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An investigation of the three-way joint coaching alliance:

A social identity theory perspective

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Abstract

This study builds upon the previous research that recognised coaching as a triangular political space generating power relationships. We integrate social identity theory into this power negotiation process and consider that the ultimate purpose of coaching is to facilitate a shared coaching identity among all related collaborators. To gain in-depth understanding of factors that promote a three-way joint coaching identity; we conducted 25 critical incident interviews and two levels of Q-sorting (n = 10) with coaches, coachees and organisational stakeholders. The research results indicated that a workplace coaching identity is a flexible space underpinned by coaches' attitude, all collaborators' positions and the contracting process. Coaches' accommodated communication techniques determine the relationship climate (instrumental or influential). Coaches' position in the coaching space regulates their self-interests and motivation to change. Moreover, a transparent contracting process encourages communication flows and psychological exchanges among all collaborators that may gain more support from stakeholders.

The coaching relationship is traditionally described as a directionally influential helping dynamic that is established between two psychological entities: coach and coachee (Kemp, 2008, p. 32). Some studies have interpreted the coaching relationship as a safe and supportive environment where fears and anxieties could be discussed (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007). A recent systematic review of coaching (Bozer & Jones, 2018) outlined several effective factors (e.g. coaching motivation and trust) to facilitate better outcomes; nevertheless, the quality of the professional helping relationship was scientifically examined as being an essential antecedent for successful coaching results (Graßmann, Schölmerich & Schermuly, 2019). Given that organisational objectives are commonly embedded either explicitly or implicitly in workplace coaching engagements, more recent studies have indicated that social context, such as, cultural diversity and power dynamics in the coaching process to date has been overlooked (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Bozer & Jones, 2018; Grover & Furnham, 2016; Shoukry & Cox, 2018). Although social psychological theories in relation to interpersonal dominance and affiliation have been researched in some coaching relationship studies (Ianiro, Schermuly, & Kauffeld, 2013), the research participants were confined to the coach and coachee. Our study takes a distinctive view by expanding existing workplace coaching literature from a dyadic focused working alliance into a group-based affiliation through incorporating social identity theory (hereafter SIT) which group membership is highlighted (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) and responds to the call for more socially contextualised coaching research (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018).

Our research builds on studies of the triangular coaching relationship (coach – coachee – organisation) defined as a political space (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014, 2018). The coach's experience with power, such as negotiating with diverging agendas in the coachee's organisation, determines whether it is empowering or limiting for the coachee's self-reflection and sense making in the coaching process (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2018).

Given that an empowering coaching space was promoted, i.e. the coach serves as an integrator, moderator and revealer to seek an integrative view between the coachee and organisation (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2018), we recognise SIT which studies individuals' psychological process in a social-contextual dimension in order to reach a joint agreement among varied parties (Haslam, 2007), can be used to explain triangular negotiations in the coaching process. In fact, one of the coaching purposes is to facilitate coachees to achieve their ultimate identities or goals (Stelter, 2009). Therefore, workplace coaching relationships can be interpreted as group-based identity negotiations with the ultimate purpose to reach identity alignment among all related collaborators. This aligned identity can be defined as a coaching identity that encompasses a joint interest and goal among all collaborators in the coaching process. This study aims to answer two research questions addressed here: (1) what are the essential factors to promote a joint coaching identity? (2) what do the roles the coach, coachee and organisational stakeholders play to facilitate an empowering coaching alliance?

This paper begins with a critical literature review which articulates the theoretical interactions between social relations in the workplace coaching relationship through a social identity approach. Further, a summary of our research methods is presented including the critical incident interview process as well as data consolidation through two levels of Q-sorting sessions. Finally, a discussion on the potential impact of social identity theory in workplace coaching is offered based upon interpersonal interactions, coachee self-motivation and psychological exchange in three-way coaching collaborations.

Literature review

Our literature review commences with a brief discussion on the role a professional helping relationship plays in the coaching process. We summarise and analyse contemporary

research evidence between the therapeutic working alliance and dyadic coaching relationships. Next, we draw on social psychological perspectives into a workplace coaching setting and discuss theoretical interactions between coaching relationships involved multiple stakeholders (i.e. coach – coachee – organisation) and SIT. Finally, we explain our research rationales by integrating power dynamics of coaching space and format of the identity shared by all collaborators.

Coaching is perceived as a professional helping relationship

The coaching process is perceived as a professional helping relationship in the literature. Several coaching definitions specify that *"coaching is a helping relationship"* (Kilburg, 1996) and *"coaching as a dyadic, egalitarian relationship"* (Grant & Stober, 2006). In addition, studies have identified further the nature of the coaching process (e.g. dialogue, conversation and facilitation) and revealed that it heavily relies upon people's interpersonal interactions and collaborations in all settings, regardless of any other techniques or frameworks (Palmer & McDowall, 2010). Moreover, a recent meta-analysis on working alliance indicated the quality of professional relationship between the coach - coachee dyad was positively related to desirable coaching outcomes (Graßmann, et al., 2019). Therefore, we consider that the relationship cannot be detached from any coaching engagements. Accordingly, "coaching relationship" will be used in the present paper to refer to what is usually described as a "coaching intervention". This study focuses on formal workplace coaching relationships (both internal and external).

However, in contrast to other professional helping relationships, such as therapy and counselling, workplace coaching usually involves a three-way affiliation among the coach, the coachee and organisational stakeholders (Bachkirova, 2008; Louis & Fatien Diochon,

2014). Furthermore, the contracting process in a workplace coaching setting is more formal and structured in comparison to that of mentoring and the coaching relationship is often a shorter-term engagement, as most organisations expect concrete outcomes within a definite time frame (Eby, Rhode, & Allen, 2007; Joo, 2005).

Essential facilitating factors in a dyadic coaching relationship

Coaching relationships are mainly dependent on advanced interpersonal interactions to facilitate the coaching recipient's learning and changes. Besides, there was a significant correlation between coaching relationships and coachees' affective (e.g. self-efficacy) and cognitive (e.g. self-reflection) outcomes (Graßmann, et al., 2019). Therefore, some relevant psychological disciplines, such as the therapeutic working alliance and interpersonal theories have been introduced to deepen our understanding of the dynamics in a coaching relationship (Baron & Morin, 2012; O'Broin & Palmer, 2010).

Working alliance theory, which refers to the quality and strength of the collaborative relationship between the client and therapist and supplies clearer purposive paths for the collaboration (Hatcher & Gillaspy, 2006) has received attention in the coaching relationship research domain (e.g. Baron & Morin, 2009). Three features of the working alliance - are mutually agreed goals, development tasks and bonds - offering specific aspects that the coach may concentrate on in this collaborative relationship (Bordin, 1994; Hatcher & Gillaspy, 2006). The need for goal setting and action plans distinguishes the coaching relationship from other human social relationships (e.g. friendship). Indeed, the working alliance has been examined as an effective mediator for coaching success, such as coachees' self-efficacy and motivation to change (Graßmann, et al., 2019; Sonesh et al., 2015). To highlight this distinct socially contextualised professional relationship from other helping interventions, the term "coaching alliance" is used hereafter.

Our study primarily focuses on subjective match (i.e. interpersonal interactions) in the coaching alliance instead of objective match (e.g. gender match) because where the coach and coachee physically meet each other and have what is called a "chemistry meeting" is crucial to the success of the coaching alliance (de Haan & Duckworth, 2012). In contrast, several studies have indicated that the coach–coachee's objective match, like gender or personality, had little effect on coaching relationship outcomes (Bozer, Joo, & Santora, 2015; de Haan & Duckworth, 2012; Gray & Goregaokar, 2010). In fact, Baron and Morin (2009) pointed out that the quality of the coaching alliance evolved based on the number of coaching sessions. Hence, "behaviours" and "events" that occurred in the coaching process had influential impacts on the effectiveness of the coaching alliance (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015; Ianiro, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Kauffeld, 2015). Some of the coach's behaviours have been identified to enhance the coaching alliance and coachees' motivation to change, essentially building trust, commitment, rapport and facilitating learning (Baron & Morin, 2009; Boyce, Jackson & Neal, 2010; Gan & Chong, 2015).

The role social psychology plays in a workplace coaching alliance

In spite of the increased research attention to the reciprocal actions between the coach and coachee, the awareness of social context in the workplace coaching relationship, *inter alia* the involvement with other groups in the organisation, has been raised (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014). Ianiro et al. (2015) took a social psychological perspective to study how the coach's interpersonal affiliation and dominance contribute to the coaching alliance. Their study indicated that interpersonal interactions between the coach and coachee were altered by the context, role and relation-specific scenarios. Ianiro et al. (2015) discovered that dominant behaviours from coaches promote positive coaching outcomes; nevertheless, only dominant-friendly interpersonal behaviours by the coach (e.g. using a clear, firm voice but smiling and

keeping eye contact) triggered the coachee's assertive and confident manners, which led to coaching success in their study. Therefore, Ianiro et al. (2015) suggested that social affiliations should be considered when studying workplace coaching relationships.

These sorts of social influences in the coaching interpersonal interaction process can be explained by Louis and Fatien Diochon's triangular coaching relationship framework (2014), in which several types of contracting formats (e.g. commercial, psychological, or learning) are involved that bring out hidden agendas. For example, coaches usually have commercial contracts with organisations that specify resources from stakeholders and outcomes benefits to corporates. However, the learning contract within coaching dyads may outline aspects of contrast with organisational stakeholders' expectations. When one party is absent from any of these negotiation processes, the absent party could imagine a secret agenda is being formed outside of their presence or control (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014). Louis and Fatien Diochon (2014) summarised the main hidden agendas in the workplace coaching relationship. Coachees may use the coaching opportunity for their personal career development, i.e. excluding the organisation (St John-Brooks, 2010), or organisational stakeholders may "mistreat" coaching as an "instrumental tool" or "political action" to deliver difficult messages (i.e. the loudspeaker), to lay off some unwanted coachees (i.e. the poisonous gifts) or to try to standardise coachees' behaviours through external coaches (i.e. the individualisation) (Fatien Diochon, 2012). These emerging hidden agendas usually direct coaching relationships to two contrary routes: conflicts between coachees and their organisations or coachees' apparent compliance. Nevertheless, none of the scenarios above promote coaching success considering that learners' intrinsic motivations emerge from their genuine interests (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Louis and Fatien Diochon's (2018) further study of power dynamics and contradictory agendas indicated that coaching space was defined as politics in the organisation, which was described as a product of power dynamics. Coaches'

experience of coaching space alters the power relationship to a limiting (instrumental) – empowering (influential) continuum (Figure 1). When coaches experienced limiting coaching space, they tend to take the role as "isolator" and use coaching as an instrument for a designated agenda. In contrast, when coaches perceive empowering coaching space, they appear to take the influential approach and become an integrator or moderator, positively influencing the system. In addition, de Haan and Nieß (2015) pointed out that coaches, coachees and organisational stakeholders in the same coaching process experienced significant emotional reactions concurrently because all collaborators shared critical moments jointly. Given that multiple agendas occurred in a triangular coaching space and all collaborators' important emotional responses were synchronised (de Haan & Nieß, 2015; Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014, 2018); we propose that the issues emerging in the coaching process should not be recognised as individual experiences but as social membership (i.e. social identity) matters. Instead of adhering to a therapeutic working alliance framework which primarily addresses the psychological influence between the working dyad (Hatcher & Gillaspy, 2006), it is crucial to apply theories that study psychological analysis of group memberships and social relations, such as SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), in research on workplace coaching relationships. The following section summarises the theoretical foundation of social identity approach and addresses its potential interactions with the triangular coaching relationship.

A conceptual framework of the three-way joint coaching alliance underpinned by SIT.

Social identity is defined as a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership(s) (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), human interactions cover a spectrum from being purely interpersonal on the one hand to essentially intergroup on the other hand. People usually shift interactive positions according to their self-

perceived identity (interpersonal–intergroup). In addition, they tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organisational membership, power relations, religious affiliation, gender, or age cohorts. The theory of social identity was originally developed to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination and explain what makes people believe their group is better than others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When the group distinctions are salient, people perceptually enhance similarities and differences within the group. This psychological identity transformative process explains why people usually favour their perceived own group relative to outgroups. In addition, self-categorisation theory, which recognises people's identity is characterised as different levels of inclusiveness, clarifies why people sometimes have different kinds of perceived identities (i.e. personal, group or subgroup identities) (Turner, 2010). Overall, the basic three levels of self-categorisation that are of value to individuals are human identity (in contrast to other species), social identity (as distinct from other social groups) and personal identity (as a unique individual). The level of social identity is always varying according to the context and perceived relations between each other (Hornsey, 2008). When individuals perceive a stronger shared identity with their groups or organisations, they are more encouraged and motivated to secure a positive group identity by working towards joint goals (Hornsey, 2008); namely, a strong shared identity promotes the group-level motivation, relationship and collaboration.

Identity-related topics have been substantially studied in the therapeutic working alliance (e.g. Ladany, Brittan-Powell, & Pannu, 1997). These studies have indicated that the supervision dyads would have the strongest working alliance when the pairs had a better understanding of each other's cultural identity, leading to share similar views. Thus, the extent of the shared identity interferes with the quality of a professional helping relationship. We expand this aspect of shared cultural identity in the therapeutic working alliance into

workplace coaching settings; consider that SIT, which analyses psychological processes as well as the group memberships and social relations in organisations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) can explain how the shared identity (i.e. divergent or convergent) influences a three-way joint coaching alliance, particularly the multifaceted negotiation and contracting process.

According to SIT, the best determinant of the long-term success of an aligned identity is the collaborators' perception of procedural fairness, rather than the actual distribution of material resources. In other words, the negotiation process should emphasise on the understanding of psychological resources. (Eggins, Haslam & Reynolds, 2002). Building upon the political coaching space framework by Louis and Fatien Diochon (2018), an empowering coaching space, which the coach serves as an integrator, moderator or revealer to influence, mediate and manipulate the organisation through constructive negotiations was promoted. Accordingly, we consider that the process of generating an empowering coaching space shares an analogous path with converging a shared social identity; namely to reach an integrative agreement among varied parties by reducing the identity distance with each other and opening the opportunity for dialogues. Hence, we suggest that a workplace coaching relationship is a divergent – convergent identity negotiation process, the ultimate purpose is to reach a joint coaching identity which comprises a common understanding and agreement on purposes, actions and required resources of the coaching relationship. Given that the climate (instrumental–influential) of a coaching relationship is affected by the coach's experience of power dynamics (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014, 2018) and the main purpose of coaching is to conjoin the identity (Stelter, 2009), we recognise that the three-way empowering alliance is more likely to be promoted when the coach acts as an integrator or moderator (i.e. influential style) and the shared identity is concurrent (i.e. convergent identity) (Figure 1). To gain in-depth understanding of essential factors in the influential –

convergent dimension to promote alliance and the roles all collaborators play to promote a joint coaching identity, a rigorous research including all related collaborators is demanded to answer two research questions addressed in the introduction.

Insert Figure 1 here.

Research Methods

A mixed interpretivist and Q-sorting research method was adopted as the main research objective to identify essential factors to promote a three-way joint and empowering coaching alliance through gathering and consolidating all related collaborators' perspectives. To maximise the rigour of our qualitative approach (Anderson, 2017) a three-stage study was designed which included different perspectives in the coaching relationship to establish the potential transferability and credibility of this research.

Insert Figure 2 here.

Research process and design

A critical incident technique (CIT) methodology was adopted in this study as originally developed by Flanagan (1954). This consists of a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behaviours to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles. CIT has been applied in several coaching-related studies to investigate the power relationship in executive coaching settings (e.g. Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2018). We modified CIT and used an in-depth interview approach to collect participants' perspectives on influential factors in a three-way joint coaching alliance, drawn from their specific coaching experience. A total of 25 one-on-one interviews (n = 25) with coaches (external coaches, n = 11; internal coaches, n = 5), coachees (n = 5) and organisational stakeholders (n = 4) such as HR professionals or line

managers were undertaken by the first author to ensure the consistency of the interview process. All coaches had appropriate coaching education or training and practiced coaching within organisations for a minimum of three years in the UK at the time of research. In addition, coachees and organisational stakeholders experienced three-way coaching relationships either as recipients or programme evaluators. Their professional backgrounds ranged from private marketing consultancy to the national health service (NHS). The interview questions focused on a specific event experienced personally regarding a three-way workplace coaching negotiation process. For instance, "*could you please share a recent three-way coaching engagement with group negotiations and describe this incident in detail?*" This method allowed the interviewer to probe specifically based on the interviewees' storyline, focusing on key points related to the research topic. In addition, all interviewees were referred to a similar scenario whereby the researchers could identify evidence commonalities in themes by cross-analysing "incidents" that increased the generality of results. Hence, these interviews provided a rich context for further thematic analysis and allowed the researchers to derive connections with outcomes.

Secondly, a thematic analysis following three stages was undertaken for integrating data drawn from various sources by means of a logical and systematic process (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013). All of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Initially, the first author conducted an open coding with transcripts through a random order (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Statements relevant to research questions such as essential factors or behaviours in a three-way coaching relationship were marked and displayed in an Excel sheet for the second stage coding. The second stage coding focused on clustering the similar statements. Figure 3 provides an example of how the data structure evolved. To maintain transparency of the data analysis process and the credibility of the results

(Anderson, 2017) four independent research collaborators with occupational psychology backgrounds were invited to review and verify the transcript analysis process. Finally, the identified codes from all analysists were re-examine d through a correlative comparison. This stage identified 278 statements (i.e. sets) which was considered satisfactory for subsequent Q-sorting analysis (Watts & Stenner, 2005)

Insert Figure 3 here.

Thirdly, to consolidate the interview participants' perspectives, a Q-Methodology was applied to sort and prioritise behavioural indicators identified from thematic analysis. Q-Methodology is an instrument to explore subjective viewpoints and objective differences in the domain of a research topic to ensure the consistency and transparency of the process (Watts & Stenner, 2005). Participants are asked to cluster and prioritise statements based on their personal perspectives and understanding of the topic, though the final results are usually consolidated with other participants' aspects (objectively). Q-Methodology has been utilised in some coaching studies, for example to identify key features of the coaching process through the Q-sorting process (Bachkirova, Sibley, & Myers, 2015).

Q-sorting was split into two levels with 10 participants (n = 10) differing from the interview contributors in this research. The first-level Q-sorting session interpreted as piloting was performed by two coaching scholars with substantial coaching practice experience (registered as coaching psychologists with the British Psychological Society). They clustered similar behavioural indicators from the thematic analysis into groups and discarded the insignificant and duplicated ones (Watts & Stenner, 2005). This initial clustering process resulted in 100 sets which described behavioural indicators of coaches were classified into 13 groups (themes). Each theme was given a title and definition. In this study, these 13 themes

are hereafter referred to as "essential factors" to promote a three-way joint coaching alliance (Table 1).

To further examine these essential factors and behavioural indicators and to ensure consistency, eight additional participants (n = 8: four coaches, two organisational representatives and two coachees) were invited to conduct a second-level Q-sorting activity in pairs, usually defined as ranking procedures (Watts & Stenner, 2005). All the behavioural indicators were shuffled, and each pair was asked to re-cluster the 100 indicators into the 13 essential factors defined from the first-level card-sorting session. In addition, they were requested to rank these thirteen factors. A 13-point scale was employed, the possible ranking values ranging from + 6 for items that are considered "most important" in the view of the pair, through "zero" to - 6 for the least important (Watts & Stenner, 2005). The scores for each factor gained from four pairs were added together; the scores ranged from -24 to +24. The final results were consolidated subsequently by the two authors. Figure 4 demonstrates the example of ranking process in this study.

Insert Figure 4 here.

Finally, the interview findings and Q-sorting results by means of an integrative analysis were consolidated.

Ethical considerations

This study had been reviewed and given a favourable opinion by the research ethics committee in the first author's institution.

Findings

Interview interpretation and theme analysis

The interview results identified three key factors in a three-way joint coaching alliance. In general, the coaching alliance was described as a flexible space and the ultimate goal was to reach the concurrence (i.e. a convergent coaching identity) among all collaborators. The climate of this space was underpinned by coaches' attitude towards coachees and organisational stakeholders. Besides, all related collaborators' perceived social identity and relation were influenced by their roles and positions in this space; namely the convergence of their shared identity was determined by all collaborators' social mobility in this alliance. Furthermore, the contracting process defined all parties' psychological boundary; the communication flow and psychological exchange were encouraged when the boundary was adjustable, and all parties had better opportunities to interact with. More detailed findings are presented below.

The coach's communication styles and attitudes

First, nearly 15% ($k = 78$ times) of total interview statements highlighted that the coach's interpersonal communication styles defined their attitudes and stance in this relationship. This factor indicates the coach has a more influential role in shaping the three-way coaching alliance. Most interviewees revealed that when coaches took a natural but adjacent stance towards the coachees' position (e.g. non-judgemental language and body gestures as well as listening with empathy) it shortened the identity distance among all collaborators. For example, an open "attitude" or "question" from the coach offered them a safe space to express their feelings and concerns and encourage them to consider the possibility of change". Appropriate responses from coaches made them feel they were being listened to and respected.

"Coaches not showing, their body language, not kind of judging someone about what we (coachees) are saying (Coachee01)".

"You know the good questions….that in some way you are really encouraging the coachee to move along continually where they are looking and thinking in a different way, just follow these questions to flow, what they are thinking another possibility. (Coach07)".

Besides, "listening actively" assisting the coach in having a better understanding of a coachee's issues and thoughts. "*Reflecting back and questioning at appropriate timing*" allowed (i.e. empowered) the coachee to think in a different way and explore new plans or solutions.

"It is not just listening aspect, it's actually to respond aspect as well, not just perceptual aspect, but also how they (coaches) respond (Stakeholder01)."

In general, participants pointed out that coaches' attitudes are the key to determine the direction (instrumental or influential) of the coaching relationship particularly at the beginning of the coaching relationship. The impartial posture clarified whether coaching was considered as a mechanical means by the organisation to "standardise" coachees' behaviours or a facilitative process to encourage sustainable changes. An influential and facilitative coaching climate was identified as an essential factor to converge the social distance in the coaching relationship.

The environment for collaboration/joint relationship

Creating a comfortable, collaborative and mutually respected environment in the coaching process was frequently highlighted by all participants (14.5%, $k = 76$ times). This factor indicates all related collaborators' positions in this space affect coachees' learning

motivation. Whereas, the equal status is essential in an effective group-based working relationship (Eggins et al., 2002) most participants (across all collaborators) specified that coachees should be placed in the central position in the coaching alliance since coachees' commitment to this process promote positive coaching outcomes. Building rapport and trust and engaging with the coachee at the initial stage was identified as an important approach to dissolve the identity boundary between all collaborators (organisation, employee, coach) and strengthen coachees' coaching motivation. This process can be considered as an empowerment to the coachee.

> *"I (coachee) really committed to these coaching sessions because I feel I got my coach was helping me, facilitating me to think, basically I am the centre of this coaching process (Coachee03)".*

> *"I (HR department) would make sure the coachee felt that they would be listened to, felt the coach totally understood the way they are coming from or what they wanted to get out of this and it's very much about the coachee rather than the coach problem solving (Stakeholder02)".*

Furthermore, when coachees were empowered in the coaching process, a trust relationship was enhanced with all collaborators appearing open-minded about working towards to a mutually agreed goal. Meanwhile, participants implied organisations should act in supportive roles and coaches as agents connecting collaborators.

> *"I (coach) don't have to report back the HR or anybody but the coachee was very open to this and actually suggested that I speak to his manager, which I did. And the manager would also be open to that (Coach06)".*

Overall, most of the interviewees acknowledged that coachees' self-motivation is important in a three-way joint alliance because the organisational-level outcomes are mainly

underpinned by behaviours of individuals (George & Jones, 2001). When coachees' interests were placed at the centre of this space, they appeared to view the coaching relationship as the enhancement of their shared social membership with organisations and their intrinsic motivation to change strengthened.

Contracting and management of the process

Moreover, 11.1% (58 times) of total referenced statements were classified into the contracting-related cluster. This factor essentially addresses that the social distance among all collaborators was adjusted by the contracting process and its configuration. The three-way contracting conversations were frequently highlighted by all participants as they observed a better communication flow across three collaborators when the negotiation process was concurrent and transparent.

"We get the individual manager and mentor (of the coachee).... on a call which is kind of validation of the objectives so myself and coachee presented the draft development objectives…. kicking the ball around…..to ensure we are all happy with these (Coach09)".

Meanwhile, the clarity of the contract details reduced psychological barriers and encouraged emotional exchanges. Accordingly, all collaborators had a greater understand of each other's objectives and concerns.

"*We [HR department] would explain what is involved and we would give them some information about the coach… we would contact them by telephone and email afterwards if they had any questions… so they (coachees) know they get the option, they don't have to just go with it if they don't feel comfortable we can find them somebody else (Stakeholder03)"*.

Overall, participants specified that all related collaborators should be recognised and treated equally as legitimate entities in the contracting process; whereas they often experienced coexisting emotional moments which influenced each other. The dissolving of their psychological boundary created a new flow and exchange to facilitate a convergent social identity (i.e. coaching identity) in this alliance.

The first-level Q-sorting findings

The first-level Q-sorting determined the 13 key factors and definitions (Table 1) underpinned by 100 behavioural indicators.

Insert Table 1 here.

The second-level Q-sorting results

Following the second-level Q-sorting with 10 additional participants, all results were documented for a final review by the two authors. The top three essential factors were distinguished after consolidating the ranking results from the second-level Q-sorting: (a) creating an environment for collaboration/joint relationship, (b) accommodated communication skills and (c) contracting and management of the process (Table 2). To establish consistency of the Q-sorting results, agreement levels between participants in each group were analysed. While the average agreement level of the level-one Q-sorting was 91% the second-level session's agreement level was lower than 50% indicating the breadth of opinion and practice within the business coaching community. As Miles and Huberman (1984) argued, the initial agreement levels should not be expected to be better than 70% because each analyst has different preferences and perspectives, especially in larger groups.

Insert Table 2 here.

Cross-analysis between the interview and Q-sorting results

According to the cross-analysis between the interview frequency and Q-sorting ranking, we conclude that "accommodated communication skills", "creating an environment for collaboration/joint relationship" and "contracting and management of the process", underpinned by a total of 37 behaviours are the essential factors required for a three-way joint coaching alliance (Table 3). In addition, it indicates that there is substantial consistency among these four participation groups.

Insert Table 3 here.

Discussion

This study builds upon coaching space as a power relationship (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014, 2018) and furthers our understanding of a three-way joint coaching alliance drawn on social identity perspectives by indicating the purpose of coaching relationships is to conjoin the identity alignment (i.e. coaching identity) among related collaborators. The study results indicated a three-way coaching alliance as a flexible space influenced by all collaborators' perceived relations and identity. To answer our research questions, this study identifies three essential factors to form a joint coaching identity: "coaches' attitude", "all collaborator positions" and "space for the contracting process". In addition, this research specifies roles all related parties should take in promoting an empowering coaching alliance. The coach should act as a mediator between the coachee and organisation stakeholders and enable the coachee to lead most parts of the coaching process, such as the learning contract and development plans. In contrast, organisational stakeholders, HR professionals or line managers are expected to take supportive roles despite the sponsorship of this coaching

engagement. To present a clearer picture of how our research findings interact with coaching collaborators' perceived identity, we extract the influential– convergent coaching dimension in Figure 1 and illustrate the transformation process between a convergent coaching alliance and diverging coaching identity in Figure 5. Three essential factors identified in this study determine the degree of their identity convergence. The following sections discuss in what way each factor influence the format of coaching identity respectively with future research recommendations.

Inset Figure 5 here.

Attitude: Accommodated communication skills promote convergence

Our study takes an initiative step to investigate interpersonal interactions beyond the conventional dyadic coaching alliance by incorporating all related collaborators' perspectives into this study. Some literature has demonstrated that all parties in a coaching relationship often experienced critical incidents concurrently and these important moments influence each other's interpersonal interactions (de Haan & Nieß, 2015). Our research results furthered previous studies by indicating all coaching collaborators' concurrent incidents, experiences and interactions alter their perceive identity in the three-way coaching alliance. Furthermore, our study reveals coaches' attitude and communication style play the key role in evoking interactions and establish the climate (instrumental – influential) of the coaching relationship. For example, demonstrating non-judgemental body language offered coachees psychological safety to express their feelings at the beginning of the coaching relationship and to reduce the identity distance among all collaborators. This finding is linked with previous coaching study (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2018) that stressed on the important role coaches take in a three-way coaching alliance; nevertheless, our research additionally elicits accommodated communication skills a coach needs (e.g. asking open questions and listening with empathy)

to adapt to different requirements and contexts and to promote an influential coaching climate. In addition, the identification of accommodated communication techniques in this study corresponds to Ianiro et al.'s (2015) research which addressed that coaches' attitudes and behaviours should be adjusted to meet varied coaching scenarios. However, our research highlighted that coaches' impartial attitude toward both coachees and organisational stakeholders should be prioritised before demonstrating any dominant-friendly behaviours that led to coaching success (Ianiro et al., 2015). Most of the interview participants indicated that coaches' neutral attitude elicited all collaborators' open-mined manner, and this is essential for trust building and identity converging at the beginning of a coaching relationship. Accordingly, we conclude coaches' impartial attitude enhances the perceived procedural fairness in the coaching identity negotiation process (Eggins et al., 2002). The future research may conduct a cross validation of the association between coaches' accommodated communication techniques identified in this study and extent of shared identity among all collaborators.

Position: A coachee-led process enhances the motivation to change.

Our study reveals coachees' motivation to change is adjusted by all collaborators' social positions in the three-way alliance. The study results indicated coachees should be placed at the centre of this alliance; namely, a coachee-led process is promoted to strengthen self-motivation in the coaching relationship (Figure 5). Several indicators, such as "exploring solutions and action plans together" and "involving coachee to lead the contracting phase" suggest that the coachee should have a certain extent of autonomy over the development areas and plans.

Indeed, self-determination theory (hereafter SDT) in adult learning theory which proposes that motivated behaviours vary in the degree to which they are autonomous or

controlled (Deci & Ryan, 2000) can be used to explain this finding. SDT has been considerably applied in the work motivation and adult learning domains (Black & Deci, 2000; Caffarella, 1993; Gagné & Deci, 2005). According to Ryan and Connell (1989), intrinsically motivated behaviours are autonomous prototypes as they are usually undertaken out of personal interest. In contrast, extrinsically motivated behaviours are undertaken and sustained by contingency (e.g. a reward). An important aspect of SDT is the proposition that extrinsic motivation can be internalised with identified external regulations. However, the identified regulations need to be integrated with the learner's sense of self so that the perceived locus of causality will be fully internalised, and the behaviour will become autonomous (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In addition, social context such as the interpersonal context, influences the extent to which individuals are autonomous versus controlled. For example, an autonomy-supported coaching process demonstrated by the coach and organisational stakeholders tends to maintain or enhance the coachee's intrinsic motivation and promote identifications with external regulations. Therefore, our study suggests that the coaching recipient's long-term considerations (e.g. self-determination and self-actualisation) and autonomous space should be prioritised within the infrastructure for a converging coaching identity and should promote a more accessible identity negotiation process.

This finding responds to Bozer and Jones' (2018) systematic review on workplace coaching which recognised the coachees' perceived pre-coaching motivation as an important antecedent of coaching outcomes. Nevertheless, they pointed out the coaching literature has yet to adequately examine how coaching motivation is related to, or the interaction between, the coachees' goal orientation or self-efficacy and the impact on coaching outcomes. Our study indeed suggests that coachees' intrinsic motivation is determined by whether they are empowered by the development areas and plans (i.e. self-determined goals). Hence, a more empowering coaching climate can be established by encouraging a coachee-centred coaching

process, this discovery also indicates coachees' self-motivation to change is regulated by their perceived identity in the coaching alliance. Accordingly, the study results may offer a new research direction following Bozer and Jones' review by investigating the interaction between perceived social identity and coachees' motivation in a three-way coaching alliance.

Space: A transparent contracting space facilitates trust building

Our study results considered that process management is equally important as interpersonal skills in the identity integration process, though a highly structured process was not favoured by the coachee in some coaching studies (Bachkirova et al., 2015). In the present study, a transparent three-way contracting and negotiation space was distinguished as being the significant factor to promote a converging coaching alliance in this identity negotiation process.

Some indicators, such as involving the coachee and organisational stakeholders together in the contracting process and communicating with the coachee's supervisors for support, suggested a well-defined and mutually agreed contract (i.e. explicit objectives, accountabilities, resources and evaluation methods) provides the foundation for trust building in the coaching process. Trust was recognised in previous studies as a significant mediator in a coach–coachee relationship. For example, when trust is present, the coachee is more likely to engage in vulnerable behaviours such as sharing sensitive information (Bozer & Jones, 2018), a stronger shared identity with other collaborators. Our study extends this trusting coaching relationship into multiple facets which include support by organisational stakeholders' (e.g. line managers or senior management teams) in the coaching process. Some coaching studies have confirmed the positive association between the coachees' perceived social support (e.g. supervisory support) and their self-efficacy in the coaching process (Baron & Morin, 2009; Ladegård, 2011). Bozer and Jones (2018) proposed that

leader – member exchange theory (hereafter LMX) which is used to explain and understand the influence of leader interactions on training transfer, should be an important direction for future research to further understand the influence of supervisory support on coaching effectiveness. Our study results implied positive interactions between LMX and a three-way joint coaching alliance; several influential factors identified in this research specified a concurrent and transparent contracting space dissolved the psychological barrier, encourage communication flows and promoted emotional exchanges among all collaborators (Figure 5). The ultimate beneficial consequence is to facilitate a convergent coaching identity in this alliance. Therefore, we suggest that future research should investigate further the relationship between contracting processes, perceived coaching identity and psychological exchange between coachees and their organisations.

Practical implications

By incorporating perspectives of all coaching process related collaborators, our study outlines the explicit and specific behavioural-based indicators required for a workplace coach and recognises that these essential factors and behavioural indicators can serve as a crucial guideline for the selection, training and evaluation of workplace coaches. Considering the increased application of coaching in organisations and that "professional relationship" is distinguished as the indicator for positive coaching outcomes (Graßmann et al., 2019; Sonesh et al., 2015) a more relationship-informed protocol is needed to facilitate a joint three-way coaching relationship. The explicit behavioural indicators identified in this study (e.g. interpersonal techniques, contracting and process management and building trust) assist in understanding a baseline for coach selection purpose, a direction for coaching training design and a preliminary guidance for process evaluation. Our research fills the gap of existing

practical coaching frameworks by offering a three-way workplace working relationship focused benchmark for purposes related to selection and development of coaches.

Conclusion

While evidence for investment in coaching intervention will continue to be a major concern for scholars in relevant domains as well as for organisational stakeholders, most of the existing coaching studies have overlooked the three-way features of the workplace coaching relationship and the social-context links in organisational settings, such as power and hierarchy (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014). This study contributes to our knowledge of the professional helping relationship from therapeutic interpersonal interactions within a dyad into a socially contextualised identity interaction (Graßmann et al., 2019). The study results indicated that a three-way joint coaching alliance is a flexible space; the ultimate goal being to reach a convergent coaching identity through constant negotiation. This study furthers our understanding of accommodated interaction techniques, coachee motivation and leader-member psychological exchange in the workplace coaching relationship as drawn on theories in social identity area. In accordance with the study results, all related collaborators' perceived identity in the coaching alliance vary during the process with three essential factors facilitating towards a convergent coaching identity: the coach's impartial attitude, the social position of the coachee and a transparent contracting space. Although our study is limited by the number of coachee and organisational stakeholder participants, it draws attention to the development of evidence-based workplace coaching practice and promotes collaboration among coaching scholars, practitioners and organisational stakeholders. Nevertheless, a more balanced sample representative from each group is needed in the future.

Two main directions for future research are proposed in accordance with our research findings. Firstly, the future study may examine further the interactions between a three-way

contracting space and coaching identity as most interview participants highlighted that the initial negotiation process is the golden opportunity to establish a joint coaching identity. Secondly, an additional investigation into the coaching motivation and shared identity is required which we acknowledge as an exploratory step in the contextualised coaching alliance research area. This study could be a good starting point in developing new instruments to assess the quality of the three-way coaching alliance drawing on the identified behavioural indicators in this research.

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Tables

Table 1. First-level Q-sorting findings

	Essential factors	No. of behavioural indicators	Definitions
1	Accommodated communication skills	15	Applying highly developed communication skills to understand coachees' issues, enhance motivation, facilitate change, and build rapport. Listening, responding, questioning, asking challenging questions, and using body language appropriately.
2	Goal focus/goal tracking	9	Identifying realistic goals, developing concrete plans and progress continuously to facilitate coachees' achieving their personal and work goals.
3	Consideration of individual differences	9	Respecting and considering coachees' individual background, needs, and context in the coaching process.
4	Contracting and management of the process	12	Discussing, negotiating, and defining objectives, process, terms, and conditions (including ethical standards, confidentiality, and both collaborators' roles and responsibilities), resources, and support of coachees and their organisations (supervisors) before commencing the first coaching session.
5	Creating an environment for collaboration/joint relationship	12	Ensuring coachees are the centre of the coaching sessions. Highlighting collaboration, creating a comfortable environment and a mutually agreed relationship in the coaching process.
6	Using resources	2	Identifying and seeking useful resources to facilitate coachees' learning and development.
7	Being aware of managing coachees' feelings and motivation	10	Being capable of identifying and protecting coachees' feelings and enhancing their self-motivation to change.
8	Assisting and guiding	6	Assisting and guiding coachees to identify their vision, motivations, and strengths for change.
9	Encouraging	3	Encouraging and supporting coachees to share their issues and generate different development plans and solutions in the entire process.
10	Creating and developing a framework for the process	10	Developing, integrating, and applying the appropriate frameworks in the coaching process. Revising the coaching structures continuously according to coachees' progress and feedback. Inviting coachees' organisations/supervisors to share their feedback and opinions at appropriate times.
11	Demonstrating empathy	2	Always demonstrating understanding of coachees' feelings, issues, and difficulties to build their confidence to change.
12	Flexibility and adaptability	2	Being open to coachees' opinions and suggestions, being flexible, revising coaching content based upon coachees' needs.
13	Engaging/coach's ability to engage & maintain engagement	8	Being approachable and open to engage coachee. Enhancing coachees' commitment by involving them in the coaching process and progress.
		Total: 100	

Table 2. Second level Q-sorting results and interview frequency analysis

No.	Essential factors	Pair 1 (1–13) Coaches (n = 2)	Pair 2 (1–13) Coaches (n = 4)	Pair 3 (1–13) Coaching recipients (n = 2)	Pair 4 (1–13) Organisational stakeholders (n = 2)	Total scores	Integrated Q-sorting rankings	Interview frequency analysis
1	*Accommodated communication skills	+1	+6	+5	+5	+17	2	14.9% (1)
2	Goal focus/goal tracking	-5	-4	-4	0	-13	12	9.5%
3	Consideration of individual differences	+2	-1	-2	-6	-7	9	3.2%
4	*Contracting and management of the process	+6	-3	+4	+6	+13	3	11.1% (3)
5	*Creating an environment for collaboration/joint relationship	+5	+5	+6	+2	+18	1	14.5% (2)
6	Using resources	-6	-6	-5	-5	-22	13	1.1%
7	Being aware of managing coachees' feelings and motivation	-1	+2	-1	+1	+1	6	8.0%
8	Assisting and guiding	-4	+1	-3	-3	-9	10	3.6%
9	Encouraging	-2	0	0	-2	-4	8	1.7%
10	Creating and developing a framework for the process	+3	-2	-6	+3	-2	7	4.9%
11	Demonstrating empathy	0	+4	+3	-1	+6	5	1.9%
12	Flexibility and adaptability	-3	-5	+2	-4	-10	11	4.2%
13	Engaging/coach's ability to engage & maintain engagement	+4	+3	+1	+4	+12	4	2.2%

*Top 3 in both interview frequency analysis and 2nd card-sorting rankings.

Table 3 Essential factors and behavioural indicators to promote a joint coaching identity

Essential factors	Definitions	Behavioural indicators
Creating an environment for collaboration/joint relationship	Ensuring coachees are centre of the coaching sessions. Highlighting collaboration, creating a comfortable environment and a mutually agreed relationship in the coaching process.	• Allowing space for private conversations. • Building rapport and trust at the beginning of the coaching process. • Creating an open and honest environment. • Encouraging collaboration to facilitate change. • Engaging coachee in coaching process before the session commences. • Ensuring both collaborators are comfortable working with each other. • Ensuring a comfortable environment for the coaching session. • Exploring solutions and action plans together. • Gaining coachee's trust by providing safe space to talk. • Maintaining a relaxed and friendly manner. • Maintaining a supportive relationship with coachee. • Remaining approachable, responsive, open, and friendly. • Remaining calm and confident.
Accommodated communication skills	Applying highly developed communication skills to understand coachees' issues, enhance motivation, facilitate change and build rapport. Listening, responding, questioning, asking challenging questions, and using body language appropriately.	• Adapting communication styles to different needs and contexts. • Asking challenging and difficult questions to facilitate coachee to think in a different way. • Asking open questions. • Demonstrating appropriate and non-judgemental body language. • Keeping balance between listening and questioning. • Listening actively. • Listening with empathy. • Providing appropriate feedback to coachee. • Staying attentive. • Summing up, prompting, and checking understanding at appropriate times. • Using appropriate language (e.g. vocabulary and terminology).
Contracting and management of the process	Discussing, negotiating, and defining objectives, process, terms and conditions (including ethical standards, confidentiality, and all collaborators' roles and responsibilities), resources, and support of coachee and their organisation (supervisors) before commencing the first coaching session.	• Being aware of and demonstrating boundary of competence. • Communicating with coachee's supervisors for support. • Creating a transparent process through involving coachee's organisation. • Establishing boundaries and terms and conditions before the first session. • Establishing mutually agreed goals. • Explaining the role of coaching processes and techniques for achieving personal goals. • Having chemistry meeting before the first coaching session. • Involving coachee and organisational stakeholders together in the contracting process. • Involving coachee to lead the contracting phase and three-way meeting with organisational stakeholders. • Maintaining and emphasising confidentiality. • Maintaining ethical standards throughout the coaching process. • Obtaining coachee permission and agreement before challenging them. • Preparing and sending an agreed contract to coachee and client before the first session.

Figures
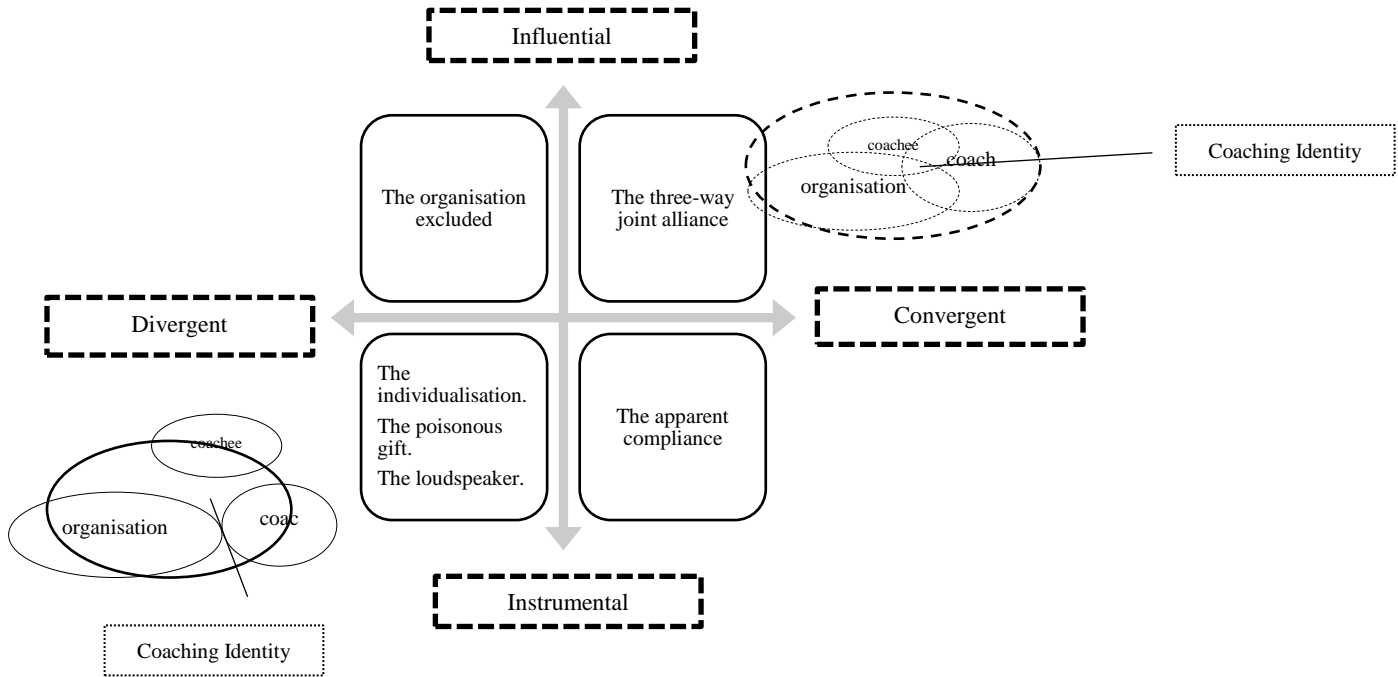
Figure 1. Three-way coaching alliance dimensions

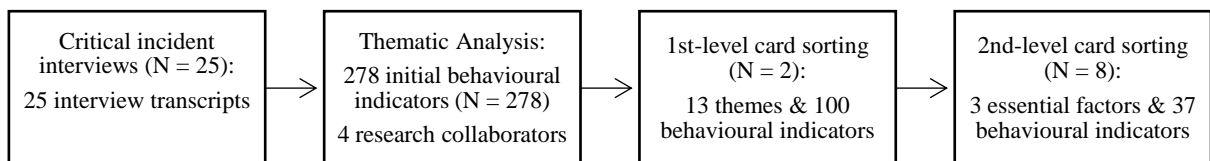Figure 2. Overview of the research process

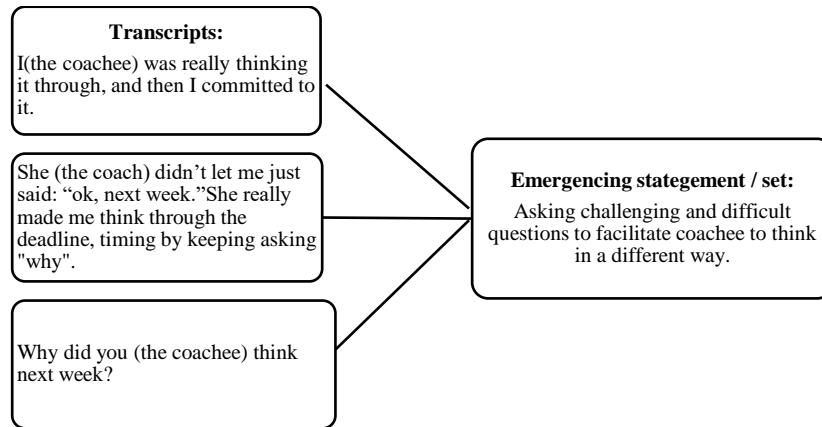Figure 3. An example of theme evolving and coding process

Transcripts:
I(the coachee) was really thinking it through, and then I committed to it.

She (the coach) didn't let me just said: "ok, next week."She really made me think through the deadline, timing by keeping asking "why".

Why did you (the coachee) think next week?

Emergencing stategement / set:
Asking challenging and difficult questions to facilitate coachee to think in a different way.

Figure 4. Leve 2 Q-sorting ranking procedure

| - 6 | - 5 | - 4 | - 3 | - 2 | - 1 | 0 | + 1 | + 2 | + 3 | + 4 | +5 | + 6 |

| Least important | | | | | | | | | | | | Most important |

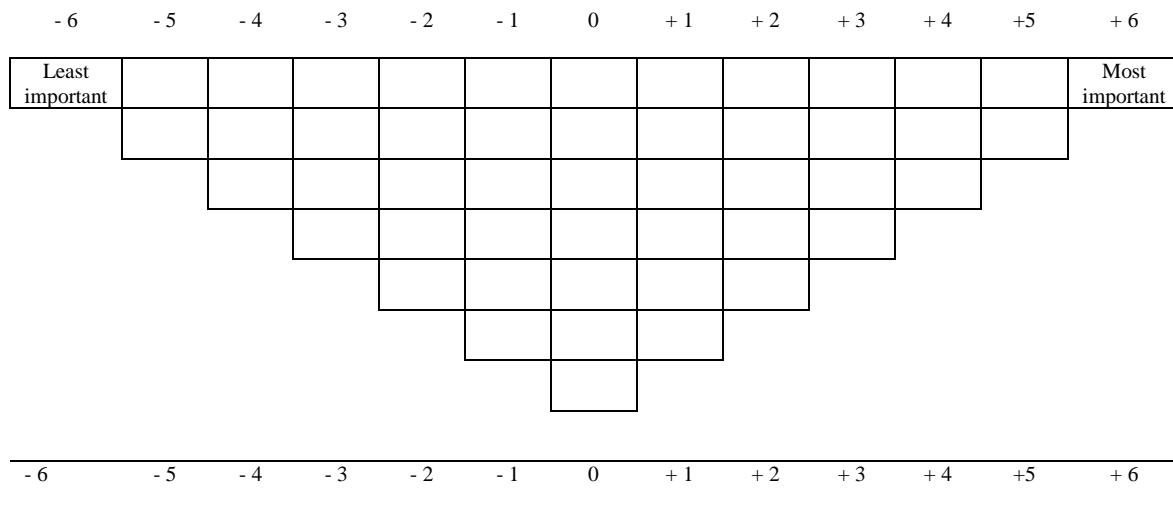| - 6 | - 5 | - 4 | - 3 | - 2 | - 1 | 0 | + 1 | + 2 | + 3 | + 4 | +5 | + 6 |

Figure 5 The transformation between a divergent – convergent coaching identity

Instrumental -Divergent

Influential-Convergent

coachee

organisation

coach

coachee

organisatio

coach

Coaching Identity
A flexible space
- The coach's attitude
- All parties' positions
- A transparent contracting space