



HOW THE PANDEMIC HAS CHANGED COACHING

22 HR experts and
coaches share their
experiences



About the study

Preliminary survey

In a preliminary survey and based on a literature review, an initial set of hypotheses was created and discussed individually with a total of six experts. Their feedback, comments, suggestions and additions were successively incorporated in the set. Thus, the final catalog of ten theses was created in October 2020.

The theses

The theses refer not only to coaching process itself, which now often takes place online but can and should be related to the changed work context of the coachees. How do collaboration and leadership change in the home office and how is this changed content addressed and processed in business coaching? This is the basic question!

The expert interviews

Individual interviews were conducted with 12 coaches and 10 HR experts in November and December 2020. Our interviewees are mostly very experienced HR experts and senior coaches: their average work experience is 17.4 years. High level of agreement, but different perspectives.

High approval

Presumably due to the development of the theses with subject matter experts, there is a very high level of agreement. The hypotheses received an averaged 88 percent of agreement in the discussion ("Strongly agree" and "Mostly agree" added together).

Ten theses with experts comments

Thesis 1: "Social distancing" will have an impact on the sense of social belonging. Business coaching must therefore provide more space for reflection on social needs and working relationships.

"The virus has managed to prevent the satisfaction of elementary needs, not only the need for contact, closeness and belonging, but also the needs for freedom of choice, logic/understandability and meaningfulness are challenged. I explain this to my coachees and it helps them to better provide their own reactions and also those of their co-workers." This statement by a coach is representative of several responses and thus working methods of coaches in the pandemic. It is precisely the very fact-oriented crisis managers who needs to become aware of the needs of their staff. If managers now pay into the relationship account, it is enormously profitable - for the team, for themselves and for the whole company.

Thesis 2: Digital media and "social distancing" are fundamentally changing verbal and non-verbal work-related communication (conversations, meetings, networking, etc.) This must be taken into account in business coaching.

"We have to rethink contact, redefine presence and this requires new conventions. However, these must first become established - not only, but also in coaching" is, briefly and succinctly, the point of view of many experts. (One such - unspoken - convention can be, for example, not to participate so actively in virtual meetings and to think it is okay to work on emails on the side). However, there are also other views on this thesis, the most succinct one being formulated by the youngest coach colleague interviewed: *"Digital media have an influence, sure, but we've had this discussion since the beginning of 2000. The tools have come to the point where I almost feel like we're sitting together. When we were still dependent on chat and asynchronous exchange, that may have been a problem, but today I see absolutely no limitation in virtual communication."* Occasionally, positive consequences of the new, predominantly digital communication were also explicitly mentioned. For example, a coach observed that there was *"less flurry, less conflict, less intrigue"*. And one HR expert noted that senior managers in particular now become more approachable for employees when they switch themselves to "green" on Skype and thus signal that they are approachable for everyone.

Ten theses with experts comments

Thesis 3: The crisis leads to comprehensive changes in all areas of life ("new normal"). Business coaching and life coaching are increasingly merging as a result.

Many experts are convinced that life coaching is also good for business and that at present the separation of work and private life is difficult or even impossible anyway. But some company representatives also showed a different point of view: From a company perspective, life and business coaching should be strictly separated. On the one hand, this is clearly a tax issue. Life coaching paid for by the company is a monetary benefit. On the other hand, those responsible for internal coaching could get into trouble if they asked, for example in a review or final discussion, what had been worked on in the coaching and then pushed into areas that led too far into personal or private areas.

Thesis 4: The loss of external stability leads to insecurity in almost all areas of life. The inner resources of the clients must now be promoted more in business coaching.

"Every interaction must currently be planned like an arms deal: Where can we meet? How many can take part? Masked or unmasked?" is the succinct description of the situation by one of our interview partners. The following statement by an HR manager is representative of many similar ones: *"Self-management and self-care are enormously important now. It is important to activate one's own resources, since there are hardly any people around to provide stability. I would say resource strengthening is the magic formula in coaching now!"* There were also indications that in the current crisis other resources should be activated than previously in the business context, for example mindfulness.

Ten theses with experts comments

Thesis 5: Business coaching must take into account the change in working and environmental conditions. Questioning habitual patterns of thinking and building new patterns of behaviour is now becoming very important.

"This is the core and epitome of coaching - this is where coaching offers the most added value. And: coaching is a change project per se!". This sums up the view of most respondents. The VUKA world has now become directly and clearly tangible for everyone. However, there are considerable differences with regard to the jumping-off point: while some had already worked and led virtually before the pandemic, others were confronted with a completely new situation practically overnight. *"In many cases, home office was simply inconceivable; presence was considered indispensable - there was a lot of re-learning,"* observes a coach specialized in medium-sized companies. An HR expert expresses a similar opinion: *"Home office was frowned upon in our company: Can I trust employees? I have to control them! The change is enormous in conservative companies like ours: hierarchical thinking is softened, managers are forced to rethink their attitudes and values."* But even those who were used to virtual working and leading are currently facing special challenges. *"We Germans find the current situation particularly difficult to deal with, because the cultural dimension of "uncertainty avoidance" is very high in our country,"* says a colleague who is specialized in intercultural coaching.

Thesis 6: Career coaching is gaining in importance because the crisis requires a reassessment of one's own career plans and professional motivators.

Here, many of the respondents even see much more fundamental changes than described in the thesis. *"Career plans do not experience a continuation; development plans that had been set up become obsolete. Maybe not all, but a large part of our managers will have to rethink careers,"* is how the HR expert of a company in crisis describes the situation. For the self-employed or for micro-enterprises in affected sectors, coaching is now often about a total personal reorientation. Jobs are lost and now the question arises: What do I actually want? Is this perhaps a new beginning for me? Many have involuntarily received a push and are now seeking coaching because they want to use this situation as an opportunity and approach it with reflection. Others first have to deal with their enormously high stress level in coaching in order to be able to think and plan clearly again. HR experts in large corporations make the following observations: *"More people are currently questioning whether they are still in the right position, whether they really want to do their job. At the same time, there is a lack of courage to move or change because so much change is already taking place. On the one hand, many are grateful for the security that a company like ours offers, and at the same time they have a feeling of stagnation."*

Ten theses with experts comments

Thesis 7: The crisis poses high challenges and changed demands on managers. The efficient, goal- and solution-oriented support of business coaching is therefore needed especially in these times.

Both HR experts and coaches see a certain dilemma here. The necessity and the special benefit of coaching are undisputed. Many managers are emotionally burdened, feel an enormous responsibility weighing on them - both professionally and privately. How to deal with one's own insecurity? How to cope with the entrepreneurial and interdepartmental thinking and acting that is now often required at lower management levels? How to drive on sight and still stay on course? How to perform the balancing act between flexibility and goal orientation? At the same time, many of the respondents perceive that managers are stuck in the hamster wheel, do not take the time to reflect and that coaching requests in companies are even declining. The pressure to save money in many companies is doing the rest ...

Thesis 8: In view of the profound changes brought about by the crisis, coaches must reflect on their understanding of coaching and put tried and tested methods and approaches to the test.

Here, a change in attitude towards virtual coaching is primarily addressed by the interviewees. The openness of coaches to work online was very diverse before the pandemic. For former online sceptics, this means fundamentally changing their assumptions about how coaching should take place. Otherwise there is a risk of failure, and that is due to a "self-fulfilling prophecy". For many coaches, the exchange and practice in peer groups, such as those that exist in coaching associations, are very helpful. Experience shows that although methods need to be adapted, most of it works well in the virtual setting. And that some clients even open up faster in virtual coaching, especially if they are in their home office and thus on their own turf, i.e. they even benefit from the spatial distance.

Ten theses with experts comments

Thesis 9: Business coaches should reflect on their own attitude towards the pandemic in supervision and/or in collegial exchange in order to avoid projections onto their clients.

Reflectively questioning one's own coaching is a basic requirement for coaches. What is happening in the world and what does that mean to me? If you don't have clarity here, you can't be a good scout for others. This is how the attitude of many interviewees can be summarized. Others see a greater need for self-explanation on the topic of Corona due to the high degree of personal involvement. *"It is important to clarify: how am I doing in the crisis? Which of my own needs are possibly unfulfilled? It is particularly challenging now not to project anything onto the clients. For example, I work with a client who is coping very well with the home office situation and does not feel affected or restricted in any way by Corona. So there is nothing to problematize from my side"*, is how one coach describes her experience.

Thesis 10: Internal HR Experts must now review their selection and quality criteria, as coaches sometimes need new (e.g. digital) competences and coaching processes are changing.

In many cases, HR experts are convinced that the coaches they work with are also up to the current challenges. On the other hand, coaches report that this review is already taking place. *"Who shows the necessary flexibility? Who finds answers to the challenges of the time?"* Crisis and conflict management skills, which used to be needed more selectively, are now in permanent demand. The ability to learn, agility, flexibility and pragmatic action play a role especially in dealing with technology and with the many and rapid changes in assignments. *"Keep it simple"*, *"just try something out, not every technique has to be mastered perfectly from the start"*, are corresponding tips and experiences. *"Watch out,"* says an HR expert, *"managers should not get the feeling that they are being coached with untested methods."* This (apparent) contradiction can perhaps be resolved with the following statement by an interviewee: *"Experience and excellent training of the coach are more important today than ever. Anything else would be negligent now!"*