, and some are hired on retainer with a base monthly contract. Nor do we have set guidelines. We recognize that not all coaches are paid the same, and the budget of a high school coach will not be the same as a professional coach (although we have also learned that many professional coaches are poorly compensated). Therefore, we may have a base rate (e.g., "X amount per hour for contact time") that fluctuates based on the situation and the relationship's longevity. In addition, some clients may want a monthly meeting, whereas others seek on-call accessibility. Therefore, while we cannot offer clear-cut recommendations, we encourage asking the question, "What does your budget look like?" and being flexible based on the needs and financial status of the coach.

For those coach developers who might be academics, there must be a realization that service to the academic institution does not have to be free. There may be a tendency to work with coaches and others with the expectation that "This is part of my job." However, recognize the value in the product being given and the expertise of the coach developer. Free work should only occur when the coach or organization cannot pay, your pay comes in some other form (e.g., personal experiences such as a trip with the team), or the work is free on the understanding that it leads to future opportunities (e.g., first consult is free). In many ways, working for free devalues the credibility of the developer and the profession.

Theme 3: "down the rabbit hole:" recognizing the complexity of problems

Quotation 1: "I'll need to go away and read up on this subject a little more for next time. Any suggestions?"

Quotation 2: "It's tough to understand it all without someone else to talk to."

Throughout the ongoing discussions, we must strike a balance as coach developers. There is a need to listen, appreciate, and understand. Conversely, listening alone does not always add significant value to the relationship or help the coach to deepen their understanding. Therefore, the coach developer must recognize *when* to listen and *when* to speak.

The purpose of going "down the rabbit hole" is two-fold. First, it embraces the many complexities associated with coaching; this phase is essential in helping establish rapport and credibility as a coaching outsider. Complex problems are rarely shared at the initial outset of the relationship. Typically, the first meeting represents a familiarization phase, which is highly dependent on the coach developer and coach fit (i.e., synergy, willingness to work together, openness, and the initial reason for being paired). However, if the relationship is the right fit, coaches' issues will soon be shared and presented (Edwards et al., 2020). In some instances, they are understandably cautious about sharing their problems, concerns, or areas for development, especially if the relationship has been forced upon them and there are concerns about confidentiality (Baghurst et al., 2024). This guarded approach sometimes results from their perceptions of fear and judgment or if the information was to

be shared outside of this new relationship. Put simply, developing an effective working relationship takes time, and the coach developer and coach relationship is no different!

In the early stages of the relationship, problems are often shared at a superficial level; for instance, coaches might allude to factors such as differences of opinion between (or with) stakeholders, minor issues with athletes, or challenging parents. However, over time, coaches begin to confide and share more personal information about the difficulties they are experiencing in their day-to-day roles. Our role as a coach developer is to listen and seek to understand (Culver et al., 2019). This listening is intentional, designed to understand the problems and establish trust. This process can be, at times, slow and challenging, particularly when working with multiple stakeholders in the same organization, each with a different point of view (Freakley, 2024). Therefore, confidentiality and integrity are paramount if real issues are to be tabled.

The second purpose is to map out the problem and establish a *shared* understanding to ascertain a variety of viable options. The development of a multi-perspective viewpoint offers a more sophisticated and accurate view of the set of issues (Salter, 2014). From our experiences, coaching problems are often intertwined with other factors, many likely outside the coach's control. Through our conversations with coaches, a great deal of time is spent deliberating the options that might be available. Often, there is no perfect solution. Instead, what exists is a series of compromises that need to be made (e.g., what works best for whom). In addition, we have found that due to the interconnected and multidisciplinary content of the conversations, coaches appreciate that there are situations when they need to do what they feel is right rather than what is easy and may just need reassurance and encouragement to make the hard decision. However, the value of coaches recognizing the complexity of their problems is that they can articulate and rationalize their decisions more clearly to others (Preston et al., 2020). This benefits coaches who may need to appease external stakeholders and justify their coaching processes.

Theme 4: practical use of theory

Quotation 1: "I don't understand the word theory; give me another word."

Quotation 2: "Explain it in English."

Many coaches are understandably cautious of theory. Often, they are reticent of, but not unable to, engage with complex terminology and unfamiliar concepts. On reflection, this is generally attributed to the difference in coach developer and coach positions and experiences. Researchers may wish to examine if there is a difference in levels of education and training between coach developers and coaches. Using overly complex language and terminology too soon (or ever) in the relationship is extraordinarily easy. However, most coaches should be exposed to precise language to develop shared mental models and a common understanding.

We encourage caution in foregrounding theories with coaches who might not yet be at a stage in their coaching journey to use them. Moments arise to share appropriate theories as a way to think about problems (Stodter et al., 2021). From our experience, it is helpful for coaches to know *why* they are doing what they are doing. This provides a sense of validation

and self-assurance that cannot be achieved from external judgments alone (McLean & Mallett, 2012). Our task is to give coaches a set of tools, or lenses, to view the world around them. This may be through our conversations with them or even providing the articles and materials for them to pursue their own learning.

Our coach developer role is akin to sharing our knowledge, albeit partially, at opportune moments. This process has similarities with teaching. Over time, we begin to recognize and understand how best to scaffold the learning for each coach we work with. This one-on-one relationship affords a high level of attention to detail and the ability to focus on the individual coach with whom we work. However, the learning can sometimes be problematic, for without a clear set of goals, conversations, while deep, often become side-tracked and of limited value to either party.

In one recent example, one of us worked with a coach who was exhibiting symptoms of burnout. These symptoms included lack of sleep, poor diet, detachment from work, and general feelings of work-related stress. Therefore, in one coach developer session, we presented some literature on burnout to the coach. This included theoretical models, ways to think about stressors, and problem-focused and emotion-focused solutions. In turn, this allowed the coach to think about their situation and populate the model. Finally, this facilitated the opportunity to work with the coach and develop a list of issues and an accompanying list of (potential) solutions most appropriate for their situation. Therefore, we consider the analogy of giving the coaches a compass (i.e., a tool), but it is their responsibility to interpret the map.

From our experience, the inclusion of theory has helped coaches. However, the extent to which this is effective depends on where the coach is in their journey and their willingness to embrace complexity. As a tangible example, one coach was introduced to the sociological concept of "power" to explain and frame why more senior colleagues might be acting in a particular fashion. In this instance, the coach began thinking about their position in the organization and their realm of influence. While we share theories with coaches, it is necessary to be clear that they are simply tools to help coaches think about and make sense of certain events. It is not, by any means, intended to be a simple explanation for events!

Theme 5: impact and transformation

Quotation 1: "I'm going to keep doing what we talked about. It's hard, but I know it's the right thing to do."

Quotation 2: "Our conversation last week reminded me that I am doing a good job. I need to remember that more often."

Coach developers can influence a coach's practice (Culver et al., 2019). In this regard, we view the notion of "impact" to have three distinctive components: significance, longevity, and sincerity. Significance relates to the level of change (i.e., the difference between new and old practices). Longevity refers to how changes in coaching processes and practices are sustained over time. To achieve this, coaches adopt new practices, integrate them into their routines, and continuously refine them over time. Sincerity relates to the depth and

authenticity of the changes made. In some instances, coaches refer to this as validation, often commenting, "It's nice to know that what I'm doing is right!" However, it is important to acknowledge that we, as coach developers, are not positioned to necessarily make judgments about practice unless we are experts in that area/sport (Davidson & Townsend, 2024). The validation coaches refer to is an internal judgment they reach when they perceive alignment between their practice and the content of the coach developer and coach conversations.

We propose that impact only occurs when coaches internalize new ideas and practices that align or realign their beliefs and values (espoused theories). This internalization is often evidenced by a transformation in the coach's approach and mind-set, leading to more effective and ethical practices (Dohme et al., 2019). In one specific example, a coach was introduced to the notion of ethical coaching using the consequential-deontological continuum (Passmore, 2009). For the coach, this conversation facilitated critical thinking and self-reflection regarding how they made their decisions. Ultimately, over time, this led them to question their core values and beliefs (i.e., a significant, long and sincere transformation). This transformation sometimes requires engagement with other interested and appropriately qualified/knowledgeable individuals. In essence, the coach developer and coach dyad facilitate a deeper knowledge of coaching practice and pragmatic solutions that can enact a change in coaching practice.

Theme 6: coach development conversations as a therapeutic experience

Quotation 1: "It's like a therapy session for me; I enjoy it."

Quotation 2: "I find it cathartic."

Having worked with many coaches, they often use the word therapeutic to describe our conversations. To be clear, the intention of the relationship is not to act as therapy. However, for some coaches, it is an important cathartic byproduct of the process. Both parties often engage in a knowledge exchange process to move toward pragmatic actions and solutions.

To achieve an effective working relationship in which both parties benefit, coach developers must be skilled in creating a safe and supportive space where coaches feel comfortable expressing their concerns, exploring new ideas, and reflecting on their practices. This relational aspect is crucial for fostering meaningful and impactful developmental interactions. More often than not, coaches look forward to engaging in these types of conversations as they are coach-centered and non-judgmental.

This aspect of the relationship is undoubtedly important for coaches to reveal some of their jobs' more politically sensitive elements. However, from our experience, we recommend caution when working in this fashion. We recognize that coaching is a demanding job that creates a variety of pressures (e.g., mental, physical, and emotional), and some of the coaches we have worked with have shared the challenges they face on a day-to-day basis. However, at times, it can become too much for coaches. The pressure to win and the need to appease all stakeholders can take a toll (Purcell et al., 2023). In these instances, we recognize our limitations as coach

developers; we are not medical professionals or counselors. Therefore, there is an obligation to signpost the coach to support and refer them to someone qualified to provide the necessary support.

At an international level, coach-developer guidelines are, at best, inconsistent. For example, Certified Mental Performance Consultants (CMPCs) operate with clearly articulated and defined professional standards. However, examples of this type of ethical code and training within coach development remain very limited. Therefore, we urge coach developers to be aware of what guidance exists and use these frameworks to inform their practice and conduct. Finally, while the coach developer and coach relationship is built on trust and mutual understanding, there is sometimes a need to discretely share any medical concerns with a management or human resources member with no conflict of interest.

Theme 7: disengagement

Quotation 1: "I feel like we are covering old ground now. Can we find new stuff?"

Quotation 2: "I'm just interested to pick the brains of as many people as possible."

Determining the right time for coach developers and coaches to disengage or part ways is complex but sometimes necessary within certain contexts. In some instances, we liken disengagement to taking a break, which, under the right circumstances, can result in reflection and the independent application of ideas discussed over time. However, we recognize that a coach may reach a point where they no longer need external support. Similarly, coaches might believe that a new perspective, at least in the interim, might yield more return. This point is supported by Occhino et al. (2013), who conceptualized how social knowledge networks function. For example, they suggest that some coaches attempt to find a "coach of influence" to support them in their coaching journey. From our experience of parting ways with coaches, leaving the door open to working together again is always preferable. Typically, the coach-development-coach relationship is productive, yet we realize that all relationships differ and that we are but one actor in their social network.

The way a coach parts ways is always unique. For some, meetings can be reduced over time; for others, it can be a hard conversation about their needs and what we, as developers, cannot offer them. Some simply stop with no warning or reason given. For example, one recent long-time client stopped responding to e-mails and phone calls, and repeated attempts to connect were ignored. This can be hard for the developer, as the initial thought may be, "What did I do wrong?"

Nevertheless, we have found that some coaches seek to rekindle the relationship or reengage occasionally. Re-engagement most frequently arises when coaches initiate the conversation and require additional and bespoke external support. This occurs when new challenges arise over time, and both parties are willing and able to return to work through the process. This may be where a coach developer works with a client sporadically, almost as if the client is a patient seeking a doctor's prescription to solve an illness. While less than ideal, sometimes it is what the client wants, and sometimes it is only what they are willing to offer. We must determine whether this is how we want to operate, the relative cost-benefits, and if we can practically provide a high-quality service.

The timing of disengagement should be guided by the coach's readiness to apply new knowledge independently and be a natural progression on their developmental journey. The notion of taking a break can provide the coach with the opportunity to consolidate their learning and apply new practices in their context. This period of independent application is crucial for reinforcing and internalizing new knowledge and skills (Culver et al., 2019). Simply, coaches need to learn and practice independently, and this new phase facilitates this opportunity. The "re-engagement" phase might occur when the coach faces new challenges or seeks further development after a period. Over time, the coach-developer relationship will inevitably change in frequency of contact. However, it can evolve with periods of intensive engagement followed by phases of reflection and independent practice.

Limitations and future research

As in any data-driven study, limitations exist that require careful consideration and provide avenues for future researchers. First, the themes have been developed from two male coach developers' (albeit extensive) experiences in two Western countries. Other studies should consider expanding this reach by encompassing more demographic and geographic options. Second, while the themes offer practical guidance for other coach developers, it is acknowledged that the profession is complex, and there may be some situations where coach developers may not feel that the lessons translate to their context. Third, the themes presented here do not encapsulate all that has been learned. Future researchers may consider, solely from the perspective of coaches, the value and importance of coach developers in their work.

Conclusion

This article shared our personal and practical experiences of the coach developer and coach relationship. As outlined, there are significant benefits (to both parties) from working together. However, improvement in any capacity and field requires effort – there are no shortcuts! The genesis of the relationship (i.e., how things have come to be) is a vital precursor to the effectiveness of the relationship. It can both help and hinder progress. As coach developers, we step partially inside the complex world of the coach we work with. Our challenge is to ensure that progress is made, and this may not always be linear due to the nature of learning and multiple confounding factors within the place of work. Therefore, as coach developers, we must tread carefully and assess *what* to offer, *how* to present it, and *when* the coach is best placed to receive the new information.

Regarding the coach developer role, the onus is on the coach developer to make the case for the support they offer. Ultimately, they need to take the time to understand the coach's complex organizational setting and goals. Put simply, it is futile and inappropriate to offer any potential solutions until we have taken the time to understand the depth of the problem(s). More specifically, for the coach to buy into the process, they need to know how the service on offer will ultimately make them better able to prepare and compete in their sport. Equally, it is important not to oversell the benefits, period; we are not trying to justify our existence but rather add value and act in service to the coach and athlete (Gamble, 2018).

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