COACHING RELATIONSHIPS

THE RELATIONAL COACHING FIELD BOOK

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The coaching contract: a mutual commitment

Charlotte Sills

Pete was running out of the house – half into his jacket and with his toast clenched between his teeth, when the phone rang. It was Colin, HR director for Chemwell, an international chemicals firm with whom he had done business several times. He liked Colin and the work he had got from him had always been interesting and rewarding – coaching, project development, consulting to the leadership team. As he drove to his meeting, he listened to Colin through the earpiece. A situation had arisen – Henry, one of his senior managers was up for promotion to the board. Their only concern – and it was a major one – was that his leadership skills were hopeless and that was holding him back. Getting the promotion depended on his developing in that area. Meanwhile, another senior manager who had been taking care of the Far East office was coming home – and he was expecting that place on the board. Tricky. Pete listened – half an ear on Colin, half his mind on the meeting he was going to – he simply must do well at this presentation; getting the contract to do all the leadership development for a large government office would look great on his CV. And with the new baby on the way he could do with the money. Colin was getting to the point. Would Pete coach Henry to see if he can be got ready for board level work? Intensive stuff – got to be done by the year end – otherwise the post would go to the other guy. The usual rates and agreements. Pete was happy to agree and told Colin to ask Henry to give him a ring so they could talk about the possibilities.

Three days later, Henry rang and Pete arranged a meeting with him. Pete was slightly disconcerted when Henry introduced himself as “taking over the director position in January”. That didn't seem to fit with what Colin had said. But
perhaps something had changed. Cautiously, Pete asked Henry what he hoped to get from coaching. Henry laughed cheerfully. “Oh, we all get coaches when we’re heading for stardom,” he said “I think it would be a good place to just take some time to reflect on my life”. Pete began to wish that he had engaged earlier in the dynamic activity of making the contract – or setting the frame.

SOME THOUGHTS AND THEORIES
A contract is an agreement between two or more people concerning the type of activity or relationship they will have with each other. In coaching, it is the agreement between coach and client about their work together; the mutual undertaking to enter into a coaching relationship. However, as all coaches know, things are not as simple as that: a coaching engagement involves a wide variety of contracts and contexts – from the initial contact with the purchaser to the subtle negotiation of an on-going and evolving coaching commitment.

Human society is founded on explicit and implicit agreements about how we can live in relationship with one another. They are one of the ways that we use to try to put order into a world that is essentially unpredictable and potentially dangerous. Despite the obvious argument that human relationships cannot be controlled by contracts, it remains the case that they are an indispensable part of the functioning of any political, legal and social system. They are therefore an essential feature of any ‘safe’ coaching agreement (and by ‘safe’, I mean safety as much for the coach as for the coachee).

And there is something else that is highlighted by the contract, something unconscious and unspoken. That is the fact that if we need a contract, we are acknowledging a ‘me’ and a ‘you’ – two subjectivities in relationship. In making contracts, we are facing the existential reality that we are separate and different and we may have different desires – and yet we are also connected and can join in mutual commitment. At best, coaching engages with that challenge of existential encounter, resisting the pull of familiar patterns.

Depending on their theoretical orientation, their personal preferences and their experience, coaches vary enormously in the amount and type of contracts that they make. At one extreme, for example, for an internal coach, there may be a simple offer of a space and an opportunity to talk without any other expectations or agreements about time frame or process. It may seem to some that it would be hard to take sufficient distance to be facilitative in this relatively structureless context. Yet many internal coaches find that they can offer very real support and guidance this way ‘in real time’. People can be useful to each other simply through engaging in a conversation, without making formal agreements about it.
Despite the beneficial effect of simple human contact, most coaches would agree that further contracting is essential. Whether they work as internal coaches, independent consultants or for a coaching organisation, there will be, at the very least, a need for agreements about such administrative details as time, place, fees (if any) and duration as well as a broad agreement about goals. What is more, a significant body of research (see the Introduction for an overview) indicates that a clear agreement about the aims of coaching and also how the participants will work together is vital for a strong ‘working alliance’ and an important element of effective coaching.

As long ago as 1977, Goldberg cited seven research studies addressing the vital importance of contracting and concluded that the *contractual relationship* is “an arrangement between equals that, when explicitly formulated, rejects coercion and fosters personal freedom” (p. 32). The implication for coaching seems clear. The contract is not simply a business case, a prediction about effect on ROI, a way of reassuring purchasers of coaching that it is ‘worth the money’: it is a vital and subtle part of the coaching relationship and its effectiveness.

However, as we come to understand the reasons for this importance, we also become aware that there is a significant factor which is a consistent influence on our contract-making and needs to be mentioned here. This is the inevitable tension between structure and emergence – order and chaos – which is a vital part of creative relational coaching.

Earlier, I commented that humans have an essential tendency to attempt to impose order in a chaotic world. We have a strong need to make sense of the world, to provide it with structure and make it more predictable. It can be argued that the coaching relationship, with its inevitable risk of exposure and its capacity to arouse emotional and disturbing issues, is in particular need of structure to contain it. The contract helps to provide this structure.

However, as Einstein reminded us, a problem cannot be solved with the same thinking that created it. In order truly to make transformative changes, we have to work in the area of “bounded instability” (Stacey 1992) between certainty and uncertainty in a sort of temporary beneficial disorder that allows for something new to emerge. Here lies the coach’s dilemma. The contract needs to accommodate the tension between the certainty of structure and the need for creative uncertainty. This creates a real *caveat* in relation to those contracts which identify specific goals for change – and which coach has not been persuaded by the outcome-driven attitudes of purchasers? It points to the need for subtle flexibility in contracting and for it to be an evolving process. This chapter hopes to guide the reader through some of the complexities and subtleties of the process of contracting so that coach and client can co-create the right path.
Levels of contract

The model here is based on five ‘levels’ of contracting process (Sills 2006). It continues the idea of the contract being the container or the ‘frame’ for the work. The five levels of contracting start with the largest contextual container and then work down the levels to the micro-moment. When colleague Brigid Proctor talks about them, she uses a set of Russian dolls. Each one nestles safely inside the container of the previous one – each separate but contributing to a whole. The dolls capture the idea that the contract, at best, acts as a safe container for the creative work in the area of bounded instability and that it can do this best if it itself is ‘contained’ by the clarity and safety of the previous level of contract.

Level 1: The Contract with the World – Society, the Planet

This first level of contract is not one that is negotiated by or with the organisation. It is a personal contract or commitment that an individual holds with the wider world. Between coaches, the details may be different. The essential thing is that there are some principles and values that we will not transgress. They may be to do with harming human beings or degrading the planet. They may concern working within the law or respecting diversity. Many coaches make clear to the client the professional organisations to which they belong and the ethical codes to which they adhere. An interesting reflection here is to ask yourself the question: what work would I need to refuse or give up? What would I be willing to lose my job over?

In Pete’s case, his particular contract with himself and the world concerned his own integrity and respect for people. He had worked for Chemwell before and knew that in the past he had liked the way they conducted their work and how they treated their employees. He had also experienced liking and respect from them. He had not, therefore, felt the need to question Colin, the HR Director, about what was happening to the people involved.

Level 2: The Contract with the Organisation and Its Parts

In 1975, Fanita English wrote a two page article called ‘The Three-Cornered Contract’. Her simple model was a triangle that looked like this:
The ‘Great Powers’ are the organisation, or the HR department or whoever is purchasing the coach’s skills and has the power to dictate whether and how the work will go forward. The other two points on the triangle are coach and client. The simple message of this important article is that there are certain things that must be transparently agreed, on all three vectors of the triangle, in order for any coaching engagement to be safe and effective. English’s work was developed by Micholt (1992) who drew triangles with sides of unequal lengths to indicate allegiance or distance between the parties. The triangular scheme can be developed to map multiple stakeholders and lines of authority (see Skinner in this volume).

Eric Berne (the founder of transactional analysis) identifies three forms of contract: the administrative, the professional (which we will call the learning and development contract) and the psychological (Berne 1966). The first two are relevant here. The psychological contract will be discussed later.

**THE ADMINISTRATIVE CONTRACT**

Sometimes also referred to as the business contract, this deals with all the practical arrangements such as time, place, duration, fees (if any), agreements with referring bodies or agencies, confidentiality and its limits. Normally it also includes a broad agreement about the purpose of coaching. These are all apparently straightforward but it is surprising how often coaches, with their eyes firmly fixed on the coaching work to come, can be unclear about them or overlook their fundamental importance. Not only is clarity about administrative agreements essential to the world of business, the creation of this structure creates a safe space within which to allow what is not known to emerge.
The administrative contract covers the following areas:

- **The venue, the time, the frequency, and the duration of the coaching sessions and changes to the agreements**
- **Fees** including the possibility of fee increase over the course of a long coaching commitment; also perhaps a policy for cancellations
- **The context of the coaching**
- **Confidentiality** and any imposed or inevitable limits, agreements to report back and so on; obligations in law and in ethics; coach’s supervision arrangements
- **Record keeping arrangements** (for more information on coaching contracts and the law (in the UK) see Jenkins 2007)
- **How the coaching will be evaluated** for example informally by the participants or with the manager, or against KPIs etc.
- **What sort of coaching?** There are many types of coach – from the expert who hopes to pass on his skills and expertise, to the facilitator who sees his role as simply to help the coachee take space for his own thoughts. It is important to be able to articulate one’s coaching proposition – even to guide the client as to what might be most suitable. Turning down work because it is not the type of coaching we offer is likely to make a better impression on potential future purchasers than trying to be a ‘one coach fits all’. It may be especially important to give a detailed explanation of the approach when proposing to work cross-culturally.

**THE ‘PROFESSIONAL’ OR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT CONTRACT**

This contract defines the purpose and focus of the coaching and how it will proceed. It is mainly the concern of coach and coachee. However, often it needs also to be part of the three-cornered contract with the organisation. For example, a coach may be engaged specifically to develop future leaders, to facilitate a transition or to build particular skills. This purpose is thus one of the transparent details that is known by all. It can also be part of planning for the evaluation process.

On a more sinister note, organisations – sometimes knowingly, sometimes unconsciousy – may use a coach or even an entire team of consultants as part of a plan to achieve a hidden end. We discuss this later under ‘psychological contracts’.

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The coaching contract

In our example involving Pete, it is easy to see that there is a place where there was serious slippage.

Because Pete was in a hurry – and preoccupied – and because he knew and liked Colin, it hadn’t occurred to him that there might be anything problematic in the air. Normally, he would have suggested a three-way conversation between himself, Colin and Henry so that he could ensure that Colin had given all the information to Henry that had gone to Pete. As it was, he was left feeling somewhat compromised. Colin had told him that Henry’s future was seriously at risk, but it seemed that Henry was unaware. Neither did he appear to know about the hero returning from the Far East with his eye on the board reward. Belatedly, Pete suggested the three-way meeting but Henry didn’t feel it was necessary. Pete felt anxious and didn’t know what to do.

Level 3: The contract with the coaching client

When all this measurable detail is clarified, the coach and coachee are free to move into the coaching work itself, which starts with a deeper exploration of the learning and development contract – the goal of the work and the tasks involved for the coach and the coachee; in other words, an agreement not only about direction but also about how they will work together.

Coaches vary as to how much they explain their role as coach and there is no special rule about what needs to be said. However, it is worth remembering that there is considerable evidence to suggest that failed or discontinued work is largely caused by an unaddressed difference in expectations between practitioner and client (Goldberg 1977). Clear contracting about how the client sees the problem and what he needs, as well as how the coach normally works and how together they will address inevitable misunderstandings, helps to avoid later problems de-railing the coaching or, worse, going underground.

The core of this conversation will, of course, be the discussion about the goal of the coaching. Until the last few years, coaching was somewhat hamstrung by the image of either being a remedial activity or for improving performance. This, as well as the inevitable focus on measurable ROI, led to contracts being automatically framed as behavioural and testable. Of course, there is a place for such contracts, but to think that this is the only kind of contract is to do an injury to the contracting process. Contracting is a rich, flexible activity that is constantly responsive to the situation and the changing needs of the client, that acknowledges the mutuality (see King in this volume) of the relationship and the importance of emergence. Negotiations about the potential scope of the coaching, its boundaries and its changing and emerging goals are a vital part of the work (sometimes they are the work).
There are two parameters that are useful in thinking about contracts. The first is the continuum from ‘hard’ to ‘soft’ contracts. In a hard contract the goal is clearly defined in measurable terms: for example, “to find myself a new job within six months”, “to implement this new system with my team” or “to delegate the operations and concentrate on networking”. Soft contracts are more subjective and less specific, for example “to develop as a team player” or “to get to know myself as a leader”.

There are some powerful advantages to making ‘hard’ change contracts:

- Clients are encouraged by the contract-making process to believe and feel that they have options and that the power for change is in their own hands. This can instill hope in the process of coaching, along with the sense of personal power, both of which are identified as being factors involved in successful therapy outcome (Asay and Lambert 1999; Duncan and Miller 2000).

- They provide a useful yardstick for assessing the effectiveness of the work, which is essential if coaches are to demonstrate their efficacy! If contracts are not being achieved this should be explored: perhaps something significant has been missed; perhaps the wrong contract has been chosen, in which case it should be renegotiated. Possibly coach and client are not suited or the issues are outside the coach’s competence.

- They provide clarity of focus, which gives both coach and client something to aim for and leads to economy of time and expense in the long run.

- They use the power of envisaged potential so that the client not only works consciously towards the goal but, at a deeper level, has already accepted the possibility of the outcome in his mind.

- They help to avoid misunderstandings and unrealistic expectations on the part of both client and coach, for instance that the coach actually has a magic wand! Contracts help to reinforce the notion that we make change happen, even if we cannot always predict all the consequences.

However, there are some significant disadvantages and caveats to the concept of ‘hard’ contracts for change and the thoughtful coach will bear them in mind:

- Inevitably, a behavioural goal often implies that there is something unsatisfactory in the present moment. In other words, the work immediately becomes problem focused, while so many studies are pointing to the importance of enquiring into the positive.
The coaching contract

- Some clients have a personality type which strives for achievement. They may turn their contract into yet another performance hurdle to overcome.

- A softer contract allows for more of an exploration into what ‘is’, what works and what could emerge. Remember also the paradoxical theory of change, which states that “change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not” (Beisser 1970, p. 88).

- A very precisely defined behavioural goal runs the risk of restricting the scope of the conversation so that clients feel that they cannot talk about deeper feelings and thoughts which might emerge in the coaching process. Only when the contract is specifically for short-term, outcome-focused work is it appropriate to limit the content of the sessions to the defined and agreed area – an approach which is summed up rather deftly by a colleague, Angus Igwe, who (adopting the words of philosopher Ziggy Zigler) says “The main thing… is to let the main thing… be the main thing!”

- Finally, there is another caveat about hard contracts which was mentioned earlier. If a client is capable of imagining an outcome, it must come from his current frame of reference. It is therefore not going to be truly transformational. A fundamental shift will be made only when clients have risked entering that area of “bounded instability” (Stacey 1992) between the known and the unknown with willingness to be open to new ideas. It is essential that the contract be non-restrictive, renegotiable and flexible, so that the client is available to his creativity.

### Into the Unknown

The question of ‘hard’ versus ‘soft’ becomes further moderated by the issue of whether the coachee (and also the coach) has a clear understanding of where he is and what he wants. While many clients come to coaching with full understanding of what their difficulty is or their goal may be, many others do not. Clients who genuinely don't know what they need may feel inadequate if a hard contract is asked of them. They are simply aware of a generalised malaise: “I have been feeling miserable in my new role for months and I don’t know why” or “I want to know who I am as a leader.” Or they may be offered two sessions of coaching as part of a training programme and have no idea what is ‘on offer’. An appropriate initial (soft) contract might be simply “to explore myself in my role”.

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Clients who have been ‘sent’ to coaching (like Henry, whose job is on the line if he does not develop leadership skills) or who have unrealistic goals (like the highflier who is competing against an internal candidate who is also the Chairman’s son-in-law) may hurry to make contracts which are doomed to failure.

Even those clients who do know what they want may not know the full significance of the change they are seeking. We human beings do not remain stuck in our difficulties for no reason and the patterns we develop have served us well at some time (for example in our previous organisation or even in our childhood). We may need to understand fully the meaning of our choice before we can carry it through. Consequently many coaches, as a matter of course, agree an initial contract to explore the client’s situation, or to make a small behavioural change. Then at a later stage, after the relationship is established and the client knows herself more fully, a contract for greater change is negotiated.

**THE CONTRACTING MATRIX**

The Contracting Matrix (see Figure 7.2) is a way of organising some of these parameters into four types of agreement for the work’s direction, each of which has implications for what might be required from the practitioner in terms of relationship and approach. The model seeks to address the limitations of goal-led coaching, while retaining the benefits of clear contracts.

**Types of Contracts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘soft’, subjective, emergent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clarifying</strong> – “The main thing is to let the main thing be the main thing”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Igwe 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No understanding of self and/or the situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exploratory</strong> – “Till we have faces”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.S. Lewis 1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘hard’, verifiable, sensory-based</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7.2
The vertical axis describes the continuum between the ‘hard’ contract, which is observable, verifiable, sensory-based – and the ‘soft’ contract, which allows the unknown to emerge, is subjective and intangible. The horizontal axis reflects the degree to which the client has a clear idea of what changes he needs or wants to make. The resulting matrix offers four types of contract that allow the coach to respond to the client where he is – according to his perceived and experienced needs and wants, his personality style and level of self-awareness – and the time frame in which they are working. As the work unfolds and the coaching couple explores the issues together, the contract will be reviewed, adapted and updated as new goals emerge.

The **behavioural contract** (top right) requires of the client a high level of clarity about his problem and desired goals as well as an ability to describe those goals in behavioural terms. Clients who come to coaching with a clear aim – and perhaps a time-limited frame – may find these contracts most useful. A newly appointed manager realised that her job involved making presentations to clients. She saw a coach to help her overcome her shyness and learn some communication skills. Her work focussed on building her confidence and working though her anxieties. She decided also to enrol on a public-speaking course. This sort of contract is often associated with mentoring or ‘expert’ coaching where the coach is presumed to have some experience and knowledge in the area of the desired learning.

The **clarifying contract** (top left) is one offered to the client when he knows broadly what he wants, or at least that he wants clearly definable change, but he does not understand what the obstacles are and what he needs to do. Here the contract may be to identify the key issues and then review the direction. An example is the man who referred himself to a coach in despair about being overlooked once again for promotion. His experience was that although his managers appeared at first to support him, and his psychometric capability assessment was high, when he actually applied for promotion the support melted away. He very much wanted the next promotion and this was his stated contract. First he needed to find out what he was doing to sabotage his possibilities and what skills and competence he needed to develop.

At the bottom of the matrix lie two types of contract which do not articulate a measurable outcome. They are for clients whose need is for a subjective internal change or development, not an externally defined one. The **exploratory contract** may be suitable for someone who can identify dissatisfaction with their work, or someone who is new in post and wants support as they discover what the challenges are and ‘who’ they will be in their new role. These clients don’t yet understand themselves and therefore are certainly not capable of identifying a behavioural goal. The contract is represented by words from C.S. Lewis: “Till we have faces”. The full quotation is “How can
we come face to face with the gods until we have faces?” (Lewis 1978) In other words, how can we come face to face with our potential self until we know the face of our present self? How can we face the challenges of our lives and decide who and how we want to be until we know who we are now? The completion of this contract may be followed by a behavioural contract, or it may not.

Finally, there is what might be called a *discovery contract* or perhaps an *engagement contract*. The signature phrase for this type of contract is “I want more of myself”. This was said by a successful client who had been in an action-learning set with the coach in the past. She returned saying that she had discovered all sorts of new aspects of herself during her time in the set. She had come back, not because she was in difficulty but because she wanted to discover more about herself. It would have been completely inappropriate to pin her down to a contract for change.

The process of agreeing a contract should be a relational and on-going affair. Clarifying the details and renegotiating the direction can prove to be the meat of the coaching.

*As Pete sat with Henry, his mind raced. There appeared to be a distinct dissonance between Henry's understanding of the coaching and what Colin had seemed to be saying. Henry clearly was leaning towards a 'discovery contract'. Pete decided to offer an exploratory one, and made a note to himself to talk with Colin as soon as possible, and insist that he sit down honestly with Henry. He suggested to Henry that they take a session to explore the ground and review the contract at that point. Henry agreed.*

**LEVEL 4: THE SESSIONAL CONTRACT**

Most coaches will want to make some kind of contract for the individual session. Some coaches, whose style is more business focused or performance related, will have a structured beginning to the session, checking on any actions that the coachee undertook after the last session and negotiating the day’s goal. One colleague always starts his sessions “So what do you want to change today?”

Other coaches are more relational in their approach, waiting to see where the coachee is and what is in the forefront of his mind. Another colleague begins “So what is important today?” or “What is figural?” from the Gestalt idea of ‘figure and ground’ – the figure stands out from the background of our perception, taking our energy and attention.

*When Pete spoke to Colin about the misunderstanding over the purpose of coaching, he was in part relieved and in part disturbed to hear Colin say that Henry had been told on numerous occasions that in order to secure the board*
job, he needed to raise the level of his leadership skills. At the next session, Pete wondered how to address this. He started the session by asking what Henry would like to focus on. Henry identified his work–life balance as the issue. Biding his time, Pete listened as Henry talked about the stresses of work and home. From time to time he made comments or observations that Henry appeared not to hear. He barely paused when Pete spoke, and simply went on with his monologue.

**Level 5: Moment-by-Moment Contracts**

There are also here and now ‘instant’ contracts, which clarify something or find a way forward in a session. They might involve the coachee asking for some feedback and the coach agreeing, or the coach making a suggestion which the client accepts. Examples from the coach are:

“I have a suggestion for you, do you want to hear it?”

“Do you want some information about that?”

It is important to listen to the client’s answer and make sure there is agreement before continuing. It is not necessary to make this sort of contract every time an intervention is made that changes the direction of the work. Permission to do this is normally implicit within a good working alliance. However, it can be useful in helping the coach find his way in the process, or in ensuring that a client does not feel pushed. This sort of contract is also valuable for heightening here-and-now awareness and self-responsibility.

Pete noticed that he felt rather irritated at being ignored and he began to wonder if others in Henry’s life experienced the same. It seemed that Colin did! Even if he had been less than absolutely clear with Henry (and in Pete’s experience, HR directors sometimes pulled their punches), he had obviously had the conversation several times about Henry’s development need.

When there was a pause, Pete apologised for interrupting the flow and asked if Henry would be willing to hear some feedback about Pete’s experience of him. Looking surprised, Henry agreed. Pete told him that his impression was of being unheard. Immediately Henry apologised and admitted that he was so inside his own thoughts that he hadn’t really taken in the fact that Pete had spoken. Pete wondered aloud if Henry was like that at work. Henry thought it was possible. The two discussed the implications of this – as a result of which, Pete was able to suggest to Henry that it may be useful for him to go and talk to his colleagues – including Colin – to find out what feedback they had for him about his upcoming career. Henry agreed to do this and to make notes for their next meeting.
At the following session, after checking that Henry had carried out his plan, Pete asked if Henry would be willing to make the feedback the subject of the session. Shooting him a wary glance, Henry agreed.

**Breaches of Contract**

Whatever the coach’s approach, the learning and development contract is made, along with the administrative contract, as a formal offer and acceptance of a coaching commitment. The coach needs to think about how to respond if the contract is broken – by either party. It is important that she be clear from the outset which agreements are immutable and which negotiable. A breach of contract on either side is likely to be symbolic of psychological processes that must be addressed – what might be called ‘disturbances to the frame’. The exploration of such breaches can often yield valuable and powerful learning opportunities as tacit knowledge emerges into the realm of conscious understanding.

In theory, either side has recourse to the courts if a legal contract is broken, but in practice it is very unlikely that a coach would take a client to court, even for such clear breaches as non-payment of fees. Indeed, Hans Cohn (personal communication), in somewhat humorous vein, said that the reason that practitioners use the word ‘contract’ at all is “because it gives them the feeling that they are in charge”. What is important is that any broken contract be sensitively explored for its implications and significance. An overemphasis on contracts may point to an excessive desire for control – a denial of human changeability. However, impatience with, or abhorrence of, contracts may imply avoidance of boundaries, of commitment and of the responsibility of choice.

**The Psychological Contract**

The psychological contract consists of the unspoken, and often unconscious, expectations that are brought to the coaching session by both coach and client, resulting in a sort of implicit agreement which can have positive or negative consequences. Berne’s choice of words reminds us powerfully of the strength of such unspoken and unchosen pacts.

Psychological contracts are, at best, empathic and respectful connections – the core of the essential working alliance, in which the client feels trusting enough to share his concerns. If the administrative and professional contracts are made carefully and appropriately, coach and client are ready to embark on whatever journey they have agreed. At the psychological level, the client may already be feeling hopeful and optimistic about what he can achieve. If the coach feels similarly confident, if they have effectively explored the client’s needs and agreed the focus, and she believes that she is able to
offer help, a bond is developed which is likely to affect the positive outcome of the coaching. This is also the realm of “right brain–right brain” connection (Schore 2003) or “limbic resonance” (Lewis, Amini & Lannon 2000) which is key in the development of healthy relating.

However, there are other, and inevitable, unspoken expectations that both coach and coachee bring to their encounter, which will not be in their conscious awareness and will be based on past experience of life and relationships. For example, a coachee who has, through bitter experience, concluded that nobody will help him and that to show vulnerability is weakness brings a rather distant, dismissive attitude to the coaching session. The coach feels anxious and slightly humiliated. If she responds to the ‘invitation’ by trying ineffectually to please the client, from a one-down position, the coaching can then be founded on this destructive bond, repeating what Wachtel (1977) calls the “cyclical dynamics”. This sort of transferential relating, if not recognised, can influence the coaching in an adverse way, becoming an enactment of the client’s (and almost certainly also the coach’s) negative beliefs about themselves in the world. As relational coaches we see it as our task to help our client become aware of how they bring their old patterns into the here-and-now relationship and how those patterns may be contributing to difficulties in their work life. We will also notice how we do the same. The coaching relationship can then become a fertile ground for learning, for experimenting with new relational patterns and for vital feedback.

Another way that the psychological contract can create a destructive outcome is through the unvoiced fears, fantasies or even manipulations that find their way into the coaching, creating what Kapur (1987) called the “bargain agreement”. One coachee is ‘sent’ to coaching in order that the organisation can show ‘how hard they tried’ to help him, before they reluctantly let him go. Another may come to coaching with the unexpressed goal that it will get his manager off his back. Another client appears to have come voluntarily but has actually been threatened by his team. And so on. It is not unusual for coaches to complain that they are being used as the deliverers of difficult messages, or gentle axe men. All these scenarios are potentially within the conscious awareness of all parties. The simple questions “why me, why now?” “do I really believe I can help?” that the coach asks both himself and the purchaser, can help to avoid such unwelcome situations.

Sometimes the coach and client collude to avoid some fact of reality which is part of their mutual field. The unspoken ‘bargain’ is “I don’t confront you by pointing out this unpalatable fact about your skills or organisation or future, and in return, you will continue to keep me in lucrative work”. Surprisingly frequently, a hidden agenda on both sides of the relationship
Part III

concerns unrealistic expectations of what the coach could and should do. If the professional contract has not been clarified with sufficient care, this hidden agenda becomes built into the coaching dyad, and both parties end up disappointed.

Pete and Henry were at risk of getting into a negative psychological contract from the start of their relationship. The lack of clarity about the contract and the feeling that he was holding a secret, made Pete feel very uncomfortable. Henry's bluff and cheerful manner made him seem miles away. At their third session, when Pete suggested the contract to look at the feedback, Henry quickly put two and two together. He looked straight at Pete and said “Colin told me that I might not be up for that promotion to the board. Did you already know?” Pete felt as if he had been caught out by the headmaster. Briefly, he noticed with interest the intensity of his feelings, but he bravely met Henry's gaze. “Yes”, he said simply. Henry looked thoughtfully at him. “Why didn't you tell me straight?” he asked. Pete nodded his understanding of this excellent question. He took a moment to reflect. Was it simply that he had felt loyalty to Colin? Or was there something else?

“I wanted to check – perhaps I had made a mistake... But there was something else... I think it was because you were so happy”, he said at last “I didn't want to spoil it”. He smiled ruefully, but Henry was looking very serious. “Yes, I know what you mean” he said slowly. “I was always like that with my father. He was so happy and jolly but if we did something to upset him, he plunged into a depression. We spent our lives tip-toeing around him.” He paused, then “I wonder if I am being my father at the office.”

For some time they discussed Henry's withdrawal behind the bluff cheerfulness that he had learned from his father. Only after the session was over did Pete remember Colin's cheery manner at their first phone call. Was this happy façade an organisational face? Suddenly he had an image of the string quartet playing while the Titanic went down. He resolved to enquire more closely into the organisational culture at their next session.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this chapter has been to explore some of the range of contractual agreements that coaches and their clients can make together. Whether we, as coaches, opt for making only administrative contracts or whether we make explicit contracts for behavioural change, there is a common factor in our contracting. Both explicitly and implicitly, coach and client make a mutual commitment to a relationship which will be in the service of the coachee's
growth and development. We aim to create a container that structures and guides some of the many dynamics and expectations of the relationship, without imprisoning and impeding the creativity. The contract is an essential part of the effective working alliance that is the heart of successful coaching.