

## Book Review

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**Bachkirova, T., Spence, G., & Drake, D. (Eds.). (2017). *The SAGE Handbook of Coaching*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.**

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The burgeoning of coaching in organizations over the past 20 years has generated questions about the field's legitimacy, that of its professionals and of the activity itself. Typical questions include: What are the impacts of coaching on individuals, teams, and organizations? How are effective coaching interventions designed? What is a legitimate background for a coach? Even, are there any risks in using coaching?

This Handbook orchestrates the various academic contributions that have addressed to date such questions. 40 key issues are then discussed and organized into 6 parts: I. Positioning coaching as a discipline; II. Coaching as a process; III. Common issues in coaching; IV. Coaching in contexts; V. Researching coaching; VI. Development of coaches. Most, if not all chapters, are written by authoritative figures of the field who put their work into perspective with the Handbook's objectives of furthering the establishment of coaching as a discipline. Overall, I would like to stress two major features of the Handbook that particularly resonated with me.

### **Orchestrating the Wild West**

First, the Handbook does a nice job of honoring and organizing into a coherent body the multiplicity of voices in the coaching field. Drawing on experts across a wide range of disciplines, it offers a thorough account of the mainstream and normative perspectives in coaching while providing an avenue for more analytical and critical approaches. Several chapters propose structuring frameworks to explore different coaching practices and distinguish between various tools, approaches, models, roles, etc. In particular, Bachkirova's distinction between modern and post-modern approaches in coaching is especially helpful as it nicely positions the different practices and perspectives in coaching such as the coach's attention, the role of the coach, the

coaching relationship, etc. While normally this multiplicity leads to a portrayal of the coaching profession as a Wild West, where the so-called lack of consistency is associated with eclecticism, ambiguity, and confusion, the Handbook embraces the richness of the coaching kaleidoscope. In earlier work, my co-author Jean Nizet and I (2012) challenged the negative connotation of ambiguity in coaching by offering an alternative interpretation. Building on Merton's functionalist analytical framework, we suggested that this perceived ambiguity might reflect the inherent multiple functions that coaching offers: from explicit (such as empowering individuals) to latent functions (such as pacifying social relations in organizations), to potential dysfunctions (such as scapegoating certain individuals in the organizations). In the end, we portray coaching as an *ad hoc* entanglement of multiple functions that vary across contexts and for people, and whose seductive power lies in these inherently malleable functions.

### **Confronting the Elephant in the Room**

Of course, as a scholar interested in what some might consider the “hidden” or “dark sides” of coaching, I was particularly attracted to a handful of commonly neglected conversations given attention in this book. To name a few: “The Key Discourses of Coaching” (Chapter 3 by Simon Western), “Coaching for Social Change” (Chapter 10 by Hany Shoukry), “Physicality in Coaching: Developing an Embodied Perspective” (Chapter 14 by Peter Jackson), and “Researching the Coaching Process” (Chapter 32 by Adrian Myers). While, as exposed by Western, the conversation often takes a technical perspective by focusing on the micro-practice of coaching with an emphasis on skills, competencies, and goals, these chapters unveil macro issues, such as the discussion of how social, ideological, and spatial factors shape (and normalize) the practice of coaching today. In brief, they confront the “elephant in the room” by inviting reflection on the interests that coaching can serve. In this context, Shoukry's chapter connecting coaching, oppression, and emancipation is especially noteworthy. Building on the research into coaching as a practice of control and discipline, this chapter identifies several factors that contribute to the neglect of critical issues in coaching, including power. Shoukry likens the adaptive nature of coaching to a 21st century society characterized by an individualistic self-improvement paradigm, a coaching body politic essentially preoccupied with serving a performance-centric organizational agenda, and the prevalence of an individual focus in coaching at the expense of systemic thinking. Similarly, Western's distinction of four discourses in coaching suggests some coaching discourses might be more likely to support an authentic

development of the individual rather than contributing to aligning behaviors to fit organizational norms in organizations.

Also unveiling under-discussed topics in coaching, Jackson calls our attention to body, embodiment and physicality. Especially, he focuses on physiological states in coaching, reviewing several practices that help both coach and client tune in to somatic experience: integral coaching, somatic coaching, ontological coaching, etc. Implicitly emphasizing the *being* dimension of coaching, Jackson's embodied perspective invites us to look at coaching as a lived space, beyond a set of tools and methods. I see this as an encouragement to further consider the spatial dimensions in coaching, thus echoing a few conversations started in this handbook. Western (Chapter 3), for example, describes coaching as an "experiential space" for the soul/psyche to speak, "a liminal space" where we listen to "the heartbeat of the conversation rather than only its content" (Western, 2012, p. 155). Along the same lines, Korotov (Chapter 8 – Coaching for Leadership development) emphasizes the potential transitional (Winnicott, 1953) function of coaching. Other scholars have also suggested to consider the specificities of this boundary space, neither totally inside, nor totally outside organizations, that potentially generates power dynamics (Fatien Diochon, Louis, Paiva, Van Hove, 2017). They call for raising awareness on the challenges specific to coaching at the interface, including the multiple hats that coaches wear from firefighter to spy or loudspeaker (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2016).

In conclusion, by *orchestrating the Wild West* of coaching and *confronting some elephants in the room*, I believe that this Handbook makes a significant contribution to strengthening the discipline of coaching, especially because it includes but goes beyond the *techne* of coaching, to tackle its political dimensions. And we can only wish for this Handbook to help all coaching stakeholders embrace the field's complexity.

## References

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