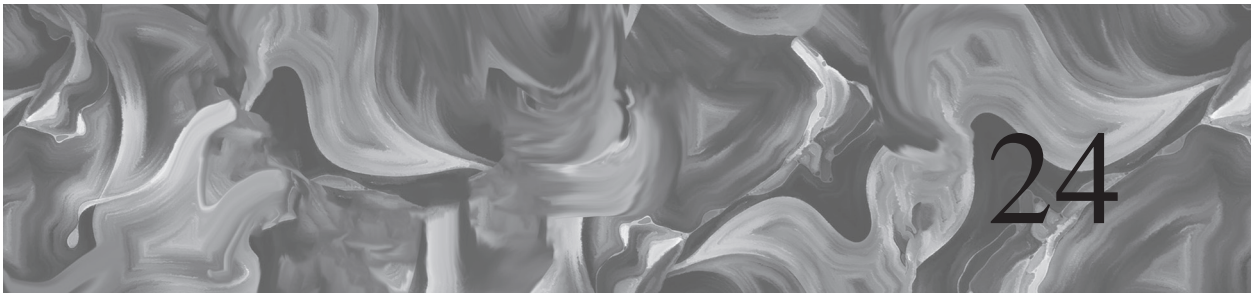

24

Coaching: Using Ordinary Words in Extraordinary Ways

Haesun Moon

INTRODUCTION

As one of the fastest-expanding industries worldwide with a multibillion dollar annual market value, coaching has generated a multitude of theories, methods, standards, and areas of application that permeate through various intersectoral and interprofessional boundaries with prolific success (Pappas and Jerman, 2015; ICF, 2016). Coaching is now one of the most cited leadership skills expected of a leader in healthcare, the corporate world, education, and the public or non-profit sectors, and the demand for coaching and coach training has increased exponentially, especially in the last two decades (Maltbia et al., 2014). The burning question of the 1990s and early 2000s, *Does it work?* seems to have been answered with a surging increase in the number of outcome studies. Yet pursuing answers to the question *How does it work?* reveals just how scant database information is in a field still in its infancy.

Current research literature is dominated by outcome studies that report individual cognitive processing and *internal* (motivation, confidence, beliefs, etc.) changes. The relational and reciprocal nature of the dialogic process is still largely underrepresented in research and pedagogical considerations. Although the permeating nature of words in dialogues has been widely documented, systematic process studies that record interactional perspective and the impact of *co-presence* – the phenomenological sense of 'being there' with another person in place and/or time – are still only emerging (Co-presence, n.d.).

In this chapter, I explore the core question of studying coaching as a dialogic process that co-constructs the notions of purpose, possibility, and progress – things ordinarily viewed together as an invisible or mysterious process. I also provide a new framework of coaching, The Dialogic Orientation Quadrant, derived from a Solution-Focused, interactional perspective, and offer a

practice-based way to understand 'how coaching works'.

DEFINING COACHING

In a field considered to still be in its infancy in terms of academic rigour, the lack of a unifying body of knowledge and the use of overarching definitions make it difficult to distinguish coaching from other human development interventions. Defining *coach* as a noun, as a verb, and as a profession are tricky undertakings that perforce engage multiple perspectives from diverse root disciplines. Each of the root disciplines has its own knowledge base comprising both theoretical frameworks and best practices that inform the theoretical grounding of practitioners from a wide range of occupational backgrounds now working as coaches (Sherman and Freas, 2004; Grant, 2005; Brock, 2008). Such diversity in the domain of coaching gives rise to as many definitions and models as there are practitioners and researchers. The respective legacy fields of those now working as coaches seems to inform how they define coaching in four general areas: what the coach does; what is understood as the client's progress; how the progress happens; and the protocol, boundaries, and usefulness of the interactions. A surge in the number of associations and researchers in recent decades has brought with it ever refined yet eclectic definitions of coaching as a conceptual bricolage of these diverse biases. For example, the Association for Coaching (n.d.) defines personal coaching as 'a collaborative solution-focused, results-oriented and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of work performance, life experience, self-directed learning and personal growth of the coachee'. The embedded biases in definitions influence how people participate in coaching dialogue as well as how they afterwards evaluate and reflect on their practice.

Along with the paucity of a unifying definition comes the increasing demand for more academic rigour in diversifying research. For example, influential authors like Grant illustrated heavy imbalance found in outcome studies relying solely on self-reporting and retrospective narrative, rather than rigorous examination of the coaching process. Grant (2006) acknowledged the diverse characteristics of coaching when he defined coaching as 'collaborative, individualised, solution-focused, results orientated, systematic, stretching, fosters self-directed learning, and should be evidence-based, and incorporate ethical professional practice' (p. 13). In this chapter, coaching is defined as a *dialogic and relational approach to curate clients' preferred interactions by exploring what might be wanted and identifying existing progress in that direction*.

THE PROCESS OF COACHING

Imagine, for example, that you are sitting with another person in a dialogue who tells you:

> I have been struggling with that for some time. I really want to see some positive changes, but I find myself going back to my old habits. I know I can do it and others seem to think that too, but for some reason, I don't seem to be able to move forward as much as I want to.

How you respond might largely depend on the expected role and relationship you have with this person. Did you imagine the other person to be a friend, a family member, a client or a colleague? Other layers of relational complexities influencing your response may include micro-habits of one's lifeworlds, dominant or binary narratives, existing interactional patterns, and so on. Our biases and assumptions direct our attention to specific parts of a narrative more so than other parts presented in that narrative. As dialogue participants, we discriminate, infer, interpret and

organize information presented in and through narrative. How does one make moment-by-moment choices in dialogue with someone? How do those choices influence collaborative dialogue in a coaching context?

The Meaning-Making

Before studying how coaching works, one needs to determine one's perspective to see the phenomenon through. In studying how meaning is established or negotiated or transformed in and through dialogue, some may find themselves in alignment with the structural stance posed by authors like Kegan (2009): *What 'form' transforms?* This traditional stance generally privileges positivistic interpretations and explanatory standpoints (cognition, motivation, other conceptual frameworks, etc.). From this point of view, the role of a coach is to discover the 'true meaning' contained in and underlying the *surface structure* of words. The influence of the aforementioned root disciplines may contribute to the position of coaches doing the work of thoroughly-knowing – literally, the process of *dia* (thorough or through) -*gnosis* (to know).

Others may sharply contrast this perspective with a post-structural perspective where meanings are co-constructed within particular interactional contexts, instead of seeing meaning as part of '*deep structure*' waiting to be unearthed (Chomsky, 1968 and Saussure, 1959, as cited in Bavelas et al., 2014). Instead of studying the words used by coach and client as independent parts of a conversation, the interactional perspective places emphasis on how words and gestures function to create and augment meaning in a given interaction. In search of the interactional functions of a coach and a client collaborating in meaning-making, post-structural therapists like De Shazer and his colleagues offer an alternative view where 'the participant's social interaction determines the meaning of the words they are using' (Bavelas et al., 2014, p. 1,). Other communication researchers following De Shazer, such as McGee (1999; McGee et al., 2005), pose questions like, *How do therapeutic questions work?* in search of how language functions in interactions acknowledged as collaborative meaning-making: the process called, literally, *dia* (through or thorough) -*logue* (words).

The Role of Language

The interactional and collaborative process of meaning-making is referred to as co-construction. The term *co-construction* is also a central concept used in broader theories of social constructionism that presupposes 'people, through their social and language interactions, continually create and rework the meanings that influence their lives' (Bavelas et al., 2014. p. 4; Gergen, 2009). According to this presupposition, the presumed process of a coaching conversation is to inductively observe new subjective meanings emerge in the collaborative interaction so that other narrative realities are made available. This supports De Shazer's (1991) description of co-construction as an activity, not an abstraction. Yet the description of the activity in the literature largely remains that of a conceptual framework.

Especially in a modality like coaching that prioritizes language as the primary tool for facilitating change, understanding how the tool works and refining its use is important for both pedagogical and practical reasons. Based on the assumption that words both shape and are shaped by social interaction, the coach's role as an influential listener in the interaction may be seen as someone who attends to the client's narrative with an intentional stance reflected in their responses. Bavelas and her colleagues (2000) call listeners co-narrators because their responses orient the narratives of their clients in the immediate social context. The main tools of co-construction in a dialogue offered by

De Jong et al. (2013) include questions, formulations, calibration, gestures, gazes, and many more. We explore questions and formulations more closely in this chapter.

How Questions Work

Although there are other interventions, the most frequently documented tool of coaching dialogue is questioning. The function of questions in a coaching dialogue reaches beyond information-gathering and the very act of posing a question may itself be an intervention. As Healing and Bavelas (2011, p. 46) propose, 'all questions are "loaded questions"; the practitioner's choice is how to "load" them with presuppositions that will be useful to the client'. A question suggests deliberate and alternative possibilities that both orient and constrain the respondent to answer within a spectrum of presuppositions embedded in the question.

Take, for example, these popular opening lines from coaching demo tapes available online:

- What brought you here today?
- How can I help you?
- What would you like to talk about today?

What do these questions presuppose? There are implicit assumptions of both roles and process, and explicit requests for specific information embedded in the examples, as illustrated in Table 24.1. Though not an exhaustive list, we can clearly see the assumptions in these examples. It may not be surprising to observe a client accepting some or all of the embedded assumptions that then become part of the shared perspectives in the collaborative meaning-making.

As presuppositions scaffold the shared perspectives between the coach and the client, using more useful presuppositions when posing questions should be an intentional process. Take, for example, the following opening questions from a Solution-Focused Brief Coaching session:

- Suppose this conversation somehow turns out to be useful, what will tell you that it was useful as you go back to your life afterwards?
- You must have a good reason to come here. What are your best hopes from this conversation?
- What are some positive changes that you would like to notice as a result of coming here?

The embedded assumptions are clearly orienting and they ask the client to address specific aspects of his or her life that are relevant to the reason for the visit. The above questions orient the client's attention in a way that is very different from the previous example.

Table 24.1 Embedded presuppositions

Question	*Assumptions*
What brought you here today?	• *Something happened in the past* • *That happening is related to or is what caused you to be here* • *You know what that is* • *It may not have been you volunteering to be here* • *You will tell me what brought you here*
How can I help you?	• *You need help* (assumption about the client) • *I can help you* (assumption about coach's role) • *You know what help you need* (building on the primary assumption 'You need help') • *You will tell me how I can help* (assumption of coaching process) • *Talking about this would be helpful* (assumption about proposed outcome)
What would you like to talk about today?	• *You want to talk* • *You have a topic in mind* • *You will tell me* • *Talking about it would be useful somehow*

How Formulations Work

Using all or part of what a client has presented is another co-construction tool coaches use when responding to client narrative, as evidence of understanding (or misunderstanding). Garfinkel and Sacks (1970) call such responses *formulations* in which 'one participant describes, summarizes, explicates, or characterizes what another participant has said' (p. 350, as cited in De Jong et al., 2013). It is also known as *reframing*, *normalizing*, *mirroring*, *echoing*, etc. in language-based interventions like therapy and coaching. Although formulations have been traditionally and generally regarded as neutral and non-directive activities meant to clarify information or display understanding and empathy, the transformative quality of formulations was observed as early as the 1970s in studying the social functions of formulations (Heritage and Watson, 1979). De Jong et al. (2013, p. 26) take an even more radical view that 'all formulations are influential choices rather than passive evidence of understanding' since the practitioner *omits*, *preserves*, or *adds to* what the client presents. Returning to our earlier example of a client's narrative:

> I have been struggling with that for some time. I really want to see some positive changes, but I find myself going back to my old habits. I know I can do it and others seem to think that too, but for some reason, I don't seem to be able to move forward as much as I want to.

At this point, the coach needs to make a choice. That choice may involve omitting, preserving (verbatim or in altered form), or adding to what has been said. The choice and all subsequent choices influence the conversational contexts and shared perspectives accumulating in and through the interactions. Here are four response examples selected from many possibilities from coach practitioners:

1 So, it's been a struggle for you. (*you* replacing *I*, deictically preserving the pronoun, preserved *ha(ve) been*, preserved *struggling* as an altered form *a struggle*, added *for you*)
2 *You keep* going back to *your* old *patterns*. (*you* and *your* replacing *I* and *my*, added the words *keep* and *patterns* to replace *habit*, preserved *going back to* and *old*)
3 *There is something blocking you* from *moving* forward. (added *there is something blocking you*, preserved *move forward* in an altered form *moving forward*)
4 So, *you* want to move forward to see some positive changes. (*you* deictically preserving *I*, and preserved the client's language *move forward, want to see some positive changes* in a rearranged order)

These four formulations are consistent with the practitioner's espoused theory of how change happens (David (1986) and Philipps (1999) as cited in Korman et al., 2013). For example, the formulations made in the first example preserve the word *struggle* and this may reflect the coach's assumption that the struggle is somehow related to the desired change. The second formulation seems to emphasize the persistent nature of the client's *patterns* and the client may take this formulation as an invitation to further elaborate on old patterns they believe they continue to follow. While questions may explicitly request more information, formulations often orient the client's attention and implicitly invite them to speak further on that particular content of the narrative. The third example illustrates a formulation where the coach adds the new information that was not introduced by the client: *something blocking*. The coach assumes a possible reason for the client not moving forward and attributes it to external factors. If accepted by the client, this assumption becomes a shared perspective between the coach and client. This particular perspective that *the client is blocked by something* is a significant departure from the initial client's utterance that *they know they can do it* and *they are not moving forward as much as they want.* The fourth and final example shows a Solution-Focused coach responding to the client's narrative. As seen in these examples, the coach's embedded curiosity behind each

formulation orients the client's utterances and narratives, and the coach's choice of formulation will influence the client's next utterance. This is what I call *interfluence*.

THE FOUR QUADRANT MODEL OF COACHING

When coaching is introduced as a question-based practice, the reciprocal and interfluent nature of dialogue is easily overlooked as it quickly becomes about what the coach does or, more precisely, about what the coach asks. Studying individual elements of dialogue instead of interactional functions risks the practice becoming ossified as a formula instead of a rhizomic flow of meaning. While acknowledging the complexity of collaborative meaning-making and interfluential relations of coach and client in their situated contexts, making the co-construction process visible is possible with the aid of an appropriate framework. The following simple heuristic of interaction is called the Dialogic Orientation Quadrant (DOQ) and is intended to make the inductive observation of a coaching conversation simpler to organize.

Observation #1: Timeline of the Narrative

There seems to be an inherent timeline in a narrative. We notice this timeline not only in coaching dialogues, but in ordinary conversations with friends, family and colleagues. The time spectrum spans from past to future and, in some cases, the past goes back to a time even before we were born and the future far out to a point even beyond our own existence (Figure 24.1). In this model, the concept of now or the present is defined as the time the coach and client spend together, so the focus of the activity is not distracted by possible and irrelevant discussion about defining 'the now'.

In coaching, it has been generally believed that the coach should focus on the narratives about the future, however, there is an increasing amount of evidence available that challenges the very notion of focusing only on the future narrative (Oettingen et al., 2016).

Observation #2: Content of the Narrative

In a conversation like coaching that can be more polarized than other everyday conversations, the content of narrative can be mapped along a spectrum somewhere between *positive content* and *negative content*, to borrow the terms used in the research method, Microanalysis of Face-to-Face Dialogue (Smock Jordan et al., 2013). Positive content includes the things people want to see continue, increase, and grow in their life: interactions, moments, experiences, thoughts, decisions, attitudes,

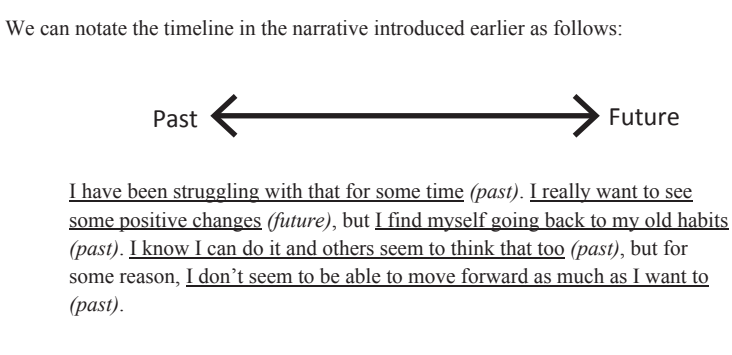

Figure 24.1 Timeline of narrative

feelings, and hopes. At the opposite end is the negative content people want to see less of. Returning to our earlier sample narrative, we can notate the content as shown in Figure 24.2.

As you may have noticed, mapping the content is not always as straightforward as mapping the timeline. This is, in part, because we are looking only at text here, devoid of other visible and audible acts of meaning. We might also find ourselves taking an evaluative stance when we assess the content as *positive* or *negative* in another person's life.

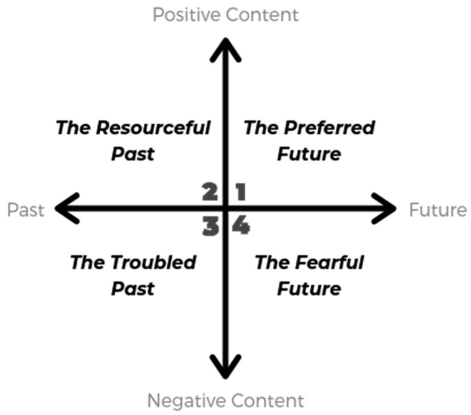

Figure 24.3 Dialogic Orientation Quadrant

Observation #3: Mapping the Narrative

A simple quadrant is created when we overlap the timeline as the horizontal axis and the content as the vertical axis (Figure 24.3). Moving counter-clockwise from the top right, each quadrant bears a unique combination of the two axes:

- Quadrant 1 (top-right): positive content and future timeline, *The Preferred Future*
- Quadrant 2 (top-left): positive content and past timeline, *The Resourceful Past*
- Quadrant 3 (bottom-left): negative content and past timeline, *The Troubled Past*
- Quadrant 4 (bottom-right): negative content and future timeline, *The Fearful Future*

I have been struggling *(negative)* with that *(negative)* for some time. I really want to see some positive changes *(positive)*, but I find myself going back *(negative)* to my old habits *(negative)*. I know I can do it *(positive)* and others seem to think that too *(positive)*, but for some reason, I don't seem to be able to *(negative)* move forward *(positive)* as much as I want to.

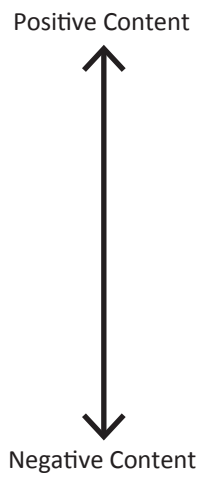

Figure 24.2 Content of narrative

Our nomenclature nods both to technical terms used in the field of coaching as well as to language used in everyday conversations. The name of the model takes into account both the quality and function – dialogic and orienting – of the coaching conversation: Dialogic Orientation Quadrant (DOQ) (Moon, 2019). We can now apply the quadrant to our narrative:

> I have been struggling (Q3) with that (Q3) for some time (Q3). I really want to see (Q1) some positive changes (Q1), but I find myself going back (Q3) to my old habits (Q3). I know I can do it (Q1, Q2) and others seem to think that too (Q2), but for some reason, I don't seem to be able to (Q3, Q4) move forward (Q1) as much as I want to (Q1).

It may be useful to note here that this activity is meant as an approximation, similar to the metaphor popularly evoked by Korzybski when he describes a model as a map and not the territory. Minor variations between different raters undertaking the analyses are common and the scope of analysis may be even more microscopic or macroscopic than that provided here.

A close examination of interactional activities like those shown above demonstrates the extent of congruence between what is espoused by a coach as their framework, and what is actually practised in their coaching responses in exploring the client narrative. As seen here in earlier definitions of coaching, it is generally agreed that coaching conversations explore *future-focused* timelines and client *strengths and potentials* (positive content). If coaching intervention tools like questions and formulations function to transform and shape meanings towards the direction of *what is wanted in the future* (Q1) and *existing relevant experiences* (Q2), what might be an appropriate response to the client's narrative at this point?

Although there is no set way of forming questions, a pattern nonetheless emerges when we observe coaching sessions by various practitioners. For example, a Solution-Focused coach is more likely to elicit and expand on the information in Q1 or Q2 with their questions and formulations. The Q3 and Q4 are less likely to be explored, though acknowledged, when expressed by the client. Experienced practitioners are able to use Q3 and Q4 information to orient a client's attention to Q1 and Q2. Solution-Focused coaches may be more likely to respond to our sample narrative with one or more of the following:

- So, you want to see some positive changes. What will you see?
- So, you want to move forward. What will tell you that you are moving forward and in the right direction?
- You mentioned that both you and others know that you can do it. What is it that others know about you that makes them believe that?

Notice that all responses are specific to the preceding narrative. The responses also preserve the client's language that we have mapped in either Q1 or Q2 and an explicit request is made in each response to expand on the information captured in the formulation. When information is presented in all four quadrants, a Solution-Focused coach will rarely invite the client to explore Q3 or Q4. For example, it is very likely not Solution-Focused coaching if the coach responds in the following manner:

- So, it's been a struggle for you. How long have you been struggling with this?
- You keep going back to your old patterns. What is getting in the way of breaking free from those patterns?
- There is something blocking you from moving forward. What are your next steps that you need to take to get rid of these roadblocks?

These responses each consist of a formulation and a question. Clients and coaches build shared perspectives in moment-by-moment exchanges of visible and/or audible acts, and Bavelas et al. (2017) noted that more than 80% of agreement is visual and includes things like nods, smiles, and raised eyebrows, without audible cues.

Observation #4: Orientation of the Narrative

Perhaps, the most useful aspect of the DOQ is that it records the ephemeral nature of dialogue onto a tangible form. It makes visible the interactional patterns of language use and one can easily see how narratives are elicited, shaped and organized. The movement of client narratives can be mapped as clients consistently cooperate in answering the coach's questions. For example, *What brought you here?* elicits further narrative from clients that can be mapped onto Quadrant 3: The Troubled Past, more often than not. In contrast, when asked, '*Suppose this conversation somehow turns out to be useful, what will tell you that it was useful as you go back to your life afterwards?*' clients will most likely respond with narrative that can be mapped onto Quadrant 1: The Preferred Future. This pattern of client narrative corresponding to promptings from the coach, be they positive or negative in content, has been consistently observed, as documented by Smock Jordan et al. (2013).

Similar observations can be made with the formulation/question pair, as shown earlier. Although the coach may not elicit Q3 and Q4 responses, the information presented in these quadrants needs to be acknowledged and not avoided. Returning to our sample narrative, here are alternate response options using Q3 and Q4 information:

- So, it's been a struggle for you. (Q3) *How have you been coping as well as you have?* (intended to elicit information in Q2)
- You keep going back to your old patterns. (Q3) *So, what does your new pattern sound and look like instead?* (intended to elicit information in Q1)
- There is something blocking you from moving forward. (Q3) Suppose the block somehow disappears, what will you notice that's different or better about the way you are moving forward? (intended to elicit information in Q1)

The formulation part is consistent with the previous example, but the question part has been modified and the intended direction of the questions are notated in terms of the quadrant. With this modification, one can easily imagine the client's narrative following what the coach is seeking in their questions.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Departing from the notion of goal setting and the use of a goal-centred approach, coaching can be practised as the moment-by-moment co-construction of meanings centring around what client might want. The quality of the co-construction can be inductively observed using a communication heuristic like the DOQ. Current research initiatives and publications rely heavily on extrapolation and inference from psychological research. For that reason, closely examining real-world coaching interactions and describing what can be observed exercises and strengthens the listening and responding muscles of the coach. The DOQ renders such examination of one's progress tangible by slowing down the observational process to a moment-by-moment choicepoint in the interaction. Kurt Lewin's quote that 'there's nothing more practical than a good theory' serves to illustrate the effect of the DOQ as a highly practical theory with diverse implications in the areas of coaching practice, pedagogy, and research, just to name a few.

Implications for Practice

Using language as a transformative tool with individuals and groups has been well documented in other closely related fields like Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005), which pays close attention to relational aspects of meaning-making. Studying one's own practice from this interactional perspective using the DOQ enables both broad and in-depth examination of what

actually happens in a dialogue. Mapping client narratives helps one to listen closely to the actual language of what the client says. Noticing one's influential presence in orienting client's narratives and paying close attention to how meaning gets co-constructed in the immediate interactions help practitioners to become observers of their own work.

Implications for Pedagogy

Using the DOQ as a pedagogical tool to illustrate the learner's progress throughout their learning is another good use of the model. If you teach dialogic approaches, the DOQ can serve not only as a practical illustration in class but also an assessment tool for measuring learners' progress. For example, I often start a class by asking learners to record a short session with another learner. Without much introduction to coaching or related models, their recorded session in the beginning is established as their baseline of skills. As they continue learning the approach, they make subsequent recordings so that learners themselves can compare their recordings to observe progress in their learning. Having the recordings makes supervision and mentoring sessions much more tangible for both supervisor and learner, and the focal point of supervision and mentorship becomes about celebrating the learner's progress and existing competence instead of correcting the wrong.

Implications for Research

If a good theory is and should be practical, as Lewin said, it can also be said that *there is nothing more theoretical than a good practice* when we consider research as an inductive process of keeping one's curiosity about how coaching works. While the field of coaching is saturated with outcome studies testing various hypotheses, the need for more inductive and emergent ways to study conversations as phenomena is escalating. How meaning is co-constructed moment-by-moment in people reciprocating with both visible and audible acts of communication in their interaction is gaining more importance in studying coaching, and it should continue to take the central site of research moving forward.

Ending with Beginning in Mind

In this chapter, coaching as a dialogic process centred on meaning-making is introduced with a simple heuristic of interaction, the Dialogic Orientation Quadrant. As we end the chapter together, the burning question of 'how will you use it' remains. As we continue to engage in the sacred work of bringing about positive changes in the spaces we occupy, it is my best hope for you to take what you learned and initiate a meaningful difference in the very places that might be exasperating various relations. As I often say in the beginning of a coaching class, *the effectiveness of a dialogue expands beyond what coaches do in session towards what clients do after the session*. The idea of ending the chapter with your various beginnings in mind in your own contexts is life-giving, and I certainly hope that you will continue to learn from every conversation you hold with yourself and others.

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