Creating high-quality coaching conversations: a video-based analysis of executive coach behaviour in initial coach–client interactions

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ABSTRACT

Coaching outcome research has made progress over the past decade. However, studies providing insights into coach–client interactions remain scarce – especially those including experienced professionals. The study takes a video-based approach to elucidate how coaches initiate high-quality coaching conversations. Our hypotheses regarding relevant coaching behaviours refer to the coaching entry phase and are theoretically based on Rogers' core conditions and meta-analytic findings on co-regulation. The analysis was based on 90 video recordings of initial coach-client encounters (average age 50). The recorded coaching sessions lasted 20 minutes each and were part of an accreditation process for executive coaches. Four independent observers analysed the coaches' interpersonal behaviour and their use of specific interventions (e.g. appreciation, contracting, reflections). Accreditors and observers assessed working alliance and coaching performance as outcomes. Findings suggest that high-performing coaches tended to behave in a neutral to dominant manner, were friendlier and were more likely to use simple and complex reflections. Surprisingly, in online coaching negative effects of complex reflections occurred. Female coaches and clients received higher outcome ratings. The results advance the understanding of microbehaviours in initial coach-client conversations and inform evidence-based human resource and coach development.

Introduction

Executive coaching has emerged as a vital tool for leadership development, particularly in navigating the increasingly complex and dynamic work environment (Grant, 2014; Taylor et al., 2019). It is regarded as a fast-growing core intervention in human resource development (HRD) and organisational learning (Ellinger et al., 2008). Furthermore, coaching is increasingly regarded as an essential managerial and leadership competency, to be incorporated into daily management practices (Hamlin et al., 2006). Meta-analytic evidence has established its overall efficacy (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023; Jones et al., 2016).

What remains unclear, however, is the micro-level pathway through which coaching produces these positive effects – especially the specific behaviours coaches enact in real time (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Boyatzis et al., 2022). Only few studies have examined executive coach – client exchanges with video-based observational methods (e.g. Busch et al., 2022), even though such fine-grained approaches are indispensable for capturing the temporal dynamics of behavioural interaction (Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2024). Without this lens, we still lack precise knowledge of which coach microbehaviours predict which session-level outcomes (Pandolfi, 2020). The present study seeks to identify the discrete microbehaviours through which coaches cultivate high-quality dialogue in the very first session, recognising that these early exchanges lay the groundwork for an effective coach–client relationship. The study of microbehaviours that enable high-quality conversations advances coaching research and contributes to HRD scholarship by demonstrating how workplace conversations can be designed to foster reflection and learning (Beattie, 2006; Beattie et al., 2014).

Process-oriented coaching research offers a promising avenue for addressing this gap. Early experimental work with novice coaches has shown that solution-focused techniques outperform problem-focused techniques (Braunstein & Grant, 2016; Grant, 2012; Theeboom et al., 2016) and that empathic, friendly coach behaviours foster a stronger working alliance (Ianiro et al., 2013; Will et al., 2016). However, these studies rely predominantly on student samples or very small numbers of practitioners (e.g. Howard, 2015), raising questions about generalisability to experienced executive coaches. Furthermore, most studies lack a coherent theoretical rationale for prioritising certain coach behaviours (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019; Hurlow, 2022; Joullié et al., 2022) and provide little guidance on which coach behaviours are likely to be critical at certain stages of the coaching process.

Although coaching and therapy differ in terms of primary intention (e.g. work effectiveness vs. broader life issues), client concerns (e.g. leadership or personal growth vs. managing anxiety or depression), and contextual conditions (e.g. potential company involvement in executive coaching), they also share substantial similarities. These include the core skills of the helping professional (e.g. active listening, questioning) and the overarching aim of fostering reflection, change, and enhanced well-being of the client (Bluckert, 2005). Similar to coaching, many therapeutic approaches emphasise a client-centred, collaborative relationship that enables clients to develop their own solutions. These similarities allow for the transfer of key insights on conversation quality from therapy to coaching, as demonstrated by several executive coaching studies (Graßmann et al., 2020; McKenna & Davis, 2009). Thus, to conceptually ground the present study, we draw on the well-established common factors perspective from psychotherapy (Wampold, 2001), which posits that certain interpersonal processes account for client improvement across different therapeutic approaches.

Applied to coaching (Bluckert, 2005; De Haan, 2008), this framework highlights Rogers (1951) core conditions of empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard as universal relational mechanisms. Only few observational studies have operationalised these conditions through coded coach microbehaviours (for exceptions, see Busch et al., 2022; Fingas et al., 2025; Will et al., 2019). Complementing the common-factor lens, the most recent and comprehensive meta-analysis on executive coach behaviour (37 randomised controlled trials) identifies co-regulation – the coach's moment-to-

moment attentiveness and flexibility – as a key driver of coaching effectiveness (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023). Together, these strands emphasise that how a coach adapts to the client in the 'here and now' are critical components of successful practice. Our criteria for conversation quality are based on humanistic and social constructionist learning principles (Raskin & Rogers, 2005; Rogers, 1951; Stelter, 2014). Within this framework, a helping relationship is considered high-quality if it effectively supports the client's learning and growth. Clients are considered experts on their own challenges and should develop their own solutions through guided self-exploration (Kaufman & Scoular, 2004).

We analyse 90 initial coaching sessions that are part of an accreditation process for executive coaches (experienced professionals). Data sources include video recordings of live coaching conversations as well as assessments of coach performance by the accreditors, who have considered feedback on the live session from clients and other accreditation candidates. Based on these data sources, trained independent observers apply a high-resolution coding scheme to capture minute-by-minute (a) non-verbal coach behaviour (e.g. facial expressions, vocal tone) and (b) discrete coaching interventions (e.g. empathic reflections, appreciations, humour). Observers also rated the overall working alliance as a key outcome. We then model how the duration and frequency of coaching microbehaviours (a-b) predict two indicators of conversation quality: the working alliance, as assessed by observers and coaching performance assessed by accreditors. As digital coaching becomes more prevalent, we further test whether behavioural predictors differ between face-to-face and synchronous online settings.

Our research makes several important contributions to the field of executive coaching. First, it brings theory-driven behavioural precision to the field by translating Rogers' core conditions and the concept of co-regulation into directly observable microbehaviours, thereby clarifying which common factors matter and how they emerge during the crucial opening session. Second, it provides robust empirical evidence: a large sample of experienced coaches, analysed with extensive video coding, provides a fine-grained and ecologically valid test of initial behavioural drivers of coaching-conversation quality. Third, it generates insights for the digital era by comparing face-to-face and synchronous online sessions, revealing whether the same microbehaviours sustain quality across delivery modes – information that organisations urgently need as virtual coaching proliferates. Taken together, these contributions move the discussion away from general assertions about 'what works' towards an actionable model of microbehaviour that shows how high-quality coaching conversations can be successfully initiated. This can influence both future research and evidence-based practitioner development. Finally, evidence on how high-quality conversations are shaped, whether in person or online, has significant implications for HRD scholars and practitioners.

Characteristics of high-quality coaching conversations

The design of evidence-based coaching education, supervision, and accreditation necessitates clarification of which coach behaviour contributes to high-quality coaching conversations. Achieving clarity is a major challenge given the many different theories and concepts that coaching can be based on (for overviews and explanations of concepts, see Greif et al, 2022; Peltier, 2010).

Similar to coaching research, psychotherapy research has faced the challenge of integrating findings from different therapeutic approaches. Meta-analytic findings showed the *largest effect sizes* in relationship to therapy outcome for common factors such as the alliance, goal consensus and Rogers' core conditions empathy, positive regard/affirmation and congruence/genuineness (range $d = .49$ -.72; for an overview, see Wampold, 2001).

Several empirical studies and meta-analyses have demonstrated that the positive effects of common factors, such as the working alliance and empathy, are also applicable to the context of executive coaching (e.g. Dagley, 2010; De Haan et al., 2013; Graßmann et al., 2020; Williams, 2023). An optimal working alliance is characterised by a positive affective bond between coach and client and by their agreement on which goals to pursue and what tasks this entails (Baron & Morin, 2009; McKenna & Davis, 2009). It is therefore important to explore which specific coach behaviours support different aspects of the working alliance (affective bond, goal/task agreement) already early in the process. Early coach–client interactions promote relationship-building processes and play a key role in initiating change in clients (De Haan et al., 2013; Wampold & Flückiger, 2023). Research emphasises the importance of the first session in creating a strong coach-client alliance; the first session even predicts a client's success at the end of the coaching process (e.g. Ianiro et al., 2013, 2015). Accordingly, initial coach–client interactions are meaningful and important for later success.

In addition to a positive working alliance, other criteria should be used to evaluate the quality of initial coach–client interactions (De Haan et al., 2020). We assume that high quality is reflected in the professionalism and general skills of the coach – both during the conversation and in the subsequent reflection on it. This may include, for example, the extent to which the coach's interventions are truly evidence-based (cf. Cavanagh et al., 2005), the richness and appropriateness of the interventions used, and the coach's self-reflection.

Important coach behaviour in initial coach–client encounters

The initial phase typically focuses on establishing initial contact with the client and clarifying the coaching assignment. This phase is used to set the framework and conditions for the coaching process and to lay the foundation for a trusting and productive working alliance (Ianiro & Kauffeld, 2022). Thus, the coach's ability to create a positive relationship is crucial. A coach's nonverbal and verbal behaviours meeting the core conditions as defined by Rogers (i.e. demonstrating empathy, unconditional positive regard, genuineness/authenticity) seem to be important for relationship building in coaching (Passmore, 2007; Will et al., 2016, 2019). Moreover, recent literature (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023; Passarelli et al., 2023; Stelter, 2018) characterises executive coaching as a co-regulation or co-creation process. The term 'co-regulation' denotes a dynamic interplay between the coach and the client, whereby both parties influence and shape the coaching process in a continuous and reciprocal manner (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023). On the part of the coach, co-regulation is described as the ability to react flexibly and constructively to what happens in the interaction with the client and to act in a credible and trust-building manner (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023). This overlaps with Rogers' core conditions, which also emphasise the coach's attentiveness and flexibility during the coaching. In the first meetings, co-creation involves clarifying the coaching

contract – defining the framework and the client's individual goals. At the same time, co-regulation happens on the emotional level as the coach responds to the client and their dynamic in the moment, helping to create a positive and supportive atmosphere.

We systematically investigate which observable microbehaviours of executive coaches contribute to high-quality conversations at an early stage in the coaching process. In this way, we create an empirical basis for an integrative approach that draws on common microbehaviours and links them to specific quality criteria. The selection of specific, observable verbal and nonverbal microbehaviours reflects the functional role of early coach – client interactions. It is grounded in Rogers' core conditions, empirical coaching-process research and recent meta-analytic findings on effective coaching behaviours. The selection of microbehaviours relevant for initial coach-client encounters is not intended to be exhaustive, but represents an initial starting point for an integrative model of common microbehaviours in executive coaching.

Interpersonal nonverbal behaviour

The development of a positive relationship largely depends on nonverbal interpersonal behaviour (Burgoon, 1995; Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). This behaviour can be described along the two basic dimensions of affiliation (friendliness ↔ hostility) and dominance (submissiveness ↔ dominance) (Jacobs & Scholl, 2005; Leary, 1957). Friendly nonverbal behaviour embodies Rogers' core condition of unconditional positive regard. Non-verbal dominance (without hostility) is described as self-confidence and assertiveness (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2000, an overview of behavioural anchors is provided in Table 1). It reflects Rogers' principle of genuineness/congruence, which is expressed through self-confident, authentic behaviour. Both dimensions feed into co-regulation: dominance allows influence, while affiliation creates trust (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023).

Several studies show that the coach's dominant-friendly behaviour during the first coaching session had a positive impact on the working alliance and the client's perceived goal attainment after the final coaching session; conversely, submissive coach behaviour had a negative impact on these outcome measures (e.g. Ianiro et al., 2013, 2015). Since attachment behaviour and emotional warmth is generally associated with the expression of nonverbal friendliness (see Table 1; e.g. Burgoon et al., 2010; Raskin & Rogers, 2005), we assume that the results concerning the affiliation dimension are widely transferable to other coach populations (excluding potential cultural differences as to which nonverbal behaviours are considered friendly). We assume that nonverbal friendliness plays an important role in achieving conversation quality in professional settings – particularly in terms of bonding in initial coach–client interactions. In addition, coaches need to take responsibility for the coaching process, guiding the client through it (De Haan, 2008). Clients are more likely to follow the coach if they perceive the coach as authentic, capable and self-confident. On the interpersonal level, self-confidence can be expressed by dominance (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005). Coaches who hide behind a façade (as the opposite of authenticity) or feel uncomfortable in their role are more likely to express this through submissive signals.

Taken together, we propose that dominance and friendliness are related to high working alliance ratings and coach performance – although we would expect the effect of dominance to be somewhat less marked than in studies with young professionals. We propose:

Table 1. Behavioural categories and coach sample behaviour.

Behavioural categories	Behavioural anchors and sample behaviours	Source (Coding System)[1]
Dominance dominant	Coach shows strong, open gesticulation, postural relaxation, speaks in a clear, firm voice; appears assertive, self-assured, direct	Discussion Coding System (DCS, Schermuly & Scholl, 2011, 2012); Behavioural anchors adapted to coaching (Ianiro et al., 2013, 2014, 2015)
submissive	Coach speaks hesitantly, quietly, looks up from below; appears shy, subservient, unassertive	
Affiliation friendly	Coach smiles and laughs with the client, leans forward, appears empathetic, warm, considerate	
hostile	Coach turns away from the client, interrupts the client harshly, shows lack of interest; appears indifferent	
Supportive feedback/ Appreciation	Coach affirms client's assumptions and strengths through feedback: 'Well done'; 'It sounds like you are very good at ...'	Advanced Interaction Analysis for Consulting (act4consulting; Hoppe, 2013)
Simple reflections	Coach repeats/paraphrases what the client has said	Motivational interviewing skill code (MISC, Houck et al., 2010), Motivational Interviewing Treatment Integrity (MITI, Moyers et al., 2005)
Complex reflections	Coach reflects/summarises a client's statement with added meaning or emphasis: 'I wonder if you mean ...'; 'So you think ...'.; 'So you are upset about ...'; 'So there are a lot of demands ...'	
Here-and-now interventions Contracting	Clarification of administrative details (e.g. time, place, fees, duration) as well as meta-perspective on what the client wants to achieve and how coach and client will work together, e.g.: 'What would you like to change in these 15 min?'; 'What is currently your most important concern?'	*New category*. Behavioural anchors based on act4consulting category and Sills (2012).
Addressing client's current thoughts, feelings or facial expressions	Coach: 'What are you thinking/feeling right now?'; 'You seem to be sad/angry/relieved ...'	act4consulting
Addressing current relation	Coach: 'When you are looking at what is happening between us at this moment, what would you say?'; 'How are we doing?'	
Disclosing own emotions	Coach gives feedback on how he/she is affected by what the client is saying, e.g.: 'I am moved by this'; 'I feel your discomfort'	
Positive humour	Coach says something funny, tells a joke, makes a humorous remark	act4consulting, Sultanoff (2013)

Note: [1]Detailed descriptions of all categories and training material to prepare the raters are available on request.

Hypothesis 1: Dominant-friendly coaches are rated higher on the working alliance
a) bonding, b) goals, c) tasks and d) coaching performance.

Supportive feedback and appreciation

While friendliness primarily communicates the coach's 'positive regard' for the client on a nonverbal level, words of appreciation and encouragement serve as the verbal equivalent. In this way, the coach affirms the client and strengthens the relational bond (Behrendt & Greif, 2022). Focusing on client strengths and competencies, as well as reinforcing what the client intends to do, can be very helpful and empowering for the client (Behrendt et al., 2021), particularly in the beginning of a coaching process.

Through affirmation, executive coaches can help alleviate potential anxiety in the face of challenges by emphasising the resources and strengths of leaders (Yip et al., 2020). Empirical coaching studies confirm the positive effect of appreciation and supportive feedback in coaching (e.g. Fingas et al., 2025; Gessnitzer et al., 2016; Will et al., 2019; Zimmermann & Antoni, 2020). Hence, we expect:

> *Hypothesis 2: A coach's supportive feedback/appreciation has a positive impact on a) the working-alliance bonding and b) coaching performance.*

Reflections

Reflective listening is considered a critical skill in counselling approaches and is widely recognised as a key indicator of empathy (e.g. Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003; Lord et al., 2015). When coaches reflect rather than ask questions, they allow clients to drive the conversation more than when they just ask questions (cf. Pollak et al., 2011). Reflections help clients to become aware of their beliefs and to adopt new perspectives. The coach can demonstrate understanding through reflections such as paraphrasing, structuring, and summarising. In counselling, these behaviours are also termed 'simple' and 'complex' reflections (Houck et al., 2010; Moyers et al., 2005). Simple reflections are paraphrases or simple summaries that add no further information. These statements are primarily used to express understanding and facilitate exchange. By contrast, complex reflections go beyond mere repetitions/summaries. They are used to provide a more comprehensive picture of what the client has said, adding meaning, hypothesis, emphasis or structure (Moyers et al., 2005). Extensive evidence from motivational interviewing demonstrates that reflections – particularly complex ones – are positively associated with clients' motivational readiness for change (for an overview see Magill et al., 2018). Recent contributions highlight the relevance of these mechanisms for coaching. Motivational Interviewing techniques are considered a powerful tool for supporting client's change in coaching (Güntner et al., 2022). Joullié et al. (2022) stress that coaches must be mindful of the language they use to stimulate change, emphasising that reflection fosters what they term a 'noble language', which supports exploration and commitment. Similarly, reflections have been shown to strengthen the perceived quality of the working alliance in career counselling (Klonek et al., 2020), underscoring their relational as well as motivational function. Furthermore, a recent survey study demonstrated that interventions involving 'meaning clarification' by executive coaches were positively associated with clients' learning processes (Antoni & Tatar, 2025). This underscores the importance of reflective listening. Consequently, we propose:

> *Hypothesis 3: A coach's simple and complex reflections are positively related to the working alliance a) bonding, b) goals, c) tasks and d) coaching performance.*

Contracting

At the beginning of a coaching journey, *contracting* provides structure, safety, and focus. It clarifies administrative details (e.g. time, place, duration) as well as roles and expectations. Beyond these formal aspects, contracting also includes the 'learning and development contract' (Sills, 2012, p. 98), i.e. agreement on coaching goals and how to achieve them. Together, these elements set the tone for the entire coaching process (Lai &

McDowall, 2014; Sills, 2012). Effective coaching goes further: the coach takes a meta-perspective, ensuring that sessions remain aligned with the client's goals. In this sense, contracting is not just about explaining something to the client; it's about co-creating a foundation for the coaching working alliance (Burger & Van Coller-Peter, 2019). This collaborative approach fosters co-regulation, transparency and trust.

Successful contracting leads to a high level of agreement on goals and tasks (Lee, 2013), which are central components of a positive working alliance. The initial contracting conversation – also referred to as the 'chemistry session' (Burger & Van Coller-Peter, 2019, p. 3) – provides an opportunity for coach and client to assess whether a viable working alliance can be established, both in terms of interpersonal bonding and shared goals/tasks. Goal setting, as an essential part of contracting, plays a pivotal role in fostering the client's learning and change processes (Antoni & Tatar, 2025). Although the importance of contracting for effective coaching is widely recognised and emphasised by various professional bodies (e.g. the International Coaching Federation, ICF; Passmore & Sinclair, 2020), empirical research in this area remains scarce (Burger & Van Coller-Peter, 2019). Nevertheless, contracting is considered a key skill of a coach (Passmore & Sinclair, 2020; Sills, 2012). Given these theoretical and practical considerations, we propose:

Hypothesis 4: A coach's contracting has a positive impact on the working alliance a) bonding, b) goals, c) tasks), and d) coaching performance.

Here-and-now interventions

Coaches not only have certain types of questions in their repertoire (cf. Braunstein & Grant, 2016), but they also use what is happening with themselves and what they observe about the client during the coaching session, especially with regard to emotions. For example, they share with the client what is going on in their minds while they are listening or they address the current feelings of the client (Klonek et al., 2020; Will et al., 2016). These behaviours can be called 'here and now' or relational interventions (Critchley, 2010), and may involve coaches talking about their own current emotions, addressing the client's emotional expressions, or addressing the dynamics of the current interaction. An important premise for this is that the coach is (self-)attentive and aware of nonverbal and emotional cues. Thus, through here-and-now interventions, the coach demonstrates emotional skills that are considered key competencies for coaches (Grant, 2007; Joseph & Glerum, 2022). Emotional skills are seen as essential to fostering relationships and developing leadership skills (e.g. Bluckert, 2005; Caruso & Salovey, 2008; Passmore, 2007). Although little empirical research has directly examined the effects of here-and-now interventions, a recent survey study with medical students as clients found that the emotional competence of coaches – as assessed through informant reports – was associated with positive changes in clients (Boyatzis et al., 2024). In this study, the coach's adaptability and emotional self-control were among the key facets of emotional competence that showed significant effects. The authors, however, emphasise that the most detailed assessment would involve coding actual behaviour during coaching sessions to verify that these competencies were enacted in practice. We assume that here-and-now interventions are one way in which such competencies manifest during sessions, thereby

strengthening the bond with the client early in the process and contributing to coaching performance. Accordingly, we expect:

> Hypothesis 5: A coach's here-and-now interventions have a positive impact on a) working alliance (bonding) and b) coaching performance

Humour

Humour is an interesting and complex construct that can be linked to both the attentive and flexible focus of the coach as well as to Rogers' core conditions. It is important for the practitioner to create humorous interventions while demonstrating empathy, genuineness, and acceptance (Sultanoff, 2013).

The central purpose of positive humour (i.e. wit or fun; not sarcasm or teasing) is to induce positive affect and create a relaxed atmosphere. Moreover, with humour, the coach can encourage alternative viewpoints (Schütz & Kaul, 2022), reduce the impact of stressful events or negative mood, and eventually activate change in the client (Sarink & García-Montes, 2023; Sultanoff, 2013). Humour can thus support the connection between coach and client and this might be important, especially at the beginning of the coaching process. At the same time, it also seems to be conditional on a positive relationship (Sultanoff, 2013), which raises the question of whether it is advisable in initial coach-client encounters. Systematic research linking humour to outcome is still rare (Sultanoff, 2013). As inducing a positive affect can help to relax the situation and support the bond between coach and client (Grant & O'Connor, 2018), we assume positive effects of humour in initial coach-client encounters, unless humour descends into satire, sarcasm, or teasing (Gladding & Drake Wallace, 2016). We propose:

> Hypothesis 6: A coach's positive humour has a positive impact on a) the working-alliance bonding and b) coaching performance.

An overview of our model and all hypotheses is shown in Figure 1.

Methods

The study employed a cross-sectional design with a two-stage data collection process. In the first stage, video recordings of live coaching conversations and performance assessments by accreditors (incorporating feedback from clients and peer accreditation candidates) were collected. In the second stage, independent trained observers applied a high-resolution coding scheme to capture coaches' microbehaviours and provided overall ratings of working alliance quality. Finally, we modelled how the duration and frequency of these microbehaviours predicted two indicators of conversation quality: the working alliance, as assessed by the observers, and overall coaching performance, as evaluated by the accreditors. By employing standardised observation systems and reliability checks, we aim to achieve the highest possible degree of objectivity (cf. Creswell & Creswell, 2018). At the same time, by incorporating accreditor, peer candidate, and client assessments, we integrate constructivist elements that reflect the social nature of performance evaluations. Accordingly, our study takes a mixed-methods approach, combining a systematic, quantitative, empirical approach with qualitative insights. The research project was approved
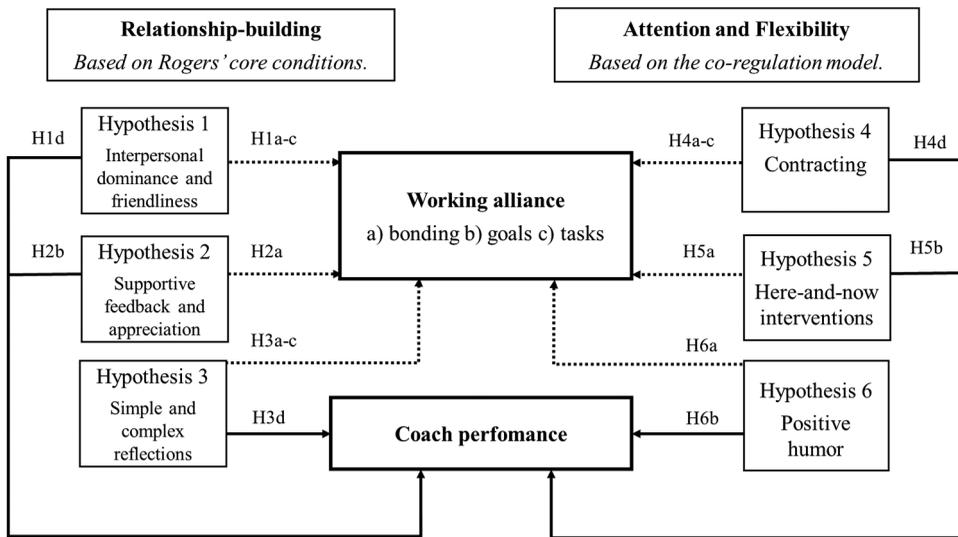
Figure 1. Overview of the hypotheses in the study. *Note.* Dashed arrow line: Hypotheses predicting working alliance. Solid arrow line: Hypotheses predicting coaching performance.

by the Ethics Committee of the Hult International Business School. The hypotheses were already formulated in the research proposal.

Sample

The sample of coaches was recruited at the Hult Ashridge Center for Coaching and included former participants in a professional accreditation process for executive coaches. All individuals completing the accreditation process for coaches between October 2016 and February 2021 were retrospectively invited to participate in the study. This accreditation process belongs to a part-time Master's Degree in Executive Coaching. The Ashridge accreditation process was established in 2005. It has been awarded the European Mentoring & Coaching Council (EMCC) Quality Kitemark at Master/Senior Practitioner level in 2007 (and twice extended). The accreditation normally takes place after some two years of starting the training, when coaches are able to demonstrate substantial coaching experience in the field. Most candidates were already experienced coaches before starting this advanced course. In total, coaches and clients of 90 dyads were recruited.

The coaches were all experienced professionals (20–30 years of work experience mainly in management/consulting/coaching) who, for the preceding 2 years, had demonstrably completed at least 90 h of coaching (50 female coaches and 40 male coaches; M_{age} = 50.8 years; SD = 7.04). All the coaches were enrolled in a qualification program at the Business School (for accreditation, to obtain a Postgraduate Diploma or MSc Degree). About 80% of the clients came from a later cohort of the same MSc, and about 20% of the clients were managers or faculty members at the Business School. All clients were professionals with many years of work, management and consulting experience. They

voluntarily participated in one observed coaching session each during the accreditation process (61 female clients and 29 male clients; M_{age} = 49 years; SD = 7.45).

Data collection

Data collection consisted of two key stages. First, data from the accreditation process was used. This included video recordings of live coaching conversations, as well as accreditors' assessments of coach performance. In the second stage, the video recordings were used to capture the coach microbehaviours and working alliance quality (1 to 5 years after accreditation). All coaches and clients have *subsequently* given written consent for the use of coaching session recordings and coaching performance evaluations from the accreditation process. Thus, at the time of accreditation, neither the coaches nor the clients were aware that the recordings would be used for research purposes.

Accreditation process

Coaches and clients were randomly assigned to one another, ensuring – by means of an email to the prospective client – that they had not met and did not know each other prior to the coaching session, so that the situation consisted of a genuine first meeting. Each coach received a different client and participated in the accreditation process only once. A total of four coaches were an exception: they participated in the process twice because they did not pass the accreditation the first time. A total of 63 sessions took place face to face, 27 sessions were online (on Zoom), due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The rooms in which the coaching sessions took place corresponded to typical business rooms in terms of furnishings, catering and equipment. Coach and client were alone and undisturbed in the room. Despite the brevity of the sessions (20 minutes), many of the essential steps of a coaching entry phase were covered, such as reviewing the client's current situation and clarifying the coaching goals. A video camera recorded the conversation and served as a basis for observation from an adjacent room. Two accreditors observed the session from the separate room and evaluated the coach's performance based on the session and subsequent questioning. Their final marks also took into account client evaluations and peer candidate feedback. These participants were able to give their impressions directly for about 20–30 min after the session.

Behavioural observation and coding

The behavioural observation by the researchers subsequently (in 2022, after all videos had been collected) was based on the recordings of the 20-min live coaching session. The face and upper body of coach and client were appropriately recognisable to student-observers in both face-to-face and online sessions. The video recordings of the coaching sessions were analysed using INTERACT – an established video coding software (Mangold International, 2021). INTERACT allows videos to be opened and coded in parallel while being viewed. Codes must be defined in advance, and specific key combinations can be used during playback to assign them to relevant video sequences. This procedure provides an overview of when particular behaviours occurred during the interaction for each conversation partner. It is also possible to specify whether the coding should capture the frequency or the duration of specific behaviours. In addition, questionnaire items can be

Table 2. Raters' and accreditors' demographics and assigned coding categories.

		Demographics	Coded coach behaviours	Coded quality measures
Team 1	Rater 1	male, German, 24 years old, Master's thesis student	interpersonal behaviour	working alliance[1]
	Rater 2	female, German, 24 years old, student assistant		
Team 2	Rater 3	female, Dutch, 22 years old, Bachelor's thesis student	reflections, supportive feedback/appreciation, contracting, here-and-now interventions, humour	
	Rater 4	female, Dutch, 21 years old, research intern		
Accreditors 1–12		five females, seven males, between 44 and 74 years old, professionals with at least 20 years of coaching experience; cultural backgrounds: British, Dutch, Egyptian, German, Irish, Israeli		coaching performance
+ clients' feedback		61 females, 29 males, mean age: 49 years.		

Note: $N = 90$ coaching videos. Double-rated videos $N = 15$. [1] Rater 1 and 2 rated the working alliance approximately four months after they had coded the coach's interpersonal behaviour. Care was taken to ensure that the raters received different videos for the working alliance ratings than for the interpersonal behaviour coding, which could be achieved in most cases.

integrated and presented in the form of overall ratings at the end of a video, as was done in the case of working alliance items. Furthermore, the tool enables graphical and statistical evaluation of inter-rater agreement, which is particularly important for rater training. Four student raters were intensively trained in behavioural observation, in the use of the coding categories, and in the use of the INTERACT software until interrater reliabilities for all behavioural categories were reasonably high. Following a recommendation by Bakeman et al. (2005), pp. 15–20% of the video recordings (thus 15 out of 90 sessions) were double-coded to determine reliabilities. Cohen's kappa of the observed frequencies of coach interventions indicate a 'substantially' strong agreement ($\kappa = .73$, Landis & Koch, 1977). Interpersonal behaviour and the overall working alliance were coded using graded dimensions (Koo & Li, 2016), showing 'excellent' interrater agreement (ICCs > .90, Shrout & Fleiss, 1979). Care was taken to ensure that coders did not code both independent and dependent variables of the same coaching dyad (which applies to most cases). Excluding few cases from rater team 1 (see Table 2), where this was not possible, did not change significant correlations between interpersonal behaviour and working alliance. All raters were blind to the hypotheses and to the accreditors' ratings of coaching performance. Table 2 provides an overview of the demographics of the raters and accreditors, and the assigned coding categories. For further analysis, the data were exported to the statistical software SPSS, version 29.

Measures

Interpersonal nonverbal behaviour

The coaches' interpersonal behaviour was assessed on the basis of the Discussion Coding System (DCS, Schermuly & Scholl, 2012). The Discussion Coding System (DCS) (Schermuly & Scholl, 2011, 2012) is an established coding tool for efficiently analysing larger samples of group interactions. In video-based application, the DCS has proven its

reliability and validity in various studies (for an overview, see Schermuly & Scholl, 2012). It has also been used to analyse coach–client interactions (Ianiro et al., 2013, 2014, 2015). The DCS coding categories for interpersonal nonverbal behaviour are based on the interpersonal circumplex model (e.g. Kiesler, 1983), which is depicted by the two axes of dominance and affiliation. It enables a behaviour-based and an adjective-based operationalisation of the interpersonal dimensions to ensure high accuracy and reliability in the ratings. The adjectives are taken from the Interpersonal Adjective List (IAL, Jacobs & Scholl, 2005), which characterises dominance, for example, in terms of being assertive, self-assured, and direct. An observer first recognises the nonverbal behaviour, which is usually associated with a specific expression (e.g. smile = friendly). Then, the observer must match the overall impression to the adjective-based operationalisation to determine whether, for example, the smile was warm or rather hostile (for more information on theory and operationalisation, see Schermuly and Scholl (2012). Using the INTERACT software, two raters coded the duration of coach behaviours on both interpersonal dimensions by marking their onset and offset.

Simple and complex reflections

The behavioural anchors for capturing simple and complex reflections are taken from the Motivational Interviewing Skill Code (MISC, Houck et al., 2010) and the Motivational Interviewing Treatment Integrity (MITI, Moyers et al., 2005), reliable and validated coding systems developed to train motivational interviewing skills and to assess treatment integrity (Moyers et al., 2016). Simple and complex reflections have already been assessed in numerous process-oriented studies on motivational interviewing (for an overview, see Magill et al., 2018).

Appreciation and supportive feedback, here-and-now interventions and humour

Several behaviour categories are based on the widely used, reliable, and validated coding systems Advanced Interaction Analysis for Teams (act4consulting, Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012; Kauffeld et al., 2018) and the adaptation of the tool to the consulting context (act4consulting, Hoppe, 2013). The ACT coding systems are theory-based and have been applied to a wide range of interaction settings, cultural contexts, and research questions (Kauffeld et al., 2018). For the present study, the behavioural codes for addressing the client's thoughts, feelings, and facial expressions, the current relationship as well as disclosing own emotions were used to capture the here-and-now focus of the coach. The category 'humour' was also adopted from act4consulting. However, the raters were additionally trained to pay attention to positive humour, i.e. humour in which a positive, appreciative attitude of the coach is generally recognisable, consistent with the recommendations of Sultanoff (2013).

Contracting

Contracting is a new category, but it is strongly based on act4consulting codes (goal orientation, clarifying, procedural suggestions, Kauffeld et al., 2018). However, our operationalisation refers more specifically to the coach's meta-perspective of what the client wants to achieve and how the coach and client will work together in the given 20 minutes. For further explanation of all behavioural categories and sample behaviours see Table 1.

The coaching working alliance (WAI)

To assess the coaching-working alliance we used the short form of the WAI-SF by Tracey and Kokotovic (1989), comprising three subscales: bonding, goal orientation, and task orientation. It has already been successfully applied as a coding instrument for independent observers (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015). WAI-observer ratings offer methodological advances to survey-based approaches: memory inaccuracies or same-source bias can be avoided. Moreover, there is also a stable correlation between the working alliance and coaching outcomes, regardless of the evaluation perspective (Graßmann et al., 2020). In the present study, we used the WAI-SF items to assess the observers' perspectives on the working alliance as expressed in the recorded coaching sessions (cf. Meinecke et al., 2016). The items[1] were adapted accordingly (e.g. 'Coach and client agree on the things the client will need to do to help to improve their situation'). After observing the entire coaching session, two observers assessed the working alliance using the items implemented in the INTERACT software. Items were scored using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = totally disagree, 7 = totally agree). Cronbach's α for the WAI-subscales was between α = .82-.87.

Coaching performance

The second outcome measure we refer to in this study is general coaching performance. It was based on seven evaluation criteria: 1. Theory, 2. Relational practice, 3. Coaching skills, 4. Contracts and boundaries 5. Change and organisations 6. Effectiveness, 7. Self-awareness and professionalism (for further explanation see Table 3). The total value can vary between 0 and 100%. The assessment criteria are theory-based (cf. De Haan, 2008) and have been used in the accreditation process at Ashridge since 2005 to assess coaching behaviour in the live coaching session. The final score is based on the assessment of two experienced and trained accreditors (see Table 2), who considered verbal feedback from peer candidates and the coaching client, contributing to high ecological validity. As a basis for assessment, the accreditors receive an observation sheet[2] with 42 detailed behavioural anchors for all criteria. All assessors involved in the accreditation process meet regularly to align assessment criteria and develop a common understanding of coaching performance.

Table 3. Evaluation criteria of coaching performance and sample explanations.

Evaluation criteria	Sample explanations
1. Theory	There is evidence of the coach working with theoretical concepts informing their coaching practice.
2. Relational practice	The coach works with ongoing awareness of the here-and-now coaching relationship as it develops.
3. Coaching skills	The coach experiments appropriately with different areas of focus for interventions.
4. Contracts and boundaries	The coach shows ability to hold the client's agenda in mind and regularly reviews and updates contracts.
5. Change and organisations	The coach helps the client to see connections between personal and organisational needs and issues.
6. Effectiveness	The coach reviews with clients their experienced personal and organisational change.
7. Self-awareness and professionalism	The coach is in touch with and reflective regarding own thoughts and feelings in response to client context, client material, and the client as a person.

Note: The evaluation criteria correspond to established accreditation criteria of the Hult International Business School.

Data analysis

Hypotheses were tested using Pearson correlations and multiple hierarchical regression. For the sake of parsimony, we decided to include only the significant coach microbehaviours in the regression models to further test the hypotheses. The predictors were entered in two steps: In Model 1, we entered coach and client gender as control variables. In Model 2, we additionally entered the coach microbehaviours. Robustness of the models was tested using Durbin-Watson, collinearity statistics and residual scatter-plot, and the Breusch-Pagan test.

Correlations between in-session coach microbehaviours and conversation quality measures in the online subgroup were analysed using Spearman Rho coefficient due to small sample size and lack of normal distribution for some variables. Differences in conversation quality measures between online and face-to-face coaching were examined using t-tests.

Results

Descriptive Statistics[3]

Interpersonal nonverbal behaviour

Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities of measurement variables are presented in Table 4. On average, within the 20-min coaching sessions, the coaches talked for about 7 out of 20 min, containing on average 4 min of friendly interactions. The coaches were more likely to be dominant (2.6 min) or neutral (2.6 minutes) than submissive (1.6 minutes) and preferred dominant-friendly (1.6 min or neutral-friendly interpersonal behaviour (1.5 min) to other combinations (< 1.2 min).

Verbal Interventions

The most frequent interventions were 'reflections' ($M = 8.09$, $SD = 3.94$), with 'complex reflections' accounting for the largest proportion ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 2.67$). The second most frequent interventions were here-and-now interventions ($M = 5.06$; $SD = 3.59$), with 'addressing the client's current thoughts' most often used by coaches ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 2.08$). Humour and supportive feedback were used only sporadically (see Table 4).

Working Alliance and Coaching Performance

Observer ratings on working-alliance subscales were generally high ($M = 4.92$–5.43; $SD = .74$-$.82$, see Table 4). The average coach performance was 57.73% ($SD = 7.2\%$), ranging 42–90%. Comparisons of coach performance measures in online versus face-to-face conversations did not yield any significant differences. Correlations of the measurement variables for the total sample ($N = 90$) and the online subsample ($n = 27$) are presented in Tables 5 and 6.

Influence of coach's microbehaviours on working alliance and coaching performance

Hypotheses 1a-d posited that a coach's dominant-friendly interpersonal behaviour is rated higher on working-alliance subscales (H2a-c) and general coach performance (H1d). The results in Table 5 show that dominant-friendly coach behaviour was

Table 4. Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities of observed coach behaviours and conversation quality measures.

Variable	Total M	Total SD	Face-to-face M	Face-to-face SD	Online M	Online SD	r
Coach's speech (minutes)	6.88	1.85	6.99	1.86	6.64	1.83	
Coach's behaviour (duration in minutes)							ICC
Interpersonal behaviour							
Affiliation							
friendly	4.00	1.84	4.08	1.91	3.80	1.69	.995
neutral	2.88	1.74	2.90	1.67	2.82	1.92	.99
hostile	.00	.01	.00	.00	.00	.03	–
Dominance							
dominant	2.63	1.83	2.62	1.96	2.65	1.53	.99
neutral	2.64	1.44	2.65	1.54	2.61	1.18	.97
submissive	1.61	1.68	1.72	1.62	1.37	1.84	.99
Combinations							
dominant + friendly	1.62	1.44	1.62	1.49	1.64	1.35	.99
neutral + friendly	1.47	1.11	1.45	1.21	1.53	.86	.89
other combinations	< 1.17	< 1.08	< 1.20	< 1.14	< 1.07	< 1.25	.85–97
Coach's behaviour (frequencies)							K
Supportive feedback/Appreciation	.49	.77	.60	.83	.22	.51	.73
Reflections (Sum)	8.09	3.94	8.67	4.26	6.74	2.65	
simple	2.07	2.44	2.37	2.68	1.37	1.57	
complex	6.02	2.67	6.30	2.93	5.37	1.80	
Contracting	2.31	1.20	2.22	1.21	2.52	1.16	
Here-and-now interventions (Sum)	5.06	3.59	5.50	3.73	4.00	3.03	
Addressing client's current thoughts, feelings or facial expressions	2.90	2.08	3.00	2.02	2.67	2.22	
Addressing current relationship	.36	.61	.38	.66	.30	.47	
Disclosing own emotions (coach)	.90	1.19	1.06	1.23	.52	1.01	
Humour	.23	0.86	.27	1.00	.15	0.36	
Overall ratings of outcomes							ICC
Working alliance							
bonding	5.21	.74	5.23	.77	5.16	.69	.98
goals	5.43	.78	5.47	.81	5.32	.71	.99
tasks	4.92	.82	4.91	.87	4.94	.67	.99
Coaching performance (percentage)	57.73	7.20	57.67	7.85	57.89	5.52	–

Note: N = 90 (n = 63 face-to-face coachings, n = 27 online coachings). r = reliabilities. ICC = intraclass correlations. K = Cohen's kappa coefficient.

positively and significantly related to all working-alliance subscales (r = .22–33, $p < .05$) and coaching performance (r = .22, $p < .05$). The dominant-friendly style was the only combination to be positively and significantly related to all quality criteria. However, neutral-friendly coach behaviour was also positively and significantly related to some quality criteria, i.e. working-alliance bonding (r = .21, $p < .05$) and coaching performance (r = .37, $p < .001$). The results also revealed that neutral affiliation and submissive coach behaviour were negatively and significantly related to working alliance and performance measures (see Table 5). In the online subgroup we found similar tendencies and effects of coaches' interpersonal behaviour. The negative correlation between neutral affiliation and working-alliance bonding (r_s = −.67, $p < .01$) and coaching performance (r_s = −.36, $p < .05$) were even more pronounced. The multiple hierarchical regression showed significant negative effects of the control variable client gender, i.e. working alliance bonding and goals were rated higher for female clients (see Table 7). Moreover, coach gender was negatively and significantly related to coaching performance, i.e. female coaches received higher scores. The significant effects of the dominant-friendly coach

Table 5. Correlations of the coach's relation-building microbehaviours, working alliance, and coaching performance.

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)
Interpersonal behaviour[1]															
1. Friendly	–	-.61**	-.33*	0.21	.39*	-.04	.51**	.69**	.06	.04	-.08	.31	.28	.04	.15
2. Neutral (affiliation)	-.46***	–	.23	-.29	.13	.37*	-.61**	-.38*	-.01	.15	.56**	-.67**	-.31	-.21	-.36*
3. Hostile	-.17	.09	–	-.25	-.28	.20	-.29	-.28	-.09	.00	-.08	-.31	-.20	-.27	-.06
4. Dominant	.22*	-.14	-.11	–	-.33*	-.58**	.83**	-.16	.08	-.19	-.37*	.38*	.20	.02	.09
5. Neutral (dominance)	.47**	.15	-.09	-.43***	–	-.04	-.22	.73**	-.03	.38*	.48**	-.25	-.10	.00	-.01
6. Submissive	-.02	.55**	.11	-.63**	.28**	–	-.57**	-.06	.19	-.06	.28	-.27	.06	-.13	-.22
7. Dominant + friendly	.60**	-.48**	-.12	.82**	-.22*	-.54**	–	.06	-.11	.13	-.49**	.54**	.27	.06	.06
8. Neutral + friendly	.65**	-.25**	-.09	-.24*	.86**	-.01	.01	–	.09	.21	.08	.13	.14	.02	.24
9. Supportive FB/Appreciation	.19*	-.09	-.07	.03	.07	.02	.01	.11	–	-.31	-.08	-.02	.34*	.18	.27
10. Simple reflections	.27*	-.08	-.05	.08	.17	-.20	.12	.20*	-.05	–	.27	-.14	-.11	-.08	-.10
11. Complex reflections	.13	.10	-.04	.12	.00	.11	.09	-.03	.03	.19*	–	-.51**	-.29	-.25	-.30
Working alliance subscales[2]															
12. Bonding	.34***	-.39***	-.17	.19*	.03	-.26**	.33***	.21*	.12	.14	.02	–	.33*	.32	.34*
13. Goals	.14	-.19*	-.09	.13	-.03	-.15	.23**	.05	.15	-.03	.02	.64**	–	.73**	.25
14. Tasks	.11	-.25*	-.01	.17	-.01	-.31**	.22*	.11	.13	.03	-.12	.68**	.89**	–	.44**
15. Coaching performance[2]	.36***	-.19*	-.01	.07	.28*	-.12	.22*	.37***	.05	.36***	.25**	.21*	.05	.15	–

Note: [1] Duration of interpersonal coach behaviour in minutes per session. FB = Feedback [2] Observer ratings of the whole coaching session. Coefficients below the diagonal represent Pearson's correlations of variables for total sample ($N = 90$). Coefficients above the diagonal represent Spearman's rho correlations of variables for online subsample ($n = 27$). *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ (one-tailed).

Table 6. Correlations of the coach's attention and flexibility microbehaviours, working alliance, and coaching performance.

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
1. Contracting	–	.29	.00	−.24	−.01	.03	.21	.00	−.20
Here-and-now interventions[1]									
2. Addressing client's current thoughts, feelings, facial expressions	.03	–	.08	.01	.33*	−.23	−.10	−.22	−.26
3. Addressing current relationship	−19*	.05	–	.11	−.27	−.22	−.24	−.27	−.13
4. Disclosing own emotions (coach)	−.18*	.20*	.16	–	.00	−.03	−.11	.08	.28
5. Humour	.14	.45***	−.07	.24*	–	−.01	−.01	.03	.03
Working alliance subscales[2]									
6. Bonding	.07	.08	−.17	.03	.18*	–	.33*	.32	.34*
7. Goals	.13	.00	−.14	−.13	.06	.64***	–	.73**	.25
8. Tasks	.08	.03	−.13	−.08	.12	.68***	.89***	–	44*
9. Coaching performance[2]	.04	.08	−.08	.14	.34***	.21*	.05	.15	–

Note: [1]Frequencies of interventions per session.[2]Observer ratings of the whole coaching session. Coefficients below the diagonal represent Pearson's correlations of variables for total sample ($N = 90$). Coefficients above the diagonal represent Spearman's rho correlations of variables for online subsample ($n = 27$). *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$ (one-tailed).

Table 7. Multiple hierarchical regression using significant coach Microbehaviour as predictors for working alliance subscales and performance.

Predictor	WAI bonding			WAI goals			WAI tasks			Performance		
Step 1	B	SE_B	β	B	SE_B	β	B	SE_B	β	B	SE_B	β
Coach gender[a]	−.07	.15	−.05	−.02	.16	−.01	−.13	.17	−.08	−3.89	1.48	−.27**
Client gender[a]	−.61	.16	−.39***	−.33	.17	−.20*	−.32	.18	−.19	1.13	1.58	.07
	F	R^2	ΔR^2	F	R^2	ΔR^2	F	R^2	ΔR^2	F	R^2	ΔR^2
	7.81**	.15	.15	1.84	.04	.04	1.85	.04	.04	3.69*	.08	.08
Step 2	B	SE_B	β	B	SE_B	β	B	SE_B	β	B	SE_B	β
Coach gender[a]	−.10	.14	−.07	−.03	.17	−.02	−.18	.17	−.11	−4.74	1.29	−.33*
Client gender[a]	−.54	.15	−.34***	−.29	.18	−.17	−.26	.18	−.15	2.01	1.34	.13
Dominant-friendly behaviour (H1)	.14	.05	.28***	.12	.06	.21**	.12	.06	.21**	.83	.44	.17*
Reflections (H3)	.00	.02	.02	−.01	.02	−.05	−.03	.02	−.13	.52	.16	.28**
Humour (H6)	.13	.09	.15	.04	.10	.05	.14	.10	.15	3.04	.76	.36**
	F	R^2	ΔR^2	F	R^2	ΔR^2	F	R^2	ΔR^2	F	R^2	ΔR^2
	5.77***	.26	.10	1.61	.09	.05	2.07	.11	.07	9.80**	.37	.29

Note: $N = 90$. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. WAI = Working Alliance Inventory. [a]Female = 1, male = 2.

behaviour remained for all dependent variables when the control variables were included. Thus, hypotheses 1a-d were confirmed.

Hypothesis 2a-b predicted a positive impact of supportive feedback on the working alliance in terms of bonding (H2a) and coaching performance (H2b). No evidence was found for either of these assumptions (see Table 5). Thus, hypotheses 2a-b were rejected.

Hypotheses 3a-d predicted that reflections (simple and complex) have a positive impact on working-alliance subscales (H3a-c) and coaching performance (H3d). Both simple and complex reflections were positively and significantly related to coaching performance ($r = .25–36$, $p < .05$). The significant, positive effect of reflections (sum of simple and complex reflections) remained for coaching performance when the control variables were included (see Table 7). However, no evidence was found for a positive relationship between reflections and working alliance. In the online subgroup, it is striking that there are pronounced negative correlations between complex reflections and all conversation quality criteria; in the case of working-alliance bonding, there is even

a highly significant negative effect ($r_s = -.51$, $p = < .01$). Thus, hypothesis 3d was confirmed (for face-to-face coaching), whereas hypotheses 3a-c were rejected.

Hypotheses 4a-d proposed that a coach's contracting interventions have a positive impact on working-alliance subscales (H4a-c) and coaching performance (H4d). The results in Table 6 do not confirm these assumptions. Thus, we rejected H4a-d.

Hypotheses 5a-b posited that a coach's here-and-now interventions have a positive impact on working-alliance bonding (H5a) and coaching performance (H5b). These assumptions could not be confirmed for any of the here-and-now interventions (see Table 6). Thus, hypotheses 5a-b were rejected.

Hypotheses 6a-b posited that positive humour has a positive impact on working-alliance bonding (H6a) and coaching performance (H6b). The results revealed that humour was positively and significantly related to both working-alliance bonding ($r = .18$, $p < .05$) and coaching performance ($r = .34$, $p < .001$). The significant, positive effect of humour remained for coaching performance when the control variables were included. However, additional analyses showed that these correlations were strongly influenced by the values of one coach who used humour relatively often (7 times) and achieved high values for conversation quality measures. Therefore, the robustness of these results is limited. Thus, hypotheses 6a-b were not sufficiently supported.

Together, the control variables (coach and client gender) explained 4–15% of the variance in the conversation quality measures (see Table 7). Significant microbehaviours (dominant-friendly style, reflections, humour) could additionally explain 10% of working alliance bonding, 5% of goals, and 7% of tasks; for coaching performance, the additional variance explained was 29% (when the online subgroup was excluded due to divergent results on reflections, this increased to 37%).

In summary, hypotheses 1a – d regarding dominant-friendly coaching behaviour were confirmed, demonstrating positive effects on working-alliance subscales and coaching performance. Neutral affiliation and submissive behaviours were negatively related to conversation quality. Hypotheses 2a – b on supportive feedback were not supported. Hypotheses 3a – c on reflections for the working alliance were not supported; however, hypothesis 3d on reflections for coaching performance was confirmed in face-to-face sessions, while in the online subgroup, complex reflections were negatively associated with all conversation quality criteria. Hypotheses 4a – d on contracting interventions and 5a – b on here-and-now interventions were not supported. Hypotheses 6a – b on positive humour showed tentative positive effects, but these were largely driven by one frequent user, so they remain inconclusive. Control variables indicated that female coaches received higher performance ratings, and that working-alliance bonding and goals were rated higher for female clients. Overall, dominant – friendly behaviours and reflections were the most consistent predictors of conversation quality.

Discussion

The demands on executive coaches to develop self-management, resilience, and agility under pressure have increased in recent years – especially in times of global crises and ongoing rapid change. Coaches support their clients to find their own specific solutions to cope with these current challenges. This raises the important question of how coaches

can do this successfully and which behaviours lead to which conversational outcomes (Pandolfi, 2020). Any answer to this question should be theoretically underpinned based on a sufficiently large and meaningful dataset of coach behaviour. This is where our findings may make an important contribution.

Based on Rogers' core conditions and the meta-analytic findings on co-regulation, we have proposed a theoretical framework for the analysis of common microbehaviours in executive coaching. Within this theoretical framework, the study explored which coach microbehaviours provide a good basis for the developing working alliance and are related to high coach performance in initial coach–client interactions. The empirical analyses were based on video recordings of 90 coach-client encounters conducted by professional coaches and clients (i.e. a total of 1800 min of coaching conversations) and rated by coaching experts (accreditors) and trained observers. In response to the call for more process-analytical research in executive coaching (e.g. Boyatzis et al., 2022; Lai & Palmer, 2019), we present empirical evidence on how to recognise high-performing executive coaches, already at the beginning of the coaching process. As expected, high-performing coaches were more neutral to dominant than submissive, they were friendlier, and they used more humour than their less effective peers. They tended to reflect more in face-to-face conversations, but, surprisingly, less in online sessions (where complex reflections were negatively associated with outcomes). Female coaches were rated higher on performance, and dyads with female clients were rated higher on working alliance bonding. These insights offer concrete entry points for shaping effective coaching conversations and can be used in the broader field of HRD to design interactions that foster learning and growth.

Theoretical implications

Relationship-building and flexibility in initial coach–client interactions
From a theoretical perspective, our results provide evidence for the relevance of Rogers' core conditions in building the relationship early in the executive coaching process. Almost all microbehaviours that can be associated with congruence, positive regard, or empathy (dominance combined with friendliness, reflections) had a positive effect on the perceived working alliance and also led to better ratings of coach performance. Exceptions are verbal forms of positive regard, i.e. appreciation and positive feedback. However, as the study by Fingas et al. (2025) showed, the expected positive effect of supportive coach behaviour emerged only for female clients. This suggests that the overall effect may be small and/or require further examination in relationship to client characteristics (e.g. gender). Furthermore, since this intervention occurred less frequently than the others, the observed effect in early coach–client interactions may have been too small to reach statistical significance. This underscores the need for larger datasets.

The nonverbal expression of dominance was less significant in this older coach population (compared to the population of young student coaches, e.g. Ianiro et al., 2013). Accordingly, it seems that, rather than expressing interpersonal dominance, coaches should avoid submissiveness to establish a positive bond and to perform successfully. In line with earlier findings (e.g. Ianiro & Kauffeld, 2014), the absence or even the insufficient use of friendly signals were related to lower ratings on working

alliance and coaching performance. Nonverbal friendliness seems to be an important element to quickly convey a positive atmosphere and a feeling of 'safety'. The negative effect of neutral affiliation was particularly evident in online conversations. Apparently, online coaches have to compensate for the lack of physical closeness with sustained friendliness.

Moreover, in line with several authors (e.g. Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003; Moyers et al., 2005), the present study has shown that simple and complex reflections were positively related to a coach's performance in face-to-face sessions. Thus, we provide evidence that repeating or slightly paraphrasing (simple reflections) as well as summarising a client's statement with added meaning (complex reflections) are key, effective skills in coaching approaches – and especially important in initial coach-client encounters. However, contrary to our expectations and different from other studies (e.g. Klonek et al., 2020), these skills were not significantly related to the coaching working alliance. Research suggests that reflections are closely related to empathy (e.g. Lord et al., 2015), which in turn is positively related to working alliance (e.g. Wampold, 2001). It is possible that the perceived bond and agreement is more a consequence of the empathic and attentive support provided by the coach (through appropriate reflection) and will become clearer in more extensive conversations. Moreover, Güntner et al. (2022) emphasise that MI techniques unfold their full potential only when delivered by highly skilled and experienced coaches who combine methodological competence with an ethical and collaborative stance. As an implication, future studies should assess not only the quantity of simple and complex reflections, but also the quality of these reflections.

The negative effects of complex reflections in the online setting need further investigation. It is possible that complex reflections may need to be accompanied by appropriate nonverbal behaviours on the part of the coach or need to be used more carefully to have a positive effect in online settings. This is supported by the fact that complex reflections correlate significantly with nonverbal interpersonal behaviour only in the online subgroup (positively with submissiveness and neutral effect, negatively with a dominant-friendly style). Thus, coaches who expressed an ineffective nonverbal interpersonal style used more complex reflections in this subsample. This further underlines the importance of examining the quality of reflections in greater detail. Larger *online samples* should be used to investigate these effects. Overall, however, online coaching conversations were as effective as face-to-face conversations, which is consistent with previous studies comparing coaching in these settings (e.g. Fischer et al., 2019; Passarelli et al., 2023).

Contrary to our expectations and different from other studies (e.g. Boyatzis et al., 2024), we found no support for the anticipated positive effects of contracting and here-and-now interventions. It is possible that the effect of contracting only becomes apparent in comparison to less experienced or less trained coaches, who hardly engage in any contracting. The three coaches in this study who showed no contracting at all also had significantly lower performance scores (namely fail scores in the range of 45–50%), including below-average ratings on working-alliance tasks and goals. These findings align with those of several authors (e.g. Burger & Van Coller-Peter, 2019) and ICF guidelines (Passmore & Sinclair, 2020) who argue that a minimum level of contracting is essential for a successful start to the coaching process. However, demonstrating contracting more than once within the 20-min interval did not affect the perceived quality of the conversation. Therefore, future

research on coaching interactions should move beyond merely examining the presence of contracting and investigate its different facets more explicitly. For instance, it should differentiate the effects of goal- and process-related contracting from those related to clarifying the framework conditions.

For here-and-now interventions, it is plausible that emotionally meaningful moments must first occur to assess the coach's emotional response. A coach's emotional intelligence, reflected in self-awareness and sensitivity to nonverbal cues, likely plays an important role in the coaching process (Joseph & Glerum, 2022). However, this requires more extensive analytical investigation of the coaching process. In a questionnaire-based study, Boyatzis et al. (2024) also highlight the methodological challenges of capturing coaches' emotional competencies. Contrary to their expectations, coaches' emotional self-awareness (one facet of emotional competence) had no significant effect on client change. The authors speculated that this absence of an effect may be due to emotional self-awareness being non-observable for others, or its relevance being limited to the coaches themselves rather than directly impacting outcomes. Therefore, Boyatzis et al. (2024) argue for closely observing critical moments in coaching and combining video-based behavioural observation with surveys of those involved. This approach makes it possible to capture both self-awareness and concrete behaviours directed towards clients. Consistent with this approach, we propose assessing microbehaviours that focus on the present moment and signal emotional attentiveness at various stages of the coaching process, ideally during critical moments.

Moreover, it should also be explored how the coach can act as a role model in dealing with emotions and thus help the client develop their own emotional skills. As the impact of emotional intelligence in executive coaching has not yet been sufficiently investigated (Joseph & Glerum, 2022), but plays an important role in the context of leadership development (e.g. Miao et al., 2018; Walter et al., 2012), such a process-analytic study seems worthwhile.

Consistent with studies in the counselling field, our study indicates a positive impact of a coach's humorous remarks (e.g. Klonek et al., 2020; Panichelli et al., 2018). It must be noted, however, that in the 20-min sessions only 13% of the coaches used any humour at all and that the correlations were determined by pronounced values of one coach. More research needs to be done to conclusively evaluate how humour works in executive coaching conversations. Humour is a complex construct that, according to Sultanoff (2013), requires a variety of preconditions for its positive effects. Therefore, it should be further explored, ideally including the client's reaction to check how the humorous statement was received. Looking at the potential positive effects of humour in coaching, we believe it would be an important addition to understanding effective coaching practices.

Combining insights from common-factor approaches, specifically Rogers' core conditions and the co-regulation model (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023) – our approach provides an integrative basis for capturing common, non-specific 'active ingredients' in executive coaching. We find empirical support for coach (micro)behaviours that have been proposed to be crucial in literature on coaching (e.g. De Haan, 2008; Greif et al., 2022; Stelter, 2014), in concepts of leadership development (e.g. Yip et al., 2020) and in recent systematic reviews on executive coaching (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Bozer & Jones, 2018).

Our approach can provide guidance and help to connect findings that might otherwise appear fragmented – without negating the fact that there are also specific active ingredients at work in executive coaching. Possible avenues for future process- and video-based research include combining common and (context- or target-group-) specific microbehaviours, as well as integrating the interaction dynamics between coach and client throughout the whole coaching process. Moreover, our study shows that it is valuable to analyse the microbehaviours of coaches using coding systems and behavioural observations.

Theoretical implications for human resource development

In the field of HRD, coaching is understood as a practice that fosters individual learning, leadership capacity, and organisational effectiveness. Coaching practices are often embedded in everyday management practice (Beattie et al., 2014; Hamlin et al., 2006). Like executive coaches, managers and leaders must be able to initiate and maintain high-quality conversations that facilitate reflection and learning. Our study addresses this need by identifying microbehaviours that foster such conversations and by highlighting directions for future research. In particular, the findings underscore the importance of nonverbal behaviour, which has received relatively little attention in organisational research (Clarke et al., 2021) despite its recognised role in relationship building and emotional intelligence (Bonaccio et al., 2016). The observed negative effect of neutral affect in digital coaching may well extend to digital workplace conversations. Finally, the use of coding systems to study microbehaviours is also seen as a future methodological approach in the field of leadership development (e.g. Fischer et al., 2024; Gerpott et al., 2019).

The role of gender in executive coaching

In this short time span, the coaches' microbehaviours accounted for up to 10% of the observed working alliance and 29% of the coaches' rated performance. At the same time, we also see significant gender effects of coaches and clients. The finding that a better working alliance was achieved with female clients is consistent with a small gender effect found in other studies, where female clients benefited slightly more from coaching than male clients (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023). This could be preceded by a higher level of motivation and willingness to engage in the coaching process, which may already be evident in the initial interactions between the coach and the client.

The significant coach gender effect needs further investigation. Female coaches outperformed male coaches by an average of 3.9% points (significant effect). This effect can be explained by the finding that female coaches in this sample displayed significantly less neutral affiliation ($t(58.28) = -2.00, p < .05$) and significantly less submissive behaviour ($t(88) = -2.23, p < .05$) than male coaches. While neutral affiliation may have been perceived more negatively in the context of relationship building, submissive behaviour may have been perceived as an indicator of a lack of confidence and competence. Both may have contributed to lower accreditor ratings. In addition, although the accreditor ratings were based on a structured observation tool and behavioural anchors, gender bias cannot be completely ruled out. Previous research has found small or no effects of coach gender or gender match on executive coaching outcomes (e.g. Bozer et al., 2015). However, our

findings suggest that gender effects should continue to be considered as important control variables.

Contributions to practice and coach development

For the professionalisation of coaching, the design of effective coaching training and choice of coaches, it is important to show what contributes to high coaching performance (e.g. Grant et al., 2010). Accordingly, from a practical perspective, there is great interest in the results of video-based research, especially as it can show how professional and high-performance coaches proceed. It is important to understand how specific coaching behaviours impact the outcomes of coaching sessions in order to inform how coaching should be taught and practiced within these institutions. Our study offers important starting points and guidance here, not only for practicing coaches, but also for managers, training institutes, business schools, professional associations, accrediting bodies, and clients.

The results show that special attention should be paid to relationship-building microbehaviours, especially nonverbal behaviours. Our results indicate that it is best for practical coaches to avoid submissiveness and to include reflections in initial (face-to-face) encounters. Particularly in an online environment, neutral affiliation seems to have a rather negative effect, and should be avoided. Moreover, the interpersonal style seems to play a role as to whether interventions such as 'reflections' are effective in the online setting. In addition, we assume that the coach's emotional awareness and flexibility are important, and that it makes sense to foster sensitivity and emotional competence in coaches, even though our study cannot provide empirical evidence in this regard. Similarly, we see great potential for executive coaches to use humour to induce positive emotions and support learning processes.

Increasing digitalisation and the emergence of digital coaching platforms make it easier for coaches and clients to find each other and to implement coaching processes even when time is short. This raises the question of whether initial contact should take place online, given its importance for relationship building with limited nonverbal cues and lack of direct eye contact. Our results suggest that the coach's visible nonverbal behaviour plays an important role here, but that it is not necessarily detrimental to the quality of the first coach–client interactions when they take place online.

While we believe that many of these practical recommendations are already part of the daily practice of many executive coaches, the importance of a scientific basis for the development of the profession cannot be overstated. A scientific approach is critical not only for validating effective coaching practices, but also for predicting outcomes before engagements, and for advancing the profession in an empirically based and theoretically sound manner. By relying on scientific evidence, the profession can ensure that its practices are not simply based on anecdotal experience or individual expertise, but are supported by rigorous research and validated findings.

Limitations

One purpose of this study was to examine professional coach behaviour under relatively standardised conditions, for which the accreditation exam was well suited. Moreover, the

integration of multiple perspectives and observer ratings seems to be an important contribution of this study. Overreliance on self-report survey measures has been widely criticised as these may be compromised by recall bias, wishful thinking, limited attention spans, and social desirability (e.g. Miller & Mount, 2001; Schermuly & Scholl, 2012). Usually, coaches and clients have already invested a lot in the process (time, effort, money) and are therefore keen to perceive this investment as worthwhile (De Haan, 2021). Furthermore, important aspects of interpersonal (but often unconscious) nonverbal behaviour are by definition elusive. Specifically, clients may find it difficult to recall and evaluate certain nonverbal behaviours exhibited by coaches. Nevertheless, our approach has some methodological disadvantages.

First, the examination setting may have increased coaches' nervousness, potentially reducing ecological validity. As initial coaching sessions in organisations also involve performance pressure, we consider the induced stress to be comparable. Clients presented authentic work concerns, and coaches pursued standard first-session goals. The reaction to passive video recording is minimal: participants typically ignore the camera once engaged in dialogue (Erickson & Schultz, 1982; Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012).

Second, the coach–client interaction was observed in a relatively short time span of 20 min. Nonetheless, it has been shown empirically that interaction behaviour in short-time intervals (e.g. 20 min) is a good predictor of behaviour over a longer time period. Even slices of 10 min can be a good estimate for an entire conversation (Klonek et al., 2015), and the focus of the study was on the coaching entry phase. A longitudinal design should be adopted in order to test more hypotheses about real-life executive coaching.

Third, the study design did not allow for the collection of objective measures of coaching success in the field – i.e. assessments as to whether clients actually improved their outlook or skills. Future studies should include job-related performance indicators and, where feasible, use randomised controlled trials to clarify causal relationships among coach behaviour, working alliance, and coaching success – a task that remains methodologically challenging for video-based executive-coaching research.

Conclusion

Our study advances the understanding of executive coaching as a key practice in HRD by showing how specific microbehaviours – particularly nonverbal friendliness, the avoidance of submissiveness, and the flexible use of reflections – shape early working alliance and coach performance. Grounded in Rogers' core conditions and the co-regulation framework, these findings demonstrate that brief initial encounters contain observable markers of conversation quality. They also reveal important boundary conditions in online formats that warrant closer scrutiny. Behaviours that are effective in face-to-face encounters, such as complex reflections, may unfold differently in online formats. Furthermore, the observed gender effects highlight that the relational dynamics of coaching cannot be fully understood without considering the characteristics of the coach and client, as well as potential biases in how behaviour is evaluated. These results strengthen the theoretical foundation of managerial and executive coaching research and provide actionable guidance for training, accreditation, and practice. They also establish microbehavioural analysis as a critical approach to the professionalisation and scientific

advancement of coaching. Future research should extend this microbehavioural lens by adopting longitudinal and field-based designs, integrating objective performance indicators, examining digital and gender-related dynamics more systematically, and exploring how coaches' emotional intelligence and humour unfold across critical moments in the coaching process.

Notes

1. Adapted items or observation sheets are available on request.
2. The accreditation process observation sheet is available on request.
3. The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The video recordings of the coaching sessions are not available due to the sensitivity of the data.

Author contributions

PMID and EDH contributed to the conception and design of the study. PMID performed the statistical analyses and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. EDH wrote sections of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Availability of data and material

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The video recordings of the coaching sessions are not available due to the sensitivity of the data.

Data transparency

The data reported in this manuscript have not been previously published and were collected as part of an elaborate data collection (video-based behavioural codings).

Declaration of the use of generative AI

The authors used DeepL Write Pro and ChatGPT o3 for English language refinement and text reduction, as neither author is a native English speaker.

Ethical approval and consent

The study has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Hult International Business School (Project ID 736,017,220). The authors declare that the research was conducted in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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