

# **Coaching Senior Professional Women in the UK: What is the Focus and what has been Learnt in the Process?**

**Research**

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# **Coaching Senior Professional Women in the UK: What is the Focus and what has been Learnt in the Process?**

A summary of a project submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Work Based Learning Studies (Professional Coaching)

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## Summary

My research aim was to conduct a survey of the issues that senior, professional women bring to coaching and identify how coaches can best support them.

I gathered data from a number of different sources. I carried out a literature review, reviewed my own practice and I conducted a survey consisting of two focus groups and ten interviews with experienced coaches. The coaches that I surveyed work across a variety of sectors and between them have coached over 500 senior women in the past five years.

The issues that I identified that senior women bring to coaching fall into eight categories. These are, in order of frequency:

- Managing the job;
- Developing self confidence;
- Managing relationships and influencing;
- Managing work and non-work needs;
- Managing and leading others;
- Managing their career path;
- Being assertive; and
- Knowing and being true to themselves.

In order to understand how coaches are supporting their clients, I analysed what tools they were using, how coaches are “being” during coaching and the process that they are using.

There are two practical outputs from the research. The first is a checklist of key issues that senior women face, which a coach and client can use during the initial stages of the coaching relationship. The second is a set of guidelines for coaching senior women. These guidelines incorporate my learning from all aspects of my research.

# 1. Background to Research, Research Questions, Methodology and Literature Review

This section describes why I chose to research this topic, my research questions and methodology.

## 1.1 Why I chose this topic

I work as an Executive Coach and coach individuals typically at or just below Partner and Managing Director levels in the Professional and Financial Services industries. Women are under-represented in the organisations that I work with at senior levels. Approximately one quarter of my current clients are women. My coaching supports individuals to become conscious and competent leaders and to reach their potential. Recently, I have been asked to coach women in order to support them to break through into the higher echelons of the management structure. I am interested in what the issues are that senior professional women face in business and how best to support them through coaching. I have noticed that books about management and leadership recommend mentoring and coaching as useful interventions in senior women's development, but I have come across little that describes what coaches are focusing upon or doing that is making a difference. I wondered what other coaches are experiencing and learning in this area.

*I want to stress that I am holding no assumptions about female or male clients nor am I implying that my findings might not also apply to men. I think that it would be interesting to carry out a similar study focusing on senior men in the future.*

I undertook this research as part of my MA in Professional coaching with i-coach and Middlesex University.

## 1.2 Research questions

My research aim was to conduct a survey of the issues that senior, professional women bring to coaching and identify how coaches can best support them.

In order to do this, I wanted to focus upon two key questions:

1. What are the most frequent issues that senior, professional women bring to (and emerge during) coaching?

2. What are the most valuable lessons that coaches have learnt about how to support their clients effectively?

In the process, I expected to gather some additional information, for example:

- Are the issues that senior women bring age-related?
- Are the issues perceived to be different between male and female clients?
- What other factors from the client's system have an impact upon the effectiveness of the coaching?
- Where do coaches want to focus their personal development (in relation to coaching women) going forward?
- How is coaching received by women clients?

### **1.3 Methodology**

This work is based on qualitative research methods. I gathered data from a number of different sources. I carried out a literature review, reviewed my own practice and used the survey approach to gather data by conducting two semi-structured focus groups and ten interviews with experienced coaches.

In total, 17 coaches took part in the focus groups and interviews. Through these coaches and the review of my own practice I was able to get access to information on over 500 senior, professional women across a broad range of industries. These women are between their late 20's and early 60's, with the majority falling in the 40-45 age range. The coaches have diverse coaching frameworks, but all share a client-centred approach. The average length of time that the coaches interviewed had been coaching senior women was 8 years, compared to 6 years for the coaches who participated in the focus groups. Coaching qualifications ranged from no qualifications to a doctorate. Several of the participants also had a coaching supervision qualification.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to being a worker researcher. The table overleaf summarises these.

**Table 1: The advantages and disadvantages of being a worker researcher**

<b>Advantages of the worker researcher position</b>	<b>Disadvantages of the worker researcher position</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-existing knowledge and experience about the topic, i.e. coaching senior women.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential for bias – I have some preconceptions about the issues that women bring to coaching based on my experience as a coach and a client.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My understanding of some organisations and their cultures in which senior women are working.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My personal and professional beliefs will have an impact on my research, e.g. I don't consider the workplace to be a gender neutral environment.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worker-researcher synergy because my previous experience as a management consultant helps me to design, carry out and analyse the survey whilst my experience as a coach enables me to utilise the new knowledge.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My experience impacts the approach and tools that I have chosen to carry out the research. It may not be the most appropriate methodology.</li> <li>• Time – it was challenging to carry out the research alongside my other roles of worker and mother.</li> </ul>

I took actions to mitigate the impact of being a worker-researcher in the research process. The actions that I took were:

1. I critically reflected on my values and actions during all parts of the research process with the aim of being as objective as possible. I kept a research diary to record my observations, reflections, biases and learning.
2. I reduced my normal work load and other activities so that I allowed enough time for my research and adhered to my timetable.
3. I made notes following each interview and sent these to clients within 48 hours to ensure that I had understood the points that they

- were making. I asked participants to review the notes and amend them as appropriate. All of the participants verified the notes.
4. I included some very experienced coaches in my survey that I do not know and who are working in industries that I am not familiar with in order to increase the independent nature of my research.
  5. I interviewed coaches rather than clients. I felt that I could cover a wider population of clients that way and I also avoided some confidentiality issues by not working directly with clients.
  6. I read widely on the subject to increase my own knowledge base and challenge my thinking.
  7. I used template analysis which helped me to take a structured approach to handling the data. I looked for the nature and frequency of issues brought to coaching and the approaches adopted.
  8. I sought feedback on my findings prior to writing my research report.
  9. I made links between the findings and other relevant work in the field.

In carrying out my research I have adhered to Middlesex University's ethical framework for research and the EMCC code of practice.

## **1.4 Literature review**

The first stage of my research was to conduct a literature review (see Bibliography). I was surprised by the paucity of literature specifically on coaching senior women in the UK. I widened my search to include international books and articles which focused on women in the workplace and gender issues. This was useful background reading and increased my knowledge about the pressures that senior women, who work in male dominated environments, face and how women learn best.

There were two particularly useful books which address my first research question, "What are the most frequent issues that senior, professional women bring to coaching?" Coffey, Huffington and Thomson (1999, p.11) carried out a study in the UK of the experience of women in leadership roles and identified the main "career blockers" as: lack of self confidence, lack of natural networks, the balance between work and home life being extremely difficult to sustain and envy from others. The other book that I found useful is by Ruderman and Ohlott (2002, p.67). It is based on a US study into the developmental issues that high-achieving women face in defining and shaping their careers. They refined their findings into five themes, "authenticity, connection, agency, wholeness and self clarity". They found that there is a relationship between development issues and age. I compared my findings with theirs. All five developmental themes from the

CCL study are reflected in the key issues that emerge from my research as shown in the table below.

**Table 2: Similar themes in my research and the CCL study**

<b>My research - issues</b>	<b>CCL study - themes</b>
Managing relationships and influencing	Making <b>connections</b>
Managing your career path	Controlling your destiny ( <b>agency</b> )
Managing work and non-work needs	Achieving <b>wholeness</b>
Knowing and being true to self	Acting <b>authentically</b>
Knowing and being true to self	Gaining <b>self clarity</b>

However, my research generated some additional key issues which the CCL study did not include: managing the job, managing and leading others, developing self confidence and being assertive. I do not know why the CCL study did not reflect these issues. I know that assertiveness and confidence are issues for women in the US too because they are raised frequently in the US literature. For example, Eagly and Carli (2007, p110), write “ The belief that leaders should be assertive and should confidently display their competence, coupled with disapproval of such behaviour in women, produces half of the double bind for female leaders.”

Some books on coaching, such as those by Peltier (2001), Brunning (2006), Ting and Scisco (2006) and Bacon and Spear (2003), have chapters on how to coach women. These provided useful information for my second research question, “What are the most valuable lessons that coaches have learnt about how to support their clients effectively?” I was able to compare the findings from my survey with their ideas. Thomson and Graham (2008, p.101) recommend that senior women ask for a coach and use their coach “to design experiments to boost your confidence and skill; to help you to find new ways to look at situations you face; to help you to see inside yourself; and to support and challenge you in your learning.” Ruderman and Ohlott (2006, pp.88-90) give the most comprehensive set of recommendations for coaching senior women.

Since I conducted my research in Autumn 2008, there has been a study published by the Institute for Employment Studies on “Encouraging Women into Senior Management Positions: How Coaching can help” (2009). This study was based on a literature review and 32 interviews with senior women and experts in Germany, Greece, Sweden, the US and UK. The study identified how coaching can help senior women to progress in organisations

by overcoming the barriers to senior management and board level positions. The areas in which the women said that coaching can help are similar to the coaching issues identified by my study. Interestingly, the study found that, despite different national contexts, the experiences recounted by the women in the five countries studied were remarkably similar in terms of the barriers that they had come up against in their careers and the ways they had dealt with them.

## 2. Senior Women's Coaching Issues

In this section I present and interpret my results relating to senior women's coaching issues. I look at four aspects:

1. The key coaching issues and the frequency with which they arise.
2. What are the differences between presenting and emerging issues?
3. Are the issues age-related?
4. Are the issues perceived to be different between female and male clients?

### 2.1 Senior women's coaching issues

I analysed the issues that senior, professional women both *bring to* coaching (the presenting issues) and those that *emerge during* the coaching. I organised the issues into eight categories and subcategories where relevant. The issues that I identified from my survey are supported by my background reading and include the review of my own practice. I have provided a description of each key issue and its subcategories, illustrated by examples and quotes in Appendix 1. The key issues and the frequency with which they appear, are shown in the table below. The ranking of issues in my own practice review differs to those for the survey. This highlights the importance of obtaining data from a number of different sources.

**Table 3: Coaching issues for senior professional women**

<b>Key issues</b>	<b>Ranking in my own practice</b>	<b>Number of focus groups issue arose in</b>	<b>% of interviews issue arose in</b>	<b>Overall ranking</b>
<b>Managing the job</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing role transition</li> <li>• Being overly self sufficient</li> <li>• Being productive and focused</li> </ul>	6	Both	100%	<b>1</b>
<b>Developing self confidence</b>	6	Both	90%	<b>2</b>
<b>Managing relationships and influencing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making more impact</li> <li>• Building alliances</li> </ul>	2	Both	80%	<b>3</b>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gaining recognition</li> <li>• Developing influencing and communication styles</li> <li>• Developing organisational "savvy"</li> </ul>				
<b>Key issues</b>	<b>Ranking in my own practice</b>	<b>Number of focus groups issue arose in</b>	<b>% of interviews issue arose in</b>	<b>Overall ranking</b>
<b>Managing work and non-work needs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work life balance</li> <li>• Exploring personal issues</li> </ul>	8	Both	70%	<b>4</b>
<b>Managing and leading others</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing teams</li> <li>• Leadership</li> </ul>	3	Both	50%	<b>5</b>
<b>Managing your career path</b>	3	Both	50%	<b>5</b>
<b>Being assertive</b>	3	Both	40%	<b>7</b>
<b>Knowing and being true to self</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing self awareness</li> <li>• Being authentic</li> <li>• Exploring meaning and purpose</li> </ul>	1	Both	30%	<b>8</b>

## 2.1 The differences between presenting and emerging issues

Coaches considered that presenting and emerging issues are different in some ways. Presenting issues are often what corporate sponsors of coaching feel that individuals "should" focus upon. These tend to be about "managing the job", "managing and leading others" and "managing relationships and influencing". Emerging issues tend to be more underlying issues. Under the category of "knowing and being true to self", some examples include creating meaning and purpose in my work, "who am I in the leadership role?" and "how do I honour myself in a man's world?"

## 2.2 Are the issues age-related?

There is a perception that the issues are age-related. Coaches provided examples of issues that arise for different age groups. For example, in their early 40's, clients without children present issues about finding meaning and purpose in life, and those with children, issues about managing work and non-work needs. Appendix 2 gives some examples of the links between age and issues arising from my survey. Other studies, such as the CCL study, found a clear link between the developmental themes and different life stages.

Some coaches consider that the issues are linked to other factors, such as personal situations (whether the client has a partner and children), generations (Baby-Boomers and Generations X, Y and Z) and personal backgrounds (upbringing, education and support). For example, women who form part of Generation Y (born 1980-1996) are considered to have more self belief and to be innately more confident than women in Generation X (1964-1979).

### 2.3 Are the issues perceived to be different between female and male clients?

The issues are *not* perceived to be different between male and female clients. The majority of coaches felt that no issues are *unique* to women. However, the timing of when issues are raised, the focus of the issues and the outcome sought are considered to be different. The focus that the issues take reflects gender issues. Some examples of these differences are given in the table below.

**Table 4: Perceived differences in women's and men's coaching issues**

Difference	Examples
Timing of raising issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women are perceived to raise core issues earlier in the coaching process, e.g. women may tell their coach in the first session that they lack confidence, whereas men tend to raise confidence issues later on in the coaching process.</li> </ul>
Focus of issues differs between the sexes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On issues of confidence, women will question whether they have a "right to be in the role", whilst men will be concerned about their relative lack of education or intellect.</li> <li>• On work and non-work needs, women tend to focus on trying to be perfect in each area of their lives, whilst men focus upon not losing one because of the other.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On managing career, women are concerned before they step up to a bigger role about whether they can do it, whilst men tend to take on the role and then are concerned that they are out of their depth.</li> </ul>
Outcome sought from raising issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women like to take an exploratory approach to issues, whilst men may take a “let’s fix it” approach.</li> </ul>

### 3. How Coaches are Working with Women Clients

In this section I present and interpret my results relating to what coaches have learnt about coaching women clients. In order to understand how coaches are working with their clients, I look at three aspects:

1. What *tools* coaches are using?
2. How coaches are “*being*” during coaching?
3. The *process* that coaches are using?

#### 3.1 What tools are coaches using?

I found that the coaches are using a broad range of tools during their coaching. This is not surprising given the difference in coaching frameworks and underpinnings that the coaches that I surveyed had. Furthermore, when I reviewed my own practice, I found that I had utilised a wide range of tools with my senior female clients.

I found consistency in the use of some of the tools. I counted how many coaches mentioned each of the tools during the focus groups and interviews. Two tools are universal to all coaches, in other words every coach in the survey mentioned using them. These are using open questions to explore issues and reviewing learning during coaching sessions.

The tools that are common to some coaches are shown in the table below. I have grouped them into tools used by at least 50% of the coaches and tools used by at least 25% of the coaches. Many of the coaches talked about the importance of “choosing the right tool, at the right time, to meet the clients’ needs.”

**Table 5: Tools common to some of the coaches**

Tools used by 50% of the coaches	Tools used by 25 % of the coaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bespoke 360 feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploring meaning and purpose</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploring values and personal constructs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning styles</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal story</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adult cycle of change (Hudson)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Looking at issues from three perspectives (individual, other person, onlooker)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying and building on strengths</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crafted experiments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role playing conversations</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wheel of life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking a systemic perspective</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using Cognitive Behavioural Coaching approaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focusing on the “here and now”, transference and counter transference</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reframing situations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guided reading</li> </ul>
<b>Tools used by 50% of the coaches</b>	<b>Tools used by 25 % of the coaches</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bodywork, e.g. focusing on body posture and breathing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Listening to and trusting our intuition</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Network mapping, using influencing models and developing an influencing strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exploring and sharing emotions at work</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Career planning tools</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Visualisation/future focused techniques to explore desired states</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Client making reflective notes</li> </ul>	

### 3.2 How coaches are “being” during coaching?

I consider how coaches are “being” during coaching to be the richest source of learning about how best to support clients. I have categorised my findings in this area into four key phases, and these are how coaches:

1. Build clients’ trust
2. Create space for reflection
3. Help clients to make sense of their experiences
4. Encourage and support clients’ development

I have provided a few examples below to illustrate each phase. Appendix 3 provides further examples of how coaches are “being” during coaching, gathered through my survey.

#### **Build clients’ trust**

This phase is about actively building trust with the client. Some examples of what coaches do include:

- Self disclosing in early sessions so that the client can connect with the coach and feel more comfortable about opening up.
- Holding a longer first session (up to 3 hours).

- Approaching topics as they emerge, and “sideways” so as not to discourage the client.
- Choosing language carefully. One coach said that she had learnt to avoid the word “ambition” with senior women and used “aspiration” instead, as this resonated more and had less negative connotations.

### **Create space for reflection**

This is about giving the client a “good listening to”. This is important because many senior women feel isolated at work and by nature, women learn best through relationship. Some examples of good practice in this phase are:

- Being interested but adopting a neutral stance and not being invested in the client’s position, which one coach referred to as, “riveted detachment”.
- Allowing the individual to choose the focus of the coaching and using open questions to explore the client’s “worldview”.
- Acting like a mirror so that the client can reflect on their experiences and the coach keeps the focus on them.

### **Help clients to make sense of their experiences**

This phase is about encouraging the client to gather data from a number of different sources about themselves so that they can make sense of their experiences. Some examples of how coaches can do this are by:

- Being courageous and providing feedback in the “here and now”, e.g. a female coach shared the impact that a client’s nervous giggle had on her and a male coach gave his client some feedback about how she tends to defer to him, asking if there were any parallels in the workplace.
- Challenging clients to own their strengths and let go of having to “know all the answers” or “be perfect”.
- Sharing intuition with the client as it arises.

### **Encourage and support clients’ development**

The final phase involves encouraging clients by holding the vision for them, exploring possibilities and reviewing learning. Some examples in this area include:

- Using supportive language and providing feedback.
- Providing open access between sessions whilst clients are experimenting.
- Being transparent about the process so that clients can learn to coach others and self coach going forward.

### 3.3 The process that coaches are using

The process that coaches reported using follows good coaching practice and is summarised in the table below.

**Table 6: The process that coaches are using during coaching**

Overall coaching process	Every coaching session
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During the contracting session, the coach shares personal information with the client, agrees the focus/goals of coaching and coaching outcomes</li> <li>• At the first coaching session, the coach allows more time, say 3 hours, to get to know the client. Coaches reported using various tools for this including asking for the client's life story or timeline, focusing on values and asking about motivational factors, strengths, standards, alignment and aspirations</li> <li>• Early coaching sessions involve discussion and data gathering, sometimes using relevant questionnaires, e.g. learning styles</li> <li>• Many coaches referred to having an interim review with the client and coaching sponsor to review progress against focus/goals and discuss how best to support the</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agree focus/goals and outcomes at the start of each session</li> <li>• Review learning since the previous session</li> <li>• Explore the issues raised, providing feedback in the "here and now"</li> <li>• Rewind during the last part of the session, to identify the key bits of the conversation for the client</li> <li>• Give "homework" if appropriate between sessions, e.g. a questionnaire on values, guided reading, something to notice or do and reflect upon</li> <li>• Notes – this practice differs. Some coaches do not ask for notes, others ask the client for a reflection note and, in some cases, the coach takes notes and gives the client a copy</li> </ul>

<p>client going forward</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Later sessions are about supporting the client to develop and reviewing progress</li><li>• At the final session the coach and client review the coaching, and agree any follow-up with the sponsor</li></ul>	
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## 4. Other Aspects of Coaching Senior Women

In this section I present and interpret my findings related to other aspects of coaching senior women. These are:

1. What other factors from client's systems have an impact upon the effectiveness of the coaching.
2. How coaches perceive senior female clients receive coaching.
3. Coaches' personal development related to coaching senior women.

### 4.1 What other factors from client's systems have an impact upon the effectiveness of the coaching?

I asked coaches what factors from client's systems have an impact upon the effectiveness of their coaching. These can be factors relating to the individual or their role and the organisation in which the client works. As one of the coaches pointed out, "in coaching, the primary focus is on the individual, however, it is important to take into account what is going on elsewhere in the client's system." These factors can make the coaching more complex and challenging and can impact the success of the coaching.

#### Organisational factors

The organisational factors that coaches mentioned are:

- Gender issues – typically male orientated work environments and unsupportive male bosses and peers. This view is supported in some of the books that I read which give examples of gendered environments (see bibliography).
- Lack of alliances – one coach reported that 85% of his senior, female coaching clients are isolated and lack strategic alliances in the organisation. Another coach commented that "women's lack of alliances is resulting in higher redundancies amongst women in Financial Services at the moment."
- Organisational change – currently we are experiencing unprecedented changes and levels of uncertainty in our business, political and ecological environments.
- Cultural issues – as individuals relocate around the world, they face challenges through having to work in other languages and finding that

behaviours that are acceptable at home are perceived negatively by a different culture.

## **Personal factors**

The personal factors are:

- Family background, beliefs and behaviour – parental conditioning can help or hinder the client. Coaches feel that, if the client has experienced traumatic experiences in her youth or holds some entrenched beliefs, these can be difficult to shift unless she chooses to undergo psychotherapy.
- Poor relationships at home – several coaches provided examples of clients who had poor relationships at home. This impacts their work and some clients do not feel ready to tackle these issues.
- Mismatch of values – there can be a mismatch between what an individual values and what a large organisation wants.
- Work and non-work balance – in order to succeed in some organisations, senior women may end up sacrificing a lot in terms of their non-work lives. Sometimes, senior women decide that the sacrifice is not worth it.

## **4.2 How coaches perceive female clients receive coaching**

The majority of coaches interviewed felt that coaching was received differently by women clients in a number of respects. These are:

1. Some female clients do not feel that they are “entitled” to coaching initially and need to be reassured. No coaches reported having had this reaction from male clients.
2. Once female clients have accepted that they are “worthy” of the coaching, they tend to be very receptive.
3. Senior women get into the underlying issues early on, for example, identifying the beliefs that are undermining their self confidence.
4. Women tend to share what they are learning from their coaching with others outside of the coaching sessions more than men do.

5. Coaches feel that their clients return to work feeling more positive about themselves and their roles, and utilise their learning in their work and beyond.

Some coaches considered that there was no difference in the way that women and men receive coaching. They reported that other factors were more important such as whether the client was given a choice of coach and whether coaching is voluntary or the client was “sent”. I also gathered some examples of differences about how coaching is received across sectors. For example, several coaches remarked that in the Media/Arts sector, women tend to have good networks, and they have higher expectations of coaching outcomes than men. Whereas, in Financial Services, some coaches described senior women as being more isolated and more “grateful” to receive coaching than male clients, pointing out that the male clients in Financial Services have higher expectations about coaching outcomes.

### **4.3 Coaches’ personal development related to coaching senior women**

I asked coaches if they were planning to undertake any personal development specifically related to coaching women. About two thirds of the coaches were. Their responses included:

- Exploring somatic coaching. Learning more about how to connect with female and male energy.
- Developing my understanding about gender issues and how women can manage them.
- Changing my supervisor so that I can get some fresh perspectives on coaching women. Interestingly, the new supervisors were male.
- Developing my own Emotional Intelligence so that I can relate to my female clients better. Having personal therapy.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommended Applications of the Research**

In this section I describe the conclusions that I have drawn from my research and I share how I am applying the research in my own practice with the coaching community.

### **5.1 Conclusions**

My research aim was to conduct a survey of the issues that senior professional women bring to coaching and identify how coaches can best support them.

I would like to reiterate that I am holding no assumptions about female or male clients nor am I implying that my findings might not also apply to men. I think that it would be interesting to carry out a similar study focusing on senior men in the future.

I have identified a set of key issues that arise when coaching senior women, and have developed a checklist to help my clients and me to identify which are relevant for our coaching.

There is a difference between the issues that senior women present at the start of the coaching and those issues that emerge during the coaching. The issues that emerge are more personal, underlying issues.

I consider that the issues I identified through my survey are age-related. The coaching issues that senior women present are not perceived to be *unique* to women but women are considered to raise issues earlier, put a different focus on them and desire different outcomes to men.

There are some common tools, ways of being during coaching and processes that experienced coaches are using to support women clients. I have developed some guidelines for coaching women based on what experienced coaches are doing and how they are “being”.

### **5.2 Recommended applications of the research**

The research has had an immediate impact on my personal learning, coaching framework and practice. I am in the process of sharing my findings with survey participants, clients, coaching sponsors and the coaching community.

The research has developed my coaching framework in a number of ways.

1. I have developed a checklist of key coaching issues that women can experience. I use this checklist during contracting and early coaching sessions to open up a discussion around issues that the client is facing and to help the client to articulate goals for the coaching. This checklist of senior women's coaching issues is given in Appendix 4.
2. I have increased my knowledge about gender issues and feel that I am a better informed coach as a result of this. I will try not to make any assumptions about my client's position, and intend to encourage discussion of the ways that gender influences things in the client's organisation and what the client wishes to do about this.
3. I have increased my knowledge about how to support senior professional women and have developed some guidelines for coaching senior women which incorporate all aspects of my research. A copy of these guidelines is given in Appendix 5.

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# Appendices

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## Appendix 1

### Description of the Key Coaching Issues

#### 1. Managing the Job

This theme has three subcategories which are:

- a. **Managing role transition** – this is about managing a new role and leaving the old job behind. In some cases it can be about taking on a more significant role, such as joining an Executive Committee for the first time. One client on taking on a new role asked, “How do I do this? What are the tasks, meetings and conversations that I need to have?”
- b. **Being overly self sufficient** – for senior women this is often about being too perfectionist, getting too immersed in detail and not delegating enough. In my own practice review, I found that half of my clients had held a self limiting belief that “they had to have all of the answers.” A coach remarked, “Women make themselves vulnerable to stress and failure by getting themselves trapped on the hamster wheel, displaying how self sufficient they are.”
- c. **Being productive and focused** on the main parts of the role. This is about managing both the technical and managerial aspects of the role and being seen to perform. It involves letting go of less productive uses of time.

#### 2. Developing Self Confidence

Senior women recognise their lack of self confidence, self belief and feelings of insecurity. One coach described how women can compress their vision of themselves to be smaller than they are and referred to this as, “it’s only little me”. Women may feel that they are not entitled to their senior role or even to having coaching. They can suffer from the “Impostor Syndrome” and be afraid that they will be found out. Women on the brink of a senior role can be reluctant to push themselves forward and need encouragement to do so. One coach described this as “reluctance to put their head above the parapet, recognising that success or failure in the new position will be very visible”. Coaches gave reasons for the lack of confidence citing upbringing, schooling and the level of support that a client has received. Some coaches were more specific and commented that a high proportion of their female clients had “dysfunctional relationships” with their fathers.

### 3. Managing Relationships and Influencing

This theme has a number of subcategories which are:

- a. **Making more impact** – this is about developing executive presence.
- b. **Building alliances** – many executive women have poor networks within the organisation. This is about learning how to partner with others and to build strategic alliances. One coach remarked, “When senior women want to become a Partner or Managing Director they suddenly ask, “Who do I need to influence here?”
- c. **Gaining recognition** – covers getting the organisation to notice what you have achieved and increasing your visibility.
- d. **Developing influencing and communication styles.** This can be about being more direct or less abrasive. One coach said that it was common for him to work with female clients on expressing feelings at work.
- e. **Developing organisational “savvy”** - women tend to dislike engaging in organisational politics and don't know how to position themselves to gain others' support. Many coaches commented upon clients having poor relationships with their male bosses and not knowing when it was vital to push back.

### 4. Managing Work and Non-work Needs

This theme has two subcategories:

- a. **Work life balance** – this is about how senior women combine running a home and/or having a family with their work role. It can also be about managing life choices and developing a personal life. One coach said, “Some female clients with children try to be the perfect mother and when they find they can't be, this is stressful for them.”
- b. **Exploring personal issues** that impact upon work, such as life transitions, relationship problems at home and handling personal change.

### 5. Managing and Leading Others

This theme has two subcategories:

- a. **Managing teams is** about dealing with conflict, giving difficult messages, managing talented individuals, trusting others, delegating and understanding how to manage people according to their individual needs.

- b. **Leadership** issues include becoming more strategic and visionary and identifying what type of leader the client wishes to be. One coach gave the example of a client who was in the process of changing her leadership style from a “rescuing” to a “coaching” style.

## 6. Managing Career Path

Coaches reported that many senior women do not have career plans. They tend to raise questions with their coach about their next career move. For some clients it is about assessing whether the organisation is the right place for them to be and they ask, “Am I willing to tolerate this working environment any more?” This issue incorporates transformational issues, that is, facilitating a client to reach her potential. One coach described this as “preparing women to be the best that they can be”. Career issues can also be about supporting a client to handle an uncertain future.

## 7. Being Assertive

This is about learning to say “No”, handling constructive feedback well, asking for support and facing up to gender issues. One coach commented that five out of his six senior, female clients “find it difficult to assert themselves with their male bosses.”

## 8. Knowing and Being True to Self

This theme has three subcategories which are:

- a. **Developing self awareness** - this is about the client understanding more about herself and how she is perceived by others.
- b. **Being authentic** - this covers helping individuals to bring their whole selves to work and as one coach said, “Giving the client the energy and motivation to be herself and releasing her from the burden of struggling with this.”
- c. **Exploring meaning and purpose** - this is about finding a place in the organisation and world. Some clients ask, “How do I find meaning and purpose in my work?”

## Appendix 2

### Examples of the Links between Age and Issues

Age range	Typical issues
<b>Early - late 30's</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing upwards, e.g. working with challenging male and female bosses</li> <li>• Young mothers, bringing whole self to work</li> <li>• Sharing emotions at work</li> <li>• Managing workload, delegating</li> <li>• Transitioning into a new role</li> <li>• Developing confidence in leading others</li> <li>• Career dilemmas for women who want children, e.g. should I stay with my current employer or move organisations?</li> </ul>
<b>Early – late 40's</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For women with children - work/non-work balance issues</li> <li>• For women without children – questions relating to purpose in life and social identity, e.g. who am I?</li> <li>• Career development issues, e.g. taking on more senior roles and do I want to tolerate this work environment?</li> <li>• Developing strategic alliances within the organisation, learning how to manage organisational politics</li> <li>• Confidence – being at one with who they are, what they bring and their femininity</li> </ul>
<b>Early - late 50's</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being more authentic</li> <li>• Easing off from senior roles and responsibilities and developing a successor</li> <li>• Working part time to develop other interests</li> <li>• Feeling reconciled to staying with the organisation and not being willing to be pushed around</li> </ul>

## Appendix 3

### Examples of how Coaches are “Being” during Coaching

<b>Phase: Build Client’s Trust</b>	<b>Phase: Create Space for Reflection</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self disclosing during early sessions so that the client can connect with the coach</li> <li>• Treating the discussion as a conversation between equals, with the client in the driving seat.</li> <li>• Focusing on understanding the client’s view of the world</li> <li>• Asking about client’s preferences in the contracting session</li> <li>• Taking a non-judgemental stance</li> <li>• Using the word “aspiration” rather than “ambition” when exploring the future</li> <li>• Using role modelling, e.g. coach models authentic behaviour, being vulnerable and sharing emotions to encourage the client to open up</li> <li>• Approaching topics as they emerge and sideways so that the client isn’t put off or discouraged</li> <li>• Using humour to show that coaching can be enjoyable and fun</li> <li>• Being interested in the whole person, not just the role</li> <li>• Creating a safe and welcoming environment for the coaching</li> <li>• Being explicit about taking time to establish a trusting relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating space and keeping the focus on the client</li> <li>• Being a neutral sounding board</li> <li>• Giving the client a good listening to, acting like a mirror</li> <li>• Asking open questions to encourage clients to explore</li> <li>• Coaching with “riveted detachment”, not being invested in the client’s position</li> <li>• Allowing the individual to choose what she wishes to focus upon</li> <li>• Having quality of presence. Adopting a relaxed, still state</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Holding” the client during times of personal crisis</li> </ul>	
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<b>Phase: Help Client’s to Make Sense of their Experiences</b>	<b>Phase: Encourage and Support Client’s Development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging the client to carry out data gathering</li> <li>• Sharing intuition with the client</li> <li>• Highlighting key themes that emerge</li> <li>• Giving feedback about how the coach experiences the client in the “here and now”</li> <li>• Discussing transference and counter transference issues</li> <li>• Challenging clients to be realistic about their strengths and areas for development and not to be embarrassed</li> <li>• Choosing the right tool at the right time to meet the client's needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploring possibilities</li> <li>• Encouraging clients by holding the vision for them</li> <li>• Providing open access between sessions</li> <li>• Focusing on strengths and helping the client to feel valued</li> <li>• Using supportive language</li> <li>• Reviewing learning towards the end of each session and at the start of new sessions</li> <li>• Being transparent about the coaching process so that clients can learn to coach others and self coach</li> </ul>

## Appendix 4

### Checklist of Senior Women's Coaching Issues

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Relevance</b>	<b>Priority</b>
<b>Managing the job</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing role transition</li> <li>• Being overly self sufficient</li> <li>• Being productive and focused</li> </ul>		
<b>Developing self confidence</b>		
<b>Managing relationships and influencing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making more impact</li> <li>• Building alliances</li> <li>• Gaining recognition</li> <li>• Developing influencing and communication styles</li> <li>• Developing organisational "savvy"</li> </ul>		
<b>Managing work and non-work needs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work life balance</li> <li>• Exploring personal issues</li> </ul>		
<b>Managing and leading others</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing teams</li> <li>• Leadership</li> </ul>		
<b>Managing your career path</b>		
<b>Being assertive</b>		
<b>Knowing and being true to self</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing self awareness</li> <li>• Being authentic</li> <li>• Exploring meaning and purpose</li> </ul>		

## Appendix 5

### Guidelines for Coaches on Coaching Senior Women

1. Coaches need to understand how gender issues within the work environment can impact female clients. Explore with your client what *her* experience of gender issues are, and help her to understand her situation and how she can adopt effective coping strategies and behaviours.
2. Treat all women that you coach as individuals; there are vast variations amongst women. Be aware of your own expectations and stereotypes of women and do not impose these on clients.
3. Initially, some female clients do not feel entitled to receive coaching. It is important that the coach spends time up front reassuring the client that she is “worthy” of the attention and investment.
4. Women learn best through relationships with others. Therefore, it is vital to take time at the beginning of the relationship to establish trust. Coaches can do this by sharing personal information and role modelling being open and authentic.
5. Familiarise yourself with typical issues that senior women may bring to coaching. You can use the checklist in Appendix 4 during early sessions with clients, if it is helpful for them. These issues are not *unique* to women but differ from issues that men bring in that women tend to raise underlying issues earlier, put a different focus on certain issues and are looking to explore rather than to “fix” their issues. In addition, there is a relationship between coaching issues and age (see Appendix 2).
6. Many senior women feel relatively isolated in their roles. They appreciate being given the space to explore both work and non-work needs during coaching. Support women to make choices that they are happy with by listening with “riveted detachment”, sharing your intuition and providing feedback about how you experience them.
7. When discussing the future, use the word “aspiration” rather than “ambition”. Help your clients to develop career plans. Hold a vision of the future for clients and support them to explore whether they feel ready for the next step and what the real opportunities and costs will be.
8. Encourage female clients to work with and through others rather than to be self sufficient. Focus clients on assessing their alliances and mapping out where they need to build relationships and networks. Explore their

beliefs about engaging in organisational politics and work with them to find acceptable ways of being effective in this arena.

9. Help your clients to understand who they are, what is important to them (their values) and how they are perceived by others (their communication style, image and presence). Support female clients to develop their own authentic, leadership styles which they feel comfortable with.
10. During your coaching, be transparent about what you are doing so that clients learn to self coach and coach others. Ask clients to consider where they are going to get their support from once the coaching is completed and encourage them to find themselves good mentors.

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