

Research Report

Exploring the role and boundaries of coaching for climate action

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1. Executive summary

As climate change intensifies, pressures associated with the sustainability transition are increasingly experienced by coaching, mentoring and supervision clients. Since the sustainability transition is comprised of multiple interacting complex systems which often transcend industries, sectors and geographies, partnership is critical to success. As part of a partnership framework, the United Nations advocates the use of coaching and mentoring to build high impact multiple stakeholder partnerships to address the SDGs. This implies that coaching and mentoring need to evolve to undertake a task different from its existing structure.

This study sought to understand how coaches are addressing climate change in their practice, and perceiving their role, practice, and ethical boundaries. To achieve this, this exploratory mixed methods study explored how the respondents are approaching climate action in their practice by exploring their eco-awareness and use of a range of intervention categories applied to coaching in the context of climate action.

The results showed a polarised response with just over half of respondents perceiving addressing climate action as part of their role as coach, whilst the remainder of the respondents were undecided or strongly opposed. This highlighted a key ethical concern regarding the need to respect the primacy of the client's agenda in coaching. However, analysis of the intervention styles showed that facilitative styles remain more prevalent than authoritative styles, indicating that this ethical principle is respected in practice. With most respondents at a relatively early stage of eco-awareness with limited training in sustainable development, there would be value in systemically orientated continuous professional development in this field.

Addressing climate action and the other SDGs in an ethical manner was found to be supported by a shift to a more systemic orientation whereby the client's agenda is explored within the client's context. When the coaching process is anchored within the multiple interacting containing complex systems, coaches have an opportunity to enrich the exploration of the issues whilst still respecting the primacy of the client's agenda.

To address this, five recommendations were put forward to the EMCC Global:

- (i) to support embedding coaching within the context through adding a competency category focused on this;
- (ii) providing explicit guidelines for ethical practice;
- (iii) encouraging responsible leadership through explicitly linking the SDGs to the criteria for the EMCC Global's Coaching, Mentoring, Supervision and Team Coaching Awards.
- (iv) supporting research projects that explore the use of coaching to address SDGs; and
- (v) using SDGs to target the EMCC Global's social responsibility initiatives.

The urgency and importance of the sustainability transition represents both a threat to society but also opens a multiplicity of opportunities for those coaches, mentors, supervisors, and their clients to contribute to this transition. Coaching, mentoring, and supervision are critical to the support of these endeavours. These recommendations are designed to together create a context in which coaches, mentors, supervisors, and coaching training providers can focus their practice in a responsible and ethical manner.

The successful implementation of these recommendations could represent an evolution of the coaching role which provides a pathway for coaches, mentors, and supervisors to more effectively and ethically navigate the wicked problems being faced by society, as well as positioning EMCC Global at the leading edge of coaching, mentoring and supervision practice.

2. Introduction

This report provides an overview of the main findings from a climate action survey conducted by the EMCC Global Centre for Excellence which aimed to explore how coaches address climate action in their practice. Climate action is one of the most pressing of the sustainable development goals, which has resulted in a global response in the coaching industry. This has raised questions about how coaches can effectively and ethically use a range of intervention categories in coaching towards climate action. This exploratory mixed-methods study was used to explore how coaches perceive their responsibilities, roles and expectations for addressing climate action in their coaching practice. A survey was designed using the eco-awareness cycle (Whybrow, Turner, McLean, & Hawkins, 2023) and an adaptation of Heron's intervention categories framework (Heron, 2007) applied to climate action to explore how coaches approach climate action in their work.

The results of this study show a somewhat polarised view of whether addressing climate action should be part of the role of coaches. With respondents mostly at a relatively early stage of eco-awareness, there was a tendency to perceive climate action in isolation or as an add-on to coaching. This was associated with ethical concerns about influencing the client agenda. Respondents who conceptualised climate action more systemically avoided this by situating the coaching in the client's context and containing systems. Recommendations are proposed to support EMCC Global to create a context in which coaches, mentors, supervisors, and coach training providers can evolve practice to navigate the wicked problems faced by society.

3. Climate action in the coaching industry

The coaching, mentoring and supervision industry has a publicly declared response to climate change and sustainability with 11 professional bodies¹, representing a combined approximate membership of 300 000 practitioners, having signed a statement of commitment (Association for Coaching et al., 2020). Alongside this, the Global Code of Ethics, which is recognised by 12 professional bodies, was updated to consider social and environmental impacts. Climate related interest groups, such as the Climate Coaching Alliance, now with nearly 3,500 members worldwide, have grown rapidly to become global communities of practice.

One of the commitments in the statement is to create “safe and challenging spaces for coaches, coaching psychologists, mentors and supervisors to reflect on and reconsider their role and their practice” (Association for Coaching et al., 2020, p. 2). To address this, it is useful to explore the level of eco-awareness of coaches as well as to investigate how coaches perceive their role and approach their practice. This is an important step in positioning reflection on practice both in terms of learning from emergent practice but also with respect to supporting the establishment of ethical boundaries for this exploration.

Climate action is one of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in Agenda 2030 by the United Nations (United Nations, 2015). The sustainability transition is complex, transdisciplinary, and transcends industries, sectors, and nation states. Complex systems are open systems which consist of parts which are systems in and of themselves acting according to their own purpose and rules. The parts interact with and adapt to one another which results in order in the system over time (Cavanagh, 2009). The problems associated with the sustainable transition are often wicked, meaning that they involve multiple interacting systems, are difficult to

¹ The 11 signatories of the Joint global statement on climate change from the professional bodies of coaching, coaching psychology, mentoring and supervision: Association for Coaching, Asia Pacific Alliance of Coaches, Association for Professional Executive Coaching & Supervision, Coaches and Mentors of South Africa, European Association for Supervision and Coaching, EMCC Global, International Association of Coaching, International Coaching Federation, International Society for Coaching Psychology, and the Institute of Coaching.

define, and characterised by uncertainties occurring at multiple levels of system (Mertens, 2015). Addressing the sustainability transition thus requires consideration of the interdependencies between the 17 SDGs. For coaches, mentors, and supervisors to be effective, it is important that these containing complex systems in which the client is situated are considered. Systems are organised hierarchically, where one system contains other systems, in a containing hierarchy (Dostal, Cloete, & Járos, 2005).

Strong and effective collaboration with stakeholders is expressed among the recommended approaches for the realisation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Stibbe & Prescott, 2020, pp. 55–56). To achieve this, the importance of coaching and mentoring activities is emphasised to support good stakeholder relations for climate action.

3.1 Eco-awareness in coaching

The application of climate action in coaching depends in part on the level of eco-awareness of the coach, client and the client organisation (Hawkins & Turner, 2020). The initial development of a stage model of ecologically conscious coaches was undertaken by Hawkins & Turner (2020), and then further developed by Peter Hawkins and through the Climate Coaching Alliance. The resultant 5 stage eco-phase cycle indicates development through the stages of eco-curious, eco-informed, eco-aware, eco-engaged, and eco-active (Whybrow et al., 2023). The stage models should be considered within a systemic orientation, whereby interconnected nested levels of system are addressed, and as such a coach may be at different stages of the cycle at any time in relation to particular contexts, rather than being positioned at a fixed stage.

A modified version of the eco-phase cycle was used in the research. A five stages structure was retained in the modified version. A nascent stage was added, as depicted in Table 1, to provide further granularity in distinguishing between a stage in which the coach has yet to recognize or attend to the environmental social and economic crisis and the curious stage in which there is more openness to discovering more about this crisis. The initial stage repositions the denial stage from the initial ecological awareness model (Hawkins & Turner, 2020). Since the focus of the study was on practice within the coaching relationship the eco-active phase was not included.

Stage	Definition
Nascent	You are yet to recognise or attend to the environmental, social, and economic crisis and your own part within it.
Curious	You are open to discovering more about the environmental, social, and economic crisis and your own part within it.
Informed	You are looking at the data and science to find out and understand what is happening.
Aware	You are emotionally working through the various reactions when facing the impact of human actions
Engaged	You are developing the skills to bring the topic appropriately into every coaching relationship

Table 1: Adapted from stages of the eco-phase cycle (Climate Coaching Alliance, 2023; Whybrow et al., 2023, p. 4).

3.3 Intervention categories

An intervention categories framework (Heron, 2007) was used to explore how climate action was applied in each phase of a typical coaching process. The framework, presented in Table 2, describes the appropriate use of three facilitative and three authoritative interventions.

Intervention categories	Definition
Facilitative interventions	
Cathartic	“Cathartic interventions help the client to abreact painful emotions, undischarged distress that is disabling and distorting his or her behaviour...they give space for the expression of spontaneously generated insights” (Heron, 2007, p. 75).
Catalytic	“Catalytic interventions seek to elicit self-discovery, self-directed living, learning and problem solving in the client” (Heron, 2007, p. 118).
Supportive	“Supportive interventions affirm the worth and value of clients, of their qualities, attitudes of mind, artefacts and creations” (Heron, 2007, p. 154).
Authoritative interventions	
Confronting	“Confronting interventions directly challenge the rigid and maladaptive, attitudes/beliefs/actions that limit the client or unnecessarily disturb or limit others, and of which the client is defensively unaware – to a greater or lesser degree” (Heron, 2007, p. 59)
Informative	“Informative interventions seek to impart to the client new knowledge, information and meaning that is relevant to their needs and interests...in a manner that enhances the person’s need to participate in the learning process with self-directed discovery” (Heron, 2007, p. 51).
Prescriptive	“Prescriptive interventions explicitly seek to influence and direct the behaviour of the client, especially, though not exclusively, behaviour that is outside or beyond the practitioner-client interaction” (Heron, 2007, p. 40).

Table 2: Intervention categories (Heron, 2007)

The intervention categories were explored in typical phases of a coaching process, namely goal setting, exploring, option generation and action planning. Generic phases were selected that were common across a wide range of approaches (Grant, 2012; Hawkins & Smith, 2013). A full range of applications of the intervention category framework applied to climate action was developed to test the use of the widest possible range of interventions to ascertain use in current coaching practice.

4. Data and research methodology

This exploratory study followed an adapted convergent mixed method design (Creswell, 2015) in which quantitative and qualitative components of the survey were analysed side-by-side. The study was registered to the Izmir Bakırçay University with the Research Id-585 based on the approval date of 17 May 2022 and decision number 605 and ethical approval was obtained from the Izmir Bakırçay University Academic Ethics Committee regarding the survey questions used within the project. A survey was implemented on Google Forms in September 2022 and distributed to the EMCC Global database of members and promoted on social media. The survey comprised quantitative and qualitative items. Responses were anonymous and were available to EMCC Global members, EIA holders as well as respondents who were not members.

The survey measured the perceived stage of the respondent in the eco-phase cycle (Whybrow, Turner, McLean, & Hawkins, 2023) and the use of intervention categories (Heron, 2007) in the context of coaching in climate action. The intervention categories framework was modified for use in the context of climate action. Items from the original scale were adapted and then checked by a group of coaching experts from EMCC Global. Descriptive statistics are reported on in this report to investigate the role and boundaries of coaching. Dedoose, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software was used to implement content analysis of the qualitative data.

To examine the feelings and perceptions of coaching and mentoring professionals about climate change, textual analysis (content analysis) and evaluation was conducted on survey responses based on keyword extraction. Textual analysis is commonly based on text vectorisation and the bag of words is collected. The bag of words consists of counting how many times a specific word is used. It should be noted that the words are taken from a predetermined list of words. In this respect, the text data is transformed into vectors. Here, a machine learning algorithm is applied along with its expected tags to create a text classification model. Such a model is a useful tool for expanding the horizons of analysis, by providing new ways of processing, classifying, and obtaining reliable textual data (MonkeyLearn, 2023).

5. Demographic profile

There were 219 responses to the survey. The sample is more female (63%) than male (36%)², is strongly represented by coaches based in the United Kingdom and European Union. 70.3% of the sample hold an EMCC Global coaching, team coaching or supervision accreditation, 95.45% offer individual coaching, 58.9% offer team coaching, 53% mentoring, and 30% offer supervision in the market. 9.1% are involved in sustainability or climate change related consultancy outside of coaching. Most coaching services are offered within the United Kingdom and European Union. The respondent age categories are displayed in Figure 1. There is a lower representation of younger respondents³. Whilst younger generations are usually considered to be more engaged with climate change, generational differences have been found to be more associated with emotional engagement than beliefs about human-caused (anthropogenic) climate change (Poortinga, Demski, & Steentjes, 2023). Generational differences are thus less critical as they relate more to emotion than beliefs or perception of risks related to climate change.

² The greater proportion of female coaching is consistent with other survey findings in the industry, for example (Passmore, Brown, Wall, Stokes, & the European Coaching and Mentoring Research Consortium, 2018).

³ Lower representation of younger respondents is consistent with previous surveys in the industry, for example (Passmore et al., 2018).

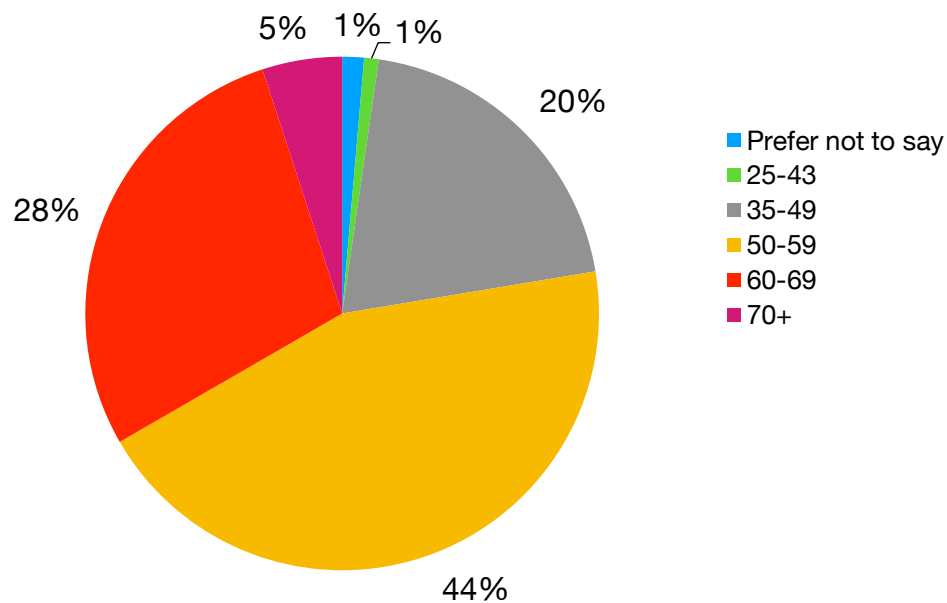


Figure 1: Respondent age

6. Level of eco-awareness of coaches

The eco-awareness of the coach is foundational to being able to coach in the context of climate action. The stage of eco-awareness of respondents on the eco-phase cycle (Climate Coaching Alliance, 2023; Whybrow, Turner, McLean, & Hawkins, 2023) was measured in the survey. Respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree, to respond to statements which characterise each stage in the adapted eco-phase cycle. Note that an additional nascent stage was added to the stage model. The results are displayed in Figure 2.

The results show the curious stage is the most strongly represented, which indicates a growing interest and awareness in eco-awareness. This suggests an openness and receptiveness to discovering more about climate action and the role the respondent can play in contributing to climate action. Many respondents are at a relatively early stage of eco-awareness.

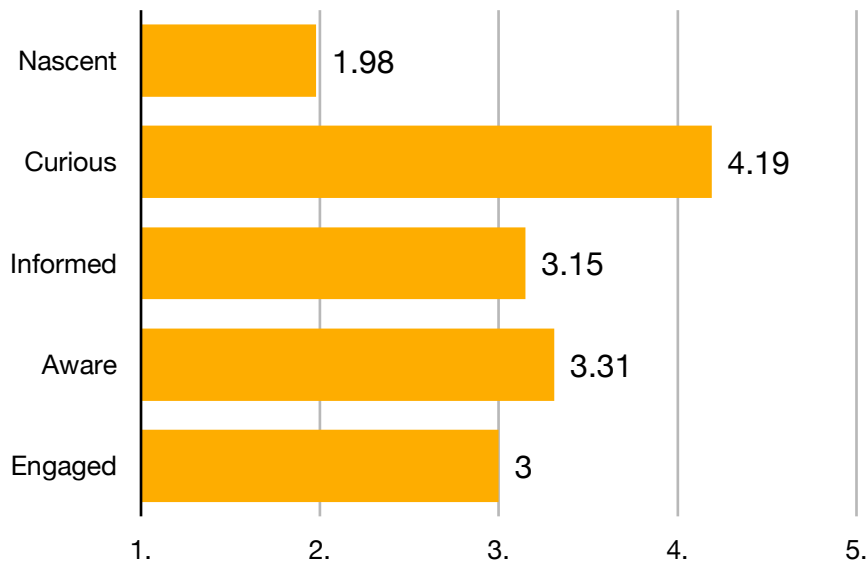


Figure 2: Stage of eco-awareness

Eco-awareness can be supported by various learning strategies. Respondents were asked to indicate their training and/or exposure to climate related matter, and the results are presented in Figure 3. Whereas very few respondents hold formal qualifications or have attended short courses in sustainability, climate action or a related field, most respondents have educated themselves through self-study (68%) and webinars (51.6%). This active orientation shows that respondents are taking the subject seriously and are building eco-awareness. However, with the complexity of climate action and sustainability, it also may come with the risk of inadequate training, which could be amplified if the coach advises or attempts to step into an expert role in sessions.

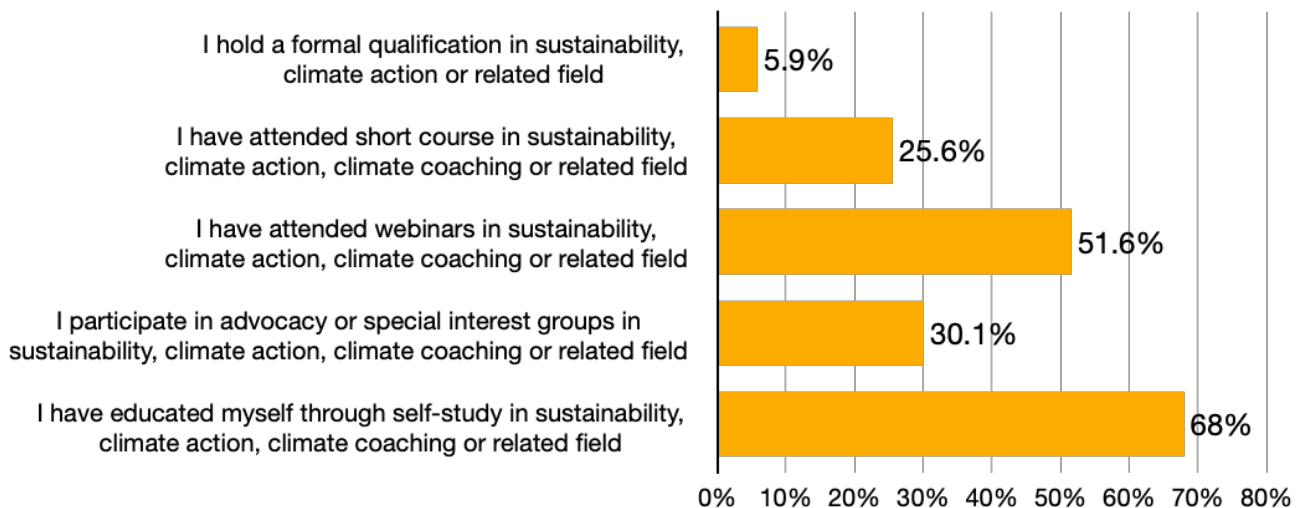


Figure 3: Professional development activities

7. Coaching role

The research investigated how practitioners construe their role in relation to climate action. When asked to what extent they see climate action as part of their role as coach, 50.7% of respondents answered agree or strongly agree. There is a substantial number (32%) who are undecided, and 17.4% who do not see climate action as part of their role as coach. There are thus widely varying views on this as can be seen in Figure 4.

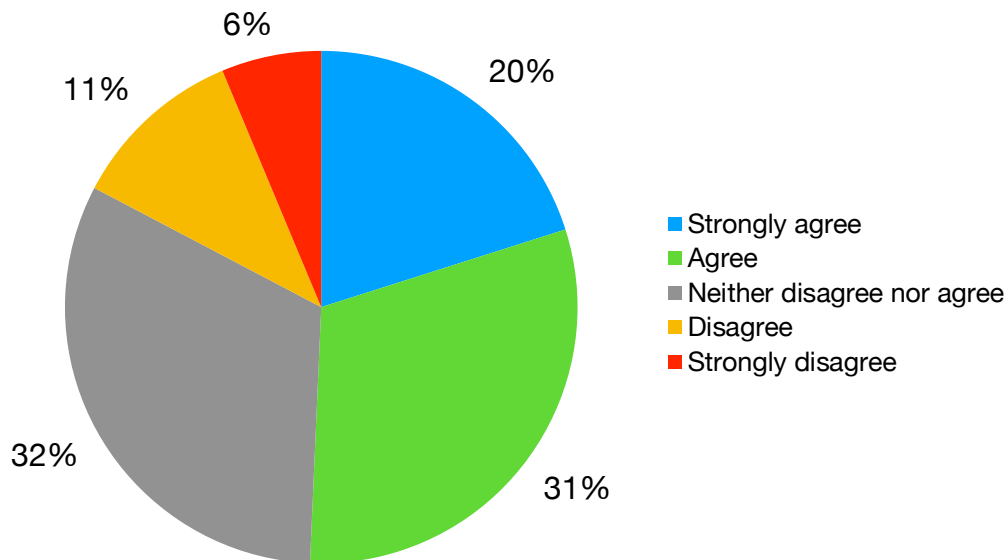


Figure 4: Role of coach in climate action

Another approach is to position coaching practice to frame coaching explicitly around climate action or related themes. Respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree, to respond to statements describing the positioning of their practice. The results are displayed in Figure 5. Very few respondents position their practice with explicit links to climate action. Most coaches have other positioning of their practice and address climate action themes as and when they emerge.

However, given this positioning, a key issue is that relatively few clients bring up climate related issues often or somewhat often (14.2%) in coaching sessions. Thus, despite the how the coach construes the role, climate related themes are seldom being raised. If clients don't bring up these concerns themselves, the coach may need to be skilled to locate the existent client agenda within a systemic context in which climate change represents one of many risks faced by the client.

Most practitioners indicated that they were somewhat or actively involved in climate action and/or advocacy outside of their role as coach, with only 23.7% of respondents indicating they were not currently involved in these activities. The work coaches do to support climate action should thus be seen alongside other advocacy work done outside of their practice.

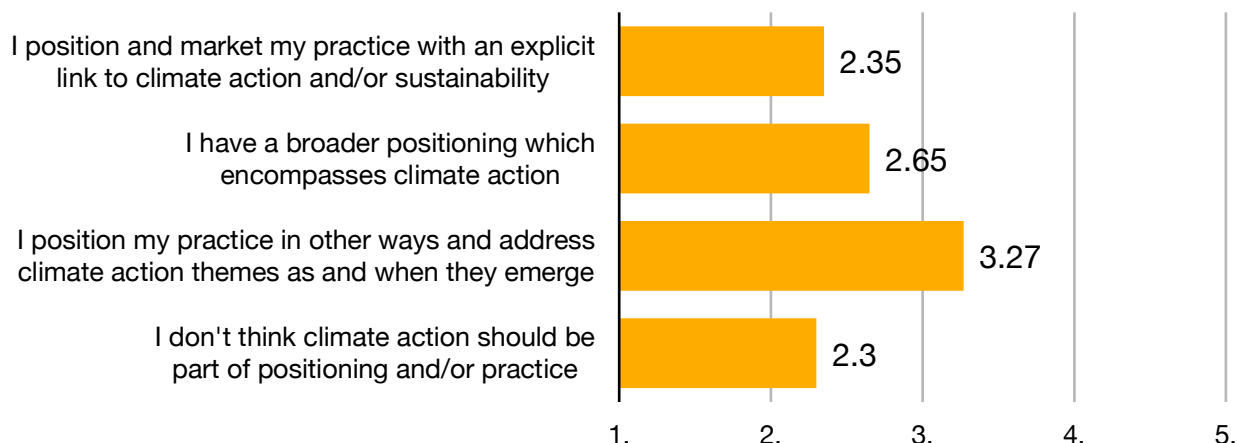


Figure 5: Market positioning

Respondents were asked, “what do you see as the role of coach in supporting climate action?” The views and perceptions of respondents were analysed using textual analysis and content analysis. Econometric modelling was used based on the information corresponding to the questions in relation to their opinions which were answered in the form of free text. This was used to create a high-level view of the data which informed the content analysis of the qualitative data on Dedoose. This was used to unpack the various contrasting perspectives seen in the quantitative data.

The outcome of the textual analysis is visualised in Figure 6, with the size of the font of the words indicating the relative prominence of a word. Whilst the survey and question asked about climate action, since climate change is part of a broader set of wicked problems, it is expected that respondents would link climate action to sustainable development since climate change is related to a broader set of wicked problems. There was no significant connection between climate action and sustainability in the textual analysis of the role of coach.

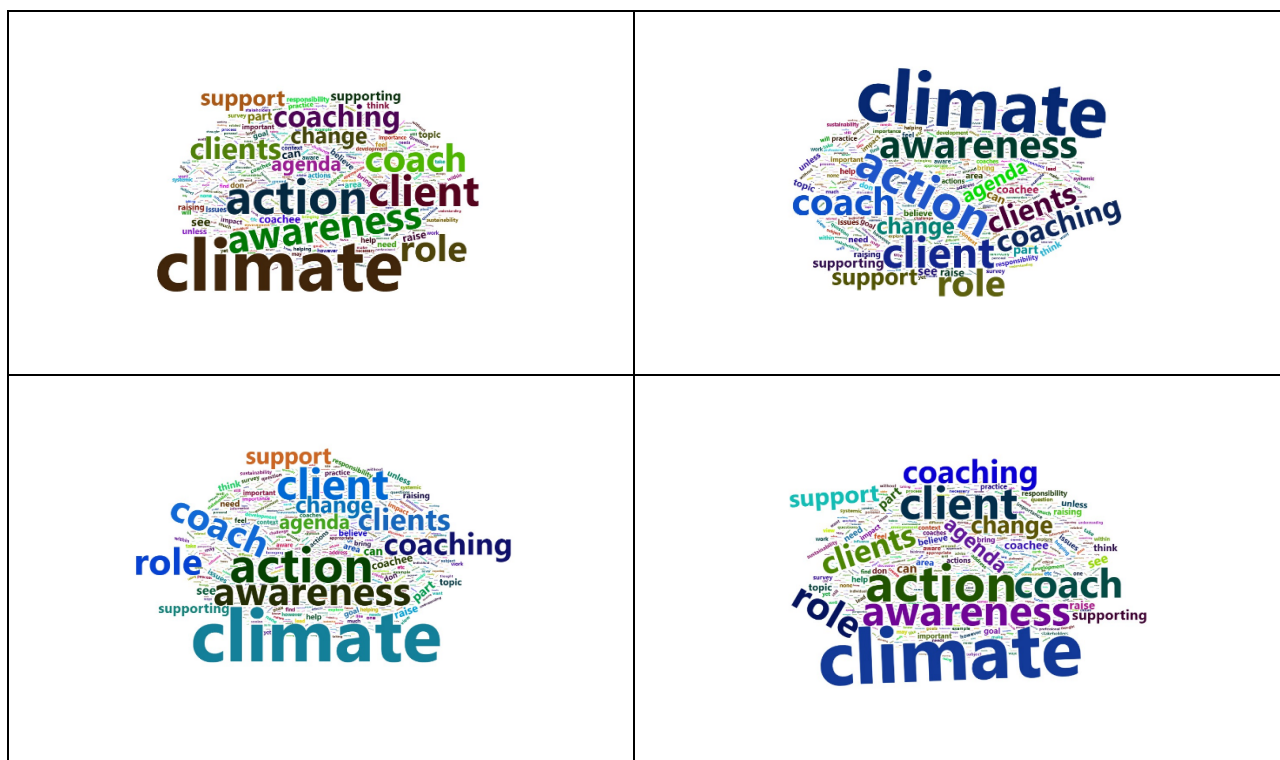


Figure 6: Textual analysis of role of coach

Several themes were identified in the content analysis relating to how respondents construed the role of coach in the context of climate change. Whilst some respondents (N=20) positioned climate action within the broader systemic context of sustainable development, most did not. Where climate action was systemically positioned, coaches were more able to address climate action and/or related interdependent themes relating to sustainability whilst respecting the client's agenda, whereas when climate action was isolated, there was tension between the opposing themes of raising awareness (N=47) and staying with the client agenda. This emerged (N=50) in the qualitative data as key opposing perspectives, with a similar frequency of responses. A key theme in these responses cautioned that coaches should not overstep their role and should limit themselves to responding to the client's agenda.

Respondents that embedded coaching in a broader systemic context (N=20) pointed to the complexity of the interconnected wicked problems connected with climate change and the sustainability transition. This entanglement means that sustainability themes may emerge in the coaching dialogue in a multiplicity of ways, and therefore exploring and unravelling these complex issues can be done whilst focusing on the client's agenda, thereby opening ways of working that addressed sustainability without disrupting the client's agenda. An illustrative verbatim response is indicated, and the respondent number is provided in brackets after the quotation:

"I see the role of coach as supporting clients to address the issues and agendas they come to coaching with. I see climate action as part of a broader set of wicked problems that are interconnected. These issues are faced by clients but aren't typically brought in as climate action. I believe in coaching being focused on the client's agenda, but the coach being sufficiently informed to work with the complexity of these entangled issues and using rigorous systemic exploration to help the client navigate these issues. We can do this without needing to become directive, and still serving the client's agenda. We can challenge and ask tough questions as we would do with any other set of issues, without placing our agenda on the table" (203).

Whereas where climate action was considered in isolation, the question triggered ethical concerns and boundary related issues. Here are some illustrative quotations that show tensions in role of coach in addressing climate action:

"None, at all - unless the coach leads. Zero" (184)

"Unless the client seeks coaching assistance in generating awareness with respect to climate change, I do not, normally, raise the issue. In my view, this ought to be the action of an activist and not that of a coach. A coach should be directed by the needs of the client and not try and ply his/her agenda - however deeply the coach may feel about climate change" (140).

In some instances, this brought up a clear non-directive view with some sense of internal conflict:

"I find it very tricky. I feel strongly that we all need to do so much more around climate action, however, view the coaching space as very much the clients and feel uncomfortable bringing the climate into the conversation if it's my agenda and not theirs" (108).

"As someone who is passionate about sustainability, if I make climate action a more explicit part of my contracting or coaching approach, I am worried it will feel like I am pushing my own agenda onto my clients, which is an uncomfortable thought. Is it a coach's responsibility to encourage clients to take climate action? And if not, who's responsibility is it?" (200).

Many coaches saw an opportunity for coaches to help to raise awareness on climate action where a recognition of the potential impact of coaching through building mindset and capacity:

"A crucial role. We have a great talent to open people's capacity and if we can raise their awareness and have them realise their great capacity then we can make a big impact" (118).

"Help expand awareness, support the development of a sustainability mindset, Foster engagement and action" (104).

Some coaches saw climate action being addressed in coaching through exploration in the coaching dialogue (N=21). This involved exploring, supporting, and challenging to enable transition:

"Strengthen capacity for transition to more sustainable ways of living, operating or running a company" (75).

"To support the coachee in finding their understanding and role in climate action."

"Some limited push back where climate issues are ignored or not addressed well may be appropriate. But we need to be careful to address their agenda, not ours" (96).

Climate action was not often raised by clients (only in 14.2% of cases). This may be due climate change being hard to grasp (epistemologically distant). Coaches thus face the issue of how to raise awareness without influencing the client's agenda. This was raised by many respondents as a key concern (N=47) and a hallmark of ethical practice (N=37).

"I have no role in supporting climate action. My role is to support and challenge my coachee" (190).

"When working on values or legacy topics with clients, sustainability has come up, but I am not sure how comfortable I feel pushing what feels like my personal agenda onto my clients. It is strange though, as I have no problem directing them towards physical activity or other well-being activities if I feel it will benefit them. Maybe it's because climate change is still such a hot button topic in the media that I am not sure how receptive all my clients will be to its explicit inclusion" (200).

Within this theme, some respondents saw an opportunity to use the positioning of the coach in the market as a way of ethically increasing the possibility of working with climate and sustainability related to themes in coaching whilst still respecting the client's agenda:

"The agenda of coaching is for the coachee/client to choose. As individuals, coaches may include climate change awareness or action as part of their brand and philosophy; and may contract to bring those things into their practice" (167).

"I can't get my head around the idea that this forms a part of 'normal' coaching. Of course, if the topic arose, then I would strongly support their aims. To be honest I'm more interested in wider sustainability (which may include climate action). One thing I've learnt from completing this survey is that I might now talk about my own values around sustainability in my self-description as a coach and during contracting" (110).

Another key theme was the view that coaches should focus on leading by example (N=17), that is focus on climate action in their personal lives and focus on the client's agenda when coaching:

"I believe that we should not mix up the two, so I treat climate action as something I do as a person and not linked to my role as a coach unless of course it is something that comes from the client and they want it to be part of their agenda in the coaching" (188).

8. Intervention categories in climate action coaching

An intervention categories framework (Heron, 2007) was used to explore how climate action was applied in each phase of a typical coaching process. A full range of applications of the intervention category framework applied to climate action were developed to test use of the widest possible range of interventions to ascertain use in current coaching practice.

8.1 Contracting

Respondents were asked to respond to how, if at all, climate action forms part of contracting by rating statements on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree. These data, displayed in Figure 7, suggest that contracting is not usually explicitly linked to climate action, and more likely to have a broader values and ethical orientation. This represents an opportunity for further development of coaching practice.

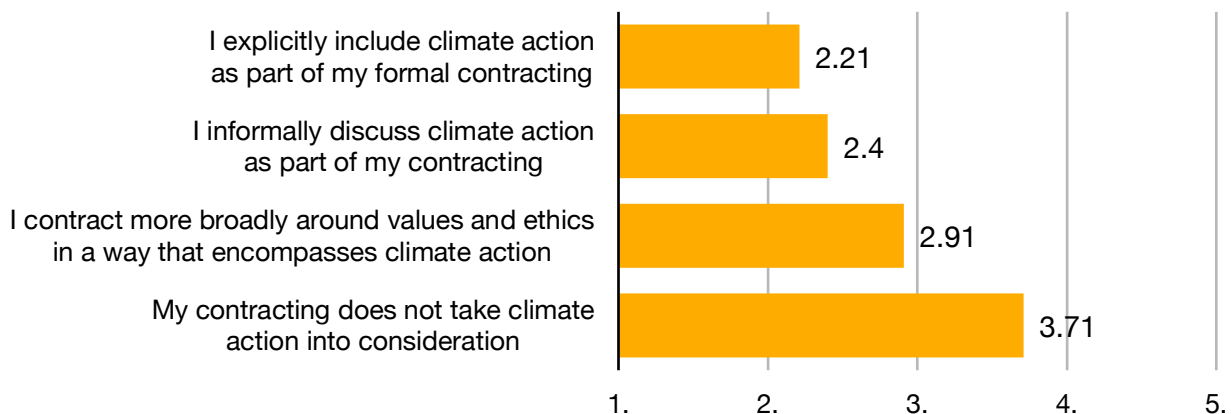


Figure 7: Contracting

8.2 Goal setting

Respondents were asked to rate statements on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree in response to the question "when I notice that the coaching goals could benefit from the client taking climate action into account I tend to?" The results are displayed in Figure 8. Coaches can be seen to apply facilitative interventions more

than authoritative interventions. There is a non-directive emphasis which is widely accepted as a hallmark of ethical coaching practice.

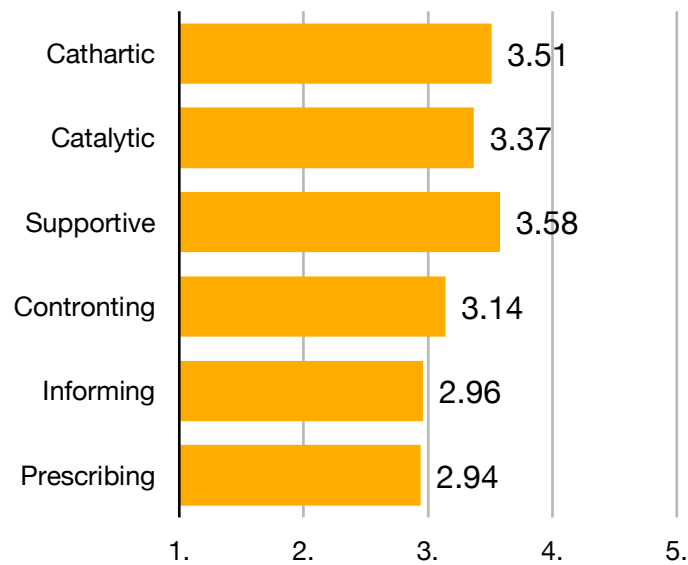


Figure 8: Use of intervention categories in goal setting

8.3 Exploration

Respondents were asked to rate statements on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree in response to the question “When I notice that the exploration could benefit from the client considering climate action, I am likely to?” The data is presented in Figure 9. Whilst facilitative interventions are again most emphasised, the supportive category is prominent, which in this case offers the least directive approach in which the client’s agenda is respected. The prescriptive category is most tolerated during exploration where it is applied to widening the exploration prior to working with options and actions.

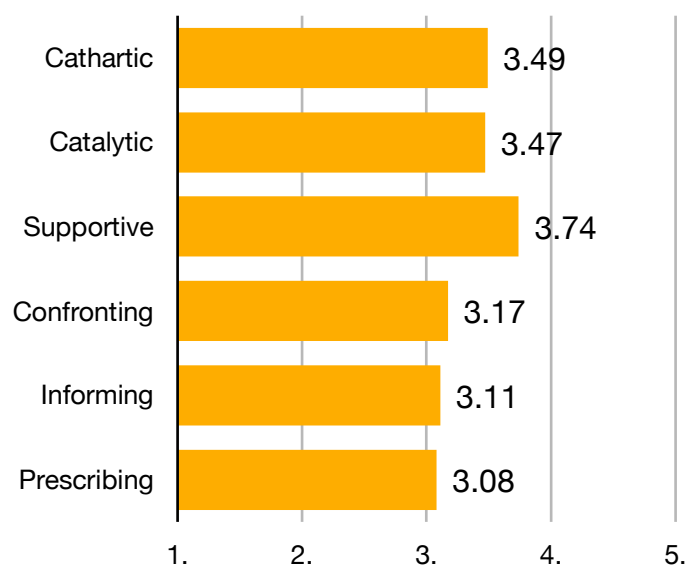


Figure 9: Use of intervention categories in exploration

8.4 Option generation

Respondents were asked to rate statements on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree in response to the question “when I notice that option generation could benefit from the client's consideration of climate action, I am likely to?” The results are displayed in Figure 10. Again, there is an emphasis on facilitative categories but interestingly the challenging category is more applied with option generation than the other session activities.

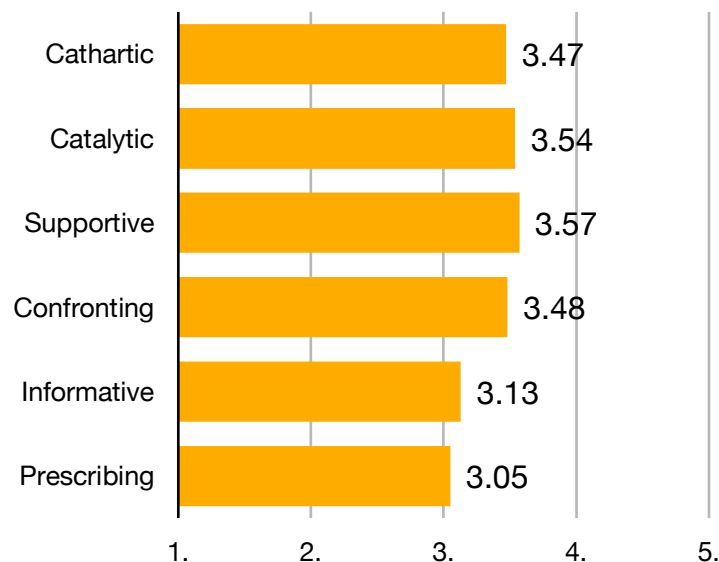


Figure 10: Use of intervention categories in option generation

8.5 Action planning

Respondents were asked to rate statements on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree in response to the question “When I notice that climate action has not been adequately considered in the client's actions, I am likely to?” The results are presented in Figure 11. Facilitative interventions are also mostly prominent in this phase of a coaching session. The catalytic category most emphasises the focus on risk and unintended consequences providing a useful way to broach sustainability-related themes within a non-directive orientation. Notice that the cathartic category is less applied in the context of action planning than in the other session activities.

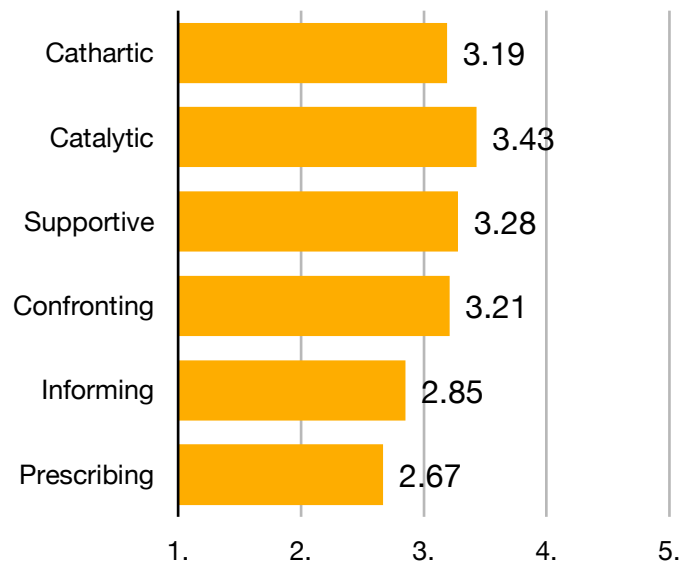


Figure 11: Use of intervention categories in action planning

Despite concerns from some respondents about coaches interfering with the client's agenda, contracting tends to be broadly focused and climate action is mostly addressed in response to the client agenda. Across all phases of the coaching process measured in this survey, prescribing interventions are least frequently used in addressing climate action.

8.6 Use of methods and tools

Respondents were asked about methods and tools used in the context of climate action in coaching. Whilst many coaches didn't yet have established methods and tools, in the most prominent theme responses focused on the use of standard coaching methods and tools (N=51) in coaching focused on climate action:

"Relating to my coachee, the issues they bring, the work itself as it unfolds between us, and my use-of self in how I am impacted by how they are, how they feel, what they think, what they are doing or not doing about their issues, and what they want to do about that - all of which may, or may not, include any aspect of climate action" (190).

Some respondents emphasised the importance of staying with the client agenda and using typical coaching approaches to address their needs:

"General good coaching methods that do NOT push coaches' agenda" (181).

"Open questions from place of curiosity, compassion and acceptance" (88).

One respondent commented about the importance of relationships in supporting clients facing strong emotions:

"Humanist orientation finding a place for strong emotions; client-coach relationship is always central, not the tool" (75).

Other coaches used values, legacy, or wheel of life tools to open and broaden the coaching dialogue:

"I've found working on values and legacy goals helped my clients consider actions they could take to widen their positive impact on the climate" (200).

The second most prominent theme focused on specialist methods and tools (N=31). Several methods were identified that illustrated facets of a complexity approach. These included systems thinking, futures thinking and vertical development. These approaches support a more holistic view which enables context and stakeholders to be included in the coaching dialogue whilst working with the client's agenda:

"Inviting the client to consider it as a part of systemic approach" (111).

"Systemic questions, futures-orientated questions, questions that address risk" (203).

"Future visioning exercises" (37).

"Questioning about legacy" (136).

"Vertical development, looking at social and whole system leadership impact - not everyone I work with is ready to comprehend this value system or to work in this way" (73).

Other specialist methods and tools included several respondents who have sessions in nature to bring an experience of nature into the coaching context.

"Coaching in the nature itself, using the natural resources to help us in our coaching sessions" (118).

Others used specific tools such as inner development goals, Neil's wheel, the eco-phase cycle (Whybrow, Turner, McLean, & Hawkins, 2023), the eco-awareness cycle (Hawkins & Turner, 2020; Whybrow, Turner, McLean, & Hawkins, 2023) and building a sustainability mindset, and "fresque du climat", which involves drawing a fresco relating to sustainability. Others leverage somatic or mindfulness methods.

Another theme saw coaches draw on more technical sustainability related methods (N=11) such as donut economics, circular economy, the permaculture wheel, corporate sustainability, and environmental, social and corporate governance (ESG) practices, scenarios and case studies. It should be noted that there are some respondents, although a small minority, who referenced some technical advice giving as part of their practice, which depending on context of practice could imply some ethical issues.

9. Ethical boundaries

Respondents were asked to respond to the question: "what ethical issues have you faced, or do you anticipate you will face in coaching in the context of climate action?" Content analysis revealed several key themes. A key theme identified was professional boundaries of practice (N=27). This theme highlighted the opportunity to target and/or de-select specific clients or niche markets:

"I already started not working with clients which do not take into consideration climate action" (208).

"If clients ask me to work in ways that clash with my own environmental working policy" (138).

Another respondent commented on specifically targeting clients already active in areas of concern to avoid influencing the client agenda:

“Serious ethical dilemma about whose agenda is paramount in coaching. I choose to work with those who are already concerned and active in social and environmental justice” (126).

A key ethical view of respecting the agency of the client and not imposing an agenda (N=43) on the client was expressed:

“I don't see coaching as the right vehicle to use to raise awareness of climate change... if we replaced climate change with poverty, social responsibility, sexual orientation etc. would that also be appropriate for us to evangelise on their time?” (70).

“None, because activism has no place within coaching” (38).

“To remain within the boundaries of the coaching role and support the client appropriately, not overreaching or projecting my values about the climate emergency onto them. Dealing with anxiety is a therapeutic cross-over and should be accommodated” (5).

Another theme relating to dilemmas experienced by coaches (N=21) was identified. Respondents in this theme focused more on the complexity associated with climate action and the broader sustainability transition, considering contextual factors and trade-offs that need to be worked through:

“Assuming that ethical issues are absolutes, and do not play out within their moral - socially constructed - context. Assuming that my own point of view is relevant. Assuming that the coaching for climate action lobby is any more expert or entitled to talk about their experience than my coachee” (190).

“Balancing profit with sustainability” (131).

Some respondents pointed to the need for coaches to deal with values-based conflicts within the coaching process. This perhaps points to an increased need for supervision focused on these tensions, particularly as sustainability and climate related pressures intensify in society:

“Tension between my own beliefs and what the coachee is bringing” (94).

“Not being triggered myself when clients do not appreciate the climate is the no. 1 code red for humanity” (88).

“Dissonance between own awareness & knowledge of the effects of climate change, biodiversity collapse etc & level at which clients are ready to engage with the subject” (75).

There were also many respondents who advocated an interventionist orientation relating to climate action (N=22). One respondent emphasised the importance of explicit upfront contracting prior to intervening in the area of climate action:

“I think clients may feel that an agenda is being pushed on them, surpassing the remit of helping them to develop. I think climate awareness would need to clearly be part of the coaching offer prior to coaching taking place. Or integrated more in nature-based work” (55).

Further there was a recognition that not all clients are ready to address this issue and that the client's sense of agency should be protected in the process:

“How much to push people who are not ready to consider this” (168).

“Need to raise awareness but no dictate” (166).

“We must be careful to not to overly burden our clients if they are not ready to take the challenge” (118).

10. Role of industry body

Respondents were asked to select items in response to the question: “what could the EMCC Global do that would be helpful to support you in considering issues of climate action and sustainability?” Respondents were requested to select the items that were perceived to be of the most value. The results are indicated in Figure 12. There was strong interest in all provided items, with webinars demonstrating tools and the establishment of communities of practice being most highlighted.

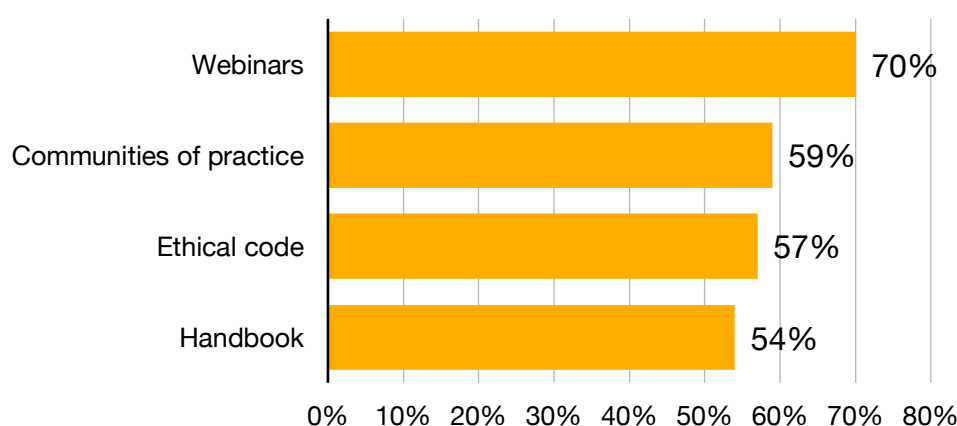


Figure 12: Industry body support

Respondents were given the option to provide other suggestions or comments on what the EMCC Global can do that will be helpful to supporting you in considering issues of climate action and sustainability. Most respondents see potential in the industry body supporting coach awareness and ethical practice, whilst there was an opposing perspective (N=9) that this is beyond the mandate of industry bodies in coaching.

Several themes emerged from respondents supportive of the EMCC Global supporting practitioners in considering climate action and sustainability. One respondent suggested the value of enabling supporting dialogue which would allow the interaction of diverse perspectives:

“Creating an open dialogue and supporting diversity within this area of interest” (111).

Another respondent suggested the importance of focusing on development of foundations of practice in this area before focusing on developing tools:

“Webinars that explore how and when our practice might take into account the climate emergency. This comes before tools” (96).

Another respondent emphasised the potential of supporting research with members:

“Co-researching with us or drawing us in research” (44).

The opposing view was strongly expressed from a minority of respondents (N=9).

It is important to note that there was a strong cautionary perspective from a minority of respondents (N=9) who believed that addressing climate action is beyond the mandate of coaching industry bodies:

"I don't look to the EMCC as being a lead organisation on climate change - that is not their remit" (70).

"If EMCC would hand out specific 'climate action' materials I would consider to end my membership and tell all my colleagues to consider doing the same" (23).

"It is unethical to be taking a stance here. Coachee agenda!! Not coach or profession agenda. This whole debate is skewed and partial. I am not saying climate change is not important - but that is not the same thing as saying we should lead clients in this way. Unhappy in the extreme about this even being a survey" (3).

There was also a comment about the value of the industry body supporting climate action through corporate social responsibility initiatives. This comment could be expanded to focus on how the organisation responds to various facets of corporate sustainability:

"EMCC Global could also donate a portion of its revenue to support climate action?" (42).

"Has EMCC considered facilitating organising pro bono coaching support to relevant orgs?" (42).

11. Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore how coaches address climate action in their practice. Coaching and mentoring have been highlighted as important in addressing cultural and human influence factors in addressing the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Stibbe & Prescott, 2020). A mixed methods study was used to explore the perceived level of eco-awareness (Whybrow et al., 2023) and the use of a range of intervention styles (Heron, 2007) when coaching in the context of climate action, as well as to explore perceptions around the role of coach, ethical considerations, and the role of industry bodies in coaching.

The findings of this study revealed polarised responses to the role of coach with respect to addressing climate action in coaching. Whilst just over half of the sample saw addressing climate action as part of their role as coach, the remainder were undecided or opposed. Respondents that saw climate action outside of the scope of the role of coach had strong views and ethical concerns. This polarised response suggests the need to tread carefully with this important issue.

A central issue that came through the data analysis was a concern for the primacy of the client's agenda in coaching. Addressing climate change or any other social issue was seen by some respondents as the coach imposing on the client's agenda, and hence highlighted as an ethical issue. Despite this, facilitative intervention styles were more emphasised than authoritative intervention styles in the context of coaching for climate action. This suggested that coaches can coach in the context of climate action in an ethical manner that respects the client's agenda.

The most prevalent stage of eco-awareness amongst respondents was the curious stage of eco-awareness. This indicates openness and interest, but also suggests that coaches are not yet well informed and engaged in climate action. The findings also suggested that most coaches learnt about sustainable development and climate action through self-study and webinars. Very few coaches hold formal qualifications or have attended short courses in this area. This can be seen to some extent to explain the polarised response where climate action was seen as an isolated

issue, as opposed to one of 17 interdependent sustainable development goals (United Nations, 2015).

Understanding the interdependence of the SDGs is crucial as it acknowledges climate action within the context of multiple interdependent complex systems, which can be seen as the containing systems in which the coaching agenda is embedded (Cilliers, 1998; Cruz, Pedrozo, & Barros Estivaleta, 2006; Peter Hawkins & Turner, 2020; Maitland & Baets, 2021). Respondents who approached coaching in climate action from within a complexity or systemic paradigm in their responses acknowledged this interconnectivity and were able to find ways of respecting the client's agenda whilst creating links to the containing systems of the client. Rather than influencing the coaching agenda, the role of coach can be seen as facilitating reflective linkages between multiple levels of system. This can be illustrated using the analogy of a Russian Doll, in which dolls are contained within dolls. Seen in this way the coach can facilitate exploration from inside-out or from outside-in or between layers. The job of coach becomes more congruent as it is about facilitating connection and increasing knowledge, rather than an imposition of agenda on the client.

If coaches are to support clients in the context of climate action and other SDGs it is important that continuous professional development of coaches, mentors and supervisors develop a systemic orientation to address climate action and the sustainability transition through coaching. Another approach that emerged in the findings was the opportunity for coaches to explicitly position their practice through marketing activities to explicitly support clients interesting in addressing the SDGs in their professional and/or personal lives. Relatively few coaches in the sample currently position their practice in this manner.

It is important that coaching industry bodies provide guidelines to support practitioners in taking up their role in an ethical and evidence-based manner. As the urgency of the sustainability transition increases, coaching industry bodies can guard against knee-jerk reactions driven by climate anxiety and encourage evidence-based and ethical responses to supporting the sustainability transition through coaching.

12. Recommendations

Several recommendations from the research have been identified pertaining to coaches, industry bodies and coach education providers. The recommendations seek to consider and respond to underlying shifts in issues faced by coaches and clients whilst respecting the primacy of the client agenda and without imposing any specific agenda on the clients. This ensures that ethical boundaries of practice are maintained whilst ensuring coaching remains relevant to the wicked problems faced by society. The findings highlight the importance of coaching industry bodies and coaches leading by example by embedding corporate sustainability practices in their organisations and businesses.

12.1 Competence category for embedding in context

It is recommended that EMCC Global support increased appreciation for exploring the containing systems in the context of the client's agenda. This involves encouraging coaching development activities to focus on the development of underpinning theories, philosophies and methodologies that contextualise coaching within an understanding of complex systems in which they are contained. This should be translated into clear methods and tools. Given the changing conditions in which coaches, mentors and their clients are operating, it is recommended that a new competence category is created to increase the focus on exploring interconnections between the client agenda and the multiple interdependent containing complex systems in which the coaching is situated. This should be implemented in a way that does not impose an agenda in the coaching

but requires coaches to situate coaching more deliberately in relevant containing systems. This is essentially about situating the coaching in the client's context and exploring the context more intentionally in relation to the client's agenda. By adding a competency category, this will support the evolution of practice through nudging the practitioner in practice, as well being supported through EQA providers, CPD providers and supervision.

12.2 Provide guidelines to support ethical practice

It is important to respond to the polarised opinions that came through the study, finding ways of ensuring that coaching, mentoring and supervision evolve to meet the challenges faced by society whilst ensuring sound ethical standards and boundaries are applied. This can include clarifying boundaries between coaching, mentoring, advocacy and consulting in relation to climate action and the broader sustainability transition. This can include guidelines on how to position coaching practice to address specific niche areas, such as those associated with climate action, responsibly and ethically. The guidelines should also provide practical ways of embedding the client's agenda in the client's context. It could also be useful to address topics such as eco-anxiety, particularly from the perspective of supporting the resilience of practitioners in uncertain and turbulent contexts.

12.3 Encourage responsible leadership amongst members

To support self-organised change, it is recommended that the EMCC Global encourages responsible leadership amongst its members. Responsible leadership can be understood as involving multiple stakeholder groups in decision making to support the long-term sustainability of an organisation (Waldman & Siegel, 2008). This will encourage coaches, mentors and supervisors to think of themselves as responsible leaders within and beyond their roles as coaches, mentors and supervisors, or providers of coach training. This broader framing encourages members to consider their contribution to the various SDGs across multiple professional and personal contexts. Responsible leadership can be supported by modifying the social impact criteria for the EMCC Global's Coaching, Mentoring, Supervision and Team Coaching Awards. A suggested phrasing could be: "impacting one or more of the SDGs aligning with EMCCs purpose: 'existing to develop, promote, and set the expectation of best practice in coaching, mentoring, and supervision globally for the benefit of society'".

12.4 Support research linked to SDGs

As an industry body, it is important to promote research as the basis for evidence-based practice. The EMCC Global annual Research Competition could be used as a vehicle to support to contribute to the body of knowledge in how coaching, mentoring and supervision can be used to address the SDGs. It is recommended that one of the grants each year is linked to address the SDGs using coaching, mentoring and/or supervision. This would promote not only knowledge creation but can also be used to support member awareness through subsequent publication in the EMCC Global's International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching and presentations at the Global Provider Summit and the EMCC Global's Coaching, Mentoring and Supervision Conference.

12.5 Use SDGs to target social responsibility programmes

Since EMCC Global is already involved in social responsibility initiatives, it is recommended that the United Nations SDGs are used to target social responsibility programmes. Since the 17 SDGs have an extensive scope, this will help to enhance impact from initiatives whilst still allowing substantial flexibility in selection of programmes. Existing programmes can be linked to SDGs and strategies to measure impact can be identified. These programmes and initiatives can also

provide members with opportunities to make an impact on the SDGs through volunteer activities, which can include targeted coaching, mentoring and supervision practice. In this way EMCC Global can lead by example through targeted initiatives with measured impact.

13. Conclusion

As the urgency of the sustainability transition intensifies, coaches, mentors, supervisors and their clients must navigate the wicked problems emerging from the interaction between multiple complex systems. The transdisciplinary nature of these complex problems means that multi-stakeholder partnerships are required to address the SDGs. Coaching and mentoring are recommended by the United Nations as part of a multi-stakeholder partnerships framework (Stibbe & Prescott, 2020). This requires that coaching and mentoring need to evolve to undertake a task different from its existing structure.

This process will assume a mediating and moderating role that confronts the existing coaching and mentoring industry with a new responsibility and in this sense, will determine the behaviours towards the emerging effects. The existing level of responsibility becomes more important when the social content and dimension of the issues in climate action are considered. In this respect, EMCC Global should be ready for the new process and trend as a fundamental collaborator and partner of these institutions and global organisations from a governance point of view.

The findings of this research emphasised the importance of coaches adopting a more systemic orientation in which the client's agenda is embedded in the client's context, and in particular in the multiple interacting complex containing systems. This contextualised approach opens opportunities for the coach to explore linkages between the client's agenda and the context whilst respecting the primacy of the client's agenda. Five recommendations were provided which will together support the evolution of the role of coaches, mentors, and supervisors in a responsible and ethical manner. This evolution of practice opens a pathway for practitioners to more effectively and ethically navigate the wicked problems faced by society, and an opportunity for EMCC Global to lead responsible coaching, mentoring and supervision practice.

It should be noted that based on the perspective of climate action discussed here, further analysis of the factors affecting the perceptions and behaviours of professionals will continue using advanced econometric techniques. Our major aim is to apply new modelling techniques based on machine learning to represent, estimate, and test the network of relationships in a way that will contribute to the literature as a scientific publication. In this way, we will be able to understand the patterns of correlation/covariance among a set of variables in our research to propose good policy recommendations.

We sincerely thank all parties who supported this process and hope that this research will be a good start for those who practice coaching and mentoring to add value in the field of sustainability.

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