Intuition in Coaching:  
Preliminary Findings of an Exploratory Study

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1.0 What Do We Want to Know and Why?

“Speaking from your intuition is extraordinarily available in coaching…like the wind in the trees, it may not be visible, but we can see and hear its effects” (Whitworth et al., 2007:52)

As human beings, we all have and use intuition to varying degrees whether we realise it or not. The same can be said in our role as coaches.

Despite the implicit link between intuition and coaching (de Haan, 2008; Whitworth et al.2007; Phillips, 2006; Murray, 2004), little research in the field has been undertaken. The purpose of this study was therefore to look at the recent advances in defining intuition and explore it in a coaching context.

A short scoping study of the intuition literature (psychology, business, coaching and education) was therefore undertaken. Following on from this, empirical research was undertaken with accomplished executive coaches to explore their experiences and perspectives on intuition in coaching and was compared to the literature findings.

1.1 Research Questions

The research questions we wanted to explore were:

1. What is intuition in coaching?
2. What helps coaches to access and apply their intuition?
3. How do we develop this essential skill as coaches?
2.0 What Did We Do?

2.1 Scoping Study of the Literature

There are many related meanings of intuition, drawn from the etymological Latin root *in-tuir* which is often translated into 'looking, regarding or knowing from within' (Hodgkinson, et al., 2008:2).

As Hodgkinson et al. (2008) acknowledged, there has been a burgeoning of research in the field in recent years, notably from business or psychology in regard to decision making. Much of the focus recently has been on dual process theories of cognition which refers to the two ways we process information. Humans have two cognitive systems: conscious and nonconscious. The conscious system is also referred to as the rational, intentional, rule-cased, reflective or system 2 type of processing. The nonconscious system is also known as intuitive, experiential, automatic, associative, impulsive or system 1 (Hodgkinson et al., 2008:9). As Sadler-Smith and Shefy (2004:89) wrote “intuition and rationality are two parallel systems of knowing; in this sense they are dual processes”.

Whilst there has been a proliferation of ideas in the field of intuition, there is also emergent agreement on some crucial facets, which are captured in the following definition, described by Hodgkinson et al. (2008:4) as “the definition of choice”:

Intuitions are “affectively charged judgements that arise through rapid, nonconscious, and holistic associations” (Dane and Pratt, 2007:40).

That is, intuition is deemed to include the following features:

1. **Affect** – there is often a physical reaction, typically “gut feelings or gut instincts”. The nonconscious processing system is traditionally connected with emotions.

2. **Speed** - is a hallmark feature of intuitive judgements. As opposed to rational or analytical processing, which when done methodically can be time consuming, intuitive judgements arise rapidly.

3. **Nonconscious information processing** – this refers to one of the two ways we process information mentioned above. We use the nonconscious system to learn from experience. It can help create feelings of knowing in the absence of conscious attention.

4. **Holistic associations** – can be the result of having some level of expertise in the specific domain. At times being able to draw an association comes in the form of a simple solution, while others it comes from the ability to see patterns, structures or schemas held in long term memory and based on one’s training and experience.
Often intuition and insight are used interchangeably although they are related yet distinct concepts. Insight is a cognitive process that can be used to solve problems. It occurs when the logical relationship between parts of the problem become clear and can be explained, whereas with intuition, consciously accounting for the rationale is very difficult. Insight is typically associated with illumination or an ‘aha’ moment. Intuition can be characterised by a sense of what is right or wrong in a situation without a clear explanation. In essence, when insight occurs, we see connections; when intuition occurs we sense connections.

Intuiting (process) is the way we arrive at intuitive judgements (outcomes). The term “intuition” is often used to describe both the process and outcome. (Dane and Pratt, 2007).

2.2 Empirical Research

2.2.1 Sample

We undertook semi-structured individual interviews with 14 accomplished experienced executive coaches (8 males: 6 females) averaging 14.5 years as a coach. The interviews took place over the phone or in person, and always with the same interviewer, over a three-week period.

2.2.2 Method

Coaches were asked to retrospectively report on intuitive experiences in 1:1 and/or group coaching. Each interview was an exploratory conversation centred around 15 broad questions. These questions were inspired from the intuition literature and designed to draw on experiences of the coaches around their use of intuition in coaching. Each interview took approximately two hours and was recorded and interview notes taken.

2.2.3 Methods of Data Analysis

The preliminary results are from a thematic analysis of interview notes which are supported by interview audio files. As the research has only recently been completed, to date it has not been possible to do a content analysis of all transcriptions.

2.2.4 Research Limitations:

There were obvious limitations to the research, as summarised below:

- **Lack of empirical data**: The challenges associated with measuring and researching intuition are well documented, due to the mere fact that intuition happens at a nonconscious level and is therefore difficult to verbalise and capture (Harteis et al., 2008; Dane and Pratt, 2009).
• **Self selection:** Coaches choose to take part in the research after an initial invitation to do so. As this was not a random selected study, it is likely that those who ‘believed’ in intuition and supported the research would step forward.

• **Retrospective self reporting:** The intuition literature points to an over-reliance on psychometrically weak self-report measures (Hodgkinson, et al., 2008:19). To provide some rigour to the process, coaches were primed prior to the interview to think about their intuitive experiences in coaching. Furthermore, they were also encouraged to fill out an intuition log prior to the interview to raise their awareness about their intuitive moments and allow them to access their examples more easily when interviewed, and therefore, help reduce recall bias (ibid). Half of the coaches interviewed chose to use the log.

• **Priming:** the decision was made up front that it would not be a ‘blind’ interview but we would be explicit about our premise and what we wanted to explore. i.e. intuition is a key coaching skill, and one which often lies at the heart of courageous coaching moments. Furthermore, we set the definition of intuition as that provided by Dane and Pratt (2007).

### 3.0 What is Intuition in Coaching?

The research we undertook would suggest that intuition in coaching follows the definition of intuition as provided by Dane and Pratt (2007) along a spectrum from the “out of the blue”, what coachees would say was “pure intuition”, at one end to “pattern/sense making” at the other end. For example, one coach talked of a situation where without knowing or talking about it in the coaching session, offered a seemingly random intuition “is this about your sister?” which served to uncover the real issue for the coachee. On the other side of the spectrum was the coach intuiting that her coachee hadn’t had a conversation on this particular issue with his boss through noticing what he wasn’t saying.

In describing their intuition experiences in coaching, coaches typically recorded physical reactions (such as the feelings in the stomach, chest, and a prickly head). Furthermore many would talk about their intuition as “coming from nowhere”, “I don’t know where it came from”, coming fast “it literally appeared” and in delving into their examples would reflect on associations, patterns and previous experiences.

Significantly coaches gave example after example about the positive effect of using and applying their intuition for the benefit of the client. Examples included how an intuition helped opened up a dialogue; raised awareness; challenged the coachee and helped to ‘create shift’.

As Whitworth et al., (2007:60) wrote: “What is relevant is what happens to the client”… “The thing about intuition and coaching is that intuition always forwards the action and deepens the learning, even when it lands with a clang instead of a melodious ping”.


3.1 What Helps Coaches to Access and Apply their Intuition?

Even though individuals experience intuition differently, in exploring what enables coaches to access and apply their intuition in coaching, the following factors appear to be important across the board. Furthermore, it appears that there is an interplay between them.

3.1.1 Self-Belief

Overwhelmingly, coaches would refer to the existence of self-belief or self-confidence as being critical to being able to access and apply their intuition. There was a strongly held belief that "what I offer is useful" and a real sense of trusting oneself, one's own purpose, experience, expertise and skills to the extent that coaches talked of being prepared to be stupid, clumsy or vulnerable.

One coach commented that "everybody is a 10 [i.e. highly intuitive]...it is the confidence and trust to access it that varies".

The emphasis on self-belief and confidence is consistent with the literature which suggests that intuition is characterised by intense confidence (Hodgkinson et al., 2008; Dane and Pratt, 2007).

3.1.2 Coaching Beliefs and Values

The research suggests that there are beliefs and values which may be conducive to accessing and applying intuition, in that they seem to provide the coach with permission and confidence. As may be expected, coaches would talk of a coachee/client centred approach and the coach's duty to offer the coachee their intuition and indeed that intuition "would only be offered for the benefit of the coachee". Furthermore, coaches would cite values such as "I am paid to do my job" and "I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't [use all what I had to offer]" and that "I care enough to go there".

This is also reflected in the literature. “Client’s count on your intuition. When you hold back, you withhold a crucial source of information and sensing” (Whitworth et al., 2007:58).

Other beliefs that seem to liberate and provide the openness to access intuition were “you can’t always explain everything”; “people generate energies and energies in relation to each other” or “if something is around I have to deal with it”.

There was a real acknowledgement and acceptance that you can’t call on intuition. Indeed, "looking too intently for it makes it more difficult to find. If you are working too hard to find your intuition, your attention is on you and your efforts. ...the key seems to take a soft focus, be open. Your intuition is there, giving your messages or clues, just below the surface. This is the paradox of intuition; an open hand will hold it; it will slip through a fist" (Whitworth et al., 2007:56,57)
3.1.3 State Management

Every coach talked about, what could be summarised as, getting themselves in the ‘right’ physical, mental and emotional state to help them access and apply their intuition. This would include their attention to their own well-being; the preparation they did before a session; the rituals or routine that they would use to start a session; and their ability to stay present and focused during the session.

Coaches would refer to the importance of being well rested (such as making sure they got a good night’s sleep, ate well and didn’t drink alcohol the night before a coaching session).

Preparation before a session would be dependent on the individual. Some would read through notes of previous sessions, think about the coachee, and/or look through various models and frameworks. Some would prepare by reading an inspirational book; one coach quoting Joseph Jaworski’s “Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership”.

Although some felt that they did not always coach in the most conducive of environments (often resorting to a hotel lounge, lobby or office), the external environment was less of a concern, than looking after one’s own state. Coaches talked of leaving plenty of time to get to the location so as to leave space to collect their thoughts and get centred before the start of the session. At the start of the session, some would use a ritual/routine as a way of getting them into the zone through the likes of using key words such as “calm and happy”, following a particular order of doing things e.g.: taking out a notepad, or having a particular ‘contracting rote’ etc. Whatever the technique, it was about the coach getting grounded, letting go of analytical thoughts, and to quieten their mind. It was about “not being in my head”, and being present, congruent, receptive, fresh, attentive and calm. As one coach said “the more I go with the moment and more calm I am, the better I am”. Indeed this centred state helps to avoid contamination in intuition, that of wishful thinking, fear and prejudice.

Some coaches talked of requiring the need to have a certain level of pressure such as emotionally charged moments. “It is difficult to be intuitive when you don’t have that intensity. I need the pressure moment”. Indeed, the literature suggests that the effectiveness of intuitive decision-making may increase positively as a function of time pressure (Dane and Pratt: 2008).

Coaches volunteered what was going on for them when they were at their least intuitive. Comments included “when I am stressed” or “when I am in my head”.

The findings are consistent with the literature. Sadler-Smith and Shefy (2007) wrote of the dynamic interplay between the inner context (quietening the mind) and the outer contexts (external environment) that affected the intuitive process. Dane and Pratt (2008) wrote that people trust and use their intuition when in a positive mood state and
therefore open. Harteis et al., (2008) also concluded that confidence and a good mood support intuitive capabilities while stress or anger are the biggest obstacles.

### 3.1.4 Permission

A further factor of accessing and applying intuition was having the sense of ‘permission’ to be able to do so. It seemed that this permission came from internally within and externally. Internally, this was about the coach giving themselves permission because they considered intuition to be an accepted/fundamental part of their coaching skill set. It was therefore as Murray (2004:206) described “to give ourselves permission to acknowledge worries, unformed opinions and untidy data”. Externally, it was also about having permission from the coachee, and was best when the coach explicitly contracted with the coachee that they would offer their intuition. A number of the coaches referred to the fact that coaching itself gives permission. As one coach said “we have permission to be intuitive because of our job…people are looking for insight”.

These issues of acceptability and the extent to which people feel confident in intuiting is an issue also raised in the literature. In terms of business decision-making, Sadler-Smith and Shefy (2004:80) note “the working environment of executives can support or suppress this automatic and involuntary process”. They recommend to ‘open up the closet’ and be overt in the use of intuition as opposed to convert.

### 3.1.5 Being in Rapport

Coaches also said the extent to which they access and apply their intuition is dependent on the relationship. This does not necessarily mean needing to know their coachee well. Rather, it is about having a high level of rapport where transformational conversations can happen. Indeed, it is a key skill of a coach to be able to establish and maintain rapport and talk at a deeper level of communication about beliefs, attitudes, emotions and feelings. One coach said “it is easier to have an intuition when you have a connection”. What was critical for intuition to be accessed and trusted was that the coach felt in tune with the coachee, and was noticing the energy of the coachee, the relational energy between them, and was fully listening and observing. As Murray (2007:206) wrote, “by paying real attention, we can pick up mood change, facial expression, intakes of breath, eye movement and other clues. We can notice hints, hunches, half ideas, doubts and fleeting concerns”.

### 3.1.6 Objective Offering

Consistent with the literature, coaches talked of the importance of having a level of detachment or objectiveness in accessing and applying intuition, in order to hold no judgement and to give it as an offering as opposed to a profound truth. This is aligned with the literature about the danger of bias, and the importance of labelling it (“I have an intuition”) and not being attached whether it is right or wrong. As one coach said, being “willing to put it out there and willing to get it wrong”.

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Whitworth et al., (2007:54) reminds us, “The important thing to remember in coaching is to be open to intuition – trusting it, aware of it, and completely unattached to the interpretation. In the end, intuition is valuable when it moves the client to action or deeper learning. It is irrelevant, really, whether your intuition was “correct”.

Consistent with the literature (Whitworth et al., 2007), coaches would offer their intuition to:

- Direct the flow of questioning
- Check what was being said matched with behaviour and reactions
- Try to understand what the client was thinking and feeling but may not be actually saying
- Intrude or interrupt
- Blurt
- Know when to speak and when to stay silent
- Challenge one’s own and the coachee’s thoughts and paradigms
- Detect patterns from ‘random noise’

In offering their intuition, coaches talked of typical expressions they would use to offer it in a way that would help it ‘land’ and be useful for the coachee. As de Haan (2008:126) wrote, “coaches (have the courage to) reflect their observations back in such a way that the coachee can hear them”. Examples included:

I have had a bit of a thought. Would it be ok to share it with you?
What do you think about this?
Just check this out for me…
Is it ok if I offer you an intuition that has come to me?
Even “this may be bollocks and feel free to disregard it”

This adds to the Whitworth et al., (2007:60) ‘crib sheet’ which includes:

I have a sense…
May I tell you about a gut feeling I have?
I have a hunch that..
Can I check something out with you..
I wonder if…
See how this fits for you
My intuition tells me…

3.1.7 Courage

We went into our research with a premise that intuition is a key coaching skill, and one that often lies at the heart of courageous moments in coaching. Whether a function of being primed about the premise or not, by first getting coaches to talk about their intuitive moments and what they do to access, apply and develop their intuition,
inevitably the sense of courage or the risk ‘to go there’ emerged. As Philips (2006)
wrote, it is about not only the what (the intuition is), the how (you raise it) but also the
whether (to raise it at all). In talking to the coaches, this comes down to whether it will
be of benefit to the coachee, and the courage of the coach.

We were deliberate in not defining what is a courageous moment for the reason we felt
it was different for different individuals and indeed the responses confirmed this was
so. What is courageous for one is not courageous for others. Some would talk of a
huge risk, huge payoff...going where nobody else would go; to knowledge of what to
do and what not to do.

The responses from the research suggest there may be a strong relationship between
intuition and courageousness. For instance, coaches reported that their most intuitive
state would also be their most courageous i.e.: being grounded, open and positive. It
would seem that by being intuitive, we can be courageous; similarly it takes courage to
listen and express our intuition. A coach often shows most courage when she listens
and uses her intuition and, by doing so, encourages the coachee to be courageous.

The following comments were given by various coaches:

- “You can’t be courageous without using your intuition. Being courageous is
  using your intuition”.
- “The alternative to finding your intuition would be structured, formulaic. [This]
  may lead to courageous moments or transformation. But it would get there by
  chance, whereas intuition would lead you directly there. Like a scatter gun.
  Intuition allows you to zoom in...I think you get there more consistently and
  quicker with intuition than you would by following a process”.
- “[Intuition and courageous moments of coaching are] completely inseparable.
  To make a leap you need something more”.
- “[they are] “completely linked because I think the things that you are daring to
talk about are the things you intuit”.

3.2 How do we Develop this Essential Skill as Coaches?

There was overwhelming consensus that intuition is developable.

As one coach said, “Intuition is native and natural to all of us...we all know what is
ture..but we practice ignorance”.

Even though it would seem that the coaches did not explicitly set out to develop their
intuition, they would talk particularly to activities that they believed contributed to its
development. While there is no one method, the most commonly cited strategies from
both the research and the literature review appear to be:


### 3.2.1 Knowledge, Experience, Practice and Feedback

As one coach said, “you have to know your stuff”. Inexperienced coaches are less likely to use their intuition and tend to more consciously use tools and techniques, whereas expert coaches who are operating at an unconscious competence level use those tools more intuitively. This may support de Haan’s findings which states that although relatively inexperienced coaches did not mention intuition in their critical coaching moments, expert coaches did (de Haan, 2008).

As Dane and Pratt (2007) proposed, implicit learning has obvious value, but learning is heightened with certain types of explicit practice: that which is of long duration, deliberate repeated practice with immediate, relevant and exacting feedback.

The literature concludes that cognitive schemas must be domain relevant to generate accurate intuitive judgements (ibid), or in simpler terms, experience enables people to chunk information so that they can be stored and retrieved easily (Hayashi, 2001). In a field which draws people from a diverse range of backgrounds, the question is what is the coach’s domain? Or rather what is the coach storing? As Gray (2006:477) said “within the literature there is also little consensus on what theoretical principles underpin executive coaching” and supports the view that it draws heavily on the principles and processes of psychotherapy. It would seem that there is an argument for taking an integrative coaching approach, if taking the view of Gray (2006:494) “coaching is made stronger by combining the many coaching paradigms” and educational literature (Harteis et.al; 2008:76) “the more patterns are available, the easier a sense of familiarity arise in challenging situations and thus, the more opportunities exist for an intuitive decision”.

### 3.2.2 Individual Reflective Practice

It would appear from the research and the literature that the rigour and discipline to reflect and capture one’s own practice and experience of using intuition is critical to development. Coaches would speak of the interplay between experience and reflection being crucial, and of trusting and playing with intuition and seeing its effects and thereby building one’s confidence in using it more. As Sadler-Smith and Shefy (2004) advise, ‘get a feel for your batting average’, that is benchmark your intuitions and get a sense of how reliable they are and how your intuitive judgements may improve. From our research those who used the log found it helped to focus their attention on how they intuit, in what situations, the confidence and accuracy and the resulting impact on the coachee/the outcome. As one coach said, “without the log I wouldn’t have reflected on what changes I saw in him [the coachee]”.

### 3.2.3 Dialogue and Supervision

As demonstrated by the interview process, there is real value in talking about intuition. Through being encouraged to talk about their experiences, coaches raised and helped make sense of their intuitive capabilities. This also served to help legitimise the use of intuition. When asked to self rate themselves on an intuitive scale, a number of
coaches expressed the view that it was difficult to judge “because nobody talks about intuition”. Feedback from coaches interviewed included “I know more about my intuition than I did before the interview”; and “I feel more intuitive now than I did before the interview”.

Coaches would talk specifically of the value of discussing issues through the practice of supervision, and indeed supervision or the coach being coached, was commonly cited as a key development technique. Not only was supervision seen as important to help the coach raise their awareness and make sense of their intuitive moments but also useful in testing out one’s intuitive moments. Furthermore, skilled supervisors could serve as a great source of role models. Three coaches specifically mentioned how their supervisor used their intuition ‘on them’ and the transformational effect that this had. Indeed as Phillips (2006:26) points out, “supervision provides opportunity for third party intuition”. “That is the coach [supervisor] using his intuition to speculate on what might be happening between two other people”. As a result of the interview, one coach said the interview “has triggered me to use my supervisor to reflect on my own intuition”.

3.2.4 Well-being and Creativity

A number of the coaches referred to the importance of looking after their well-being, and the need to build relaxation, meditation, and exercise time into one’s life. It was seen as important to take time out to reflect and contemplate, to relax and re-energise and clear one’s head, and seek congruence and alignment. It was important to do what you love. One coach said that they bring more to their coaching if they ride their horse the day before. Others spoke of how walking their dogs helped, or their dancing. Indeed, the use of creativity in dance, music, creative free flowing writing and drawing is viewed as key to opening up your intuitive avenues.

3.2.5 Others

The following were also mentioned by the coaches, albeit to a lesser extent.

- **Emotional intelligence** – As you would expect, coaches spoke of the importance of self-awareness, self-management, empathy, social skills and social management. Indeed balanced emotions are crucial to appropriate use of intuition and the engagement of both intuitive and analytical minds. (Hayashi 2001).
- **Spiritual growth** – Coaches mentioned prayer and journaling what you are learning about yourself. One coach talked of their commitment to “living life with more integrity and in a real way”
- **Use of symbols** – “a crucial part of coaching is the identifying and sharing of symbols” (Phillips: 2006: 27)
- **Doing something scary** – getting out of your comfort zone

It would indeed appear from the literature that there are a number of actions one can do through a mix of cognitive, affective, and somatic techniques to allow intuition to
emerge and expand voluntarily and the challenge is to synthesise from a disparate and emergent literature, a coherent set of methods (Sadler-Smith and Shefy, 2007).

3.3 Summary of Findings

This study serves to help address the lack of studies of intuition in coaching by comparing the experiences of accomplished executive coaches with recent advances across particularly, the psychology and business fields in defining intuition as a construct.

A significant benefit of this research is that it helps to legitimise the use of intuition as a critical skill in coaching, by the mere action of talking about it or as Sadler-Smith and Shefy (2004) refer to as ‘opening up the closet’. Indeed isn’t it time we as the coaching community did more to explicitly talk about it as playing an important role in our coaching, and by doing so, help further to legitimise and maximise its use?

In addressing the key research questions, the following comments can be made:

Research Question 1: What is intuition in coaching?

It would seem that this research is the first time that the construct of intuition as provided in the literature (namely Dane and Pratt, 2007:40) has been applied to coaching. It would appear from the experiences of the coaches that the construct is applicable and appropriate in a coaching context. The research suggests that in coaching there is a spectrum and this would benefit from further investigation.

Research Question 2: What helps coaches to access and apply their intuition?

It would appear from the research that experienced coaches have the skills and confidence to help create conditions for the effective accessing and application of their intuition. Courage is given more prominence as a concept, than in the literature and would be a topic worthy of further research.

Research Question 3: How do we develop this essential skill as coaches?

The research suggests that there are individual practices that have particular value to developing intuition as a coach such as reflective practice, supervision and dialogue. Whether these are favoured because they are favoured practices of coaching development is a question worthy of further research.

As Sadler-Smith & Shefy (2007) concluded, more work needs to be done to assess the outcome effects of increasing intuitive awareness, and this would be true in the coaching context.

One of the big questions that connects all three and which remains and deserves further research is the level of expertise that the coach holds.
The research has obvious limitations, and further research would benefit from incorporating feedback from the coachee, or obtaining evidence from observing coaching as opposed to relying solely on the perception of the coach. Obviously there would be enhanced benefit from undertaking a comprehensive literature view which brings together coaching theoretical frameworks with the psychology of intuition. As expressed by (Sadler-Smith & Shefy, 2004: 89). “it makes no sense to talk of intuition versus rationality but only of intuition and rationality. By considering only rationality, one is left with a partial means of knowing the world and its possibilities”. It is when we engage both, that there are true benefits. The literature does point to activities which lend themselves to a more rational or intuitive approach. Coaching as a relational and unstructured activity surely lends itself to the use of intuition. Further research into this important area is therefore encouraged.

4.0 References


