The coaching confessional

Opinion piece

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This opinion piece reveals an important but hidden side of coaching, and offers a brief explanation as to how the coaching confessional works. It also prepares coaches to deal with unexpected content that can surprise them in coaching sessions.

From coaching tools to the coaching confessional

Coaching has been a phenomenal success, growing immensely in popularity in the past decade. However, the reasons for this success have not been fully explained in the literature, and I decided to try to uncover the hidden ingredients that make coaching so desirable. I undertook three years' research for my book Coaching and mentoring: a critical text (Western, 2012), and drew on my own experience as a coach and supervisor to ask what was really happening in the coaching room that was so seductive to clients. I discovered multiple causes, but one that stood out and which I will now address was a largely ignored and unknown force that I called 'the coaching confessional' (Western, 2012, p:147).

The language of executive coaching focuses on performance, results, setting goals and targets, and it uses machine metaphors such as applying 'coaching tools' to fix problems. This language fits with business school theory and managerial practice. However, there is a dissonance between, on the one hand, the stated aims of coaching and what is reported to managers after coaching sessions, and, on the other, what actually occurs in the coaching session. What often takes place in the coaching room is a much more nuanced and subtler human exchange than the direct behavioural focus on improving performance. As coaches become more skilled and experienced, this less direct approach seems to grow in importance. I find in my own coaching work (which is supported by other coaches) that there is an almost magical quality that develops in coaching sessions that seems to invite the client to confess. These confessions are not of huge sins, but are confessions from the 'wounded self', that is, hidden anxieties, fears, personal problems, feelings of inadequacy at work or general unhappiness, or they can be confessions from the 'celebrated self', revealing hidden desires, achievements, abilities and aspirations

In my previous roles as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, there was a greater expectation for clients to 'confess' their inner worlds, as this is part of the therapeutic contract. However, these confessions were guided towards the wounded self, which is the realm of the counsellor and therapist. What has surprised me as a coach is that even when the contract is to improve performance at work, there are nearly always times when the client uses the session as a confessional space. This response often surprises the client too. A client is not only the speaker in coaching sessions, but also a listener to their own voice speaking. One client described it as if another voice within them was speaking through them. The confessional part of coaching is a dynamic and powerful hidden force that helps to explain why coaching is so popular. Western culture has inherited and developed a fundamental need for a confessional space that, today, seems more powerful than ever.

Coaching offers a new bridge between the 'wounded self' of the therapeutic world, and the 'celebrated self' of positive psychology, and the human potential movement (see Western, 2012, Introduction)
Coaching: the postmodern confessional

*Western man has become a confessing animal.*

Foucault, 1978, p.59

As Foucault says, we have become a confessional society. He goes on to say that the confessional is a vital place where we produce our ‘truths’. The confessional is everywhere: famous people confessing on TV, autobiographies, newspapers and magazine headlines revealing people’s confessions and secrets. Oprah Winfrey is the queen of the coaching confessional:

*Oprah Winfrey, Jerry Springer… and all their imitators were evangelists of the talking cure who believed that secrets are a slow-working poison to the soul, and that confessing them in a public forum has a healing effect… Whatever their motives for appearing they acquiesced to the idea that disclosing to a national audience their misdeeds and emotional afflictions would cleanse their soul.*

Cobb, 2005, p.255

If the talk show is the public face of the confessional, then coaching is the new private space that has usurped the priest and therapist, providing a more dynamic contemporary confessional space.

The confessional is in our DNA; it is inherited and has developed through three main stages:

- the premodern confessional (the priest)
- the modern confessional (the psychotherapist)
- the postmodern confessional (the coach)

Each of these confessionals offers the client some form of reparation in different ways. The premodern, religious confessional offers redemption from an external power, utilising God as a ‘big other’ through his instrument: the priest. The modern secular confessional offers reparation by creating a therapeutic space for a less judgemental confessional, whereby the client confesses the sins of the times, that is, their weaknesses, pathology, neuroses, inner secrets and anxieties, while reparation (making good) replaces religious redemption. The client talking about repressed thoughts is curative (talking is good for you), and the expert therapist offers insights, guiding the client to make life changes. The postmodern coaching confessional offers a more democratic, mutual, playful and creative setting. The coach does not have the same social kudos and power as the priest or therapist and, therefore, the confessional becomes less judgemental and less focused on weakness and pathology, opening a new confessional space that enables clients to confess desires as well as ‘sins’ and anxieties. The coaching confessional enables the client to use the session to be transformative in three ways:
• **Insight**: Speaking and listening to our inner repressed voices offers both new self-awareness and release.

• **Acceptance**: Simply being accepted as who you are, with empathy and without negative judgment, seems to have a powerful soul-healing impact that triggers self-forgiveness and transformation. It seems that the acceptance is a more powerful healer when coming from an expert in a socially sanctioned role, that is, a coach rather than a friend.

• **Desire**: This new coaching confessional differs from previous confessionals as it focuses on desire as well as confessing unhappiness (sins) or our pathologies. One stuck client confessed to me: “I really am not motivated about teaching maths; my real passion is music, but I haven’t told anyone in this school”. This confession led the coaching to help the client develop an after-school choir that became very popular, having a big impact in the school, and it gave the teacher new confidence and motivation, and he became deputy headteacher within four years.

Confessing this desire is often the starting point for real change to take place.

**Summary**

Coaching offers a new, postmodern confessional space that enables clients to self-disclose hidden anxieties and desires, and to reflect on their emotional experience. The coaching confessional creates a safe psychological and sense-making space that we ‘moderns’ seek and need in order to process our emotionally complex worlds, and to live fully engaged lives (Western, 2012).
Coaching confessional: case study

I was coaching an educational CEO of a national body, who managed a team of 150 people. We were working on the strategy of the institute and how she could improve her personal role and performance. The aim was to create an eco-leadership approach (Western, 2008), distributing leadership and working more systemically.

During the work, the coaching confessional surfaced unexpectedly for the client. As coach, I sensed she was in trouble, I interrupted our pragmatic work on strategic planning and created a space for reflection and asked her what was really going on. After a long silence, she revealed that a culture of bullying existed in her organisation, and she then confessed that she had her own part in this. She became upset and we worked with this over the next few sessions. She had a bullying father, and detested bullying, yet, when under big pressure, she found herself becoming a bully herself to others, mirroring her father’s behaviour, being too aggressive and creating an atmosphere of fear. This contradicted her usual state where she was admired and was a truly motivational leader.

We were able to address this by providing a containing space to think about the triggers that led to her bullying behaviour, and how she could remove herself from certain situations and react differently in others. What surprised everyone was that at the annual conference, attended by all staff, she confessed publically, telling all that she had been bullying, that she was ashamed and sorry, and that together they had to stop this culture. It was a hugely moving and courageous moment, and one that enabled others to address the underlying reasons for their bullying. It was the beginning of a culture change that reduced bullying by each and every one present becoming aware and taking leadership in their own areas.

The eco-leadership approach we were trying to achieve came about through this indirect coaching intervention that led to the bullying disclosure and subsequent events. This would never have happened if the coaching confessional had not been facilitated and I had, instead, ploughed on trying to finish our goal-focused strategic planning work.
Challenges of the coaching confessional

Below, I outline four common challenges and suggested solutions when working in the coaching confessional:

**Challenge 1**
The client becomes surprised by their own confession and feels overwhelmed.

**Solution**
The coach contains the client, speaking calmly and making them feel safe. He or she then asks the client to think about their work role and how what has been said in this coaching session connects to the workplace. As work is the anchor point of coaching, making the connection back to work is a containing intervention for the client, making them feel safe again.

**Challenge 2**
The coach feels out of their depth, not sure how to deal with the confessional material, for example, if it’s heavy with emotions or feels too revealing.

**Solution**
The coach takes a deep breath and refocuses the session without jumping to solutions or trying to fix the client. They ask the client how this material they are discussing is impacting on their work life. Again, this refers the client back to the anchor points (work task and role) of the coaching session.

**Challenge 3**
The confession reveals that the client is unhappy in their role; they are clearly not focused or engaged.

**Solution**
The coach explores this dissonance and conflict, and calmly helps the client to find their own solution. It is better for the organisation and the employee that this dissonance between how they feel and their role at work is resolved. If it is left unspoken, it will manifest itself in practice through employee resistance, conflict or withdrawal and disengagement.
Challenge 4

The coach is internal and knows the client well in another role at work. The confessional material that is spoken may feel embarrassing and both parties are discomforted by an unexpected disclosure.

Solution

The coach reaffirms the confidentiality of the session and explains to the client that this information will not be shared. They then calmly take the themes from the conversation and return to the anchor point of coaching – work, task and role – guiding the client to reflect on how the session informs their working role. If the coach can take broad themes rather than focus specifically on what was said, this broadens the work and takes it away from the individual's confession. For example, if a client confesses that their partner has left them and begins to become tearful, the coach can calmly support them, then guide the client to think about how they are coping at work when obviously under pressure, focusing on how they might make things easier for themselves at this time.

Key points

- Coaching offers a conversational and confessional space, enabling clients to self-disclose, which opens up a safe, psychological, reassuring and sense-making space, which can be transformative.
- The coaching confessional is evoked in all coaching relationships, but more so where the coach is receptive to depth work with clients.
- Creating a safe and non-judgemental space for the confession to emerge is important. Coaches too often fill this space with their own anxious ‘grab-for-tools’ and an ‘I-must-fix-it’ mentality. Fixing a client is not the role of the coach.
- In the postmodern coaching confessional, unlike past confessionals, hidden desires and aspirations are evoked as well as hidden fears and worries.
- The coaching confessional is a playful and creative space, rather than the condemning or pathologising space of past confessionals.
- The key to using the confessional material is to allow it to emerge in its own time, to welcome it and then to coach the client to understand the meaning of what they are revealing. The second stage is to facilitate the client by connecting the confessional material to their working role and wider life, if appropriate.
Questions for coaches

- Have you experienced the coaching confessional in your work as a coach or mentor, or when being coached and mentored? If so, how did you deal with the experience and what did it teach you?
- What are the benefits of creating a space for the coaching confessional to emerge, and what are the risks?
- We live in a confessional society. Can you identify where you or your friends or colleagues disclose your inner desires and fears? Does this work for you, or would a coach be helpful to you?

References

Western, S, 2008, Leadership: a critical text, Sage Publications
Western, S, 2012, Coaching and mentoring: a critical text, Sage Publications