

## **Coaching Should Not Become ‘Individual Training,’ Sliding Into Being Unethical**

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### **Abstract**

Insufficiently developed conceptual foundations for coaching continue to present issues in the fields of both the academic study and practical delivery of coaching. For practitioners, there is confusion about everyday practice, such as what being ‘non-directive’ and not introducing their ‘own agenda’ really means. This can lead coaching to morph into ‘individual training,’ with associated ethical risks. In this paper, I highlight these risks by drawing an important conceptual distinction between the process and content of coaching which, unless sufficiently acknowledged, will continue to create misunderstandings that lead to undesirable consequences for both coaches and clients alike.

*Keywords: coaching content and process, individual training, non-directive coaching, coach’s own agenda*

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### **Introduction**

Despite overwhelming evidence that coaching works as a practice (e.g., Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018), the field is still lacking in terms of an adequate conceptual foundation (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019). A simple illustration of this lack is unresolved debates about whether so-called ‘AI coaching’ can be identified as coaching in the first place (Bachkirova & Kemp, 2025). This would not happen if there was a general agreement about the essential characteristics of coaching, which could be used as criteria in settling such disputes.

It is an expectation of all professional services, which respond to the emerging needs of their clientele, to develop an adequate conceptual foundation (e.g., Alvesson, 2001; Breakey, 2016). Such a foundation should include not only the methodologies employed for meeting market demands, but also a clear description of the essential characteristics of this service. It should also include a proper discussion and an agreement in principle about the purpose of this service and implications of it for all relevant parties, including societies and the environment (Bachkirova, 2024). More specifically, it should also aim to answer the following questions:

- What are the essential characteristics of this service?
- What is its main purpose?
- What might it damage?
- How can we evaluate the degree of its influence?
- Who should be involved in such evaluation?

We are still behind with the task of collectively engaging with these questions, but what appears as a major effort is only a proliferation of the methods of delivery and marketing of this service. The problems we face under these conditions include a huge number of issues in terms of the quality of practice, research and ethical concerns. A surge of new technologies aggravates these problems to the extent of questioning the relevance of this practice and even threatens its continued existence altogether. There is an urgent need ‘to put our house in order’, which is a task that concerns not only coaching theoreticians but also every practitioner.

As a contribution to this task, I aim here to address some everyday challenges that confront coaching practitioners, which stem from the lack of recognition of core concepts of this practice on the one hand and the nuances, paradoxes and ambiguities of it on the other. These challenges are, unfortunately, associated with the most common ‘formulas’ of coaching, such as being ‘non-directive’ and ‘not bringing your own agenda,’ which are still left with many unresolved questions. For example, how could a coach remain ‘non-directive’ with a client who is a new leader and obviously lacks basic leadership skill and knowledge? Or, in what circumstances is it appropriate to introduce a new topic of coaching that was not indicated by the contract? When does this topic become an ‘agenda’ of the coach or organization?

If these challenges continue to be brushed under the carpet, many coaching engagements can become just a form of ‘individual training’ and, in the worst cases, unethical. What I mean by ‘individual training’ is not just another organizational intervention but a potential ‘mutation’ of any coaching. I see it as an anomaly, a departure from coaching to some different activity that might undermine the image and value of coaching if it is conducted under the title of coaching.

To untangle these practical issues, it is important to make a pivotal conceptual distinction between the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of coaching, which, unless acknowledged, will continue to give rise to misunderstandings and has the potential to lead to some significant ethical issues for both novices and experienced coaches. ‘What’ is the content of coaching (i.e., topics of conversation) and ‘how’ is its process; the way coaching conversations are facilitated.

### **Directive and non-directive coaching**

The debate about ‘directive’ and ‘non-directive’ coaching is about the ‘*how*’ of coaching, which is what kinds of *interventions* are appropriate in coaching as a process. For example, asking questions is seen as the most appropriate intervention. In contrast, coaches are taught that it is inappropriate to give advice, which would be ‘directive’ coaching. The fact that in practice this often happens, openly or in a disguised way, might suggest that the coaching process that consists of only asking questions is unsustainable. Even when it is possible, this coaching would deviate from one of the essential characteristics of this practice: being a joint inquiry, a partnership that involves a dialogue (Bachkirova & Kemp, 2025). Such a mechanistic approach would not sit well with the way most of us would see coaching as a genuine connection between the client and coach, which enables the co-creation of meaning. If we see coaching in this way, it is paradoxical that the mechanistic bombardment of clients with questions is seen as an expression of ‘non-directivity’ in the coaching process and often the only legitimate ‘method.’

In theory, the idea of ‘non-directivity’ comes from the person-centered approach (Rogers, 1951), which is beautiful in its principles, but not without serious issues in practice (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2018). In coaching, the person-centered principle is exemplified and amplified in approaches such as ‘clean language’ or ‘time to think,’ which can work well, but are also not without limitations. Needless to say, ‘interventions’ in the real person-centered approaches, inspired by Rogers’s theory, are much more diverse and nuanced. They do not rely on the ambition that appears to feed ‘only questioning’ approaches: hoping that some questions will be so ‘powerful’ and ‘incisive’ that they would ‘transform’ the client. Putting so much belief into such a ‘happening’ might have an opposite effect on the coach, because aiming to come up with such powerful questions takes the focus away from the client to the coach’s own performance.

### **Reaction to the issues with ‘non-directivity’**

It is of no surprise that some coaches recognize the issues with a ‘non-directive’ process of coaching, as described above. What is interesting, however, is that this recognition sometimes creates an opposing idea of liberation from the rigid constraints of mainly asking questions, which becomes problematic in a different way. This tendency is expressed in allowing oneself to do *anything* which feels appropriate in the moment. At this point it is useful to remember that the encouragement to ask questions, instead of giving advice, has a positive intention. It only backfires when exaggerated to the level of the ridiculous. In the same way, the opposition to ‘non-directivity’ and liberation from any restraints leads to throwing the baby out with the bath water.

The problem is that such liberation appears not only in relation to the ‘how’ of coaching but also to the ‘what.’ The ‘what,’ as the *content* of coaching, the topics of conversations, is normally defined by what matters to the client and informs the purpose of their participation in coaching. Critiquing non-directive coaching as a mechanistic *process* becomes an excuse to sneak in a different and quite unsavory idea that the coach can legitimately impose the *topics* of conversation, which is the *content* of coaching. This obviously goes against the grain of another quite important prescription to coaches to not bring their ‘own agenda.’ Of course, coaches could genuinely believe that their ‘agenda’ is for the ‘benefit of the client’ and ‘adds value.’ However, they might be missing that some restrictions are there for a good reason and need to be observed, even if in a more nuanced way than prescribed.

### **Content and process of coaching: reasons for confusions**

As I have encountered the confusion between the content and process of coaching quite a few times in various conversations with coaches, I think it would be useful to carefully unpick what not bringing ‘the coach’s agenda’ actually means. To start with, it is important to acknowledge that such unpicking is not easy for at least two reasons. One of them is related to the unfortunate conditions of the coaching service in organizations that has a long history. Another one is a result of the quite fortunate growth of social awareness and responsibilities amongst coaches, which is fairly new (Fatien et al., 2023) and clearly deserves to be encouraged, albeit with a recognition that it is not free of challenges.

1. The first reason is that we are not entirely free to work *only* on the ‘agenda’ of an individual client, because of the double masters we serve in organizations (Bachkirova, 2024). It is a difficult issue, which not many coaches wish to acknowledge out of fear of endangering their living and status. I would say that under these restrictions to our freedom, ethically aware but also realistic coaches do their best to defend the ethical conditions of their contracts that respect rather than manipulate the individual as their main client.
2. The second reason concerns coaches who, as socially aware individuals, feel that it is their responsibility to influence people as much as possible in terms of some important concerns for e.g., environmental damage and/or issues of inequality. However positive such development in coaches is, it requires careful managing in terms of the content of coaching. I would say that socially aware coaches who succeed with such managing tend to work on what matters to the client as the main focus of their assignments. At the same time, such a focus can be naturally enhanced when the various layers of the clients’ contexts are expanded in relation to the clients’ issues.

### **Coaching or individual training?**

Now, we can address what can be seen as ‘fundamentals’ in terms of the process and content of coaching conversations, so we can clarify what is unique to coaching and where it might look like something different. For example, we often discuss how coaching is different from therapy or mentoring. Seeing the differences between the content and process of the engagement can help us in making a more nuanced distinction even in this regard.

For example, in terms of the *process*, mentoring has a lot of similarities with coaching, apart from more freedom that a mentor has in terms of giving advice. However, the *content* of mentoring is much more shared between the mentor and mentee, and the mentor can freely introduce new topics of conversation. This is different in coaching, because coaches do not have to be experts in the content of the topics the client might want to discuss. Coaches are also restricted by the rule in respect of their ‘own agendas.’

The difference between therapy and coaching in terms of the *process* might be even less noticeable than between coaching and mentoring, especially if we consider some types of developmentally oriented coaching. The exception though might be the role and space for contracting, that is much more pronounced in coaching in comparison to therapy. However, in relation to the *content* and purpose, therapy and coaching would have more noticeable differences. These differences are more nuanced than the typical concern in coaching not to act as a therapist, which often means not dealing in depth with issues of mental health or serious issues of a personal nature. At the same time, these concerns highlight that it is the *content* of a conversation that is an issue, which indicates an important difference. A therapist has *carte blanche* to go into any area of the clients’ life if needed, e.g., to explore in depth their past experiences and, in some modalities of therapy, work extensively on these topics. Coaches are more restricted in this regard and are expected to work with more explicitly identified themes through focused contracting, often within a limited time frame.

For my purposes here, however, I want to address in more detail how the distinction between the process and content of conversations can help us to differentiate coaching from *training* or education. It might be seen as an obvious distinction, but I believe it is important if we wish to clarify the issues created by the prescriptions of non-directivity and ‘no agenda of the coach.’

In education or training it is tutors who select and bring in content, which is legitimate and expected by students. In coaching the expectation is that content, with a gradually clarified purpose, is provided by the client and then discussed with the coach. It sounds like an extremely basic reminder of the obvious, but without deeper understanding of this distinction coaching can easily slip into becoming *individual training*.

To avoid this mutation, first we need to make clear what might appear unnecessarily restrictive for the coach in bringing new content into coaching conversations. Of course, experienced coaches would have developed a significant knowledge base not only in relation to the process of coaching, but also in relation to the topics that clients typically wish to deal with, e.g., in the area of leadership, communication or conflict resolution. Coaches can certainly offer snippets of useful knowledge when the client struggles with a topic, and such precise input seems important. If this is introduced concisely to facilitate further exploration and the dialogue on the client’s issue, I would see such contribution as enriching variations in terms of the *process* of coaching. However, it becomes *content* if the coach believes that the topic of the client’s choice needs significant diversion towards a different purpose of enquiry. I am not saying that unexpected developments in the content are not possible or are always unwelcome. However, the coach has to give a good deal of thought to the reasons for such change, with consideration of their own needs and degree of influence over the client. The client in such situations has to be made aware of such change in content and must have a meaningful opportunity to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to it. This latter condition is very important because in some cases it would indicate if the actions of the coach are sufficiently ethical, which I will explore next.

### **How does this look in practice?**

To make the above proposition more practical I offer five scenarios in which what I call ‘the fundamentals’ can be potentially circumvented, blurring the boundaries between coaching and individual training. These scenarios are, of course, simplifications for the purpose of highlighting important differences. I also indicate ethical concerns associated with these situations and how they can be avoided.

1. In some situations, probably familiar to many coaches, a coach might discover that the client, as a new leader, is lacking skills and knowledge that, strictly speaking, should have been provided by prior appropriate training, which was not made available to the client. This can be a situation when coaching can become individual training, as the coach would see it as essential for helping the client to deal with inevitable problems. There are no ethical concerns as such in helping clients with practical ideas in their specific situations of work. However, there are implications from such a way to coach for the wider image of coaching and for contractual obligations to organizations. In avoiding these, the coach could provide the client with references to useful resources to engage with between the sessions but use the

actual sessions for working together with the meaning clients are making of them in their real work situations that require the use of such knowledge and skills.

2. There are types of coaching that are specialized according to particular themes that dominate the content of coaching, e.g., specific skill coaching, well-being coaching, coaching for emancipation, maternity coaching, health coaching. If such a specialization is explicit and the client chooses such a coach, this type of coaching has a very strong potential to become individual training. As the coach is chosen by the client with an agreement as to the nature of the process, this situation does not create an ethical concern. However, to avoid wider negative implications for the image of coaching I believe it would be advisable for the coach to mitigate this tendency in the same way as mentioned in the previous scenario.

A special case scenario is when coaching is part of the package in a training program, e.g., a leadership development program, and when ‘the client’ has no meaningful topic to work on. The coach in this scenario is on a ‘fishing expedition’ to identify a useful topic. He/she cannot follow ‘normal’ process without throwing various ‘hooks’ to explore what could make coaching viable. These ‘hooks’ are in search of the *content* that normally should be provided by the client. It is obvious that such coaching by design is in danger of being individual training. Although not generating ethical concerns, it can create a wrong impression for the clients about what coaching actually is. One way to avoid it is to be absolutely open about the non-naturalness of the situation and to share responsibility for what is happening with the client who does not have a reason to be coached.

A bigger challenge that can become borderline unethical is when the purpose of coaching is defined by the organization and the coach is hired to ‘deliver’ towards this purpose. This is often initiated openly in three-way conversations, where the coach acts as a broker between the individual and the organization’s needs. In this case, it will be legitimate for the coach to remind the client about the purpose of their engagement, as it was previously agreed to by the client, with implications for the content of coaching. This can be done even if the topics of the coaching conversations have changed to more meaningful ones for this client. However, if the coaching is conducted mainly for the needs of the organization, it becomes individual training, maybe without an ethical issue, but still not really being coaching.

I question the ethicality of such an arrangement because this client is a means to the organizational ends, even when he or she may not see it this way and willingly participates in such coaching. To mitigate ethical concerns, I would expect that during coaching, clients have a meaningful opportunity to clarify for themselves and adjust, if necessary, their own reasons for participating.

3. A final scenario is when coaches freely introduce the purpose and the topics for coaching, e.g., adjusting particular personality traits of the client, in the process of *generic* coaching, such as executive coaching, or even responding to a client’s generic ‘goal,’ such as promotion. These topics can be driven whether by the coaches’ own beliefs or as *instructed* by the organization, but without an open discussion with the client. If these topics become the *content* of coaching without explicit contract with

the client, I would call it individual training which also generates an ethical concern. It can easily become a form of manipulation, even if the coach is convinced that his/her actions are for the client's good.

As these scenarios hopefully show, the *process* of coaching can be 'non-directive' as claimed, but with no guarantee that it doesn't become at best 'an individual training' and at worst ethically inappropriate training in terms of the *content* of coaching. These coaches can continue using, and possibly overusing, consistent questioning, but introducing through this questioning the directions and topics for exploration that would follow their personal or undisclosed organizational agenda without the client's explicit consent. On the other hand, the strong critiques of simplistic 'non-directive' coaching can justify revamping their coaching into individual training by bringing in as much direction and content as they feel appropriate. This 'improvement' can become ethically inappropriate if not made explicit for a client, fully discussed and culminated with the client's agreement.

## **Conclusion**

In this short paper I have demonstrated how recognition of differences between the process and content of coaching helps to avoid potential pitfalls in which even experienced coaches can find themselves. This differentiation is particularly useful in those situations when there are misconceptions of what non-directive coaching means and what coaches need to watch for in order to work without imposing their own agenda on coaching indiscriminately.

Finally, here is what could be served as the shorthand recommendations for coaches in these tricky situations, so they can stay away from making their coaching individual training and ensure that they work ethically in this regard:

- Whatever is the *process* of coaching, 'non-directive' or dialogical, the purpose and the *content* of coaching conversations should be defined by the client or agreed through an open discussion of the coaching focus.
- New purpose or topics for discussion that the coach believes are important for the purpose of coaching, as defined by the client, can be offered by the coach. However, the coach should invite full consideration of possible implications for the client of these new directions of the content. The beliefs that coaches might have about the value of these topics needs to be owned by them, with as full as possible consideration of the differences between them and their clients, and ideally discussed in supervision.

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