

# Life's thumbprint: The impact of significant life events on coaches and their coaching

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## Introduction

Coaches do not come to practice as a blank slate, 'tabula rasa'. However, there is little documentation of the impact diverse life experiences have on coaches' skills, professional evolution or presence in practice. Analysis of a critical events question included in a long-term global study of coach development identified three different clusters of life experiences each of which has an impact on a specific range of coach characteristics and coaching practices. Stressful personal experiences impact characteristics such as empathy and self-awareness. Coaching field specific experiences influence practice skills and knowledge base. Some prior professional training and experiences influence coach practices and perceptions of client workplace. An initial investigation by including a 'critical events' (Bryman, 1989; Furr & Carroll, 2003) question in the Development of Coaches Survey which specifically sought to identify:

- 1) What are the personal and professional experiences that influence coaches in their practice as a coach?
- 2) What are the dimensions of coaching practice that are impacted by personal and professional experiences?
- 3) What is the impact of specific life experiences on the coach's values, mental models and coaching behaviours?

The outcome will facilitate further study's in the development of coaches both qualitative and statistically.

## Background

A review of empirical coaching literature offers useful background information with respect to three elements: studies of coach characteristics; studies of coaching processes and practices; and studies of coach training. There remains a need to examine the role that personal and professional experiences play in the coach's behaviours, beliefs, values, identification of role and development of the coach-client relationship.

## Study Method

The Development of Coaches questionnaire was adapted from the quantitative survey used in a global, long-term study of the development of psychotherapists (Orlinsky and Ronnestad, 2005), which was revised to conform to specific language and descriptors consistent with the coaching field.

An open-ended critical incident question (Awal, Katzell and Katzell, 1988; De Haan, 2008) was added as a compliment to the quantitative items:

*Think of one to three different events in your life which have significantly influenced your development as a coach. Describe the nature of the event, your role in it, and what you learned from it?*

The responses to the above open-ended question forms the focus of this article. An initial group of 80 coaches responded to the survey, of which 67 responses were analysed. These included peers in local ICF chapters and other coaching associations (The Association of Coaching, Association of Coach Training Organisations), professional affiliates and coach training programme alumni.

## Results

Life events responded to the above question were coded into 10 distinct sub categories as shown in Table 3. Simple frequency calculation provided a distribution of event types with Personal Events being the largest single sub category of events as shown above at 21%.

Table 3. Types of life events.

Personal events	21%
Formal coach training	17%
Work experience	16%
Practice coaching	13%
Receiving coaching/mentoring	13%
Other formal education	6%
Self-development	5%
Professional affiliation	4%
Professional training	3%
Miscellaneous	1%

Above 10 events were further classed under 3 inclusive categories, detailed below. Categories, sub-categories and impact codes were clustered together to examine implied relationships between events and their impacts. Following were the key findings:

- 1) Coaching Field Specific Events: this combined formal coach training, practice coaching, receiving coaching/mentoring and professional affiliation.
  - Collectively, these comprised 48% of the total events identified.
- 2) Individual Non-Work experiences: this combined personal events and self-development.
  - Collectively, these comprised 26% of the total event pool.
- 3) Other Professional Experience: this combined work experience, other formal education and professional training.
  - Collectively, these comprised 26% of the events.

## Conclusion

One can conclude that a plethora of external factors such as, but not limited to, professional background, life experience and educational background all impact the coaches and their coaching. All of which indirectly benefit the coach client relationship. The study suggests the need for multifaceted strategy to prepare coaches in three domains: technical, affective and cognitive; in other words prepare the coaches to 'sharpen their saw' for their coaching methods, emotional intelligence and ability to reason / think / perceive.

Life experiences emerge as the most frequently cited incident in coach's development enabling them to 'lead with more courage', be more aware of their strengths and limitations, and most importantly, develop empathy; an attribute that is cited in several research studies reviewed for this study.

The study also suggests that formal coach training and education to develop skills and theory is quintessential in cultivating skills grounded in science and experience-based evidence allowing for a more 'rounded' and comprehensive practitioner who is able to engage in reflective dialogue.

As such, life's thumbprint does impact coaches and their coaching whatever and wherever the start point.