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**TEACHING AND LEARNING INTUITION: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR HRD AND COACHING PRACTICE**

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Structured Abstract

Purpose: examine conceptual and theoretical links between intuition and coaching; investigate accomplished coaches’ practical experiences of intuition; identify skill set of an intuitive coach; discuss implications of findings for coaches’, HRD professionals and line managers’ learning and development.

Method and Sample: in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews with 14 accomplished experienced executive coaches (eight males and six females) averaging 14.5 years as a coach.

Findings: outline of core attributes of an intuitive coach.

Implications: immersion in experience, a reflective approach to practice, effective feedback and supervision, and attending to personal well-being are likely to enable coaches, HRD practitioners and line managers to take a more informed and intelligent approach to ‘going with their gut’ in coaching situations.

Keywords: coaching; competence; intuition; human resource development

Type of Paper: Research
TEACHING AND LEARNING INTUITION: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR HRD AND COACHING PRACTICE

Introduction

This paper seeks to bring together two increasingly important areas of HRD theory and practice: coaching and intuition. They are relevant to innovations in teaching and learning of HRD for four reasons: (1) coaching is a vital area of HRD professional competence: for example, as part of its 2004 competency model for HRD professionals, the ASTD identified coaching as one of nine areas of expertise deemed critical for workplace learning and performance. Coaching is also one of the key topics in the learning and talent development professional area of the CIPD’s HR profession map; (2) intuitions are affect-laden judgements that arise through involuntary, rapid, non-conscious and holistic associations in complex, people-related situations (Burke and Miller, 1999; Dane and Pratt, 2007; Sinclair and Ashkanasy, 2005; Sadler-Smith and Shefy, 2004) a category in which coaching is to the fore; (3) intuition is relevant both to the practice of coaching and the experience of being coached (see: Phillips, 2006). For example the International Coach Federation (ICF) notes that coaching asks certain things of the individual, all of which begin with ‘intention’ but which also required that clients should listen to their intuitions, assumptions, and judgments[i]. However, as Murray (2004, p.204) notes there are “real risks attached to intuitive approaches [in coaching]. These risks need to be managed and kept under constant review through honest self-assessment”. Researching the role played by intuition in coaching is a vital part of systematic, informed inquiry and critical reflection both on the part of individual coaches and the coaching profession; (4) whilst students of HRD and HRD practitioners are likely to experience and deploy intuition, they are in all probability naïve intuitors - unlikely to be well-versed with regard to its nature, significance, and how they may cope with its pitfalls or exploit its potential in coaching and other areas of professional practice.

Given that coaching is one of the most important HRD methods (CIPD, 2008) and that intuition has a vital role to play in coaching (see: Murray, 2004; Phillips, 2006 and the International Coach Federation’s professional standards), it is appropriate to examine in more detail the relationships between intuition and coaching. We aimed to do this by means of an empirical study of coaches’ practical experiences of intuition, with a view to understanding how intuition and coaching might be better connected in HRD practice and the teaching and learning of HRD, and by making some practical suggestions in this regard. Following this line of argument, primary research was undertaken with accomplished executive coaches in order to explore their experiences of and perspectives on intuition in coaching. Our research sought to answer the following questions: (1) what role does intuition play in coaching; (2) how do accomplished coaches access and apply intuition in their work; (3) how might coaches’ intuition be developed and thereby contribute to innovative practices in HRD teaching and learning, and to the development of the current and next generation of HRD practitioners?

At a more general level there is little to suggest that management acknowledges or accommodates the development of intuitive judgment (see: Mintzberg, 2004). This state of affairs ought to be a matter of concern for HRD for three reasons: firstly, as noted above intuitions are
involuntary and pervasive in work and personal life and are used (skilfully or unskilfully) by employees in organizational decision processes; secondly, when informed by experience and expertise, intuitions have the potential to be a rare, valuable and difficult-to-imitate cognitive asset for individuals and business organizations; thirdly, by virtue of its role in helping people develop and realise their full potential, HRD is well-placed to take this innovative agenda forward.

**Intuition**

Recent developments in social cognition, cognitive psychology and cognitive neuro-science have led to the widespread recognition that non-conscious cognitive processes have an important, if not crucial, role to play in many complex, judgemental decision choices. Intuition is of primary significance in this regard given the unique position that it occupies at the nexus of cognition and affect (Sadler-Smith, 2008).

Recent attempts at theorizing intuition have focused attention on dual-process theories of cognition (Hodgkinson, Sadler-Smith, Burke, Claxton and Sparrow, 2009; Lieberman, 2000; Stanovich and West, 2000), and whilst there is no consensual definition of intuition, most scholars’ views converge on the following attributes: (1) intuition has an affective or somatic component, referred to colloquially as ‘gut feel’ or ‘hunch’; (2) speed of operation is a distinctive feature of intuitive judgements (analytical processing, on the other hand is comparatively slow and effortful); (3) intuiting is non-conscious to the extent that only the outcome (intuition) of the process (intuiting) are available to conscious awareness. Even though the term “intuition” is often used to describe both the process and outcome, Dane and Pratt (2007) argue for a clear distinction to be drawn between intuiting (process) and intuition (outcome); (4) intuition is distinct from insight (see: Hogarth, 2000 for a detailed discussion); (5) informed intuitions are the outcome of holistic associations founded upon expertise in a specific domain (for example, coaching), and pattern matching against previously acquired prototypes (for example, of verbal and non-verbal cues) is the basis of informed intuition (for example, intuitive coaching)[ii]. Intuitions are involuntary and arise in a wide range of scenarios and settings, including HRD and coaching, and as noted earlier professional bodies have acknowledging the significance of, and role played by, intuition; for example the UK’s Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) included intuitive/creative thinking in its 2002 Professional Standards (described as “deployment of intuitive/creative thinking in order to generate innovative solutions and proactively seize opportunities”).

**Coaching**

Coaching is one of the most important of contemporary HRD practices, especially at senior manager and executive level (Joo, 2005) to the extent that recent years have witnessed a “rapid growth in an emergent coaching industry” (Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie, 2008, p.287). In the CIPD’s learning and development survey published in 2008 it was reported that 71 per cent of organisations undertake coaching activities, with a similar proportion (72 per cent) finding coaching to be an effective tool, and with the bulk of responsibility for coaching delivery vested in line managers (36 per cent). Clearly therefore, at least in the UK, coaching is a vital part of HRD practice (CIPD, 2008). What it takes to be a competent coach is not authoritatively documented, but a picture is beginning to emerge (see: Elliger, Hamlin and Beattie, 2008), and awareness of cognitive and affective states in oneself and others appears to be an important aspect of a coaches’ skill set (Griffiths, 2008).
The European Mentoring and Coaching Council’s (EMCC) competence standards (on which a growing number of coach training programmes are benchmarked and approved by EMCC) call on coaches to demonstrate an ability to manage their own ‘state of mind’ through processes such as review and self-reflection. The ICF is more explicit about the role of intuition: in their Core Competence Standards ICF identified intuition as part of ‘Coaching Presence’, defined as the ability to be fully conscious and create a spontaneous relationship with the client by employing a style that “accesses own intuition and trusts one’s inner knowing – ‘goes with the gut’” [iii]. Over and above such attempts to capture and formalize intuition, narrative accounts of coaching episodes have affirmed the significance of intuition in the dynamic interplay between coach and client: “empathic resonance, intuition, pattern recognition, inquiry skills, and listening strengthen and deepen our understanding of what has been happening and how our clients are managing their lives and circumstances” (Kilburg, 2004, p.259).

In addition to developing its own identity as a profession, coaching is also a necessary area of expertise for HRD practitioners who are not formally designated as coaches, and that the intended purposes and processes of many HRD activities and coaching are “virtually the same” (Hamlin, et al., 2008, p.287). Joo (2005, p.476-477) suggested that the most important qualifications for a coach are “character and insight” developed through personal experiences (the “richer and deeper” the better), allied to acute perception and sound judgement. With these issues in mind the role of intuition and intuitive judgement in coaching is a vital issue not only for the professions of HRD and coaching, but also for the day-to-day practice of HRD and coaching in organizations. This then presents a potential learning and development need not only for professional coaches but also for line managers who find themselves engaged not only in coaching but also in other aspects of interpersonal communication and relations (including leadership).

Sample and Method

These issues prompt a number of questions, for example: how do experienced coaches recognise and deploy intuition; on the basis of the latter, what are the intuitive coaching skills needed by the HRD generalist and/or line manager if s/he is to recognise and respond to intuitive episodes which are likely to occur in their own coaching activities; can these skills be developed and, if so, how? Given that the intuition literature points to an over-reliance on psychometrically weak self report measures (Hodgkinson, et al., 2008: 19) and the fact that we were interested in the phenomenon of intuition in coaching from the coaches’ perspective, interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate method to obtain in-depth qualitative data. Therefore, we undertook semi-structured individual interviews with a sample of accomplished experienced executive coaches employed by a performance development consultancy, and for which the first-named author was also at the time of the research a consultant. An email invitation to participate was sent to full-time and associate staff (40 people). Fourteen coaches self-selected on the basis of interest and availability. Of these, eight were male and six female, seven were full-time and seven were associates. They averaged 14.5 years experience as a coach, and were aged between 33 and 59 years. In addition to 11 UK nationals, one was Canadian, one Australian and one Swedish.

An email was sent to thank participants for agreeing to be involved (with an attached intuition log and a confidentially agreement) and a time and date was set for the interviews (six took place face-to-face, eight were via telephone). An interview schedule was developed (it is available from the first-named author on request) and participants were notified prior to the interview to think.
about their intuitive experiences in coaching. Participants were also encouraged to fill-out an intuition log prior to the interview to raise their awareness about their intuitive moments, to allow them to access their examples more easily when interviewed, and to help reduce recall bias. In so far as a definition of the construct was concerned we chose that of Dane and Pratt (2007: 40, see above). Why? Needs justification? The interview was conducted by the first-named author. Interviews were recorded and interview notes were also taken.

Data Analysis, Limitations and Findings

The results are derived from a thematic analysis of interview notes which are supported by interview audio files. Illustrative quotes were selected on the basis that they best encapsulated or illustrated the theme, or offered an interesting point of view. There are however some limitations to the research, which may be summarised thus: (1) lack of ‘objective’ data: the challenges associated with measuring and researching in this area are well-documented, due in no small part to the fact that intuiting (as opposed to intuition, the outcome of the process) is considered to be largely non-conscious and hence difficult to verbalise and capture (see: Harteis et al., 2008; Dane and Pratt, 2009); (2) self-selection: coaches choose to take part in the research after an initial invitation to do so, hence it is likely that those who were favourably disposed towards intuition and the research would step forward; (3) retrospective self-reporting: coaches were asked prior to the interview to think about their intuitive experiences in coaching, and were encouraged to fill out an intuition log prior to the interview to raise their personal awareness of ‘intuitive moments’ and hopefully allow them to access their experiences of intuition more readily during the interviews; (4) priming: the decision was made up-front that it would not be a ‘blind’ interview but we would be explicit about our premise and what we wanted to explore.

What is intuition in coaching?

The research we undertook would suggest that coaching intuition has much in common with the definition of intuition as provided by Dane and Pratt (2007) along a spectrum from ‘out of the blue’ and what clients would say was ‘pure intuition’ at one end, to ‘pattern / sense-making’ at the other. For example, one coach described a situation where, without knowing or talking about it in the coaching session, there arose a seemingly random intuition “is this about your daughter?” (Coach L), and which subsequently served to uncover the real issue for the client. Coach G intuited that her client had not had a conversation on the particular issue with her/his boss through noticing what he wasn’t saying. Not clear In describing their experiences of intuitive coaching, coaches typically recorded physical reactions (such as the feelings in the stomach, chest, and a ‘prickly head’). Furthermore many would talk about their intuition as “coming from nowhere” (Coach B), “I don’t know where it came from” (Coach G), and coming fast “it literally appeared” (Coach A). Significantly, coaches gave more examples of the positive effect of using and applying their intuition for the benefit of the client, than negative instances. Examples included how an intuition helped opened up a dialogue; raised awareness; challenged the client and helped to create shift. Since what is most relevant in coaching is what happens to the client “the thing about intuition and coaching is that intuition always forwards the action and deepens the learning, even when it lands with a clang instead of a melodious ping” (Whitworth et al., 2007, p.60).

These findings suggest that intuition has a number of generic features (for example, it is somatic phenomenon), but that it manifests itself in different ways for different people (different
parts of the body). One implication of this for coaching and HRD practice, and the introduction of intuition into the HRD curriculum, is that it might be appropriate to start from the perspective of the intuitor, rather than an ‘expert’ defining intuition for them. This could involve adopting a phenomenological stance by asking them ‘what happens when they intuit?’ (in effect de-nominalising the question ‘what is intuition?’), and thereby guiding them to introspecting on their subjective experience. Equally, in a group teaching situation such an approach could be used to elicit a spectrum of subjective experiences with a view perhaps to identifying areas of overlap and differences in people’s experiences of intuition. The HRD curriculum might also give more attention to somatic awareness in order to help individuals become more open to affect as a new or alternative way of receiving information.

What helps coaches to access and apply their intuition?

Having explored the issue of coaching in general terms, the research sought to explore the factors which enable coaches to access and apply their intuition in a coaching situation. Several inter-related factors emerged in the interviews, namely: self belief; one’s coaching beliefs and values; state management; permission; being in rapport; an ‘objective offering’; and courage.

Self Belief

Overwhelmingly, coaches would refer to the existence of self belief or self confidence as being critical to being able to access and apply their intuition. There was a strongly held belief that “what I offer is useful” (Coach G) and a real sense of trusting oneself, one’s own purpose, experience, expertise and skills to the extent that coaches talked of being prepared to be stupid, clumsy or vulnerable. One coach commented that “everybody is a 10 [i.e.: highly intuitive]…it is the confidence and trust to access it that varies” (Coach L). The emphasis on self belief and confidence is consistent with the literature which suggests that intuition is often accompanied by feelings of certitude and self-assurance (Hodgkinson et al., 2008; Dane and Pratt, 2007).

One implication from this finding for the teaching and learning of HRD is that whilst intuition may be accompanied by feelings of certitude and self-assurance, it is important for intuitors, especially novices, to avoid ‘trusting their gut’ come what may. As we shall see the certitude which many experienced intuitors display is illusory in the sense that intuitive expertise belies a considerable amount of experience, and learning and skill which may be as difficult to articulate as it is easy, for an expert, to execute. Hence, intuition should always be treated with caution, and even for experts it can be wrong, although one distinctive feature of an intuitive expert is that even though they recognise that their intuitions may be wrong, they have come to expect and know it to be right more often than it is wrong, i.e. they know what their ‘batting average’ is.

Coaching beliefs and values

There are beliefs and values which are conducive to accessing and applying intuition in that they provide the coach with permission and confidence. As may be expected, coaches would talk of a client-centred approach and the coach’s duty to offer the client their intuition and indeed that in a coaching situation the coach’s intuition “would only be offered for the benefit of the client” (Coach H). Furthermore coaches would cite values such as “I am paid to do my job” (Coach L), “I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t [use all what I had to offer including intuition]” (Coach M) and that “I care enough to go there [to intuition]” (Coach N). These findings are consistent with
the coaching and intuition literature: “client’s count on your intuition. When you hold back, you withhold a crucial source of information and sensing” (Whitworth et al., 2007:58).

Other beliefs that seem to liberate and provide the openness to access intuition were a recognition that it is not always necessary or desirable to rely solely on rational analysis, “you can’t always explain everything” (Coach B) and that intuition can arise from the dynamic between coach and client, “people generate energies and energies in relation to each other” (Coach B), and the need to be open and honest with clients, “if something is around I have to deal with it”. (Coach N). There was an acknowledgement and acceptance that you can’t call on intuition since it is a largely automatic and involuntary process. Intuition is non-volitional to the extent that “looking too intently for it makes it more difficult to find. If you are working too hard to find your intuition, your attention is on you and your efforts… the key seems to take a soft focus, be open. Your intuition is there, giving your messages or clues, just below the surface. This is the paradox of intuition; an open hand will hold it; it will slip through a fist” (Whitworth et al., 2007:56-57).

An implication for the teaching and learning of HRD is that in dealing with intuition practitioners need to be both patient (and wait for it to come or create the conditions for it to arise, see below) and respectful of the occurrence of intuition (both their own and that of clients), be prepared to acknowledge and deal with it (with the corollary that it might be potentially dangerous to ‘sweep it under the carpet’ and ignore it), and offer an ‘open hand’ rather than a fist (cf. Whitworth).

State management

Every coach talked about, getting themselves into an appropriate physical, mental and emotional state to help them access and apply their intuition. This would include: attention to their own well being; preparation prior to a session; rituals or routines in starting a session and the ability to stay present and focused during the session. Approaches would depend on the individual coach, for example some coaches would read through notes of previous sessions, think about the client, and / or look through various models and frameworks. Some would prepare by reading an inspirational book; for example, one coach referred to the importance of reading Joseph Jaworski’s Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership (Coach K).

At the start of the session, some would use a ritual / routine as a way of getting them ‘into the zone’ through the use of key phrases such as “calm and happy” (Coach J), following a particular order of doing things, for example taking out a notepad, or having a particular ‘contracting rote’. Whatever the technique, it was about the coach becoming grounded, letting go of analytical thoughts, and quietening their mind. It was about ‘not being in my head’, (Coach B) and being present, congruent, receptive, fresh, attentive and calm. As one coach said “the more I go with the moment and more calm I am, the better I am” (Coach N).

By way of contrast coaches volunteered what was going on for them when they were at their least intuitive, “when I am stressed” (Coach N), or “when I am in my head” (Coach C). The findings are consistent with the literature. For example, in their empirical study of the application of mindfulness techniques to developing intuitive awareness, Sadler-Smith and Shefy (2007) commented on the dynamic interplay between the inner context (‘quieting the analytical mind’) and the outer context (external environment) and its effect on intuitive processes. People are more likely to trust and use their intuition when in a positive mood state, whilst stress or anger can be
major obstacles to accessing intuition (see: Dane and Pratt, 2008; Harteis et al., 2008).

Finally, it is crucial to draw a distinction between intuitive feelings and emotional feelings, and that intuitive feelings are not of the same type, duration or intensity as emotional feelings (for example, the subjective experience of being happy, sad or in a state of fear are distinct from the subjective experience of gut feel) (Sadler-Smith, 2008). In terms of effective coaching, Ellinger, Hamlin and Beattie (2008) identified “becoming too intense and emotional” as one of several ineffective managerial coaching behaviours. Hence, it is important that coaches, HRD practitioners and line managers are able to distinguish between their emotions and their intuitions, and also are aware of the impact that mood may have on intuitive feelings. The concept of emotional intelligence (EI) has been highly influential in management and leadership training and development. Hence, a challenge for practitioners is to integrate knowledge of intuition with practices associated with the management of emotions in self and others – thus creating the opportunity for the management of intuition in self and others as the basis perhaps for an ‘intuitive intelligence’ (Sadler-Smith and Shefy, 2010) that may sit comfortably alongside EI.

Permission

A further factor in accessing and applying intuition was having an internal and external source and sense of ‘permission’. Internally, it was about the coach giving themselves permission because they considered intuition to be an accepted and fundamental part of their coaching skill set, “to give ourselves permission to acknowledge worries, unformed opinions and untidy data” (Murray, 2004, p.206) and as one coach said “we have permission to be intuitive because of our job…people are looking for insight” (Coach M). Externally, it was also about having permission from the client, and was best when the coach explicitly contracted with the client that they would offer their intuition. The concept of ‘permission’ also extends to the professional and organizational contexts: as noted earlier, both the coaching profession (in the form of the ICF standards) and the CIPD (in the form of the acknowledgement in its professional standards of the role of intuition) have acknowledged the significance of intuition; from the perspective of the organizational context it is likely that different organizational cultures will be more or less receptive to intuition. How organizations value and cultivate the use of intuition, approach uncertainty and emphasise solid analysis are vitally important factors that the teaching and learning of intuition for coaching and in HRD should not overlook.

Being in rapport

The extent to which coaches access and apply their intuition is dependent on the coach-client relationship, which does not necessarily mean needing to know the client well. Rather it is about having a high level of rapport where transformational conversations can happen. It is a key skill of a coach to be able to establish and maintain rapport and talk at a deeper level of communication about beliefs, attitudes, emotions and feelings: “it is easier to have an intuition when you have a connection” (Coach N). In accessing and trusting intuition it was important that the coach felt in-tune with the client and was noticing the energy of the client, relational energy between them, and was fully listening and observing. As Murray noted, it is through awareness and attention that a skilled and experienced coach “…can pick up mood change, facial expression, intakes of breath, eye movement and other clues…[coaches] can notice hints, hunches, half ideas, doubts and fleeting concerns” (2007:206). An implication of this finding for intuition in HRD is to accept that intuition is not a unitary construct, and may comprise several facets one of which is social
intuition, for example, the capacity to ‘read’ another person’s motives and intentions. Social intuition may therefore be an important aspect of intuition in coaching, and HRD and management contexts more generally and deserving of being delineated from other forms in the teaching and learning of intuition. Sentence not clear.

Objective offering

Coaches talked about the importance of having a level of detachment or objectiveness in accessing and applying intuition, in order to hold no judgement and to give it as an offering as opposed to an objective ‘truth’. This aligns well with the notion of clearly labelling it (“I have an intuition”) and not being attached to it, whether it is right or wrong. As one coach said, this means being “willing to put it out there and willing to get it wrong” (Coach B). Whitworth et al., (2007, p.54) reminds us that “the important thing to remember in coaching is to be open to intuition – trusting it, being aware of it, and unattached to the interpretation. In the end, intuition is valuable when it moves the client to action or deeper learning. It is irrelevant, really, whether the coach’s intuition is correct”. Consistent with this coaches reported offering their intuition to: direct the flow of questioning; check what was being said matched with behaviour and reactions; try to understand what the client was thinking and feeling but may not be actually saying; intrude or interrupt; blurt; know when to speak and when to stay silent; challenge one’s own and the client’s ideas, opinions and assumptions; detect patterns against a background of ‘random noise’.

In offering their intuition, coaches talked of typical expressions they would use to offer it in a way that would help it ‘land’ and be useful for the client and in such a way that “the client can hear them (de Hann, 2008, p.126). Examples included: “I have had a bit of a thought. Would it be ok to share it with you?”; “What do you think about this?”; “Just check this out for me…”; “Is it ok if I offer you an intuition that has come to me?”; and even “this may be ******** and feel free to disregard it”. These offerings augment the intuition ‘crib sheet’ suggested by Whitworth et al., (2007, p.60): “I have a sense…”; “May I tell you about a gut feeling I have?”; “I have a hunch that…”; “Can I check something out with you?”; “I wonder if…?”; “See how this fits for you…”; and “My intuition tells me…”

Two implications of this finding for HRD are firstly, the importance of learning how to offer intuitions so that they are effectively heard by the recipient. This requires practitioners to expand their repertoire and enhance flexibility in communication. Secondly is the mindset of detachment, the value of stepping back from being the ‘all knowing expert’, and being prepared to get it wrong.

Courage

A strong relationship between intuition and courageousness emerged from the interviews. For instance, coaches reported that their most intuitive state would also be their most courageous i.e.: being grounded, open and positive. It would seem that by being intuitive, we can be courageous; similarly it takes courage to listen and express our intuition. Indeed, a coach often shows most courage when s/he listens and uses her/his intuition and by doing so, encourages the client to be courageous also. The following comments were offered in this regard: “You can’t be courageous without using your intuition. Being courageous is using your intuition” (Coach L); “The alternative to finding your intuition would be structured, formulaic. [This] may lead to courageous moments or transformation. But it would get there by chance, whereas intuition
would lead you directly there. Like a scatter gun. Intuition allows you to zoom in. I think you get there more consistently and quicker with intuition than you would be by following a process” (Coach C); “[intuition and courageous moments of coaching are] completely inseparable. To make a leap you need something more” (Coach K); “[they are] “completely linked because I think the things that you are daring to talk about are the things you intuit” (Coach B).

This finding challenges HRD to explore the relationship of courage and intuition both at a theoretical and practical level. Arguably, transformational conversations and innovation happen at the interplay between courage and intuition. HRD professionals and line managers who play a key role in facilitating such conversations and developing innovative mindsets and skills, arguably could benefit by exploring the concept of courage in the curriculum, and nurture their own courage and encourage others to do the same.

**How do we develop this skill as HRD practitioners?**

There was overwhelming consensus amongst participants that intuition is developable, as Coach I said, “Intuition is native and natural to all of us…we all know what is true…but we practice ignorance”. Even though it did not seem that coaches explicitly set out to develop their intuition, they talked about particular activities that they believed can contribute to its development. In what follows we use the insights offered by the participants to draw some further conclusions for the teaching and learning of intuition in post-graduate education and professional development contexts within HRD.

**Knowledge, experience, practice and feedback**

As one coach said “you have to know your stuff”. (Coach H); a corollary of which is consistent with the view of intuition-as-expertise (Sadler-Smith and Shefy, 2004). Inexperienced coaches are probably less likely to make effective use of intuition and as novices are more likely to consciously use tools and techniques (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986). Expert coaches on the other hand operating at an unconscious competence level are more likely to use tools and techniques in a more nuanced and intuitive fashion. This is consistent with de Haan’s findings that whereas relatively inexperienced coaches did not mention intuition in their critical coaching moments, expert coaches did (de Haan, 2008).

Cognitive schemas must be domain relevant to generate accurate intuitive judgements (Dane and Pratt, 2007), since experience enables people to chunk information so that they can be stored and retrieved easily and used in a recognition and pattern matching process (Hayashi, 2001; Simon, 1987). As far as the profession of coaching and coaching expertise is concerned, important question may be asked about: what is meant by ‘expertise’, what patterns and actions scripts is an expert coach likely to be storing, and what theoretical principles are these based upon? Within the literature there appears to be little in the way of consensus as to what theoretical principles underpin executive coaching, but it is clear that aspects of executive coaching draw on the principles and processes of psychotherapy (Gray, 2006, p.477). However, an eclectic and integrative approach that combines different and complementary paradigms offers the potential for more patterns to be available, in which case “the easier a sense of familiarity [may] arise in challenging situations and thus, the more opportunities exist for an intuitive decision” (Harteis et al., 2008, p.76).

One implication of this for the teaching and learning of intuition in coaching and HRD is that
the development of the intuitive expertise necessary in most domains of professional practice (coaching included) depends upon a lot of exposure and experience, and there are likely to be few if any short cuts. Opinions vary, but a ‘rule of thumb’ sometimes quoted by expertise researchers is that a period of the order of ten years is necessary to acquire a sufficient range of prototypes and scripts to support intuitive judgement (but learned in the right environment with good feedback – see Hogarth, 2001). In so far as the practice of teaching and learning is concerned, this is likely to involve exposure of novice coaches to simulated settings in the first instance via role play and a gradual immersion into practice with expert guidance on hand. Such approaches are not novel, and extended practice of itself is necessary but insufficient to become an intuitive coach or intuitive HRD practitioner, other supporting skills, activities and conditions are vital, including reflection, dialogue, well-being and creativity (see below).

Individual reflective practice

The willingness and discipline to critically reflect upon and capture relevant aspects of using intuition is critical to its development (Hogarth, 2001). Coaches talked of the interplay between experience and reflection being crucial, and of trusting and ‘playing with’ intuition and seeing its effects and thereby building one’s confidence in using it more. This is one way for a coach to get a feel for the accuracy of her/his intuitions (Sadler-Smith and Shefy, 2004), to benchmark them, and get a sense of how reliable they are and how they might be improved on. The participants in our research who used a log found it helped to focus their attention on how they intuited, in what situations, the confidence and accuracy and the resultant impact on the client/the outcome, “without the log I wouldn’t have reflected on what changes I saw in him [the client]” (Coach J). This process is what Gray (2007) refers to as using a learning journal through which professionals can explore their beliefs and assumptions in order to promote self-reflection. It enables a coach to sensitize self-to-self in an intra-personal dialogue.

An implication of the above for the teaching and learning of intuition in coaching and HRD is that techniques which focus practitioners’ attention on the process and outcomes of intuiting is likely to yield greater intuitive self-awareness (Sadler-Smith and Shefy, 2007). The tools and techniques for doing so are varied, but include: the aforementioned use of journaling and intuition logs, but also a greater intra-personal awareness in terms of noticing (focusing on) the bodily ‘felt sense’ associated with an intuitive episode and recognizing it as such (Gendlin, [add]), and also being able to discriminate between intuitive feelings and emotional feelings (see above).

Dialogue and supervision

The interview process itself was a learning experience for a number of our participants, and by being encouraged to talk through their experiences of intuition coaches acknowledged, reflected on and, hopefully, made more sense of their intuitive capabilities. Coaches singled out the value of discussing issues through the practice of supervision, and indeed supervision or the coach being coached, was commonly cited as a key development technique. Not only was supervision seen as important to help the coach raise their awareness and make sense of their intuitive moments but was useful in testing out their intuitive moments. Furthermore skilled supervisors could serve as role models (Gray, 2010). Three coaches mentioned how their supervisor used their intuition ‘on them’ and the transformational effect that this had. As Phillips (2006, p.26) points out, supervision gives an opportunity for third party intuition by the coach’s supervisor “…using his intuition to speculate on what might be happening between two other people”. As a result of the
interview, one coach said the interview “has triggered me to use my supervisor to reflect on my own intuition” (Coach G).

There are a number of implications of these findings for the teaching and learning of intuition in coaching and HRD: firstly, one way in which individuals may be made more aware of the extent to which they use intuition is by means of self-report inventories for the identification of individual differences in intuitive processing, for example the Rational Experential Inventory (REI) (Epstein, Denes-Raj, and Heier, 1996); secondly, an admittance to oneself and others that intuitive judgements occur and have the potential to influence decision choices. This process of ‘opening the closet’ on intuition can be an important means of opening-up one’s intuitions to the scrutiny of self and others. The process of inquiry can even be taken as far as pursuing a devil’s advocate-type approach and the stringent testing of one’s intuitions by ‘what if?’ , ‘why should?’ and other questioning techniques (Sadler-Smith and Shefy, 2004). These avenues of inter- and intra-personal dialogue may be a means to facilitate the ‘honest self-assessment’ that Murray (2004, see above) deemed to be essential to the effective use of intuition in coaching.

**Well-being and creativity**

A number of the coaches referred to the importance of personal well being, and the need to build in space for relaxation, meditation, and exercise and that it was important to take time out to reflect and contemplate, to relax and re-energise and clear one’s head, and seek congruence and alignment. For example, one coach said that they bring more to their coaching if the day before they ride their horse (Coach N), or walked their dogs (Coach J), or danced (Coach B).

These observations hold several implications for the teaching and learning of intuition in coaching and HRD. For example, giving space and creating the conditions for intuitions to occur and insights to arise may be a way to overcome ‘analysis paralysis’, and as such may involve nothing more than ‘taking a breather’, but might also involve more formal techniques such as those associated with meditative and contemplative mindfulness techniques derived from Eastern philosophical and spiritual practices. The validity and impact of such approaches have been shown to yield a number of positive outcomes in management development (Sadler-Smith and Shefy, 2007). The notion of well-being, both physical and psychological, can be an important means towards coping with the stresses and strains of any demanding professional role. The tools and techniques outlined here are not only potentially beneficial to coaches but also work both ways in that they are activities and interventions that coaches and other HRD practitioners might consider integrating into their practice. ?? Not clear.

**Summary of Findings**

Both coaching and intuition provide an opportunity for development and transformational change, and innovation and creativity, issues of deep interest to HRD. Through an empirical study of experienced coaches’ practical experience of intuition, this paper explored the relationship between coaching and intuition and provides suggestions as to how they might be better connected in HRD practice and the innovative teaching and learning of HRD.

Firstly, the study shows a close link between coaching and intuition. To the best of our knowledge this is the first time that Dane and Pratt’s (2007) conceptualisation of intuition (affectively charged judgements that arise through rapid, non-conscious and holistic associations), seen by many as foundational, has been used in a coaching context. Coaching as a relational
unstructured activity involving complex people judgements lends itself to the use of intuition. The finding of the appropriateness of the construct to coaching and the emergence of a spectrum of different types of intuition, suggests that the construct itself might benefit from further conceptual elaboration or a disaggregation (see Dane and Pratt, 2009). It also highlighted the benefit for the HRD ‘learner’ her or himself in terms of understanding and exploring their own subjective experience of intuition.

Secondly, based on our interview data an intuitive coach: (1) is self-confident and client-centred; (2) gives themselves permission to access and use intuition; (3) listens to their body; (4) is mentally and physically prepared; (5) is disciplined, focused and organised; (6) is responsive to challenges in the moment; (7) seeks permission from the client to use intuition; (8) establishes and maintains rapport with the client; (8) is unattached to their intuitions; (9) is objective about their intuitions; (10) is courageous in their engagement with intuition. Clearly, several of these attributes are not unique to the concept of ‘the intuitive coach’ rather they are generic attributes of an effective coach (for example, client centred) and align with aspects of the EMCCs competence standards for coaching, such as “self-belief in their ability to coach”, “self-management and self-awareness”, “whole body listening”, “emotional intelligence”, and “establishes rapport”. However these attributes provide important detail for HRD in terms of what is desirable in the skill set of coaches, HRD and line managers, and in particularly how intuition links to more general coaching competencies. Hence a greater clarity and focus of what skills need to be developed and assessed can be incorporated into the HRD curriculum (see next).

Thirdly, the study points to a variety of ways that coaches, HRD professionals and line managers can develop their intuitive self awareness to enable them to access their intuitions. Techniques allied to educating them about the psychological basis of intuition, immersion in experience, a reflective approach to practice, effective feedback and supervision, and attending to personal well-being (all of which are factors which emerged from our data) are likely to enable them to be more informed and intelligent when choosing to ‘go with their gut’ in coaching situations. HRD would benefit from a curriculum which explores such matters as advocated in this paper including exploring the subjective experience of the intuitor, training in body awareness, understanding one’s ‘batting average’ and the difference between emotions and feeling, developing social intuition and mindsets of detachment and courage.

Finally, the study also acknowledges the importance of creating an organizational culture that values and nurtures intuition. This requires leaders to share their intuitive experiences and give weight to intuition alongside rational, process-driven analysis in organizational decision making. As a profession the more we are explicit about the use of intuition, the more we talk about it, the more we can benefit from it. Indeed the purpose of this paper is to contribute to the legitimisation of intuition as a critical skill in coaching and employee development. HRD professionals are well placed to be champions in taking this innovative agenda forward.

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References


[ii] Insight is typically associated with a ‘Eureka’ moment whereby the logical relationship between parts of the problem become clear and can be explained. Hence, when insight occurs, it is possible to ‘see’ connections; on the other hand when intuition occurs it is possible to ‘sense’ possible connections and coherences.