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The Grammar of Coaching

We are used to talk coaching without knowing precisely what it essentially is. It seems sufficient to know that coaching refers to a coach-client relation, which is established to help clients to solve their problems or master their challenges on the basis of strict confidentiality. Sure, these features are important. But what do they mean in detail? And: How could we describe coaching in order to be able to decide whether a specific process is coaching and not training, counselling, selling, discussion or a small talk? And furthermore, how could we describe coaching to give students helpful advice how to learn coaching?

We can answer these questions, once we realize that language is in the center of coaching, - and particularly the pragmatic or pragma-linguistic features of language. Ludwig Wittgenstein called this feature "language games" and demonstrated that they are constituted and defined by specific social rules. On this conceptual basis we can state that coaching is a specific language game with particular social rules, and that these social rules constitute coaching as a specific communication genre in contrast to communication genres like counselling, training etc.

On this conceptual basis I have tried to decipher the 'social grammar of coaching' empirically. The first important insight of my qualitative research is that coaching processes consist of clusters and series of decisions, which coaches and clients must make cooperatively with regard to ten basic decision making dimensions. Furthermore, each of these dimensions offer a specific set of decision making options. These dimensions and options define the basic frame for decision making processes in coaching.

The second most important research result is that coaches and clients use this decision making frame quite differently. Because coaches use their decision making options to constitute and optimize a specific leadership style. It is determined by the paradox of giving directions for facilitating participation and self-directedness. This paradoxical leadership style can be found and analyzed on two levels of coaching processes. On the first of these two levels coaches refrain from giving advice and prefer decisions to facilitate clients to decide for helpful problem solving activities. This first level process must be managed by meta-communication, which takes place on a systemically superior process level. One of the most important tasks on this level is that coaches must present and explain the basic idea of coaching to be a helpful relation with a high aspiration of clients' participation and self-directedness. In a next step this concept must be implemented into the coaching process carefully.

With these features my research approach shows some unique specialities, which give impulse to compare it with the approach, which Eric de Haan and Adrian Myers have developed.



Previous research publication from this research

- Harald Geißler (2016): Die Grammatik des Coachens - eine empirische Rekonstruktion. Wiesbaden: Springer (in print)
- Harald Geißler (2011): Empirische Rekonstruktion von Coachingprozessen. In: E.-M. Graf, Y. Aksu, I. Pick & S. Rettinger (Hrsg.): Beratung, Coaching, Supervision. S. 93-125. Wiesbaden: Springer
- Harald Geißler (2009): Die inhaltsanalytische „Vermessung“ von Coachingprozessen. In: B. Birgmeier (Hrsg.): Coachingwissen. S. 93-125. Wiesbaden: Springer

About Harald Geißler

Harald is professor for vocational and management education at Helmut-Schmid-University in Hamburg. In the early 1990-ies he was the first in his discipline, who participated in the management based discourse about organizational learning and introduced this new concept into the educational sciences. Using this concept not only for theoretical discussions, but also in his organizational counselling practice he realized that coaching is of extreme importance for organizational development processes to facilitate successful and sustainable organizational learning processes. On this basis finally he explored the options, which modern media offer to enrich coaching processes and thereby to open new horizons for organizational development and learning.

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