

## Workplace telephone coaching conversations: a unique institutional practice as revealed through interpretive and empiricist multi-method approaches (Jenny Lynden and Rachel Avery, 2016)

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*Journal: Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice, 2016, Vol.9, No.1, 5-23)*

### Aim of study

Telephone coaching is used by over 94% of coaches worldwide (Newham-Kanas, Irwin, Morrow, 2011). This study explores the understanding of coaches' experiences of **workplace telephone coaching** and uses conversation analysis (CA) as a novel methodology to provide evidence suggesting that workplace telephone coaching conversations require a very specific approach to coaching communication skills as compared to **telephone counseling**.

Micro-level conversation analysis was used to examine 7 workplace coaching experiences and communication patterns were analyzed to demonstrate the wide range of linguistic styles used to facilitate effective workplace telephone conversations.

### Background

#### Research on Telephone Coaching to date

There is little empirical evidence to support the development of theory for effective professional practice in using the telephone modality. While some published studies have identified no significant difference in coaching outcomes, as perceived by coaches in face-to-face vs. telephone, others have stated an increased focus and pace, as well as more rapid development of rapport, trust and intimacy with telephone coaching (McLaughlin, 2013). Examples cited by Collett (2008) support these findings, and include enhanced active listening and increased use of silence. A number of training resources identify the use of verbal tone, pitch and pace as crucial for rapport (Starr, 2011).

Despite this focus on the role of language in coaching practice, and systematic review of 140 published studies, the authors found no published research exploring the linguistic structures using a micro-level transcriptive conversation analysis. This area is vitally important for coaching when the communication process lacks visual cues.

#### CA

Conversational Analysis (CA) is used to support professional training for other types of 'helping conversations' (counseling/therapeutic). CA focuses on micro-level analysis of the different features in talking such as pauses, hesitations, speech overlaps and changes in prosody - the pattern of stress and intonation in a language - across similar conversations. CA seeks to identify verbal patterns to reveal how participants act by focusing on talk-in-interaction with emphasis on specific contexts. The study's authors argue that a CA approach applied to telephone coaching can begin to identify how coach - coachee inter-actional talk or practices (such as a challenge or using silence) can facilitate workplace telephone coaching conversations despite the lack of verbal cues.

## Methodology

Using a mixed method study, the authors adopted a phenomenological approach addressing coaches workplace telephone coaching conversations. CA was conducted and focused on participants' analysis of the syntactic, prosodic and semantic features. The final phase of analysis involved 'scoping' published research to enable comparison of communication strategies with other 'helping' (counselling) telephone conversations. Seven coaches were recruited locally through the authors' personal networks. Each had training in coaching and wide diversity in actual coaching experience, use and preferences of workplace telephone coaching. Two coachee participants were additionally recruited. Data collection consisted of interviews and role plays using the GROW model.

## Key Findings

Three themes were identified as resonating with coach/participants and being most significant for their experience of workplace telephone coaching conversations.

1. Building rapport
2. Silence
3. Challenges

A CA of sections of role plays identified conversation patterns and some differences between participants based on the range and extent of working with telephone and on-line modalities.

<b>Building Rapport</b>	All the coach participants recognized the impact of the telephone. Some reported higher levels of self control and enhanced opportunities to control unhelpful feedback that would have been impossible in managing body language cues face-to-face. All coach participants agreed that telephone coaching allowed them to focus very specifically on the coachees dialogue and changes in tone, pitch, pace and emphasis as they were not distracted by body language or visual cues. The authors feel this micro-level analysis of the linguistic styles used in the dialogue can reveal features and patterns and, with this training, coaches can possibly acquire telephone coaching conversations skills.
<b>Silence</b>	Professional coaching literature identifies the importance of silence and its management. Some coaches felt they managed extended or awkward silences intuitively. No clear patterns emerged from this small data set. The authors note that silences of longer than 0.5 seconds have been showing to indicate a tendency to refuse to engage. The use of 'uhmmm' is a recognized device to avoid being seen as actively expressing refusal (Kitzinger, 2013). Periods of silence are important to facilitate reflective thinking (Charlton, 2010, Clutterbuck, 2010). Further micro-analysis and illustrative examples of coaching conversations could provide the basis for training and give the coach more awareness and method to co-manage silence with the coachee.
<b>Challenges</b>	The use of powerful questions to facilitate deeper thinking and perspective transformation as well as the construction of a challenge was experienced differently in telephone coaching than in face-to-face. Clearly this hypothesis requires further CA applied research.

## Limitations / Questions

- Role plays do not represent reality - cultural diversity can impact visual cues and formulation of challenges.
- Extremely small and non-diverse sample size of study.
- Telephone counselling CA data may not truly correlate and support workplace telephone coaching CA outcomes.
- The authors themselves admit there are challenges in linking telephone CA conclusions to workplace telephone coaching. Awareness and sensitivity to interpretation necessarily requires subjective references to wider cultural and social influences.

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