Sponsors and Co-Researchers

Research Report

What is the place of uncertainty in coaching purposes at senior levels in organisations?

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This research was conducted as part of an MA in Work Based Learning (Coaching) with Middlesex University

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Executive Summary

This project was initiated following an interest in the use of goals in coaching, in existential coaching and uncertainty. The study looks at how HR 'coaching sponsors' in large organisations (multinationals and large public sector employers), frame the purpose of coaching for their senior leaders (top 3 levels). It particularly addresses the ways in which developing leaders capacity for engaging with uncertainty appears as an implicit or explicit purpose in coaching.

The narrative around coaching purposes is still somewhat limited and I was interested in the nature of the dialogue that would emerge. The narrative around uncertainty and complexity has developed rapidly as a result of the 2008 banking crisis. My interest is in everyday leadership uncertainties as well as the 'crises'. The study used a grounded theory approach in order to surface the assumptions and paradigms impacting on the framing of 'uncertainty' in coaching purposes at senior levels in organisations.

The enquiry explored how the organisation saw the purpose of executive coaching, the kinds of issues the leaders typically brought to coaching and the processes that support it. The study also examined the implications for the selection of coaches. This developed into a 'grounded' theory of leaders' responses to uncertainty and the role of coaches in supporting leaders in developing optimal responses to uncertainty as it appears in their organisations.

What has emerged is:

1. A typology of meaning of uncertainty that distinguishes the felt sense from the external challenges

2. A narrative that connects the organisational drivers for coaching with the leaders personal change journey

3. A model of responses to uncertainty that is based on leaders' tolerance of uncertainty and sense of agency.

4. Insight into the variety of coaching purposes in relation to uncertainty

5. Learning about the significance of alignment of purpose, process and practice in coaching.

6. Implications of coaches' stance in relation to uncertainty for their coaching processes and practices.

A key finding concerned the ways in which a transformational concept like engaging with uncertainty is co-opted into existing paradigms of leadership effectiveness and existing modes of leadership development, unless it is linked to a wider strategic shift in the organisation and crucially the dialogue within it.

I do not seek to make any specific recommendations, other than the value of ongoing dialogue in generating a more sophisticated understanding of the meaning, use and implications of concepts in common currency.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my partner in research Tamsin Slyce, for sharing this journey with me and being a great source of inspiration and fun, and my partner in life and husband; Peter, for his loving support as I prepared for the EMCC Conference and hid away at various stages work on the report.

Mostly I'd like to thank all my co-researchers who have given so generously of their time and so openly of their practice. I hope our conversations have been as stimulating for you as they have for me.

I would particularly like to thank Camilla Arnold for listening to our presentation before we took it to the EMCC and being so positive about our enquiry and the guys at the SHU Coaching and Mentoring Research Unit for creating such a fabulous learning and researching environment and helping me believe there was something of interest in my questions.

Finally I'd like to thank i-coach and the generous spirits of the i-coach community for creating such a rich learning experience over the past 3 years.

Thank you all.

Introduction

The challenge to goals

In line with David Megginson's challenge to the goal setting I realised that many of my clients, as senior leaders, are at the edge of knowing, they are working with uncertainty and ambiguity, both personal and organisational, They do not want to think in terms of 'goals'.

Transformational Coaching

This drew my attention to how embedded behavioural, 'from A to B' change models are in much discourse on coaching and how less is made of the emergent nature of the process, or of the importance of sitting with the way things are (an existential principle). At the same time the ability to engage with uncertainty seemed to be being articulated, in various forms, as a crucial capability for senior and successful leaders[1]. Transformational leadership, by definition, goes beyond 'A to B' change models.

There seemed to be a paradox between organisations desire for leaders who can succeed in ambiguous, complex contexts and the implicit models of personal change underpinning much coaching design. This research seeks to understand how this paradox presents itself and how it impacts on the stated purposes of coaching for senior leaders.

Developing the Dialogue

I have sought to start a dialogue with coaching sponsors to see how they experienced these issues and to understand how coaching was being presented at senior levels in their organisations.

I also sought to triangulate this through conversations with coaches to understand how they were experiencing the world. I reached out to the coach community through a number of CPD events.

My colleague, Tamsin Slyce has been researching senior leaders' stories of experiencing uncertainty. Together we were able to offer some new perspectives arising from our research at the EMCC Conference in December 2008. This paper focuses on my research findings.

Everyday Uncertainties

I could not have predicted how the external realities of credit crunch and recession would impact on the relevance of and interest in this subject. Clients have moved from a space where 'uncertainty' was regarded as a scary word, especially in the City, to something they want to learn to 'manage', or perhaps learn to thrive on.

While the global recession has enabled my research to gain traction and provides an opportunity for dialogue it risks framing this as about crises rather than the '*uncertainty*'

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[1] Hall, L. *Your Coaching Issues for the Year Ahead.* Coaching at Work, Vo. 4. Issue 1. Jan/Feb 2009.

inherent in everyday organisational life. This study offers some frameworks for exploring the dynamic between 'uncertainty' and coaching in corporate settings.

Defining Terms

Defining my terms was important. In fact the individual appreciation of words is a key part of my research findings.

- In '*senior leaders*' I am referring to the top 3 executive levels.

- '*Coaching sponsors'* are those people who frame and provide access to coaching for senior leaders.

- My definition of '*coaching*' is 'a carefully framed series of one to one conversations designed to facilitate exploration, reflection and learning, which support clients in meeting their professional challenges'.

- *'Uncertainty'* for me, refers to all the unknowns that we engage with on a day to day basis. It includes ambiguity (what is unclear), complexity (as opposed to complicated) and paradox. Clarifying the meaning of uncertainty became a finding in this research.

I see two key audiences for this research.

- Corporate sponsors and brokers of coaching services who are concerned that the coaching they commission meets the real needs of their key leaders.

- Other coaches, as this project sheds light on the needs and interests of coaching sponsors in global clients and raises questions about the alignment of coaching practices with purpose.

The state of research into coaching purposes

The value of looking at purposes and processes before results.

In reviewing the field of coaching research I was struck by how dominated it was by impact studies or the 'my technique is better than yours' variety of research. Kilburg[2] and Spinelli[3] and Linley (2006:5) suggest coaching will follow established findings in counselling and psychotherapy. That is, that technique and approach don't differentiate – it's the quality of the relationship that does.

Despite assertions that research is looking at purposes I could find only one study that focussed on HR sponsors of coaching[4],[5] and even this was focussed more on perception of results than analysis of purposes. This inquiry is premised on the assumption that before we can ask whether coaching works we must ask what it is being used for[6]. Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006:24). I have noticed that the level of analysis of purpose in the field too quickly moves to considerations of 'effectiveness'.

In our desire to categorise from larger scale studies, whether it is into skills, performance or development coaching[7], or into coaching to the executive's agenda or knowledge acquisition[8] we are missing something of the organisational context for coaching and the implicit assumptions about the nature of change and leadership that sponsors are using to frame these purposes. It is towards this that my research is directed.

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[2] Quoted in Passmore, J. and Gibbes, C. *The State of Executive Coaching Research: what does the current literature tell us and what is next for coaching research?* International Coaching Psychology Review. Vol. 2. No. 2. July 2007. BPS. p 124.

[3] Spinelli, E. Speaking at DPSP Copenhagen Conference, 28th September 2008.

[4] Dagley, G. *Human Resources Professionals' perceptions of executive coaching: Efficacy, benefits and return on investment.* International Coaching Psychology Review. Vol. 1. No. 2. November 2006. p34-45. BPS.

[5] Megginson, D. and Cox. E. *Exploring Dialogue: Challenges for Mentoring and Coaching Research.* 2009. (adapted from a draft of Chapter 2. Coaching and Mentoring, Garvey, B., Stokes, P. and Megginson, D. (forthcoming) Coaching and Mentoring, Sage. p 11. In this study the authors found 8 studies relating to coaches, 3 to coaches and 2 to staff perceptions. None used data from HR sponsors.

[6] Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006:24

[7] Grant and Cavanagh, 2004, cited in Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006:25

[8] Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006:24

Research Methodology

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a systematic interpretative approach that seeks to build concepts from the ground up that illuminate social reality.

Grounded theory provides researchers with a disciplined process, not simply for generating concepts, but more importantly for coming to see possible and plausible relationships among them. In this research I am seeking to understand the relationship between the way sponsors conceptualise 'change', 'coaching' and 'uncertainty' and their sense of the purposes for coaching in their organisations.

My approach to theory is pragmatic. If this emergent theory can provide some sense of agency, something the reader can orient themselves by while they establish how things are in their world then that will be sufficient. If it creates a greater sense of a shared meaning (but not a definitive one) on which we can continue to dialogue it will have fulfilled its purpose.

Sampling and data collection

The criteria for the selection of potential co-researchers included:

- Corporate HR sponsors of coaching.

- Supporting the most senior leaders in the business.

- Not clients for whom I already provide coaching; where they have already gained an insight into my coaching model and I into their coaching practices.

I met with the following people:

Name and Job Title	Organisation
Camilla Arnold, Managing Partner and Exec Coach	TXG
Phillip Sadler	Tomorrows Company
Sharon (in confidence), Head of Coaching, EMEA	Pharmaceutical EMEA
Sue Mortlock, Head of Coaching	NHS Institute
Kim Stanbrook, Head of Learning and Development	BT
Steve Pike, Head of Leadership Development	UK Home Office
Clare Thompson, Head of Leadership Development	RWEnPower
Alison Wilcox, Global Director of Leadership and OD	Vodafone
Phil Whichello, Managing Consultant	YSC
David Love, Consultant and Coach	OPM
Sara , Internal Coach	Professional Services
Paul Ellis, Head of R & D	Defence Academy
Stephen King, Head of Learning and Development	E.ON UK

I also sought to engage the coaching community. I chose events that were more likely to attract coaches who work at senior levels in organisations. I ran sessions at the Sheffield Hallam University Coaching and Mentoring Unit Research Days and the EMCC International Conference in Prague. These were dominated by people coaching in organisations, usually at fairly senior levels..

I did not seek to explore coaches' experience of coaching purpose in the same way as I looked at coaching sponsors. I sought to engage this community to identify themes of interest, notice their dialogue around uncertainty, and notice how the interim findings were received. This, combined with my colleague Tamsin Slyce's research into leaders' perspectives, enabled me to triangulate the data from the HR Sponsors.
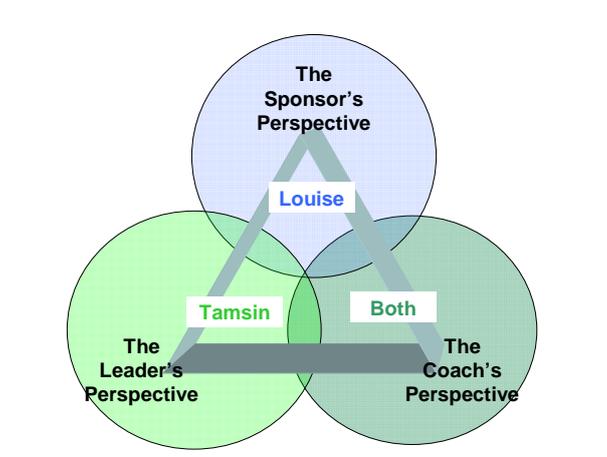
Conducting the conversations

The conversations were typically an hour long and were either conducted over the phone or face to face (approximately 50-50 split). I had a framework of questions, which I used as a starting point for the conversations. I developed my questions in response to the co-researchers circumstances and my evolving theory. In the later interviews this included sharing aspects of the interim findings, such as the 'Responses to Uncertainty Model'.[9]

I then raised questions about the purpose of coaching in the sponsor's organisations. While I was interested in 'how' they described what is happening I was also seeking to 'ground' this by reference to examples of client stories or actual processes in use.

I used the same approach to my conversations with coaches at the SHU research days. I offered to lead 'open space' events on three occasions. The three issues I raised for the open space sessions were 'Choosing your coach', 'The place of uncertainty in coaching' and 'Coaching market segmentation – who is driving it, coaches or sponsors?'

Initial analysis and presentation to EMCC

The commitment to run a session at the EMCC International Conference created a focus for a key phase of the iterative data analysis in late November 2008. This was a significant opportunity to test the 'theoretical sensitivity' of this research, by looking at the level of alignment between my findings from sponsors and coaches and Tamsin's from leaders themselves. In delivering the presentation we gained valuable insight into

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[9] See Appendix N, EMCC Presentation, slide 17.

how the concepts were received and understood and have integrated this into this report.

Findings

Unpacking the concept of uncertainty

My first meeting with Camilla Arnold at TXG (a city coaching brokerage firm) in January 2008 raised the issue of the language of uncertainty. What is common currency now was uncomfortable then. Uncertainty smacks of failure.

Effective dialogue is actually about the continual reworking of the meanings we give to things in order to enable us to act coherently and effectively in the world. From my conversations with sponsors and coaches I have developed an emerging conceptual framework for 'uncertainty' as it is used today.

I scanned the words used by sponsors and coaches through the enquiry in relation to uncertainty and drew out a range of higher order categories:

Figure IV. A Typology of the Meaning of 'Uncertainty' in HR Sponsors accounts

The Meanings of 'Uncertainty'
• **THE FELT SENSE**: the individual feels anxious, uncertain, frustration, stuck, and its opposites of enthusiasm, emboldened, energised.
• **WHAT THE WORLD PRESENTS**: unpredictability, complexity, wicked problems, paradox, instability, flux and turbulence.
• **RESULTING IN A LACK OF CLARITY IN THE SITUATION**: things are ambiguous, unclear, nebulous, a mystery, unknown, and swampy.
• **RELATIONSHIP TO, RESPONSE TO**: resolution, trust, lived through, being in, learnt from, dialogue with, engage with, embrace and cope.
• **CAPACITY GENERATED FROM ENGAGING WITH** (the uncertainty): flexibility, resilience, emergence, creativity and innovation.

It is worth noting here the distinction between the complicated and the complex. Following Stacey (2007) the complicated can be seen as having multiple elements, but with a clear solution or 'right' outcome, and the complex as having multiple variables and an unclear outcome. 'Simple' is making soup, 'complicated' is making a car, 'complex' is bringing up a child.

In terms of talking about uncertainty in a business setting my findings suggest it may be useful to separate the language of the felt sense from that of the external realities (what the world presents). While engaging with the individual the emotive can be important, (coaches often wanted to hear more about the emotional journey for clients facing uncertainty). However, in a business context, in dialogue with HR sponsors, it may make more sense to stay with the external issue, rather than the internal realities. While 'ambiguity' and 'complexity' may now be more acceptable words in the City post

credit crunch, 'uncertainty' hints at not knowing, not being able to gain a sense of control over things and would often not be OK. This was borne out by some of the other interviews.

The Telecoms HR Sponsor spoke of a concrete culture, where although they might refer to complexity in the HR function, on the ground they would talk about the operational challenges in particular, situational terms, eg. 'making something work in a matrix structure'.

Coaching purposes and uncertainty

The sponsors I engaged with in this research were typically accountable for top talent or leadership development. Sponsors mediate the expressed needs of leaders with the business challenge, the organisational culture and their own sense of what works in developing people. The language they use may indicate a cultural orientation to uncertainty in the organisation. They spoke of organisational agility, tolerances for ambiguity, and flexibility in particular. They referenced the challenges that leaders face of transitioning into new roles, personal impact in a 'political' environment, engaging stakeholders and delivering through others. The issues that had the strongest resonance to uncertainty were; stakeholder engagement (reflecting complexity, and working through relationship and complex influencing), flexibility (with the often implicit rather than explicit request for 'both - and' thinking), and personal impact and presence (which often appeared to be about how leaders shape their identity when working in ambiguous / political environments).

However, at the same time, while talking about 'complexity and ambiguity' their phrasing betrayed an underlying problem resolution paradigm. This is evident in the language of 'managing through' and 'coping with' and more particularly in the processes in use to support coaching which I will discuss later.

The HR sponsors views of the purpose of coaching, were expressed both in terms of what individuals and the organisation sought from it. The following categories of purposes emerged:

Figure I. Stated purposes of coaching for organisations & individual leaders

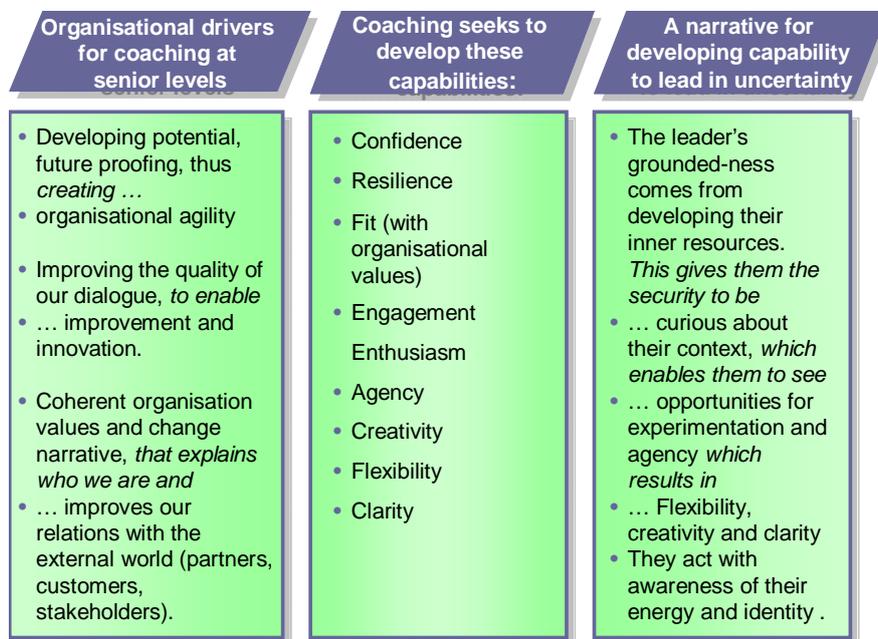| Organisational	Individual
• Talent and Leadership Development (7)	• Career and Role Transitions (10)
• Performance and Improvement (5)	• Leadership Effectiveness (6)
• Capability in Complexity and Ambiguity (5)	• Confidence (5) & Impact (4)
• External Relations (5)	• Stakeholder Engagement & Complex Influencing (5)
• Changing the dialogue (3)	• Managing complexity & transformation (3)
• Flexible and Responsive Leaders (3)	• Organisational fit (3)
	• Performance (1)

	● **Resilience (1)**

Number of citations within that category are in brackets

The striking finding was how virtually all the sponsors identified managing career and role transitions as the main or at least a significant purpose of coaching at this level. Most used the term 'transition'.

After further analysis of the data I reworked the categories to identify the underlying narrative around the organisational drivers for coaching and compared these with the emerging sense of what they wanted their leaders to develop through coaching.

Figure II. Purposes of coaching for organisations & individual leaders

Organisational drivers for coaching at senior levels	Coaching seeks to develop these capabilities:	A narrative for developing capability to lead in uncertainty
• Developing potential, future proofing, thus *creating …* • organisational agility • Improving the quality of our dialogue, *to enable* • … improvement and innovation. • Coherent organisation values and change narrative, *that explains who we are and* • … improves our relations with the external world (partners, customers, stakeholders).	• Confidence • Resilience • Fit (with organisational values) • Engagement Enthusiasm • Agency • Creativity • Flexibility • Clarity	• The leader's grounded-ness comes from developing their inner resources. *This gives them the security to be* • … curious about their context, *which enables them to see* • … opportunities for experimentation and agency *which results in* • … Flexibility, creativity and clarity • They act with awareness of their energy and identity .

What emerged as I tried to understand the mixed picture I was getting about the capabilities (in the middle column) from my conversations with the different sponsors was that any of these capabilities can be expressed in a contained 'A to B' frame, or an open, emergent one. They will look quite different in each.

One sponsor gave a particularly good example of this in relation to clarity. They recognised that clarity could be seen as having targets, clear objectives etc, when in fact what they were looking to see in their leaders is the capacity to bring clarity not through making things concrete but through making them meaningful through engaged dialogue.

The frame we use to look at these concepts shapes their meaning. If we look at enthusiasm in a contained 'A to B' change frame it may look like developing vision, being positive, motivating others by selling the idea. In an emergent frame, it may look more like curiosity, going with the energy that is there.

The risk in defining these differences too specifically is that we end up building a competency model for emergence and that would just be a re-working in the old

paradigm of a more stable, fixed and certain world. I wish to avoid what Martyn Brown (2002:8) warns against: "Most tend to talk about the new theories of complexity, self-organisation and emergence by, in the main, presenting existing views (e.g. in terms of control, design, simple rules and regularity), in new jargon – with the danger of it becoming yet another management fad". I have presented a simple narrative that pulls it towards an 'engagement with uncertainty'.

It is the lens through which you look at these concepts that differentiates the more radical engagement with uncertainty from a form that has been commoditised and appropriated by the existing management science paradigm.

Figure VII. What you see depends on the lens you look through
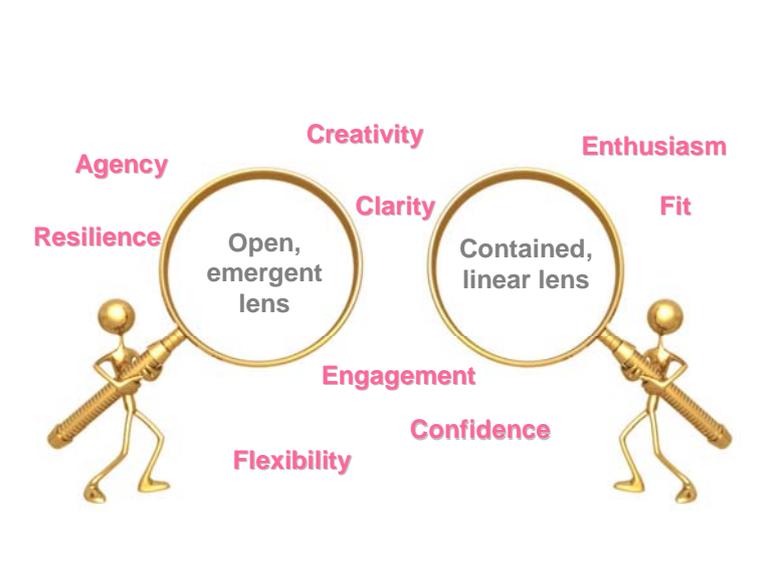
Sponsors are clear that coaching at the top is a bespoke service. It is always situational and personal. It is therefore more nuanced than at other levels. One example of how this plays out is in the distinction between leadership effectiveness and engagement with leadership paradoxes.

When organisations talk about leadership effectiveness they are describing a clear sense of what the leader has to do to be effective. This is often based on competencies and feedback and assessment data. This asks the leader to be more flexible, be more achievement oriented, demonstrate more empathy etc. There is a sense of certainty being communicated about what success here in this organisation looks like. Tamsin's research and our own coaching experience suggested that leaders, particularly top leaders, are beginning to react against this apparent certainty. They experience paradox, not 'pathways to success'. Organisations that recognise this say to leaders, 'we understand this is complex, we understand there are mixed messages, the skill we want in you is that you can hold this, make some sense of it and still act in the world to create opportunities for us rather than replicating what we are already good at'. They encourage coaching that supports engagement with leadership paradox. The message to leaders about what they have to 'learn' is quite different. The type of coaching that can deliver this might be different too, as it takes us beyond 'A to B' goal oriented thinking.

A key finding is that how uncertainty is construed is significantly affected by the individual and organisationally held assumptions about the appropriate strategy or response to uncertainty. So, in framing coaching purposes it is important that sponsors, coaches and clients understand their relationship to uncertainty if they are to effectively articulate what they want to achieve in relation to it. This point is expanded in the next section.

Responses to Uncertainty

As I listened to the sponsors and coaches I realised that the language of uncertainty is intertwined with assumptions about what one might do with it. The SHU coaching community discussion offered an insight into the difference between engaging with and resolving uncertainty. I was also struck by an observation from one of Tamsin's interviews that you find 'change junkies' in organisations; people who love being part of change projects as they create an intellectual and behavioural challenge to re-establish a new certainty (they like bringing order to chaos). Appreciating the 'change junkie's hidden desire for certainty provided the key validation for me of the emerging model that we presented at the i-coach and EMCC conferences.

Figure VIII. Strategies for responding to uncertainty
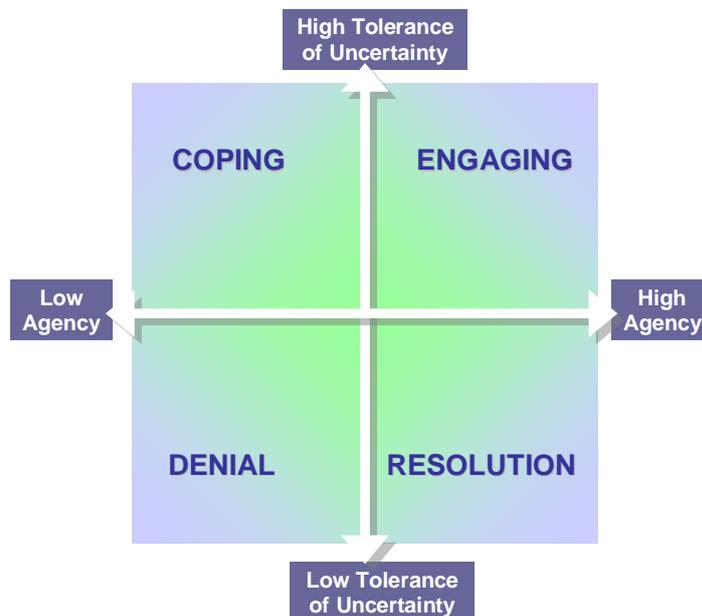
The categories in the model above are described below.

Denial is characterised by seeing the acknowledgement of uncertainty as 'failure' and a demonstration of a lack of expertise. Organisations and people act as if the world is predictable, believing we are organised and strategic, and so we are protected from uncertainty. Ambiguity is regarded as simply lack of knowledge and expertise. The financial institutions were in denial about the real risks of parcelling off 'debt risk' to the extent that they could not identify their exposure. We are in recession as a

consequence. Leaders can place themselves in a position of denial either when they are not prepared to admit they do not know or in their assumption that someone else has 'the answer' and can tell them.

Coping is the strategy we use when we have a low sense of agency or empowerment in a situation. We recognise the uncertainty but don't feel there is much we can do about it, so our strategy is to 'cope' and manage 'through' the uncertainty. Leaders will see their role as being to continue to deliver and to maintain the morale of staff. It is a place of waiting, hoping that time, external factors or senior leadership will resolve the

uncertainty. It is not necessarily a negative place to be, it is a place of surviving but not thriving. My research suggests that current and ex public sector organisations may have a dominant response to uncertainty that is a coping one. In these contexts the focus of the coaching agenda is very often the individual and their career needs and the interpersonal skills of effective team leadership (to maintain morale). Leaders are concerned with how I can get on in this context, rather than how I can change this context by changing my orientation to it. At a systemic level, in HR and among coaches, I would argue that this is not just arising from a place of respect for the individual, but from a culture of lack of agency to influence the wider system.

Resolution is where we actively seek to create a new certainty. We plan our change and hope to move from the certainty of 'A' to the certainty of 'B'. It is based on the idea that there must be an answer and the job of leaders is to find it, and to find it quickly.. It reflects a low tolerance for ambiguity. This response appears to be more typical of engineering and technology based organisations. It is deeply ingrained in many of our management practices and problem solving / achievement orientation (as demonstrated in Telecoms and the Pharma examples). It might provide a high achieving culture in a stable domain, but what happens when the context changes as it has for mobile telecoms staff? They have faced a downturn for the first time after a heady period of growth. While an effective strategy for maintaining momentum, resolution can also represent a false sense of security. Where this is the dominant response, failure to achieve the desired resolution can lead to significant stress for the individual and the organisation. When resolution is achieved it heightens the sense of competence as in the Pharma impact study description of staff 'not wanting to stop' using the ABC change model the coaching had introduced[10]. It unpacked the 'mysteries' of leadership behaviour for them, and, I would suggest, created an illusion of control. This is not to devalue problem resolution, rather to recognise the limitations of making this one's only response to uncertainty. The rush to action, characterised by Resolution, that according to Ket de Vries (2004) is, 'a typical human response to anxiety' and 'a well-accepted response in the business world' does not provide time for active engagement with the dilemmas, paradoxes and tensions that leaders and organisations face in order to create space for new creative possibilities to emerge.

Engagement is, perhaps, the most honest and helpful strategy for responding to uncertainty, though it may not be the easiest. It involves sitting with the discomfort; not just putting on a brave face, but accepting the lack of certainty and resolution and yet still taking purposeful action in the world. It is this *purposeful* action in the face of uncertainty, a sense of agency or confidence in the ability to make things happen, that distinguishes 'engagement' from 'coping' or 'resolution'.

In this place of engagement with others we recognise our interdependence. We develop 'trust' in others that is not built on guarantees but on a sense of a shared world and

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[10] Antecedents, Behaviour and Consequences, based on cognitive behavioural models and resilience training.

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shared journey. We learn to trust ourselves and find our own moral compass. We work together to build new organisational narratives that explain what is important to us, as EON is, without being too prescriptive about the future. What we achieve is greater flexibility, innovation and a higher tolerance for ambiguity in the individual and the organisation that will help us face the next big uncertainty. This is the source of breakthrough ideas.

Confidence and uncertainty

The sponsors spoke a lot about building leaders' confidence and the role that coaching played in that. The model envisions the distinction between the humility and confidence to engage with uncertainty from the bravado and 'I can do it all' attitude that projects a false sense of confidence. The following diagram uses some of the sponsors phrasing to demonstrate this distinction.

Figure IX. The language of sponsors located in the responses to change model

Ways of speaking illuminate our engagement with uncertainty
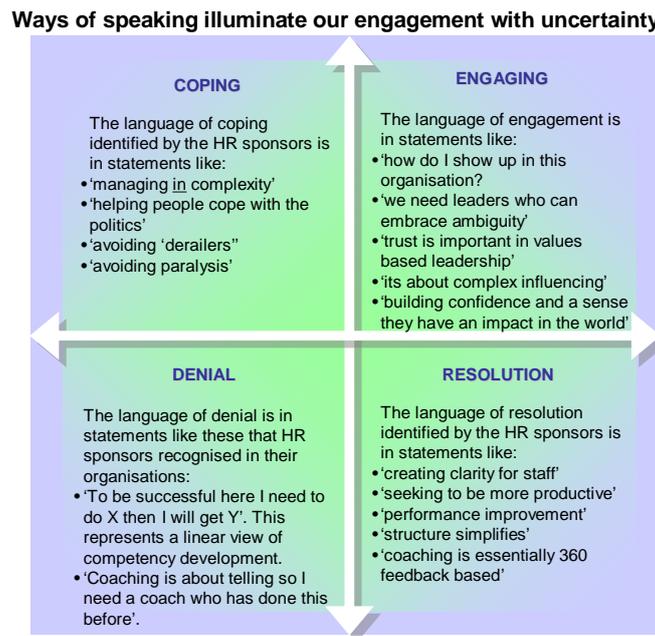
Using the model

I propose that the organisations that engage with the uncertainty and ambiguities organisational and business life will be the ones to survive and thrive. These are the ones that are being honest and direct about the difficulties they face, not the ones putting their heads in the sand and saying it won't affect us (denial) talking themselves up and saying they have the answer (resolution) or just believing they will endure because they always have (coping).

However, this should not be seen as a simple assessment model. Organisations and individuals may have any or all of these strategies in play in various situations or aspects of their lives at the same time. I suggest this model may be useful, not in assessing our response to uncertainty to date and labelling ourselves and our organisations, but in asking questions about where we are right now and facilitating dialogue about the choices and consequences available to us today and the conditions we need to create that will enable us to have a more flexible response in the future.

Martyn Brown (2002:9) suggests that "people can only engage in this *(uncertainty)* when the pattern and quality of their relationships provides good enough holding of the anxiety of facing the unknown together". The grounded-ness that individuals have in themselves and the relatedness with others are key to the capacity to engage with a level of uncertainty that is 'just unsafe enough to be exciting'. The question arises as to what both HR professionals and coaches are doing to provide the context for the development of that relatedness and safe enough space.

The Dynamic between Context, Purpose and Process.

So far I have taken a relatively detailed look at how coaching purposes are framed in an organisation. As I suggested earlier, HR sponsors are critical agents in the framing of the context for coaching through the design of associated processes. Thaler et al (2008) in their book 'Nudge' would identify them as 'choice architects'. So a question emerges as to what kind of choice architecture have sponsors established for coaching in their organisation.

One of my observations is that context, purpose and processes are not necessarily aligned. In talking to the individual sponsors I was struck by how often they would describe a resolution process alongside an engagement purpose. Seeking to explain this I looked at their statements about their context. Building on the i-coach model of inputs, throughputs and outputs that had been so helpful in creating coherence in my own coaching model I looked at context, organisational purposes, individual purposes, processes and requirements for coaches among the co-researcher sites. (See Appendix D for the format developed through this research)

I recognise that senior HR coaching sponsors are often supporting change in the nature of the organisation itself. This leaves them working at a point of tension. I observed a lack of consistency in their change paradigm. More specifically, there was a difference between the models of change implied by some of their purposes for coaching and the models of change assumed in the processes[11] selected to support coaching. For example: as individuals concerned with development they demonstrated an orientation towards 'engagement' with uncertainty, however they often faced a culture and context that seemed to prefer 'resolution'. If they are not clear about their response to uncertainty it can mean that systems and processes in the organisation might be in conflict with the coaching purposes, some facing towards engagement and others towards, coping, resolution or even denial.

The paradox.in change leadership

It could be argued that HR sponsors seek to provide a multitude of models for different purposes. They certainly value diversity in coaching approaches. However, their reported difficulty in articulating what they want from coaches who might support engagement with uncertainty indicates that they are still seeking to make sense of this paradox.

In reality this paradox mirrors the paradoxes other leaders' experience. As Dagley (2006:44) states, "HR professionals are, however, also subject to the business imperative of being able to demonstrate the financial value of costly programmes". HR sponsors are leaders in an organisation where they are often seeking to change a culture and the ways of being as a leader, while they too are facing the same challenges as those they seek to develop. I would suggest that rather than seeking to resolve this paradox, HR sponsors might bring awareness to, and challenge themselves about their paradigm, so that they can best articulate the paradoxes and tensions they are working with as they engage in supporting change for individuals and their organisation.

My observation from this small sample is that the closer the HR sponsor is to 'the change initiative' the more likely they are to have coherence between their way of being, the coaching purpose, their organisations 'coaching enabling processes' and the practices of their coaches. This applies just as much in the Pharma company using an

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[11] See Appendix X. Data: List of HR Processes that HR Sponsors Influence.

ABC model to deliver improvements in productivity (resolution), as it does in the energy company

seeking new ways of being in relation to it's 'tri-lemma' of how to address ethical and eco issues, culture and people issues and price and efficiency issues at the same time (engagement). It might be argued that those HR sponsors located in talent or leadership and development are more likely to be constrained by existing paradigms of individual change (e.g. behavioural feedback and existing HR processes, such as competencies or succession models), that may be less open to supporting engagement with uncertainty.

The impact this has on the effectiveness of coaching cannot be explored in this paper. The implications for coach selection, though was explored with both coaches and sponsors.

The sponsors and coaching houses often recognised the need to ensure a coach had the ability to support a leader engaging with uncertainty; however they recognised they did not know what that would look like. What emerged from analysis of the data was that what sponsors wanted from coaching support varied according to the dominant response to uncertainty in play. Within a resolution frame they valued coach experience, within a coping frame, empathy and within engagement the ability to develop confidence and narrative were prioritised.

What do sponsors seek from coaches supporting the capacity to engage with uncertainty? It depends on the dominant orientation to uncertainty.
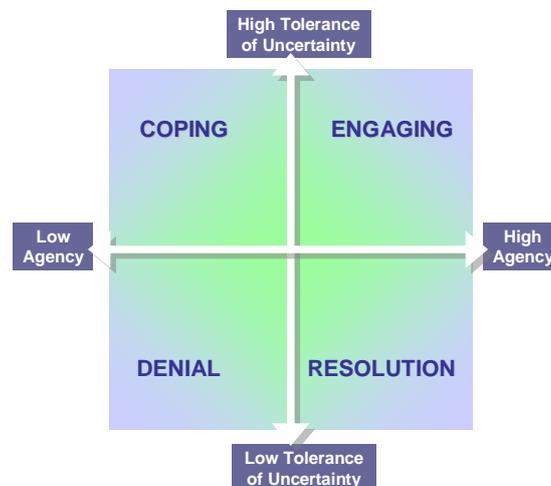
Within a Resolution Frame it often means looking for someone who has been there already and knows how to support the individual on this change journey (ie mentoring from an experienced business person). TXG noted an increase in request for this type of support in the city post credit crunch. This is based on the assumption that we can go back to previous certainties. The 'credit crunch' represents a temporary blip that we can get over. It might also include seeking a coach with sector knowledge, with awareness of the company competency model or who uses 360 and other 'concrete' assessment tools.

Within a Coping Frame it might mean looking for someone who can provide empathic support, someone who describes building resilience, or developing leadership skills in their clients. The capacity to build a nurturing and supportive relationship that provides stability during change may or may not be an explicit selection criteria but it is a preferred practice for many humanist coaches.

Within an Engagement Frame it might look like someone who has experience of coaching people through difficult and emergent life transitions, working across sectors, used to helping leaders develop narratives and crucially building confidence. This last point was emphasised by both HR sponsors and many of the leaders in Tamsin's research. It will also be important that the coach can create an environment in which the leader feels safe enough to explore the ways in which they do not feel safe or certain.

Most sponsors recognised that the coaches own stance towards uncertainty would be significant, but did not know how to explore (or assess) that. Some suggested that the coach's confidence, presence and lack of defensiveness would be important.

As I developed this theory I realised I was prioritising the principle of coherence and that this could represent my own attachment to order, logic, causal relationships, structure and perhaps 'certainty'! Taleb (2007) in his book The Black Swan describes this risk that we 'mistake the map for the territory', I hold to the principle that what I offer here is a map that I have created today, that might prove useful as a starting point for other explorers.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

This study started with questions about goals and purposes in coaching and has expanded to include an emergent theory about the significance of coherence in context, purposes for change, purposes for coaching, HR processes supporting coaching and coach selection.

As a result of the research:

- I offer a way of looking at the language of uncertainty that differentiates the felt sense from operational realities, and responses from capabilities. I have suggested that different audiences will respond to different ways of talking about uncertainty at different times.

- I offer a model of responses to uncertainty that can be used by coaches and sponsors to locate individuals in their particular context, according to their tolerance for uncertainty and degree of agency. It can provide a useful basis for reflecting on their experience and exploring how they want to orient themselves in the future.

- I have identified that engaging with uncertainty has a place in coaching purposes at senior levels, but that that it is more often implicit than explicit.

- I have identified that what we might regard as 'uncertainty capabilities' will look different in different contexts and when seen through the different lenses of the responses to uncertainty model.

- I have recognised how the dominant management paradigm or lens that values the concrete and certain can inhibit understanding and engagement of a new emergent paradigm that recognises the ubiquity of uncertainty and sees leadership as a relational process. The new jargon (of uncertainty and complexity) becomes absorbed into the existing conceptual frame and in the process loses some of its radical underpinnings.

- I have identified that alignment of coaching context, purpose and process creates greater coherence and more positive energy for change in organisations.

As I reflect on the purpose of my research:

- I feel it was highly relevant to my own sense making about coaching for uncertainty. I now have a range of material I can use with leaders and sponsors to explore the different ways of being available to them as leaders. I am particularly interested to further develop my thinking around the notion of wisdom in leadership.

- I am clearer about the language of uncertainty in use in organisations today. I still prefer to use the felt sense term of uncertainty, rather than complexity or unpredictability which I find dissociate one somewhat. I recognise though the circumstances in which other terms will be more effective.

- I have challenged my own capacity to engage with uncertainty as the research evolved. I was not sure how the various reflections and concepts might come together into a coherent whole. I now feel much better prepared to write the book that Tamsin and I have been talking about and I am keen to explore even further the

growing literature about uncertainty, neuroscience and existential and gestalt coaching.

What does this mean for how as coaches we consider developing the capacity to engage with uncertainty?

Stacey (2007) asserts that change can only occur when the pattern of conversation changes, because it is this that organises the individual's experience. This has been the fundamental premise of this research, to explore how my world and the coaching sponsors' world appear and to create the possibility of change through engaging in a dialogue.

I am not seeking to make recommendations. It is for others to find their own agency and decide what they want to do with what has been presented. All I can propose is continuing the dialogue.

I do hope what I have provided here, in the process of these research conversations, and in my communications to date, added to the coaching communities understanding of what I consider a very important paradigm shift for leaders. We have the opportunity to move from an agenda focussed on creating clarity and managing change to a more emergent one concerned with engaging in uncertainty and relatedness. Clearly sponsors feel coaching has a role to play in this, though they are not always sure what to look for. This is a clear area for further enquiry and dialogue.

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Appendix A.   Project Activity: Co-researchers.

The following lists show the key sources of data for this research

Table of co-researchers:

	Name and Job Title	Organisation	Interviewed
1.	Camilla Arnold Managing Partner and Exec Coach	TXG	January *, November & December ** 08
2.	Phillip Sadler	Tomorrows Co.	February 2008*
3.	Sharon *(in confidence)* Head of Coaching, EMEA	Pharmaceutical EMEA	August 2008
4.	Sue Mortlock Head of Coaching	NHS Institute	September 2008
5.	Kim Stanbrook Head of Learning and Development	BT	October 2008
6.	Steve Pike Head of Leadership Development	UK Home Office	November 2008
7.	Clare Thompson Head of Leadership Development	RWEnPower	November 2008
8.	Alison Wilcox Global Director of Leadership and OD	Vodafone	December 2008
9.	Phil Whichello Managing Consultant	YSC	December 2008 and January 2009
10.	David Love Consultant and Coach	OPM	January 2009
11.	Sara *(in confidence)* Internal Coach	Global Consulting	January 2009
12.	Paul Ellis Head of R & D	Defence Academy	February 2009
13.	Stephen King Head of Learning and Development	E.ON UK	February 2009

*   initial meeting only about research area
** reviewing our presentation for EMCC and providing feedback

Table of other research project engagement meetings / networks

Organisation	Activity	Date
Sheffield Hallam University C&MRU.	Ran an open space event on 'choosing your coach' as part of the C&MRU Research Day.	October 2007
Sheffield Hallam University C&MRU.	Ran an open space event with Tamsin Slyce on 'the place of uncertainty in coaching'.	January 2008
Sheffield Hallam University C&MRU.	Ran an opens space event on 'market segmentation in coaching – who wants it coach or sponsor?'	September 2008
i-coach research day	Presented a session with Tamsin Slyce on our research and interim findings	November 2008
EMCC International Conference, Prague	Presented a paper and workshop on 'How coaching can help 21st century leaders operate effectively in an uncertain world' with Tamsin Slyce	December 2008

Appendix B.   Definitions of purpose: implications for coaching

Term	Oxford dictionary definition	Implications for use in coaching
Purpose	the reason for which something is done or for which something exists	This focuses on the rationale, the reason, the broad intent. The question: what are we trying to achieve by investing in the coaching of senior leaders is often not addressed. Is it an act of faith, just a good thing, or part of a strategic development agenda?
Outcome	A consequence	This is the result, what actually happens and is the focus of impact and ROI studies in coaching. While organisations may think they should be measuring this, most aren't in any positivist sense.
Goal	An aim or desired result	This requires we identify in advance what we want. Megginson has examined the place of goals in coaching and discovered a significant deviance from the 'orthodoxy' that says we should structure our interventions around clear coaching goals.
Objective	A goal or aim	In coaching terms 'an objective' often implies a clear end state, usually agreed with another and SMART.

Appendix C.   Data: List of coaching processes that HR sponsors influence

The processes that HR sponsors in this research had influence or control over include:

- budgets
- definitions of coaching, (this includes deciding not to define coaching or it's purposes, leaving it entirely open to the individual coachee to define)
- access routes to coaching
- identifying development needs
- defining career pathways
- competency models, or defining 'success'
- improvement frameworks and change models
- evaluation / ROI / impact studies
- tendering processes
- coach selection criteria and processes
- coaching objectives (if a sponsor asks for a 'goal' what impact does that have on the coachee's sense of purpose for coaching, their sense of what it should do for them and how they should be within it?)
- coach / coachee matching and brokering negotiations about coaching between coachee and line managers.

Appendix D.   Organising and aligning purpose, process and practice

I used this framework to evaluate the data from each organisation. I have since developed this with the Swiss MSc in Coaching and Mentoring Group run by Sheffield Hallam University to include actual coaching practice. They found filling the chart in a powerful way of looking at alignment of process and practice.

Corporate context and culture	Coaching purposes identified at organisational level	Coaching purposes identified at individual level	Coaching processes in use	Language of uncertainty in use	What this means for coach requirements

Corporate context: external environment and challenges. Corporate strategy, values and culture	Coaching purposes identified at individual and organisational level	Coaching processes in use	Coaching practice (what the coaches actually do)