



## KETS DE VRIES INSTITUTE

### THE VIEW FROM A BATHYSCAPH: EXPLORING BENEATH THE SURFACE OF THE ORGANISATIONAL SEA

50 SHADES OF COACHING - HOW TOUGH DOES COACHING HAVE TO BE?  
Manfred Barth, KDVI Associate

During a recent coaching session, Jim, a leadership development coach, asked his coachee, Bob, which three action points he wanted to focus on during the rest of the week. As Head of Procurement for a medium-sized multinational, Bob liked lists. After taking three minutes to jot down 10 action points, the coach interrupted his client with a smile and said: you're just a "to-do-list-junkie"!

Bob clammed up. He wasn't used to being spoken to like this and it made him uncomfortable. Jim, on the other hand, could see and feel what we might call a shift in Bob's attitude. Bob became aware of his reluctance to let go of less important action points, therefore failing to prioritise. He opened his eyes to the excessive expectations he had for his own behaviour.

Was this "tough coaching"? Probably, yes. Was it helpful for the client? Most certainly so. There's a lot to be said for a tougher approach in coaching.

Does a good coach have to be tough? And if so, how tough is tough enough and what does it mean to be a tough coach? At first sight, the answer seems simple. Encouraging a client to leave their comfort zone usually helps them make new connections and learn new things about themselves. This might be perceived as "tough" by some clients, but the coach chooses this intervention not because he wants to be tough per se, but because he wants to help his client reach his objective.

Being tough as a coach frequently means provoking the client. There is a school of provocative coaching based on [Provocative Therapy](#). In provocative therapy the therapist may play the devil's advocate, siding with the negative elements of the client's ambivalence towards his life goals. The therapist might tempt the client to continue self-defeating attitudes and behavioural patterns in order to enable the client to change behaviour.

In a coaching context, "Carefrontation" or "Tough Empathy" are names for an approach by which coaches combine challenge and support during their work with their clients. This approach pushes coachees outside their comfort zone, but allows them to feel safe enough to explore new behaviour and learn from it.

This doesn't mean the more the client finds himself outside his comfort zone, the more he's going to learn. There is a panic zone beyond the comfort zone, and beyond the learning zone. "Do no harm" is the important dictum that applies to therapy as well as to coaching. Being too tough can also affect trust, and as a consequence, could negatively affect the working relationship between the coach and the client.

### **Tough intervention versus tough style**

It's important to keep in mind that "toughness" should not characterise a coaching style in general, but rather the character of a specific intervention. If a coach encourages a client to leave his comfort zone, he does so for a specific purpose, because he believes this intervention will work better than others. He feels the client can handle it and that the risk is worth it. At the same time, the coach must be aware that when clients leave their comfort zone, it's very possible that the positive effect may not be immediate, but only noticeable after some time has passed. For the coach, this becomes a delicate balancing act and an exercise in risk management.

A tough coaching intervention that enables the client to leave his comfort zone does not have to look tough with sharp-pointed questions or aggressive comments. A coach can get to the point by using humour or by addressing sensitive ideas in a delicate manner, without causing offense.

Nevertheless, there are more dynamics at play when coaching gets labelled, intended, or perceived as "tough coaching".

### **Why would a client want to have a "tough" coach?**

The client, who decides s/he wants a tough coach, wants to be challenged. But in some cases, s/he might just want to delegate the responsibility of challenging himself, to the coach. S/he pays to be beaten up in order to alleviate feelings of guilt. As a result, s/he doesn't learn to leave her/his comfort zone—instead, paying the coach to force her/him into doing it. Not surprisingly, this rarely generates the independence a coachee should be encouraged to develop. The coach, on the other hand, might play along because the client gets what s/he wants from his tough coach and the coach can please the coachee. Everybody seems to win.

Another desire for tough coaching can be based on the satisfaction a client finds in demonstrating his ability to "take it" or "cope with it". This desire is frequently seen in the highly stressful and competitive environment of professional services firms. Oftentimes it's more about demonstrating an element of fearlessness than about the additional insight a tough coaching approach can provide. Here, even an element of bragging can play a role.

There are coaching engagements in which the coachee's desire to experience tough coaching results in a relationship of subordination in which the coachee experiences or wants to experience the coach as the teacher who deals with a student, or the tough, but loving parent, who deals with him as the child. This can become evident when "homework" has not been done or the coachee confesses, with feelings of guilt or shame, that s/he has fallen back into old behavioural patterns. We know this kind of pattern from Transactional Analysis, as the Parent-Child model.

When parent-child dynamics find their way into a coach/client relationship, the coachee risks losing something that's essential for a successful coaching intervention: the ability to make choices and the readiness to take over responsibility for the results of the coaching. At its best, the coaching relationship moves clandestinely into a mentoring relationship (which is okay as long as both parties agree to this). At its worst, the coaching client might become too dependent on the coach, almost seeing her/him as his guru.

Erika Leonard's "Fifty Shades of Grey", taught many of us to think of Subordination not only in negative terms. There might be some psychological relief for alpha males in societal dominant positions in identifying with the submissive role. In the "professional" relationship between the domina (dominus) and the submissive, the submissive does not really give up control. First of all, there is usually a clear (often commercial) contract about defined boundaries, and secondly, the submissive can end his role with a safe word at any time. We have safe words in the coaching contract as well, we just don't refer to them as that. We call it the principle of respecting boundaries, which gives the coachee the possibility to stop going further with deeper questioning if s/he no longer feels comfortable.

### **The dark side of the coach**

So, if there are some hidden sides in the coachee making him want a coach to be tough, how about the coach? The coach might also be under the influence of a parent-child dynamic and may enjoy being in a dominating role for whatever hidden, or not so hidden, reasons.

There's the risk of a coach thinking he has to be tough in order to be accepted. Coaches are in the "soft" business of behavioural change, but they have to deal with senior level clients who are working in a robust, and sometimes not forgiving, environment in which status and power plays a big role. These clients are oftentimes on a high social level in society, possibly much higher than the coach himself.

How do you behave as a coach in order to gain an executive's acceptance so that a constructive coaching relationship can be established at eye level? There might be a temptation to be tougher or to create a tougher impression than the specific situation requires. Coaches can be

seduced into applying an overly “in your face” communication style in an effort to gain acceptance by the senior executive client. But this might cloud the coach’s view for the appropriate intervention.

The coach might also have his own issues with regards to being, or not really being, at eye level with the coaching client. This can be especially true for coaches with a background in executive management who might not yet have left the game completely in their minds, or with the success they had hoped for. Maybe their coaching client operates on a level that the coach aspired to achieve but never did. This might have created an emotional wound that the coach might not even be aware of. All this gives the coach’s need to be at eye level a new perspective. In [Gestalt Therapy](#) we call this “unfinished business”. And let’s not kid ourselves. You don’t have to have a background in executive management in order to be lured into this kind of trap.

### **The importance of getting the coaching client**

Playing the tough coach might already begin at the initial meeting between the coach and the top-level executive. Although all coaches claim the chemistry meeting is about the fit between the coach and the coachee, we can’t ignore the fact that the coach oftentimes needs and wants to sell her - or himself. In reality, the chemistry meeting is only a chemistry meeting on the client’s side. For the coach, it’s mostly a business development meeting, with the objective of getting a promising coaching assignment, further establishing his reputation and paying the bills. This can carry the risk of promising a client a tough, fearless style and then needing to keep that promise.

The coach has to survive in a competitive coaching environment. In order to be successful, a coach needs to be good. Many companies have coaches evaluated by their coachees and good evaluations lead to more business. But what do the coachees really evaluate? What are their criteria when they fill out forms that are sometimes hardly more than “happy sheets”? There’s a risk that more credit than is due is given to a coach who is impressive and appears tough, but in the end, relieves the coachee from her/his own responsibility.

### **So what?**

We carry our dark sides within us - in business, in our relationships and in our coaching relationships. If the coaching client thinks s/he needs a tough coach or if the coach thinks s/he has to be one, there’s a risk that something is at play that might not be helpful.

So, what to do with all of these dynamics that have the risk of the client not getting as much as s/he could from working with the coach? The answer is simple, yet difficult: We have to be aware of these dynamics as much as we can be.

It's pretty clear what this means for the coach. Besides doing technically good work, it begins with clear contracting and carries on with disciplined execution. The coach needs to make sure that s/he maintains a clear view, not only on what's going on in the client but in the coaching relationship, and in her- or himself. S/he needs to take a look at her/his Inner Theatre. A good coach will work with a supervisor who facilitates the process of professional self-reflection. The objective is to be as "clean" as possible, and we all know that you don't stay clean unless you wash regularly. A clean coach will use tough coaching for what it's meant to be, an intervention, and not as a general style, pattern or obsession.

The coachee is much less trained to recognise patterns that could find their way into a coaching relationship, but s/he does have common sense. Firstly, the right coach needs to be selected by making sure HR does the appropriate screening. A good coach will have some training in clinical psychology, be highly self-reflective and will undergo regular supervision. From questions about situations in which s/he made a mistake during her/his work, the client will be able to get an idea about how self-reflective the coach really is. Observe how s/he responds to the question: "How tough will you be?" Then watch for flexibility in her/is answer.

Even in the middle of an ongoing coaching engagement, it is helpful for both parties to take a close and inquisitive look at the relationship. The coach should initiate this and if s/he doesn't, the coachee should. If the coachee doesn't feel at ease about what's going on, s/he should put it on the table. A good coach will appreciate it and make sure that it adds value to the coaching.

The most important thing for a coachee is not to get impressed by their coach. After all, in coaching we are not in the "WOW" business, we are in the "AHA" business.