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WORKPLACE COACHING AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL INTERVENTION: METAPHORS, DYNAMICS AND EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCES

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This article studies coaching in an organizational context. The research focuses on analysing the specifics of clients' experiences before, during and after coaching sessions, based on a survey (N=68) and sets of interviews with executives, managers and employees (N=18). It investigates the role and types of coaching expectations, the dynamics of client evaluations during the sessions, their feeling of security, the perception of the coach's style, types of work (psychologically-oriented and managerial-oriented) and organizational context. Special attention is paid to the qualitative analysis of the positive and negative metaphors of coaching in relation to client satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the sessions, and the conditions which contribute to, or hinder, the efficacy of corporate sessions.

Keywords: coaching; organization, qualitative research, metaphors, satisfaction, coaching sessions.

JEL Classification: Z

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Introduction

The evolution of coaching in recent decades can be seen in many areas. Coaching developed from initially quite simple models and methods of work with a person (such as models of goal setting, identifying strengths and weaknesses, scaling) to more complex approaches and larger theoretical traditions (such as cognitive-behavioural, psychodynamic, narrative) (Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2010; Passmore, Peterson, & Freire, 2013); from separating itself from other disciplines and defending its boundaries to bridging with other disciplines (Brock, 2008); from lacking regulation of coaches' activities to professional standards and competencies (Gray, 2012); from the absence of empirical studies to a significant increase in their number and quality (Grant, 2013; Theeboom, 2014). One of the elements of this evolution is its reunification with psychology, its sub-disciplines and the modern body of psychology research and concepts. An important role here was played by positive psychology, which provided evidence that it is possible to reliably increase well-being by using special interventions, including *coaching interventions* (Kauffman, Boniwell, & Silberman, 2010). At the same time, coaching is still not a monolithic activity (Grant, 2013); it is experiencing the effects of fragmentation (Brock, 2008), and obtaining the status of a proper profession in the future is not guaranteed (Gray, 2012). In any case, since the practice of coaching started, it has passed from inspirational and individual training methods to wider reflective and responsible practices.

This article presents a phenomenological study of workplace coaching, aimed at 'viewing from within' in terms of employee experiences of coaching, their perceptions, expectations, feelings during the process, and satisfaction with it.[3] It raises some of the problems with regard to the corporate coaching format, depicts and discusses its key elements and presents templates which may be helpful for practitioners in arranging the format in a safer and more consistent manner, promoting employee satisfaction and overall coaching efficacy.

Qualitative research of coaching

In recent years, special attention has been paid to the analysis of coaching research methods and design (Grant et al., 2010; Grant, 2013; Theeboom et al., 2014). *Qualitative research* on coaching, although not extensive, is present in peer-reviewed academic journals. Most published studies are case studies based on observations, interviews, personal

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reflections and interpretations (Peterson, 1996; Wasylyshyn, 2004; Winum, 2006; Korotov, Florent-Treacy, Kets de Vries, & Bernhardt, 2012). Some studies use an original design, such as descriptions of perceptions from both the coach's and the client's point of view, published as co-authors (Peterson & Miller, 2004; Freedman & Perry, 2010). Also noteworthy is research using grounded theory design (Brock, 2008; Passmore, 2010), and a number of early qualitative studies without affiliation to any specific qualitative methods (Kiel, Rimmer, Williams, & Doyle, 1996; Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999; Hart, Blattner, & Leipsic, 2001).

Despite these and some other studies, we suggest the potential for qualitative research in coaching and positive organizational psychology is far from fulfilled. Making use of field organizational observations, interviews, conversation analysis of teamwork, meetings, leadership styles, coaching session records, thick descriptions of the workplace settings and employees' daily experience, analysis of personal and organizational stories, narratives, metaphors, official documents, visual and video materials (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1994)—all these qualitative methods and techniques can provide new valuable data on the inner organizational life and practices which help employees to flourish.

Qualitative design and epistemology

The field of qualitative research has undergone some changes over the last 20 years. The position of many authors has moved from extensive epistemological debates and the contrast with quantitative methods to mixed methods research and looking for the answer to the core question: how can we draw valid knowledge from qualitative data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). There are several simple and productive distinctions which help, in our opinion, to integrate qualitative design in broader conventional research methodology: qualitative methods deal with meanings and mostly using textual data (Dey, 1993; Tesch, 1990), whereas quantitative researchers work with few variables and many cases, qualitative researchers usually rely on a few cases and many variables (Ragin, 1987).

In our research, we explore not the external dimensions of coaching effectiveness (such as work productivity, career and goal achievements, return on investment), but the *experiential dimension* of coaching: the field of personal perceptions, clear and vague feelings, senses, expectations, impressions, and concerns. As expected, using metaphors helped the participants to depart from their ready formal statements and templates.

Method

Organizational context

The research was conducted within a Russian holding company that had launched a project to improve corporate culture. The project included a number of activities, one of the core ones being to offer individual coaching sessions to employees, managers and directors. The company provided three one-hour meetings with a coach free of charge, after which the employee could continue sessions at their expense. Top-level managers had the possibility of choosing their coach at a preliminary meeting; the coaches for midlevel managers and employees was chosen by HR. Approximately 100 employees attended the coaching sessions and about 30 coaches were involved in the project, some of whom worked with several clients. The coaches represented various centres and schools of coaching and consulting, and their participation was confirmed by the company in advance. Our research explores the experience of employees before, during and after individual coaching sessions held within corporate coaching for a large group of employees in a company, and their overall impression and perception of workplace coaching.

Data collection

All employees who took part in coaching sessions were recruited through corporate emails sent by HR, inviting them to participate on a voluntary and confidential basis in the research. The first phase of the study consisted of an online survey that included the collection of demographic data on participants (gender and age) and information about their status of session attendance. At this phase, 68 employees took part, 20 men and 48 women, aged 25 to 53 (M = 33.63 years, SD = 6.54). The sample includes heads of departments, midlevel managers, and line personnel. All of them were Russian-speaking. 52 of the participants completed all three proposed coaching sessions; 12 employees attended one or two sessions (for different reasons), 2 employees were in the process of taking the coaching sessions, and 1 employee completed more than three sessions (continued working with the coach at his/her own expense).

The survey also included a question on the general satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the coaching sessions, which showed that overall 79% of participants (N= 54) were satisfied, 21% (N=14) were dissatisfied; 85% of men (17 out of 20 participants) and 77% of women (37 out of 48 participants) were satisfied. The main part of the survey was to describe the key benefits (or otherwise) of the coaching, and to find an image or metaphor which could express and illustrate the meaning of coaching for the person. Qualitative analysis (described in more

detail, below) was applied to identify key themes and compare the content of descriptions provided by the satisfied and dissatisfied participants.

During the second phase, we conducted in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The sample (N=18) consisted of directors, managers, and employees randomly selected from both groups (satisfied and dissatisfied). Interviews occurred in meeting rooms at the company; the average duration was 30 minutes for each interview. The interview guide included such topics as initial expectations of coaching; impressions of the process and format, feelings and emotions before, during and immediately after the coaching sessions; impressions of the coach and his/her actions; subjective results, changes, key benefits; drawbacks in the work and the client's recommendations.

Data analysis

Responses to open-ended questions received during the primary survey, and the transcribed interviews were subjected to a further process of qualitative data analysis. There are many approaches to analysis of qualitative data. Despite the differences, all of these approaches have the same task: to categorize data and make connections between categories (Dey, 1993). We used thematic analysis as it allows us to represent the primary data as a set of themes, not wedded to some pre-existing theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Answers to open-ended questions and the transcriptions of interviews were read while making notes, coding the features of the data, collating the codes into themes, naming the themes, and writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

We assigned all of the themes that emerged to separate *domains*: client expectations and first impressions; perceptions of the coach and his/her style; the feeling of safety; the dynamics of evaluations; metaphors of the coaching; and subjective types of coaching.

Results

Expectations and first impressions

Curiosity

The descriptions of the expectations of the sessions are all linked by participants to their first impressions and final satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the sessions. A portion of the participants left satisfied by coaching and indicated that they had some curiosity about the forthcoming sessions. They were interested in what the coaching was going to be like; what it could do; how coaching differed from the types of work more familiar to the participants (training, consultations).

Willingness to work

Some of participants also point out that they were ready 'to work', had a willingness to share personal information with another person, 'internal agreement', 'readiness and willingness to change something, to learn something, pull something out of the closet'. The presence of some 'real concern', 'need', or 'issue', that they wanted to discuss in coaching and find solution to was also important.

Over-expectations

Some employees who left disappointed after the very first session or the entire cycle of sessions, noted that they had high expectations of the coaching. Usually they talked about 'the deception of expectations', 'the mismatch of expectations with reality', 'a mismatch of the coach's image', or 'what exactly a coach does'.

> When I met the coach for the first time, I was badly upset and vexed. I had some expectations, some thoughts. I wished a person to come and miraculously solve my problems. But then we turned to quite another direction... Yes, I was upset, annoyed. I expected that the first meeting would be for 'taking my pulse', and maybe it is me who doesn't understand anything. In fact, all three meetings were the same (*Manager, female*).

Scepticism

The opposite attitude was also common among our participants—'initial scepticism', 'a critical attitude' and 'a closed position' before the session. This attitude is associated most often with: lack of knowledge of who the coach is, and a lack of experience as a client; a negative image of coaches, for example, an image of a rigorous coach who would 'push'; annoyance that the company offered coaching at the wrong time, during a period of excessive workload; disappointment that the company provided only three coaching sessions during which, as participants believed, it was impossible to achieve something meaningful; the notion that planned coaching sessions were rather a pro-forma meetings for the company than a real development activity.

Participants talked about their ironic attitude and jokes about coaching, which were voiced behind-the-scenes between employees. It is interesting, however, that a sceptical and ironic attitude before the sessions often gave way to pleasant surprise for the participants who recognizing the value of coaching sessions as early as at the first meeting.

Frankly speaking, I was quite sceptical about the session before we started. It happened in quite a difficult period, when there was a crazy amount of work. At first, we thought: 'Oh my God, how badly timed is this?'. But the first session flew by very, very quickly. I felt inspired to even greater openness, interest and enthusiasm to come to the next sessions. For me, it was a discovery. I did not expect that it could be like that (*Director of department, female*).

Perception of coach and his/her style

Coach's personality traits

The personal traits of the coach rather than his/her professional skills were rated above all by participants, and were recognized as crucial for the selection and evaluation of the coach. They are very individual, vary from one interviewee to another and often not rational and thoughtful but intuitive and driven by 'a feeling' from their communication. As one of executives formulated it: 'It's about the quality of energy that a coach gives to you besides conversations and knowledge'. In this case, it is apparently difficult if not impossible to make a universal and consistent list of personality traits that would be satisfactory for any client. Nevertheless, it is possible to describe some of the most general features listed, such as openness, sociability, empathy, the ability to find some common ground with a person, build trust, initial interest in the client, a desire to help, and enjoying the work himself/herself.

Matching

Positive feedback frequently mentioned the interaction with the coach as complementarity, or a similarity with the coach, a match of 'psychotype' or 'character'. At the same time, a discrepancy here and a negative first impression are not necessarily a rejection. In the course of the first session, a change of the initially negative attitude to a more positive attitude can occur, as described by one of the interviews:

When we just started to talk, scepticism increased, because this person is not like me at all in character, charisma, or emotions. I even thought: 'Oh my God, how will we have these three sessions?'. But actually everything proved to be very easy and comfortable, without any pressure, insisting, without attempts to push to anything (*Director of department, female*).

Active position of the coach

One of the features that resulted in positive impressions for the participants was the active, initiating, involved, focused position of the coach. Behaviour that was seen as passive,

mostly receiving, silent, 'introverted', with no focus on some concrete topic of the slow pace of the sessions caused participants frustration and irritation in the context of organizational forms of consulting. This lack of activity was associated by employees with the time-consuming work of a therapist, rather than with business coaching, and seemed inappropriate.

> A pretty, pleasant woman, understanding and accepting... But where is all the coaching? She gave all the initiative to me to reveal myself and describe what was worrying and bothering me. In my opinion, the tempo was too smooth, like psychotherapy. At this tempo, though very comfortable, it's impossible to achieve any progress during three sessions. It was lacking dynamics. A state of relaxation is not the usual format for me to analyse information (*Manager, female*).

Balance of gentleness-insistence

Among the specifics of a coach's work which led to some insights and results, the participants noted that their coach was rather empathetic and gentle, on the one hand, but rigorous and uncompromising, on the other. Some observations of participants are provided below:

−'She [the coach] is so gentle, but at the same time you know that she has the opportunity and mastery to allow a person to grow a little bit even during the hour that we spent with her' (*Manager, male*).

− 'This person was uncompromising with me and went all the way in solving the problem. He could just sympathize with me, we would smile at each other and finish in this way' (*Employee, female*).

The ability to confront

Some of the comments show cases of constructive confrontation and provocation from the coach which led to the realization of something important for participants. One of the cases is described below:

> The second session was also indicative for me as we could not find a meeting room because the room booked for me was given to other people, and I decided not to disturb them. The coach called my attention to it: 'You don't want to bother anyone, but don't you want to take care of yourself? You throw away your assets to other people so easily, because of a strange feeling of pity, but you don't think about your own interests'. I started to protest, which resulted in a kind of confrontation with the coach, but then I realized that he was right (*Manager, female*).

As a compliment to their coaches, some interviewees also indicate that at some point they had resistance to the work and negative emotions which the coach was able to overcome.

Feeling of safety in workplace coaching
Discomfort during session

A specific feature of business coaching is working at the client's company. For this project, the company offered the employees a choice and each one decided by themselves, whether to have the sessions inside the company, or in the coaches' offices outside the workplace. Among our participants who had their sessions inside the company and who pointed to discomfort were both those who negatively evaluated sessions and those who positively evaluated sessions. The following factors can hinder self-disclosure and cause a sense of discomfort:

−'open space' meeting rooms, which prevent the participant from focusing entirely on the process;

−concern that someone can hear the conversation because of the poor sound insulation of the meeting rooms;

−unclear motivation of the company for hiring a coach; concern about confidentiality: that HR, the line manager, or the security department could obtain and use the conversation in some way or that it is tape-recorded by security department;

−a busy period for the department;

−discussion of issues that the client does not want share with the coach;

−the incongruence of office space and personal problems;

−too quickly jumping 'right off the bat' from business issues to private ones.

Such factors as a new boss, conflict in work relationships, and an environment of mistrust within the team may become cause a feeling insecurity. It is clear from the interview with a manager:

> Working for a company is being involved in the company, and on the one hand, it is a game without understanding of who is on which side. So, when some things are initiated by the company, in particular, such as selection of a coach, it creates a feeling of insecurity for some people like me. I think I could get more benefit from this, if these disturbing lead-ins were removed from the start (*Manager, female*).

Regret of excessive self-disclosure after session

Another feeling associated with a fear of negative consequences due to excessive openness and frankness is regret:

> After the first session, I felt a little uncomfortable, because I shared more than I should have, in my opinion. And the first thing I felt is a light prick that the information could be used against me. However, after thinking for a while, I decided that everything I disclosed was within the bounds of decency, generally accepted standards, and this is nothing more than some of my own fears and concerns. I realized that, firstly, it had already happened and, secondly, it was all within the bounds of decency, so there was no problem at all (*Director of department, male*).

Accepting the risk of self-disclosure

Participants who did not have difficulties with the discussion of personal issues within the office space explain the ease of their self-disclosure by the fact that they did not have 'skeletons in the closet'; or that the coach could create the 'right environment'; or because they perceived the coaching as an opportunity paid for by the company: 'It's like to going on vacation and staying in the hotel room the whole time' (*Manager, female*); and, in general, accepting possible risks: 'Everything will become known to those who need it. I do not have any illusions that the security department will fail to have a look at something' (*Manager, female*).

Sense of own limits and comfortable distance

Experienced participants, who had undergone coaching and training before noted that they had learned to better understand their personal boundaries over the time and it helped them.

> If I don't want to disclose anything, I will not do it. We talked exactly about those thing that I was ready to disclose. She [the coach] was trying to touch one more issue, but I told her: 'Stop, we'll not go in this direction'. She tried once, twice, and I told her: 'Let's not waste time on it' (*Director of department, female*).

Participants talked also about the coach's ability to create an optimal distance by balancing the avoidance of an intrusion into restricted areas, and needed closeness with the client.

Helping and assistance to coach

Finally, the secret of establishing a good relationship with the coach for some participants was their own active position, i.e., assistance in communication, talking about things that he or she really cares about, having an interest in finding solutions, seeking to keep and perform agreements, doing homework.

Dynamics of evaluations during the sessions

By analysing the different kinds of feelings and evaluations of participants, we notice highly diverse dynamics in the beginning, middle and final coaching sessions.

The first coaching session

The first meetings often awoke a wide range of feelings and emotions. The most common reactions which participants expressed and which we may summarize in some sample statements were:

1. 'I liked it, it was interesting' (recognition of the value of time spent, positive emotions: joy, elation, energy boost, renewal, hope, desire to do something, curiosity).

2. 'I was puzzled' (discovery of something unexpected, mixed feelings: surprise, confusion, irritation with yourself or coach).

3. 'I haven't realized the degree of importance yet' (neutrality, looking closely).

4. 'It turned me off' (uselessness, lack of interest and desire to continue, negative emotions: disappointment, anxiety, irritation with the coach, feeling of invasion).

Here are some of the first impressions described:

– 'The first session was a revelation for me. I built a complete picture, it was warm inside, "butterflies were flying"' (*Director of department, female*).

– 'I had a feeling that I managed to find the time for the things that usually stayed lying on a shelf, namely for myself' (*Director of department, female*).

– 'I was annoyed, but it was a plus for me, i.e., it was going out of my comfort zone' (*Employee, male*).

A pattern in descriptions was that *a small personal discovery*, insight, or recognition, which occurs at the first session adds value, increasing the client's personal investment and the probability of attending the next coaching session.

> But just after the first session - bingo! The problem is of another kind! I was very enthusiastic after the very first meeting and immediately realized the direction I want to go in, my interests not only within the company (*Manager, female*).

The second coaching session

The second session was usually referred to less than the first one and the last one. It is primarily mentioned in relation to some striking moment at the session. The most typical variants of impressions:

1. 'More detailed discussion of the issues discussed before' (further investigation, positive emotions: elation, joy, anticipation of the next session).

2. 'A crucial point' (breakthrough, bright moment that changed the dynamics of sessions, positive emotions: excitement, hope, anticipation of the session).

3. 'One and the same' (lack of novelty in the work, increased resistance, negative emotions: boredom, irritation at the coach).

An example of a clear crucial point which influenced the course of the process and is still subjectively meaningful to the participant of the research after a few months is shown below:

> But literally there, in the second half of the second session, we dived so deep that I actually was caught off balance and am still thinking how to deal with it, as it may have significant effect on my future career (*Employee, female*).

An example of the opposite is the coach sticking to one topic, a certain inflexibility and lack of attention to the needs of the client:

> At some point, we were very much concentrated on the same subject. I tried to turn the coach to another direction, but he still went on. We spent a lot of time, especially, on managerial style. We spent almost two sessions for discussion of styles (*Director of department, male*).

The third coaching session

The third session was the final one in this company's project (each of the employees, as we have noted, could have further sessions at his/her own expense). In this context, the session usually became the summarizing one and crucial for participants' assessment of the value, productivity and satisfaction for them of all cycle of sessions:

1. 'Feeling of completeness' (a sense of integration, generalization of the content and findings from the first two sessions, positive emotions: satisfaction, hope, calmness).

2. 'There are some results' (achievement of some positive results and mixed feelings: satisfaction, regret about absence of any breakthroughs or out-of-the-box solutions).

3. 'Finally disappointed' (no significant results and progress for the client, negative emotions: from regret about the time spent, to complete disappointment with and a devaluation of the coach and coaching).

A lack of strong progress or a tangible breakthrough after all three sessions was not always a devaluating factor. Below there is an example from an interview, which describes quite a common situation when a participant received moderately positive results, but perceived the value of his/her work:

> This experience has not been a breakthrough for me that completely changed my life and, after completion of the coaching session, I would say: 'Yes, I understood how to live'. No, it did not happen. I received some additional tools for myself, additional knowledge about my future goals and directions. I think it helped me (*Director of department, female*).

At the same time, the absence of any novelty and progress, the monotony of topics, methods and directions of the discussions was a factor in a negative evaluation of work when the coaching lasted for more than one session.

Model of dynamics during three sessions

Summarizing the abovementioned points, several variations of dynamics can be highlighted and presented as specific models showing positive or negative evaluations during the cycle of three coaching sessions (see Table 1). Obviously, presented models do not cover all possible cases.

Table 1. Model of evaluation dynamics during three coaching sessions. Notations: "+" positive evaluation; "++" strong positive evaluation; "-" negative evaluation, "--" strong negative evaluation, "n" relatively neutral evaluation, "x" interruption of sessions.

Model of dynamics	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3
Adjusting	n	n	+
Small Steps	+	+	+
Completed Cycle	+	+	++

Trust Gain	-	+	+
Interest Decreasing	+	-	-
Marking time	-	-	--
Interruption	--	x	x

1. *Adjusting*: (session 1) neutrality and acceptance, (session 2) deepening and greater disclosure, (session 3) breakthrough and insight.

2. *Small steps*: (session 1) interest awakening and a little progress, (session 2) interest increasing and further progress, (session 3) novelty and satisfaction.

3. *Completed cycle:* (session 1) diving in deeply and insight, (session 2) deep work and engagement, (session 3) completion and integration.

4. *Trust gain:* (session 1) ambiguousness and frustration, (session 2) awareness and trust, (session 3) advancement and little results.

5. *Interest dying down:* (session 1) curiosity and novelty, (session 2) sticking to one subject and boredom, (session 3) monotony and disappointment.

6. *Marking time:* (session 1) neutrality and looking closely, (session 2) lack of progress and disappointment, (session 3) repetition and devaluation.

7. *Interruption:* (session 1) mismatching and closure (interruption of session cycle).

Positive Metaphors of Coaching and Coach

Analysing the answers to the survey and the interviews, we grouped the metaphors similar in meaning and images which describe the participants' impression of the coaching. Below we show the metaphors used by participants satisfied with sessions (see Figure 1) and those who remained dissatisfied (see Figure 2). Because of the obvious positive and negative connotations of both groups of metaphors, we have referred to them conventionally as 'positive' and 'negative'.

Discovery

Some of participants associated coaching with 'discovering' (themselves, something new), 'realizing possibilities', 'self-revelation', 'self-investigation', getting rid of 'blinkered vision'. At the same time, such an investigation and discovery have a practical side. As one of executives expressed it: 'This is something that helps me to develop in a utilitarian way. Not just making my inner world wider and richer, but for my inner development in the business area'.

Overcoming of obstacles

Another group of statements revealed an obstacle, and the process of creatively overcoming it, i.e., 'crossing an internal barrier', 'assembly' or 'turning point'. This group is represented by succinct metaphors of the coaching such as 'unravelling a tangle', 'verbally completing an abstract jig-saw puzzle'. In this case, the coach is described as 'a mediator of solutions', 'a guide to some place you need'.

Life expertise

Some of participants considered coaching as 'expertise', 'conversation-discussion through which the coach helps me to understand what direction to take', and coach as a 'professional friend'. It is remarkable that despite knowing about the non-expert position of the coach, many participants confessed to waiting for the coach's recommendations.

Training

A group of statements described coaching as 'training', 'game', 'education' and the coach as a trainer. One meaning of the metaphor could be grasped by the words of one employee: 'It is like learning to swim: you do everything by yourself, but the trainer urges you'.

Psychotherapy session

A significant group of participants described coaching as a 'session with a psychologist', 'visit to a psychotherapist', 'mental therapy'. Although the number of instances of this theme across the data set is not crucial for thematic analysis (see *Broun & Clarke*, 2006), it is notable that this metaphor was mentioned by 29% of the sample (20 of 68 employees). Interestingly, satisfaction with sessions differed among members of this group. 25% or 5 of 20 participants were unsatisfied. Comments from interviews showed that comparison with a psychologist/psychotherapist for such participants has rather a meaning of something imposed and *intrusive*. The other 75% or 15 of 20 were satisfied with the sessions. Such participants tended to suggest that a coach as a corporate psychologist/psychotherapist was for them some kind of supporting and understanding figure. These two polar attitudes are presented in extracts of interviews below:

> For me, a coach is a psychologist who can listen to and help me forward myself in the direction I wish to go, i.e., to help me make a choice myself without anybody's help (*Director of department, female*).
> Meeting with a coach formed an impression that I am speaking again with my therapist. And it didn't make a really good impression on me, because these two processes [coaching and therapy] should have different tasks. I felt like I was at a

psychotherapeutic session. But I didn't initiate these sessions, but [HR-specialists] whose thoughts at that moment were unclear for me (*Manager, female*).
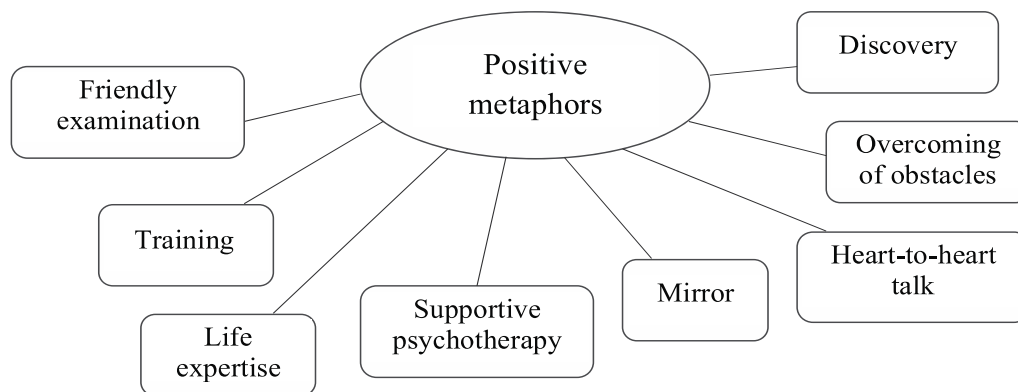

Figure 1. Positive metaphors of coaching.

Mirror

This metaphor treats the coach as a dispassionate mediator, a kind of specific *alter ego*, a mirror you can look in, or even an 'rational inner voice'. Coaching was described as a 'conversation with myself'. We can find similar passages in interviews: 'It is something between your conscience and yourself, because the coach asks you questions that you are not ready to ask yourself' (*Manager, female*).

Heart-to-heart talk

Description of coaching as a 'conversation', 'dialogue', 'communication' looks quite obvious and even neutral or formulaic, although all such descriptions were coupled with satisfaction with the sessions. Among more emotional statements, there were such characteristics as 'constructive', 'interesting', 'inspiring' communication, 'a heart-to-heart talk'.

Friendly examination

There is also a group of those who were satisfied but whose statements had some indication of non-voluntary involvement, enforcement, mandatory nature or excessive insistence of the coach. Using the words of participants, we named this group, 'friendly examination'. It includes such ironic and critical comments as 'friendly conversation, but sometimes a coach tries to pull out your soul like during an interrogation', 'school lesson (you must talk even against your will)'. The perception of the coaching as a 'job interview' could be included in this category as well.

Negative Coaching Metaphors

Stress

The remaining metaphors disclose perceptions of the coaching by those unsatisfied with coaching sessions. Coaching is described as 'a forced conversation', 'stress', 'discomfort', 'uncomfortable communication and a lack of understanding about the subject we discussed' and even 'torture'.

Hollow talk

The last group of metaphors includes statements expressing total disappointment of coaching sessions and the feeling that the participants did not understand each other. The degree of disappointment differs from rather neutral (e.g., 'a monologue in an empty theatre', 'a dialogue with an incidental travel companion'), up to rather strong (e.g., 'a waste of time' and even 'a conversation with a charlatan').
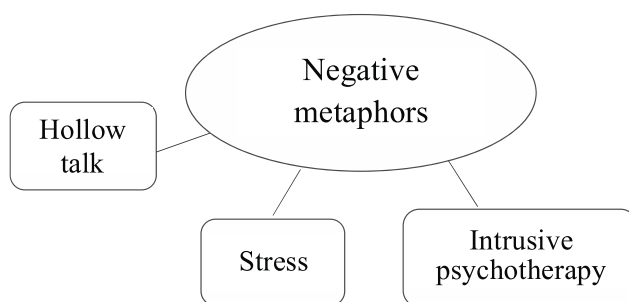

Figure 2. Negative metaphors of coaching.

Types of work in workplace coaching

Despite the variety of client goals and the issues they presented, the types of work can be sorted into two groups: *psychologically-oriented* and *managerial-oriented*. According to their personal view of coaching, our participants mostly tended to suppose that (a) workplace coaching necessarily includes a psychological and intrapersonal dimension as it gives coaching its depth and authenticity; or that (b) workplace coaching should strive to avoid psychologism and discussions going beyond business processes and managerial issues. There were also those who believed that (c) the choice depends on the clients needs. This latter is perfectly illustrated by an episode from the interview with a director experienced in working with various coaches:

In my first experience of working with a coach, I should have solved the problem with myself, my feelings in certain situations. At that moment, I preferred a psychodramatic type of coaching. This time the task was closer to managerial, and here I preferred to see someone with management skills. I wouldn't choose a person with business experience for my first task. I spoke with various coaches and we understood that we could not resolve this issue with them. But psychodrama did. However, I know that my colleagues went to my coach, but with other issues, and they refused to continue after the very first session (*Director of department, female*).

We deal with various client concerns, with different *types of work* in workplace coaching, and with people searching for *specialists* with different qualifications. In other words, a client may need various coaches, mostly matched to his/her issue or task, which is illustrated in the reflective words of one of executives:

I would like to have different coaches for each separate task. I had a very useful experience, when I met different coaches and understood that they are strong in different areas. Their technique with a client has strengths in different areas: one is good at management, another at something else. And I thought it would be perfect to choose a coach for my particular task or issue (*Director of department, female*).

Discussion
Summary of findings

If individual coaching is held for a group of employees, there is the risk that some of them would not have *motivation* and *willingness to work*. At the same time, as emerged from our interviews and survey, a neutral attitude, a lack of expectations, scepticism and even irony at the beginning do not necessarily become a hindrance and may have positive effects, such as the satisfaction from coaching and positive impressions from the coach, as it would leave space for client's surprise and openness to something new. It appears that the *client's support* of the coach's efforts to help him/her even with some initial scepticism is the key for productive work, which is similar to the case study of Freedman and Perry (2010). We may see that *curiosity* plays a positive role in the coaching experience. In contrast, unrealistic expectations and idealization before the sessions have a high risk of rapid devaluation and are often accompanied with disappointment and a negative assessment of the session cycle.

The personality of the coach and relations with him/her are one of the pivotal themes and previous studies also support this finding (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005; Stewart, Palmer,

Wilkin, & Kerrin, 2008). It is interesting that *personal traits*, not professional skills, come to the fore in describing the coach. A sense of *matching* with a coach also plays an important role, which was also noted earlier (Grant et al., 2010; Passmore, 2010), although it is more likely intuitive, rather than rationally weighted. Coaches' *styles* are also taken into account, especially the balance of gentleness-insistence, the ability to confront, and being able to work with resistance and negative emotions. Some of these findings have been presented in the literature previously (Hall et al., 1999; Gonzalez, 2004; Passmore, 2010).

The question of *safety* and *boundaries* in the coach-client relationship was crucial in corporate settings. The participants point to the fact that deep and honest work helped them to move forward in finding solutions. On the other hand, a question arises: how to discuss sensitive topics within an organisation in an effective and ethical way, without making the client feel discomfort and subjective insecurity, and without creating real insecurity (that information may be accessible to somebody else, and used for purposes beyond the coach's control)? Personal control of the boundaries of the conversation by the client is a partial solution for this issue. However it is obvious that the coach should also be attentive to these issues (see: Kiel et al., 1996), as it is not always the case that the client can instantly realize a comfortable level of self-disclosure during a coaching session.

The many metaphors of coaching show that conversations with a coach give displeasure when they are related to enforcement, or to intrusive psychotherapy without the client presenting a problem or when the communication turned out to be empty, non-professional or meaningless. On the contrary: the perception of coaching as discovery, an overcoming of obstacles, having expertise in one's own life, the trainer's work, supportive psychotherapy at work, a mirror, a heart-to-heart talk and friendly examination are all connected with satisfaction with the coaching sessions. In general, positive metaphors of coaching are more differentiated and diverse than negative ones, but the negative ones are much more emotionally laden.

The differentiation between *psychologically-oriented* and *managerial-oriented* coaching gives a new angle to the old dispute on coaching boundaries. It is more likely that some clients of workplace coaching expect to receive help in solving personal and behavioural problems, which is very close to psychology and psychotherapy. Other clients are focused on assistance in designing, structuring and optimizing organizational and business-processes, which is closer to organizational consulting and management. This distinction has parallels with the differentiation of coaches concentrating primarily on business competencies vs. personal growth (Bono, Purvanova, Towler, & Peterson, 2009).

It is possible to summarize the findings of our research in the form of a list of conditions, which enhance or decrease participant satisfaction with workplace coaching and contribute to or hinder coaching efficacy within an organization (see Table 2).

Table 2. Conditions contributing to and hindering from efficacy of coaching sessions in organization.

	What hinders workplace coaching and decreases satisfaction	What promotes workplace coaching and enhances satisfaction
On the client's side	Excessive expectations, inflexibility in revising expectations Indifferent attitude, no presenting issue for coaching Avoidance of discussing personal topics, anxiety of self-disclosure, resistance to work Comparison with colleagues' results of sessions	Willingness to work, curiosity, providing help and assistance to the coach Ability to be open with other people A sense of own boundaries and safety A small discovery at the first session Something interesting, new and unexpected from the sessions
On the coach's side	Passive, silent, "introvert" position Imposing interpretations on the client Invasion into topics that the client does not want to talk about Sticking to the same topic, lack of novelty in the sessions	Active, initiating position of the coach Openness, ability to establish contact Creating of comfortable, safe environment for self-disclosure of the client without any obstacles Balance between softness and insistence Ability to withstand a confrontation, to work with resistance Ability to hold an optimal distance Ability to work with issues of managerial and psychological nature Diversity and flexibility in topics and methods at the sessions

	Uncomfortable conditions for coaching sessions (poor noise insulation, open space meeting rooms); for some clients – sessions within the company	Offering the client to choose a comfortable place of sessions by himself/herself
On the company's side	Wrong time for sessions (projects reporting, time pressure, etc.).	A relatively quiet time for the client to attend the sessions
	Not offering employees the opportunity to choose a coach before the sessions	Offering employees to choose a coach out of several coaches
	Unclear motives for offering the coaching sessions to employees	Presentation of the coaching project's objectives to employees and the company's expectations of these sessions
	Climate of distrust within the company or department of the client	Introductory meeting that reveals advantages of coaching as a methodology and examples of corporate coaching issues (concerns)
	Lack of instructions on what the coaching is and what tasks can be solved by it	Providing freedom to choose a theme for work with a coach

Limitations

The study did not take into account the affiliation of coaches to different coaching schools, their skills or length of service. Some coaches represented solution-focused coaching emphasizing positive differences and exceptions from problems (Grant, 2006); other coaches applied a psychodynamic approach, which is quite different and usually tracks the sources of issues (Kilburg, 2004). While some of the descriptions give us information about common features of client-consultant relationships in an organisational environment, other descriptions may reflect a perception of specific methods. It should also be noted that the research was held within one company and one coaching project which could also limit perceptions. Holding interviews in meeting rooms could prevent some participants from speaking absolutely freely although the level of their openness was fairly high. Interviewees also provided their responses from a few weeks up to several months after the completion of coaching sessions.

Conclusion

The current study demonstrates how diverse, delicate and complex employee experiences of coaching sessions within an organization are. As with other qualitative research, it allows us to view coaching 'from within' through the eyes of participants and shows different contexts or dimensions of coaching: conversational, relational, spatio-temporal, individual, organisational, business, political. As Grant (2013) notes, qualitative research on coaching can provide important insights and overall a true evidence base should respond to the diversity of practice by a wide range of applications, contexts, and methodologies. In conducting qualitative research we see not only a way of making a comprehensive study of coaching and positive interventions, but also improving them as responsible positive social practices, which has always been considered to be one of the aims of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

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