

Becoming A Reflexive Practitioner: A Systems-Psychodynamics Perspective of Working as an Internal Organisational Coach

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Abstract

Internal coaching within organisations is becoming more popular, yet it can be a uniquely challenging experience for coaches. A theoretical framework to support a coach's sense-making of their sessions is missing from the literature. This article critically analyses two fictitious coaching case studies, using a systems psychodynamics framework. The author's reflexive account is integrated into these analyses. The article has two objectives; firstly, to demonstrate how systemic factors may influence coaching dynamics; secondly, to support coaches in developing their reflexive capabilities.

Keywords: internal coaching, reflexivity, systems psychodynamics, systemic coaching

Introduction

The idea behind this article emerged from working as both an internal and external organisational coach, as well as an employee in several organisations. I wondered how the emotions experienced by internal coaches, and perspectives they take when coaching, might influence their practice. I was also curious how they might make sense of coaching engagements given their dual roles as an employee and coach. My search for a reflexive account of an internal coaching experience in the coaching academic literature was unsuccessful. Hence the objective of this article; to incorporate reflexivity into an analysis of two fictitious coaching case studies (vignettes). One particular theoretical framework was considered most suitable for this analysis, which I describe below. My hope is that this will help coaches to consider more deeply how the 'self' (Bachkirova 2016, 2020) as well as systemic factors influence their practice.

Extant literature

This article does not offer a complete review of the literature on internal coaching, as this has been offered in a recent publication by Jordan & Henderson, (2024). Suffice to say that my literature search on internal coaching yielded few results, consistent with Jordan & Henderson's (2024) assertion that research in this area is limited. Perhaps the most useful reference for my own internal coaching experience was Goldenberg's (2023) discussion of three metaphorical roles of the internal coach: the Trojan Horse, Field Medic and Canary in the Coal Mine. Implications in terms of boundaries and ethical practice for each are discussed, as are the underlying motivations for coaches adopting these roles. Goldenberg describes the notion of "going native" (p. 55), where a coach struggles to perceive systemic issues to which they are subject.

Other articles on internal coaching adopt different lines of inquiry to roles, boundaries or ethics. McKee, Tilin & Mason (2009), adopting a case study methodology, describe the process of developing a cadre of internal coaches within a bank. The benefits for leaders of applying their coaching model are discussed. Machin (2010) explores the nature of the internal coaching relationship, with a specific focus on how trust is created. Findings are discussed in the context of what is known in the field of counselling. This article suggests value in future research seeking to better understand how the coaching relationship influences outcomes.

Jordan and Henderson (2024) sought to understand how internal coaches make sense of organisational role boundaries through an interpretative phenomenological analysis of three internal coaches. Their findings highlighted the importance of role awareness, relational factors, and contracting. The study notes how multiple factors influence trust in the coaching relationship, including different roles played by the coach. The study did not attempt to focus on the content of internal coaching engagements, or how exploring the relationship between systemic factors can help to make sense of these engagements. Finally, neither this article nor any other article found in this review incorporated a personal reflexive stance into a systemic analysis of an internal coaching case.

The motivations (Robson & Boak, 2024) and lived experience of internal coaches (Feehily, 2018) have also been studied. Reactive, experiential and embodied sense-making were found to be the experience of four internal coaches within a UK higher education establishment. Internal coaching is now a well-established area of practice. It was considered over 20 years ago to be an emerging role (Frisch, 2001), but its prevalence now appears to be significant. Although a dated study, a survey of 250 firms conducted by the Institute of Leadership and Management (2011) found 83% to source coaches internally. Yet the research base in this area of coaching is sparse. To the extent that the lived experience of internal coaches has been explored, none appear to have incorporated a systemic perspective or adopted a theoretical framework as a sense-making reference. This article offers both. It is rooted in two premises: that all organisational coaching is systemic; and that coaches should seek to understand their role within, and how they contribute to, the system. To this end, coach reflexivity is of vital importance.

The importance of reflexivity

“Reflexivity is the ability to notice, understand and use constructively one’s own processes of thinking and feeling as well as the psychological, social and systemic influences that condition them” (Jackson, 2021, p. 28). Cunliffe (2016) defines it as; “questioning what we, and others, might be taking for granted – what is being said and not said – and examining the impact this has or might have” (p.741).

This article takes an explicit axiological position that to be a reflexive practitioner is central to coach development. This position is premised on the belief that coaching is not a set of reductive behaviours. If this were the case, coaching would be analogous to a plumber fixing a hot water system. The ‘self’ of the plumber is of minimal importance in the application of declarative and procedural knowledge that has been trained over time. In contrast, the ‘self’ of the coach influences the nature of the coaching discourse and relationship. The ability of a coach to develop the meta capability of being aware of one’s thinking and emotional processes can, I contend, help them and their clients develop wisdom. Moreover, reflexivity is critically

important in coaching if a coach adopts (as I do) an intersubjective ontology. That is to say, the notion of the ‘self’ can *only* make sense in relation to others. We are continually shaping and being shaped by others and our environment. Critically reflecting on these dynamics is therefore important for any coach who does not consider coaching to be analogous to plumbing.

I have sometimes found discussions centred on reflexivity to be unhelpfully abstract. Fox (2025) offers a rare practical framework for critical reflexivity within team coaching. In this article I offer the reader a window into reflexive practice by considering how a coach’s relationship with systemic factors may influence their coaching.

Systems psychodynamics primer

Systems psychodynamics was chosen as a theoretical framework to analyse and make sense of each coaching vignette. I find this framework useful because it considers how individual and group behaviours within organisations are influenced by emotions, recognising the inter-relatedness of emotional experience (Sher & Lawlor 2022). Fraher (2004) notes that several studies ‘have shown that organisations develop mechanisms to defend against anxiety inherent in the system’ (p. 574). I adopt Sher and Lawlor’s (2022) position that a coaching client is always part of a larger system, and that helping a client explore the idea of ‘organisation-in-the-mind’ encourages their creativity when considering organisational life. As such, it is my belief that understanding defense mechanisms can usefully expand coach and coachee perspective-taking. I now offer a brief primer on this topic, describing the main premises of the theory and concepts that I consider relevant to the vignette analysis.

Psychodynamic theory is the root of systems psychodynamics, which emerged from analysis during World War 2 (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). Psychodynamic theory explores the ‘inner world of human beings’ (Nagel, 2020 p.7) and the role of non-conscious factors in human behaviour. According to this theory, we develop defense mechanisms in response to fear and anxiety caused by inner conflict. Infancy and childhood play a significant role in psychodynamic analysis. Our primary caregivers, through the holding environment they create, shape our relational experience. This holding environment influences both our expectations of others, as well as our feelings of safety, in relationships. Coaches working in the psychodynamic tradition facilitate a process of a client becoming increasingly aware of their inner world. Psychodynamic theory has been drawn on to explore various aspects of leadership and organisational culture (e.g., Maccoby, 2012; Stein, M., 2011, 2013). In their discussion of psychoanalytic contribution to organisational studies, Fotaki, Long & Schwartz (2012) assert that it is underutilised as a tool for understanding organisational issues.

Systems psychodynamics is an expanded version of psychodynamic theory, integrating the three perspectives of psychodynamics, group relations and open systems (Fraher, 2004). A fundamental assumption is held that environments influence our psyche and behaviours, in both conscious and unconscious ways (Sher & Lawlor, 2022). Individual defense mechanisms that protect against anxiety within psychodynamic theory, are now developed to the level of the group and organisation (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). Indeed, organisations themselves are deemed to generate anxiety and consequent social defense mechanisms. Anxiety, defined as fear of the future, is a powerful force influencing workplace relationships (Sher & Lawlor, 2022). Finally, the construct of power is significant within systems psychodynamics. How people,

individually and collectively, relate to power is considered central to understanding organisational life. As with other psychodynamic concepts, these are shaped by early life experiences of power dynamics and are often outside conscious awareness. Systems psychodynamics is a multilayered approach that explores unconscious systemic forces driving group behaviour (Fraher, 2004).

Basic concepts

Each vignette within this article will be analysed drawing on some basic systems psychodynamic concepts. Each concept can be considered a mechanism that serves in some way to protect us individually and collectively from undesirable emotional experience. These concepts are now briefly described.

Projection

This is where we attribute unwanted aspects of ourselves to another person. An example in organisational workplaces could be a leader who lacks confidence in making the right decisions and ‘projects’ their related anxiety onto their direct reports by accusing them of incompetence.

Projective Identification

Projective identification is where the recipient unconsciously accepts the projection and makes the feeling their own. They are said to identify with, or internalise, the projection. Projective identification can be considered an unconscious means of communication, and seen through the lens of power, a form of manipulation (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020).

Transference

A phenomenon where we mistake feelings connected with different people. Often, this entails feelings evoked by historical people in our lives being attributed, or transferred onto, people in our present. In organisational settings, we can transfer three types of feelings onto leaders: admiration, idealization, and/or denigration (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). Transference may lead to relational confusion and difficulties, as the dynamic is influenced by outside figures.

Splitting

Where individuals experience, and then partition, conflicting sets of feelings and thoughts, they then take ownership of one set whilst denying or disowning the other. Splitting is a concept within Klein’s object relations theory (Nagel, 2020) that describes how individuals handle their ambivalence towards themselves and others. People sometimes hold onto desirable elements of themselves and project unwanted elements onto others.

Social defenses

Employees are said to invest in, and manipulate, certain features of an organisation (a common discourse or work method), in order to bolster their individual defense mechanisms. Group anxieties are sometimes managed by being given *objective existence* in organisational

cultures (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). These are known as social defenses, and although they help groups defend against anxieties, they often result in second order anxieties.

Selves in role

Systems psychodynamics takes the view that we each have a propensity (valence) to attract and be attracted to specific roles that affirm our self-concept. The term 'role' refers not only to task-specific duties and responsibilities, but also has psychological and relational dimensions. It can be seen as the individual's internal conception of the part they play in the organisation and operates at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, group and organisational level. Our perception of our role, and that of others, helps locate us in a social system. An individual's behaviour is their expression of how they 'play their role.'

Workgroups and basic assumption groups

Systems psychodynamic scholars consider unconscious factors at both the individual and group level. Informed by the work of Bion, two types of group are considered. The first, known as a *workgroup*, is characterised by group members cooperatively focusing on work tasks in order to achieve a shared goal. The second, known as a basic assumption group, forms when a group faces anxiety-provoking tasks (Motsoaledi & Cilliers, 2012). Characteristically, group members act 'as if' certain irrational beliefs are true. Here, the concept of regression is relevant. Regression is where individuals resort to patterns of relating to others, often in threatening situations, learned in childhood. It may be an unconscious attempt to gain control. Basic assumptions can be considered a set of shared regressions that protect groups from anxiety, and in doing so move them away from task accomplishment (Motsoaledi & Cilliers, 2012). Moreover, they shape group norms and structures.

Essence of systems psychodynamics

At its core, systems psychodynamics focuses on the emotional underpinnings of power relations. It attempts to understand collective behaviour by integrating individual psychology, group dynamics and systemic forces. The purpose of leaders in this analytical framework is seen not only in their words and actions, but also in the role they play in the minds of those they lead.

A note on the vignettes

Two coaching vignettes are now briefly described, and analysed, through a systems psychodynamic lens. Both vignettes, along with the characters, are fictitious. However, they are informed by my life experience; partly from my experience as an internal coach and employee in more than one company, and partly from my understanding, through conversations, of the working life of others. The 'company' I refer to within each vignette is a composite of all these experiences and perceptions.

The analysis of each vignette is an account of how an internal coach may have made sense of, and approached, each coaching assignment. Similarly, the reflexive account illustrates how a coach might engage in critical reflexivity.

Vignette 1

Dominic initially sought coaching in order to help him address some dysfunctional team dynamics. He held a mid-manager position within the risk-management department, responsible for a small team. Three of his team members were considered by others to be aggressive which had adversely impacted cooperation and collaboration. Dominic was, by his own admission, reserved in nature, enjoyed the analytical component of his job, and felt uncomfortable holding others accountable for their behaviour. He wanted to work on being more assertive with his team. The most senior leader in risk-management was Peter, a Managing Director (MD), and Dominic's line manager. Peter spent most of his time in meetings with more senior colleagues and would rarely hold one on one meetings with direct reports. Some colleagues considered him to be affable and approachable, whilst others had a starkly different view of him.

Over time, the focus of coaching moved from Dominic's team dynamics to his relationship with Peter. Dominic felt bullied by Peter, and this was impacting his mental health. Peter would belittle him with thinly veiled criticisms during meetings. During one coaching session, Dominic reported being berated by Peter in front of his team. Peter had not previously spoken in person to Dominic about any of the issues raised. Dominic believed that his boss was deliberately attempting to undermine him. The situation deteriorated to an extent that Dominic was transferred to another office and stripped of managerial responsibilities.

Coaching analysis and considerations

What the coach found striking when Dominic was recalling his experience was his apparent lack of affect. There was no sense of anger, resentment or antipathy towards his boss or the company. He wanted to remain in the company, viewing this experience as unrepresentative of the company culture. In contrast, the coach saw this as typical of the culture.

Although he had worked for several other organisations, Dominic had worked for this company for nearly 10 years. It appeared to the coach that he was demonstrating a form of deluded optimism, as a coping mechanism. The coach chose to suggest this possibility to him, given the purpose of their work was to encourage client critical thinking. At the same time, they were hesitant to do so and were cognisant of the risks of imposing their value system onto a client. They considered self-delusion as mostly undesirable, as it prevents us making informed judgements. Yet, they recognised that delusion may be a double-sided coin, serving a useful purpose. Perhaps constructing a narrative of a benign organisation alleviated Dominic's anxiety.

Dominic was confused about his experience and why it had happened. Systems psychodynamics offered a useful framework for sense-making. The organisation was considered by some insiders to be demanding and unsupportive. Many senior leaders were viewed by others as aggressive and combative. It seemed possible to the coach that many of these leaders doubted their competence and projected this onto their reports. By accusing and labelling others as incompetent they could sustain a desirable self-image.

What's more, by taking disciplinary action against Dominic, Peter may have been splitting aspects of himself he found shameful and projecting them onto him. Although Dominic did not identify with this projection, his apparent apathetic response illustrated to the coach the utility (to

senior leaders) of certain social defenses. That is, erosion of personal autonomy through organisational control may have explained a perception of a generic soporific attitude amongst staff. This in some respects could be desirable for leaders.

The approach to coaching Dominic involved a psychoeducational component, to help him ‘think through’ his feelings. There was minimal focus on helping him build individual resilience to his stressors, as it was felt that to do so would be to be complicit with the organisational system. Much of the focus was helping him view his experience through relational and systemic perspectives. The intention was to help him develop a more sophisticated understanding of forces driving organisational dynamics. In the language of adult development, it was hoped this would move him from being ‘subject’ to more ‘object’ (Berger & Atkins, 2009). Paradoxically, greater clarity would help Dominic experience more acceptance of his suffering, whilst not exerting his energy on unhelpful emotions. Consistent with an absence of agency, Dominic expected the coach to play the role of ‘wise advisor’. Increasingly, he saw coaching sessions as a safe zone, a respite from an unsafe environment. The coach’s role was largely to be a trusted listener.

Vignette 2

Morten, an experienced manager in his mid-50s worked in the customer complaints department and requested coaching for himself. Morten presented as professional, yet cold and emotionally contained. Consequently, the coach found it difficult to connect with him. He seemed to be set in his view of how things should be done in the company. His colleague Andrew, a less experienced manager of a related team, was (according to Morten) impossible to collaborate with. He was antagonistic, always wanted to get his own way and would often give meandering monologues during meetings. Andrew was also known to talk critically of others behind their backs. Morten could no longer cope. The coach had interacted with Andrew through their non-coaching role as an employee and felt uncomfortable in his company. Something felt inauthentic about him. The relationship between Morten and Andrew had deteriorated to the extent that other members from their respective teams were used as mediators for the two managers. It was creating stress within each team and was impacting the quality of their work.

Analysis and coaching approach

Organisational role analysis, a central component within a systems psychodynamics framework, guided the coaching with Morten. Morten and Andrew had developed a symbiotic relationship where each expressed their dissatisfaction with the role the other was taking. Yet they were unable to escape their pattern of relating. Morten spoke with a condescending righteousness to Andrew, who in turn was viewed as aggressive, resistant and self-focused. Through a systemic lens, the coach wondered if Morten’s behaviour could partly be an attempt to regain control in an authoritarian system. This might be an example of regression. Additionally, could Andrew’s behaviour be a consequence of, and consistent with, how the organisation treated staff? Coaching with Morten entailed exploring and defining his desired psychological work role in relation to Andrew, with action-oriented implications, in addition to creating a more bounded working relationship.

In systems psychodynamics, social defenses are constructed in order to avoid anxiety or discomfort. Confronting unacceptable behaviour was avoided in this organisation. This may have

been consistent with a benevolent organisation in mind, characterised by ‘agreeable colleagues.’ Andrew’s occasional unbounded behaviour was perhaps a symptom of this.

Relational capabilities did not seem to be greatly valued within the company. Leaders were mostly focused on output and results, and as such paid little attention to interpersonal dynamics. This could be an illustration of linear systemic thinking in action (Lawrence, 2025), where leaders are deemed able to control the functioning of a system. It could also reflect a social defense against the anxiety of confronting relational difficulties.

Finally, any analysis would be incomplete without considering the role of the group in understanding individual behaviour. It may well have been the case that Andrew was the container for others’ desires. Resistance and unbounded behaviour may have been projected onto Andrew by others (especially Morten). In doing so, he became the container for emotions which others felt unable to express in the workplace. This projection would be beneficial for Morten, as he could not only offload undesirable feelings, but also identify Andrew as the problem.

Reflexivity

As a corporate employee, the coach had a particular perception of how power relations influenced dynamics within and between corporate functions. This impacted their practice, although they were unclear how it influenced coaching effectiveness. Coaching served as a sanctuary for the coach, transporting them momentarily from their employee experience into roles of an internal medic (Goldenberg, 2011) and, dare they admit, a sadistic observer. This observer’s role where they disassociated from their own employee experience, perhaps could be considered a form of splitting. One possible consequence of this disassociation was an absence of compassion for coaching clients. The coach was able to be the resource of independent and confidential thinking partner to their clients, but less able to offer emotional support.

The coach’s internal coaching experiences generated, but also occluded, several emotions which they perceived led to a deterioration in the quality of their coaching. They wondered if being within the organisational system limited their emotional resources available for coaching. The nature of coaching assignments left them often feeling tired and emotionally drained. Rather than compassion, they noticed that their primary feelings when engaged in this coaching role were anger and shame.

A power dynamic with significant implications is worth considering. Within this company, coachees often seemed motivated to give power to their coach, which could have been a response to feeling disempowered as employees. They also sometimes saw the coach less as a partner of equals and more as an advisor. A risk existed whereby coaches, who were also employees subject to the same feelings of disempowerment, may then misuse their power in the coaching relationship. Paying attention to their own relationship with power was important for this coach, especially as they had strong egalitarian values. At the same time, perhaps informed by their childhood educational experience, they associated organisational hierarchy with fear. This could explain why they judged that on occasion they were excessively subservient to senior leaders. A possible example of transference.

The coaching function as a form of social defense?

It may be that the establishment of a coaching service within this organisation was a form of social defense. The key question to consider is what organisational anxieties did coaching protect staff from being aware of? And in doing so, what illusory narrative did it allow employees to believe? One possibility is that coaching allowed employees to believe that the company cared about their wellbeing and career growth. In reality, career advancement was difficult, as few promotions were available. Yet in creating an illusion of possible career progress, the company was able to control staff. This is consistent with Goldenberg's descriptor of the Trojan Horse role played by internal coaches. In this role, coaches are pawns in an organisational agenda and serves to undermine any pretence of being person-centred in their work. Internal coaches may also have been the container for all the undesirable feelings held by their coaching clients. To some extent, organisational anxieties around interpersonal relationships were possibly located in the coaching service.

Implications for coaching practitioners

There are several implications for coaching practitioners and professionals creating internal coaching functions.

Existential

When internal coaches practice within an organisational structure characterised by blame and control, they will likely experience existential angst. They may feel uncomfortable being complicit with the organisation or wonder the extent to which they are contributing any real value through their work. In that regard, a large gap may be felt to exist between the aspirations and realities of their practice. It may be that an existentially-focused supervisor could be particularly helpful for internal coaches.

Boundaries

Confusion surrounding role boundaries can create an emotional burden for an internal coach that is qualitatively distinct from an external coach. This is especially the case if the organisation implicitly perceives coaching as a means for leaders to contract-out the relational responsibilities of their role. As such, self-care and the restorative function of supervision are particularly relevant for internal coaches.

Ethics

Ethical considerations appear to be much more widespread and pertinent to internal coaches. In an environment where role boundaries can seem unclear, and where an employee is struggling to distinguish between their coach and employee identities, ethical sensitivity and awareness need to be facilitated by a comprehensive governance framework. To help them make wise judgements in their practice, a framework articulating the values that guide their decision-making processes would be a useful tool. Regular, ethically-focused dialogue amongst a coaching group is desirable. The quality of such a dialogue would likely be enhanced if guided by an appropriately qualified external coach supervisor, who ideally has experience coaching internally.

Reflexivity

It is vital that all coaches engage in reflexive practice. Arguably, it is most important for internal coaches. From a systems psychodynamics perspective, coaches should seek to understand their attachment patterns to authority figures and continually examine their relationship with transference in the workplace. Coaches need to understand what psychological roles they are naturally drawn to in their practice, what roles their clients are pulling them towards, and the implications for the quality of their coaching. The nature of a coaching relationship will be influenced by a coach's engagement in self-analysis, and how systemic factors combine with their personal psychological tendencies. This will help contribute to adaptive expertise, which I have previously argued (Berry, 2021) should be an objective within coach development.

Philosophy

It is likely that perceptions of coaching, its definition and objective, will vary across an organisation. This has potential to create confusion and misunderstandings about the role of the coach and how to determine coaching efficacy. To mitigate against this possibility, internal coaching functions may wish to create their own coaching philosophy. A philosophy goes beyond, although critically informs, practical considerations of coaching style and process. It would clarify the purpose of the coaching service, the role of the coach including the desired relationships between coach & coachee, and the values underpinning the practice.

It would also be desirable for internal coaches to take a stance on, and articulate, a systemic position. Lawrence (2025) suggests that the purpose and practice of coaching varies according to how coaches and their clients view the interdependencies within the organisational system. One role of a coach claiming to practice systemically could be to broaden client thinking in terms of how the system functions. This is particularly relevant for leaders to consider how change happens within a system.

Organisational agendas that will be within and outside of coaching scope should be made explicit. A coaching philosophy has been suggested previously for individual coaches and supervisors (Jackson and Bachkirova, 2018). For a group of coaching practitioners, such a framework could help define boundaries and inform their ethical judgements.

Implications for education, theory and research

Systems psychodynamics was the theoretical approach to sense making adopted in this article, but there are several alternatives. Inevitably, no single approach can fully explain any coaching experience. What is missing is a theory that incorporates systemic complexity into sense making. That is, a framework that recognises the unpredictability and randomness embedded in any complex adaptive system (including relational systems). Any such theory would have significant practical implications for coaching practitioners.

The intention of this article was to help internal coaches expand their sense making when working with clients, integrating reflexivity in this process. Coaching researchers could empirically explore the extent to which organisational coaches incorporate reflexivity into their sense making. Better understanding the nature of their reflexivity will facilitate the appropriate

design of coach education programmes to develop this capability. It could also help supervisors in the same regard.

Sense making and reflexivity point to a broader consideration. Expanded and deeper sense making allows coaches to develop their professional judgement and decision-making. Yet very little extant research focuses on professional judgement and decision-making of coaches. Judgement and decision-making are functions of the quality of reasoning and sense-making. If organisational coaches are to support their clients in developing more sophisticated reasoning in complex systems, then it is important that they continually do the same. A component of this capability is metacognition, and the ability to notice one's own reasoning processes. Future research that seeks to understand and develop coach metacognition would be desirable.

Conclusion

As internal coaching increasingly becomes commonplace, there is a need for scholarly literature to support the development of practice in this area. Unclear boundary conditions and complex ethical considerations may contribute to coach confusion around professional judgement. This article has offered a reflexive account of two fictitious coaching vignettes, analysed through a systems psychodynamics lens. It is hoped that this will support coaches in understanding both how to develop their reflexive capabilities, and how that may influence the coaching dynamic.

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