

Critical Incidents in Cross-cultural Coaching: The View from German Coaches

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Abstract

The importance of a cultural perspective in coaching is increasingly significant for coaching practitioners and academics living in a globalised world. The question remains as to how the coaching methods rooted in the Western approach can be applied in the context of other (national) cultures. Using semi-structured interviews and based on the critical incidents technique, fifteen German coaching experts were interviewed to determine those critical incidents they experienced in cross-cultural coaching settings. The results show incidents in four main areas: communication, coach-client relationship, coaching setting and role understanding. These are aimed at improving outcomes but not at the expense of identifying the true core issue or coaching topic.

Keywords: Coaching, Cross-cultural, Intercultural, Culture-specific, Critical Incidents

Introduction

The International Coach Federation (2013) defines coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential”. The occurrence of such coaching worldwide is becoming more prevalent (Stout-Rostron, 2009) and after being overlooked for many years the inclusion of a cultural perspective into coaching has gained momentum (Rosinski, 2003; Rosinski, 2010; StClaire-Ostwald, 2007). Coaches are becoming more likely to be working with coachees from different cultures (Rojon & McDowall, 2010) and the benefits of incorporating an intercultural perspective into coaching is increasingly acknowledged (Gilbert & Rosinski, 2008).

Several descriptors have been used when referring to coaching and culture. Rosinski and Abbot (2006a; 2006b) refer to “coaching from a cultural perspective” and “intercultural coaching”, Rosinski

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further discusses “coaching across cultures” (2003) which is similar to Rojon & McDowall (2010) who refer to “cross-cultural coaching”. At this point it will be useful to distinguish between an intercultural component of coaching in regard to the coaching topic and intercultural component in regard to the players within the coaching process (Barmeyer, 2002). For example an American Manager may receive coaching in order to be better prepared for a new assignment in Japan. Coaching can thus be used to assist coachees to develop intercultural skills and capabilities (Jenkins, 2006) and the coach is required to locate appropriate tools and methods for the likely intercultural themes to arise.

In this paper we will use the term ‘cross-cultural coaching’, which we relate to the coaching process where a coach and a coachee originate from different national backgrounds where for example an Australian coach is hired to help a Chinese coachee. Akin with Barmeyer’s (2002) definition of ‘culture-specific intercultural coaching’, the coach therefore needs to have specific knowledge about certain cultures. The coach needs to reflect how the coaching concept itself and chosen tools and are aligned with the cultural background of the coachee.

Coaching originated in the US (Rosinski, 2010) and also, given that coaching tools and models are often based on a ‘Western cultural’ approach they might not fit with values and practices of other cultures (Handin & Steinwedel, 2006; Verhulst & Sprengel, 2009). Given the trend towards cross-cultural coaching, in addition to the fact that there is no common view on how this should proceed, a decision was made in this study to examine what types of issues and challenges arose when German coaches worked with coachees from different cultural backgrounds.

Models and Frameworks of Culture

Numerous definitions of culture exist and several cultural frameworks can be identified which map out different dimensions of culture (see Table 1 for examples). Rosinski (2003, p. 49) who created a cultural framework relating to the coaching context defines a cultural orientation as an “inclination to think, feel or act in a way that is culturally determined.” Culture is not limited to national culture; it can also be extended to other groups such as organisational cultures (Rosinski, 2003). Hofstede et al. (2010) argue that within research on cultural differences ‘nationality’ should be further articulated for example in regard to ethnicity or region. While sub-cultures are important in this context, national ‘borders’ often enable the operationalisation of research. For the purposes of this study, the distinction is made between national cultures instead of using smaller groupings.

One prominent cultural framework is based on Hofstede’s research with employees from IBM in several countries and we chose this framework to exemplify different cultural dimensions. Hofstede developed five dimensions of cultural significance.

1. Power distance: “the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede et al. 2010, p. 61)
2. Individualism vs. collectivism: individualistic or group-orientation of cultures (Hofstede et al. 2010, p. 92)
3. Masculine vs. Feminine: differentiation between ‘emotional gender roles’ in culture (Hofstede et al. 2010, p. 140)
4. Uncertainty avoidance: “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations. (Hofstede et al. 2010, p. 191)

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5. Long-term vs. short-term orientation: “fostering of virtues oriented toward future rewards” (long-term orientation), “virtues related to the past and present” (short-term orientation) (Hofstede et al. 2010, p. 239)

Hofstede’s et al. (2010) dimensions are related to countries and it must be noted that an individual can have different inclinations towards the dimension from the average country culture score. Linking these dimensions to the concept of coaching Tulpa & Bresser (2009) describe the coaching ‘ideal’ as lower scores with regard to power distance and uncertainty avoidance, medium scores for the other three dimensions.

Table 1: Cultural frameworks & Dimensions

Authors	Dimensions
Hofstede (1980)	Hofstede names four and later five dimensions - Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculinity vs. Femininity and Short-term vs. Long term Orientation.
House et al. (2004)	Nine cultural dimensions are defined: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Humane Orientation, Collectivism I and Collectivism II, Assertiveness, Gender Egalitarianism, Future Orientation and Performance Orientation.
Rosinski (2003)	Seven categories are described: sense of power and responsibility, time management approaches, identity and purpose, organisational arrangements, territory, communication patterns and modes of thinking.
Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (1997)	Seven dimensions are named: Universalism vs. Particularism, Neutral vs. Emotional, Specific vs. Diffuse, Achievement vs. Ascription, Sequential vs. Diffuse, Internal vs. External control.

For coaches working in international settings, knowledge about typical cultural patterns is of importance in order to be able to understand their client’s behaviour, norms, values and beliefs. The goal of this study was to identify cultural factors which influence the effectiveness of coaching from the perspective of German coaches working with coachees with a different cultural background.

Methodology

Our research questions were:

- 1) What critical incidents were experienced by German coaches during cross-cultural coaching?
- 2) What cultural aspects might have an impact upon the effectiveness of coaching?
- 3)

The research was undertaken using an explorative approach. We chose guideline-supported expert-interviews conducted according to the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954). A critical incident is described by Flanagan (1954, p. 327) as:

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... any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation, where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects.

By applying Flanagan's (1954) critical incidents technique we were interested in critical cross-cultural coaching incidents experienced by German coaches. The coaches were asked to describe critical incidents in cross-cultural coaching with a focus on cultural and behavioural differences between coachee and themselves, as well as possible adaptations of the coaches' behaviours and consequences for the coaching sessions. A guideline with the required information (coach-client-relationship, coach, coachee, methods, coaching-setting, coaching in society and surroundings) was given to the interview partners.

Coaches were chosen based upon aspects noted as important in regard to experts, such as expertise within the industry, specialised training and knowledge (Hitzler, 1994; Meuser & Nagel, 2009). Coaches listed in the database of the German Federation for Coaching (DBVC e.V.) with a recognised coaching qualification were invited to take part in the study on the basis that they had experience coaching in German and a foreign language, authored relevant books and articles as well as by being recommended by previous participants. For our study, 15 German business coaches working with clients from cultural backgrounds different to their own were recruited (14 interviewed coaches were German; one was born in overseas, but lived in Germany for 51 years).

Five women and ten men were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The participants had been working as coaches for 2 to 27 years; they were between 43 and 63 years old and delivered on average between 0.42 and 50 coaching-sessions per month, depending on whether they were working full-time or part-time as a coach. Eleven participants had between 10 and 90 percent of their coachees come from cultures different to their own; four participants reported one to three individual cases. In regards to the critical incidents the following cultures were named: Angola, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Finland, Great Britain, India, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Morocco, Netherlands, Pakistan, Republic of South Korea, Russia, Singapore, Switzerland, Turkey, United States of America.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. A table was used to structure the content of the interview with regard to the expert, the coachee, the described coaching situation and the critical incident. The expert was permitted to describe several critical incidents that happened with one client. A situation is coded as a (new) critical incident when the coach sees himself confronted with a (new) problem. This is mainly the case if the coach draws a (new) conclusion about the coachee or if he/she recognises a difference between his/her culture and the culture of the coachee. In some cases the experts reported several situations with one client which were coded as separate incidents.

The transcripts were analysed according to Mayring's (2004; 2010) method of inductive categorisation as described by Sedlmeier and Renkewitz (2008): first, each critical incident was given an appropriate keyword. The keywords were checked in regard to ambiguity, non-overlap and suitability. A keyword was suitable as a criterion if a critical incident could only be assigned to one specific criterion. Keywords that overlapped were summarised under an existing or a new criterion. The categories and criteria were checked by three people.

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Results

Based on the analysis of the interviews the following main categories of cross-cultural coaching incidents were established: communication, coach-client relationship, coaching setting and role understanding. Table 2 below shows an overview of the categories and sub-categories.

Table 2: Categories and sub-categories of cross-cultural coaching incidents

Category	Sub-categories & Explanations
1) Communication	<p>a) Loss of face: Some coaches report that the addressing of mistakes, problems or emotions is challenging or not do-able. Some coaches report that coachees retract to their hierarchical position in order to not talk about problems, mistakes or emotions</p> <p>b) Uncommunicative: Some coaches report coachees being uncommunicative</p> <p>c) Positive focus: Some coaches report that coachees only talk about positive aspects</p> <p>d) Feedback challenges: Some coaches report that coachees reject critical feedback whether public or private</p> <p>e) Different body language: One coach reports that he has difficulty interpreting the body language of the client</p>
2) Coach –client Relationship	<p>a) Expecting friendship: Some coaches report transference: they have the impression that the coachee is expecting friendship</p> <p>b) Idealisation: Some coaches report idealisation of the coach</p> <p>c) Informal addressing: Some coaches report over-familiarity in regards to coachees addressing them informally by using first names</p> <p>d) Reservations: Some coaches report reservations by the coachee with regard to the coach’s gender or culture. One coach is not sure how to address the religious difference between himself and the coachee</p> <p>e) Establishing trust: Some coaches report difficulties in the introduction phase and when establishing trust/the coach-coachee relationship.</p>
3) Coaching Setting	<p>a) Coaching with company: One coach reports that the coachee is accompanied with his own entourage</p> <p>b) Clothes and location: Some coaches report having difficulties with the clothes of the coachee (i.e., too revealing) or the location of the coaching.</p>
4) Role Understanding	<p>a) Role expectations: Some coaches report that coachees are expecting different roles from the coach such as acting as consultant or mediator</p> <p>b) Hierarchy: Some coaches report the coachee’s organisational hierarchy as influencing context-factor (coachee has his superior’s agenda in mind)</p>

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Table 3 shows the frequency distribution of the cross-cultural incidents.

Table 3: Frequency Distribution of cross-cultural coaching incidents

	Total	Communication	Coach-Client Relationship	Coaching Setting	Role Understanding
Total	62	24	25	3	10
Europe	22	8	9	1	4
Asian	24	11	9	2	2
Arab Countries	4	/	3	/	1
Africa	4	3	/	/	1
USA	8	2	4	/	2

In the following the categories will be discussed and example incidents from the German coaches will be presented.

1) Communication

The category ‘communication’ can be divided into the following sub-categories: loss of face, uncommunicative, positive focus, feedback challenges and different body language.

Several incidents were reported by the coaching experts in the area of *loss of face* which refers to addressing mistakes, problems or emotions exhibited by the coachee. Some coaches interviewed point out incidents where coachees say that coaches cannot talk to them directly about their mistakes or problems. In the absence of such a clear statement, silence or change of topic was a common reaction of the coachees. These aspects can influence the coaching process and relationship in several ways, e.g. a rapport-break between coach and coachee may happen. For example:

Critical incident 1: The coach is talking via ‘phone, to a client from Japan. The coach says “I don’t understand the approach of not addressing problems in Japan. How does that work?” The coach repeats the same question several times but the manager from Japan always answers in the same way: “There seems to be a connectivity problem with the telephone line” Only after the coach changes the topic does the coachee answer a question.

Critical Incident 2: A client from Egypt says at the beginning of the coaching session “I cannot talk about my family; I cannot talk about mistakes.”

Critical incident 3: A client from Morocco cannot come up with a topic for the coaching session. However, it seems that there are topics which make him very upset, some even bring tears to his

eyes. The coach realises that the coachee does not want to be seen in a bad light. The coachee becomes unresponsive if work-related topics are brought up.

Some coaches report that coachees retract to their hierarchical position in order to not talk about certain topics that involve a reflection upon their own behaviour.

Critical incident 4: The coach is working with an executive from Japan who has issues with his European team. The goal of the coaching sessions is to discuss differences between European and Japanese management styles. The coach asks questions such as “What do you think your team member xy thinks of you? What do you think is important for your team member xy?” The executive answers “I don’t care, I am the manager and I want him to do what I say.”

Some coaches noticed that their clients appeared *uncommunicative*. Such cases were mentioned with coachees from Finland, India and Switzerland. Sometimes it could be related to the topic (e.g. discussion of 360 degree feedback); meaning negative emotions could be involved. At other times it seems to be a personal issue, e.g. a client who gets coached due to his nervousness in conversation situations.

Critical incident 48: The coach wants to work on a deeper level with a client from India and asks personal questions about the client’s past. The client becomes shy and reserved.

Some coaches report that coachees only talk about *positive aspects*. In this context a coach questions, for example, if only positive comments are a realistic picture of the situation.

Critical incident 8: A client from Great Britain only reports positive aspects. For the coach the report sounds too positive and he wonders how he can bring critical aspects to the surface.

Several incidents were noted by German coaches in regards to *feedback*, especially challenges and issues when giving feedback in front of others and feedback that could be perceived as a critique.

Critical incident 12: International participants are working within a group coaching context on several topics such as communication style, self-development and reflection. When the participants start to receive feedback from the group with regard to their communication, their behaviour, and the impression they made, a manager from Singapore interferes by stating that “critical feedback of my personal behaviour is an absolute ‘no-go’ and I refuse it. Numbers and target agreements are what counts.”

Critical incident 14: Feedback in a Chinese team. The team members are asked to give each other feedback. The participants don’t want to engage in this activity and ask the coach to give the feedback instead.

One coach also describes that he has difficulties *interpreting the body language* of the client.

Critical incident 67: It is the opinion of the coach that the body language of the coachee does not match the content. The coach feels that if he knew more about the client’s culture and social norms he might be able to interpret his body language better.

2) *Coach-client-relationship*

This category could be divided into five subcategories: Expecting friendship, idealisation, informal addressing, reservations, establishing trust.

Some clients express, directly, that they want to be *friends with the coach*. Others make personal invitations for dinner. Some coaches state in the interview that the expected friendship can make it challenging for them to set up a professional coaching process. However, we also need to keep in mind that the word 'friend' may have different connotations and/or meaning in different cultures.

Critical incident 23: A female client from China says to the coach "I want you to be my friend."

Critical incident 28: A client from India explains that for him coaching is a form of friendship. He wants the coach to become his friend so that they may learn about each other's culture (e.g. by visiting slums in India).

Critical incident 24: A client from Turkey issues a personal invitation at his house to the coach.

Coaches report incidents where *idealisation* plays a role; the coachee puts the coach on a pedestal. For example, the coachee's admiration for the coach can create issues when trying to work on the same level.

Critical incident 33: The coach has the impression that a female client from India admires her as teacher and role model. Communication on the same level seems challenging.

Informal addressing by using his/her first name is noted by some interview partners.

Critical incident 25: A client from Turkey uses the coach's first name instead of formally addressing the coach with his last name.

Critical incident 44: A coachee from the Netherlands offers his first name instead of his more formal last name.

Some coaches noted *reservations* exhibited by the coachee by virtue of the coach's cultural background and gender. For example, one male coachee disliked the fact that he was coached by a woman. Other coachees wanted a coach with a similar cultural background to their own. In another instance the coach himself was not sure how to address the religious differences between himself and the coachee.

Critical incident 63: In a meeting with a female coach a male client from Pakistan stated that he finds it unacceptable to be dominated by someone, especially a woman.

Critical incident 31: A potential client from Turkey refuses to be coached by a female coach.

Several coaches mention difficulties in the introduction phase and when establishing the coach-coachee relationship. In this context, coaches describe that it can be challenging and difficult to *build trust* with coachees from another cultural background. Other coaches emphasise the importance of first establishing the relationship before being able to subsequently cover challenging topics. With some coachees, the trust building goes too fast for the coach, in other cases it seems to be more difficult for the

coach to achieve this. In some cases, coaches mentioned that they had the impression coachees were keeping their distance.

Critical incident 49: The coachee is from Japan and the coach is aware that he cannot address some topics directly. Two meetings have already taken place; the coach thinks he can now start the process. He wonders how he should proceed.

Critical incident 37: In his first coaching session with a client from the USA the coach wants to build the relationship. The client wants to start straight away, leads the conversation, says what he wants, what he expects and with what outcomes he wants to achieve in the coaching session.

3) Coaching Setting

This category refers to challenges in the context of the coaching settings with the sub-categories coaching in company as well as clothes and location. For example, one coachee comes to his coaching session with *several other people* although the topic is his individual preparation for a management role overseas. Furthermore, coaches reported *the location of the coaching sessions and the clothes of the coachee* as possible issues for themselves.

Critical incident 38: A coach is meeting with an executive in Japan. The coach enters the room and sees three people waiting for him. The coach is not sure which one is his client.

Critical incident 66: A male coach meets with a female client. He feels that the coachee wears clothing that is too revealing which makes it hard for him to concentrate on the process.

4) Role Understanding

This category can be divided into the two sub-categories role expectations and hierarchy as context factor. Several critical incidents were reported where clients *expected a consulting role* from the coach. This expectation of concrete advice was expressed by clients from several cultural settings, namely Switzerland, USA and Angola. One coach reports that, compared to his German clients, he was asked for more direct suggestions by clients from these cultures.

Critical incident 52 and 53: A client from Switzerland wants the solution to a problem from the coach. The coachee wants concrete advice from the coach.

Furthermore, in one case a coachee from China expected the coach to be a messenger for him and suggests one of his ideas to his manager, probably to avoid a potential loss of face.

In two cases the interviewed experts mention *hierarchy* as influencing context-factor, meaning the coachees have their superiors' agenda in mind and the coachees' comments are shaped as to what would be best for their manager.

Critical incident 61: A client from India is working in a coaching session on his leadership skills. When the coach and the client discuss the goals for the sessions the client asks: Will this help my superior?

Critical incident 62: A client with an Arabic cultural background is asked to reflect about possible ideas for changes in his organisation. The client always answers from the perspective of his superior “My superior wants x and y to be changed.”

Discussion

For effective coaching to occur across cultures, coaches need to be equipped with appropriate intercultural mind-sets, knowledge and skills (Abbott, 2010; Franke & Milner, 2013; Handin & Steinwedel, 2006). Furthermore, coaches need to be aware of how their own culture has influenced them and therefore can influence their interaction with the coachee (Handin & Steinwedel, 2006; Peterson, 2007; Rosinski, 2010).

In regard to our study, the influence of the German culture on our coaches and their coaching approach needs to be taken into consideration. According to Hofstede et al. (2010) German culture tends to have a lower power distance, is more individualistic, masculine, avoids uncertainty and is short-term oriented. Coaching has been described in the German context as supporting the client’s independence, assisting them to find their own solutions and the coaching process being limited in time (Böning & Fritschle 2005; Rauen 2013). The Global Coaching Survey report shows that in Germany a mixture of directive and non-directive coaching styles are applied (Bresser, 2013). It has to be emphasised however that German coaches may have individual coaching styles and might differ in their understanding of the coach’s role.

When working on intercultural aspects of the interaction, coaches also have to ensure they do not carry an oversimplified picture of a culture but see their clients as individuals (Peterson 2007). The critical incidents in this study might have also been influenced by other variables such as the personality of the coachee, (e.g. someone being more silent or shy) or the culture of the organisation for which the coachee works. Also some of the clients who work in international organisations are part of an international community. These coachees might have already adapted to norms and rules of that community and are less referable to their own cultural background.

Taking these considerations into account, our findings shed further light on the complexity of cross-cultural coaching situations. The incidents found in our study can be related to dimensions of culture as identified by authors such as Hofstede et al. (2010), Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (1997) or Rosinski (2003). Using just one of the aforementioned examples, Hofstede et al. (2010) dimensions of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculine versus feminine and long-term versus short-term orientation, may play a role when looking at some of our categories. For example, understanding the cultural issues of expected power distance reflected by our aspect of coach-client-relationship and role understanding, a coach may implement a more directive or a more non-directive coaching style. Anagos (2009) questions in this context whether a move to mentoring may be more suitable in particular in regard to more collectivistic orientated cultures, whereas Webb (2010) highlights that as a coach the principles of coaching in regard to letting clients create their own solutions. The coach might also adapt the coaching approach in regard to how much time is invested into building rapport and trust with the client. With regard to communication especially loss of face, uncommunicative, positive focus and feedback challenges it might be helpful to consider aspects such as: Is the client used to directly addressing problems? Is it appropriate to talk about mistakes? Furthermore the dimension of individualism versus collectivism may be relevant within the coaching context - who is in the center of

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the client's thinking and actions – a collective group or rather the individual? It has to be noted however, that key incidents, such as 'role understanding', may also relate to general coaching and are not exclusive to cross-cultural coaching, for example how much advice a coach should provide. Although identified by the experts as related to culture, different role understandings could also very likely occur in intra-cultural coaching situations.

The incidents discussed represent individual experiences from the perspective of selected German coaches. Experts from other cultural backgrounds might have experienced the situations differently. For example, a few coaches described as a critical incident, non-formal addressing. Addressing one formally with the last name would be a normal business procedure in Germany whereas in other countries it would be usual to use the first name, even when meeting for the first time. A further limitation of this study is that the critical incidents reflect the subjective view of that particular coach with regards to that particular incident. The coachees, in contrast, might have experienced or interpreted the situation differently. Future research might therefore also include the coachee perspective, study coaches from a variety of cultural backgrounds or conduct the study on a larger scale. Whilst observation of coaching sessions by an independent observer might offer novel perspectives on a given problem, due to the highly confidential nature of many coaching situations, this might not be possible.

Apart from the relatively small sample size of the current investigation, other limitations restricting the generalisability of our findings, were that the participating coaches were of different ages and had different professional experiences and varied with regards their training and professional development.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our findings from the interviews raise important questions regarding adaptations of coaching methods and tools for cross-cultural coaching, in particular, how to deliver critical feedback (i.e., loss of face), how to establish and maintain a professional client-coach relationship and dealing with unseen influences (i.e., a superior's agenda). For example, if a coaching tool implies too much critical feedback then the coach might need to adjust when working in different cultural contexts.

Cross-culture coaching incidents are complex and several factors might play a role. In our view, Rosinski (2010, p. 123) was correct when he pointed out that "we still have a long way to go before culture is systematically integrated into coaching". More work is required in this area if we are to produce cross-border coaches. However, at the same time, we should not over-emphasise cross-cultural issues at the expense of recognising the real underlying problem in a coaching situation (Abbott, 2010). At the end of the day, coaches must ask themselves: *What is really going on here?*

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