The Importance of Timing during Coaching

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Appendix 1 - Questionnaire
1 ABSTRACT

This is a study investigating the issue of timing in coaching. It answers the question, “How do coaches know when the time is right to intervene (i.e. ask a question, make a request or remain silent) in a coaching conversation?”

A preliminary questionnaire identified that coaches have different ways of approaching the issue. These range from various aspects of non-verbal communication and content to structured coaching methods and the client’s agenda. Some were unable to be specific and cited experience or intuition. The subject is not covered explicitly in training.

The results showed that both coach and client bring an individual sense of timing to the relationship that is related to personal style and preferences. Timing has to be right in the broader context of the client’s development. Clients must want to act but there may be a mismatch between their words and feelings, and psychological blocks affect results. Previous studies show that non-verbal communication (NVC) is more expressive and accurate than words, and the ability to read this enables the coach to intervene when the timing is right for the client. Only 26% of the study participants are consciously using NVC to time their interventions. Non-verbal communication offers subtle insights into the mind of the client and is a learnable skill. This is knowledge that can be used to create powerful and well-timed interventions leading to successful outcomes.
2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Overview

As a participant on a course on group communication, I came across the notion of “permission”. Permission, according to communications author and trainer, Michael Grinder, is a point in a process when an individual or group is ready, willing and able to hear the message the speaker is intending to communicate. Grinder contends that the power of the communication is lost if the communicator mistimes the intervention.

Whilst the course was not about coaching per se, the issue caught my attention as coaching is undoubtedly a communication process and therefore the implications for coaching would be similar. For Grinder at least, excellent communicators time their verbal interventions very specifically. Yet it seemed to me at that time that the issue of when or if to intervene in a coaching conversation had not been explicitly addressed in the training I had received or the literature I had read. I thought it interesting that a subject this author thought vitally important could be missing from the literature, especially as he sees communication as a skill that can be taught and there is therefore, no good reason for omitting it.

Grinder assesses the success of communication with groups or individuals with the question “How well did I do given the level of permission I had?” That is, he contends that the group or individual will have a mental barrier which the communicator cannot cross without the group’s or individual’s willingness, or permission in his terms. Success depends on recognising where the barrier is and whether it is up or down. The emphasis shifts from what to say to when, or if to say anything at all. He believes that there are physical indicators that can be noted without the need for intrusive questions. This struck me as particularly useful in situations where trust is still building in a coaching relationship or in business where a coach is particularly keen to maintain a business like, non-therapeutic relationship.
2.2 The Problem
Since the basis of coaching is effective communication, timing seemed an important area to overlook. A number of questions arose in my mind:

- if it is important why is it not addressed in coach training?
- what might be the impact of mistimed interventions?
- could this be a defining factor in successful coaching relationships?
- could an awareness of timing allow the coach to bring sufficient depth to create change without breaching the boundary between coaching and therapy?

2.3 Personal Perspective
I had recently witnessed several occasions when coaching techniques had been used as little more than a blunt implement with the question “May I coach you?” uttered through clenched teeth and the subsequent exchange being geared towards bringing the client – in the first case a colleague – round to the coach’s point of view. In another, a trainee coach fired (I use the word advisedly) coaching questions such as “If you could do anything what would you do?” at a friend. In this case no explicit permission was sought but in both cases arguments ensued. If either of the self-elected coaches were aware that neither the timing nor the appropriateness of their interventions was helpful, they did not act on it.

Whilst it is easy to argue that these incidents are not real coaching in that they did not take place privately in a contracted coach and client relationship, both the self-elected coaches were professional business coaches so their behaviour is at least interesting as a reflection of their attitudes to the appropriate use of their skills. They also demonstrate that coaches do use their skills outside formal coaching relationships. If “permission” is an issue, it is an issue wherever coaching takes place. Another aspect of the situation is that increasingly coaching is becoming part of the job description and skill set for managers and business leaders. One of the results of this is likely to be that much coaching takes place in spontaneous communication outside formally contracted dyads.

There is also the problematic and so far inconclusive issue of what coaching is. One coaching organisation I know believes that by embarking on the coaching
programme, the clients had given the coaches the right to insist they undertake particular activities in highly directed ways. To me, this does not constitute permission however it is defined, but the organisation has coaches and clients who are both comfortable with this philosophy and it gets results. I have come across a similar directive approach where permission is assumed (Fournies 2000) and it is the opposite of the client-centred approach recommended by a coach like Whitmore (1993). Both are coaching in the view of the authors but the level of permission implied, and therefore the timing, is very different. It seemed to me that timing is an issue for all coaches, whichever approach or philosophy they subscribe to.

2.4 The Study
The topic is actually a communication issue but as communication is the only vehicle we use for coaching, it therefore sits above all coaching techniques. The result, the change, both coach and client hope for is the measure of effectiveness. The quality of the communication is only one aspect and it seems difficult, if not impossible, to determine cause and effect in coaching. Certainly I know from my own experience that coaching produces variable outcomes, and it is often far from clear to me how or why some coaching produces great results and some is less effective. Perhaps timing is a hidden factor. Others that I think important are:

• the skill of the coach
• the readiness of the client to change
• the level of rapport between the client and coach
• the degree of openness between the client and coach
• whether coaching is an appropriate method for tackling the presenting problem.

When I considered the list it seemed to me that the first five points would all have a connection with timing or permission as conceived by Grinder. One of the essential skills of the coach is to notice whether permission is present or not and this goes beyond getting verbal agreement to be coached. It seemed to me that there was an idea to be explored further. Whilst for practical reasons my data would be supplied from the business arena, I knew I would have to look outside the coaching literature for information and that any trends or insights that emerged from the study would be applicable to other forms of coaching or mentoring.
Although I was persuaded that a question around timing exists, I was still concerned by the lack of attention paid to it and so further exploration was necessary. I could immediately see some difficulties with the topic. It is very abstract to begin with and was bound to be qualitative since I had no hypothesis to test, simply some questions and some curiosity about the general area. I wanted the study to be grounded in practice and so I needed to seek the views of other coaches to see what time, and timing, meant to them. As the subject is abstract, I decided to use an episodic style of interview as described by Flick (1997), in an attempt to reveal some of the specific links between coaches’ behaviour with clients and their beliefs about time and timing.

I suspected that training and background would inevitably have an impact on the approach of the individual so I wanted to cast the net wide in terms of sampling. I wanted a cross section of the coaching community but I had to balance this with an attempt to find some meaningful trends or implications. I decided to concentrate on business coaches. From experience I would say that in the business world a great number of very different activities are being called coaching or mentoring. Coaching is now a management tool as well as a profession and this means that coaching encompasses a very wide range of activities and motivation. Business coaching seems less homogeneous than life coaching.

One of my assumptions, based on personal experience, is that business coaches see a greater number of clients who have an ambiguous commitment to the process. I have coached people who have been sent to me, some willing, some less so, for help with work-based problems identified in appraisals. Others come because coaching is available rather than out of conviction. Many are not paying for themselves and there can be agenda conflicts with the company which is footing the bill. I suspect that the added complexity of coaching in business increases the likelihood of “permission” being withheld even if verbal consent has been sought.

2.5 The Literature
As the coaching literature has little to say about the topic of timing I decided to look at other disciplines that use conversation to achieve similar ends – action, change or
learning. I felt that the literature from any profession with these objectives could contribute and I considered this to include therapy, sales and management. Whilst timing is also important in other disciplines such as training, education and the theatre, I concentrated mainly on one to one communication processes as these more closely resemble coaching. For an overview of the subject I looked at academic studies by communications psychologists. Explicit explorations of timing turned out to be comparatively rare and I was mostly searching the literature for implicit clues. Timing rarely features in an index.

2.6 The Results
I sent out a questionnaire and followed this up with interviews. This resulted in a significant amount of data with several different themes emerging. These are presented in three sections. The first discusses the micro aspects of timing, the specific cues and techniques which are controlled by the coaches. The second looks at how timing is affected by what the client brings to the relationship, and therefore the aspects that the coach responds to, but does not control. The third reflects on the overarching themes that arose from the study.
3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Introduction
This study focuses on the communication aspects of coaching and as communication skills are not specific to coaching there is potentially a very wide field of literature that could illuminate the topic. Education, management, sales, presenting, therapy all have potential. Due to time constraints I restricted myself to disciplines that rely primarily on one to one communication – therapy, management and sales as well as the coaching literature. I also looked at communication from the perspectives of psychologists, linguists and social scientists.

3.2 Themes
It quickly emerged that the issue of when or if to intervene is seldom tackled directly. John Heron (2001) is the main exception to this and he believes that timing is a complex subject that can only be learnt in experiential workshops. Generally the subject was either missing, or treated as a small part of more general discussion about non-verbal communication (NVC). In the coaching literature NVC, if mentioned, was deemed to be something that is worth paying attention to and that noting and decoding it is a skill that improves with practice and experience.

It is the communication, management and Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) authors who treat it as a learnable skill albeit from different angles. The communication literature is academically rigorous and also acknowledges the lack of consensus amongst researchers. The management books are based mainly on the practical experience of the authors rather than research although there are exceptions like Maureen Guirdham. NLP also bases its claims on practical applications by practitioners rather than rigorous research but its influence is marked in both the management and coaching literature. The NLP literature demonstrates none of the awareness of the complexity of communication that is apparent in the academic research and the management literature, but it does focus very specifically on NVC signals, and timing is inherent in these. Almost all of my interviewees were aware of NLP techniques and used them to some degree.

Another theme to emerge was the situations that can derail the communications process and prevent the attainment of goals. Primarily these were emotional states
but also overarching timing issues such as the point in the clients’ development. These factors play a part in the timing issue as they impact on the readiness and willingness of the client to hear and understand the messages that could facilitate the desired change or action.

The literature also describes the positive emotional impact of good communication: the factors that make some of us very skilled at persuading and influencing and others more persuadable and open to influence. Knowing who we might be able to influence, as well as how and why, will clearly have an impact on the speed and effectiveness of our coaching. This is not about manipulation as many aspects of NVC are outside our conscious awareness and we cannot avoid having an impact on other people as the communications literature, and NLP makes clear.

In this review I have first looked at what the coaching literature has to say about timing and then considered the issue from the perspective of other authors.

### 3.3 The Coaching Literature

The coaching literature says very little directly about how to time interventions. Many of the classic texts I have referred to make allusions or comments in passing but only the most recent authors attempt to tackle the topic specifically and few common themes emerged. Each author takes a personal, idiosyncratic view. The main developments in the literature are focused on different processes and approaches. It is clear that the banner of coaching covers many different styles, philosophies and practices and the variations seem to be proliferating and diverging rather than coming together.

One thing that stands out in the coaching literature is how much more complex coaching has become since John Whitmore’s Coaching For Performance was first published in 1992. There is a marked contrast between the simplicity of Whitmore’s (1993) GROW model and the plethora of tools, techniques and question lists in more recent works by writers such as Zeus and Skiffington (2002) and the most recent book I consulted by Vickers and Bavister (2005). Whitmore acknowledges this himself in a forward to Co-Active Coaching (1998) and a brief look at his website (July 2006) reveals an increasing number of more psychologically focused courses.
As the field grows, people are entering from a host of different arenas and diversity in coaching practices and approaches seems to be growing commensurately. What coaches do, how they do it and to what psychological depth they take it, is very varied. As a result there seems to be a polarisation developing between people who think coaching is a complex process that should only be carried out by highly trained individuals and those who see it as a powerful, but essentially simple way to help people achieve their goals. Zeus and Skiffington (2002) frequently refer to the disadvantages experienced by coaches lacking psychological training, and the need for clinical supervision. These concerns find echoes in the articles by Berglas (2002) and Williams and Irving, (2001) who are both critical of what they consider to be under-trained and under-regulated coaches. A similar sentiment is expressed on the website of one coach and consultant, (Noer 2006) who is apparently horrified to find that many of his consulting colleagues are calling themselves coaches. He considers they have neither the temperament nor the skills for the job. This sentiment was also expressed by one of the questionnaire respondents. However, most consultants I know consider coaching to be an integral part of their job and one of my clients trained all their consultants with John Whitmore a few years ago.

Zeus and Skiffington refer to coaching as a “natural form of leadership” (2002, p2) and Guirdham (2002) make a similar point. This is the reason organisations are introducing coaching cultures but there are practical training and personality issues in training all managers as coaches, not all of whom will have the aptitude and inclination for coaching. In practice, many coaches in business will not be inclined, or trained, to operate at the level of psychological complexity that requires clinical supervision and the confidence that would justify claims such as “We are, after all, experts in behaviour and behavioural change” (Zeus and Skiffington, 2002, p 233). Businesses may be underestimating the levels of skill required to effect deep change.

There seems to be a coaching continuum developing with relatively straightforward action planning and outwardly focused, incremental changes at one end, and personal and psychological transformation at the other. A coaching company I was associated with, has a model that entails three levels of coaching. Coaches are
warned not to stray into the third, deep level unless the client is willing. This has resonance with Whitworth et al’s (1998) three levels of listening.

One result of this is that whilst many of the earlier books mention the importance of coaches developing skill at observing NVC, (Whitmore, 1993) (Flaherty, 1999) (Downey 2002), (Parsloe and Wray 2000), they do not give practical advice on how to do it and what, specifically, to watch for. The earlier authors are more concerned with the process of coaching and they tend to assume a high level of communications skill amongst prospective coaches. However, as organisations move towards coaching cultures, and coaching skills are perceived as basic prerequisites for managers, consultants and educators rather than a life calling or a discrete profession, then it is no longer enough to assume excellent communication skills. They are much more likely to reflect the communication skills of a general management population. Some of the more recent coaching authors such as Vickers and Bavister (2005) and Zeus and Skiffington (2002) go into more detail about noticing and interpreting communication signals but the subject still occupies only a few pages.

3.4 Timing in the Coaching Literature

Downey (2002) implies that timing is important. He writes “timing is everything” (p 59) in spotting an opportunity to coach. (He is referring here to opportunities for informal business coaching rather than specifically contracted coaching). He also uses the metaphor of a dance which requires an attention to good timing and he says that at this point of harmony “the intelligence, intuition and imagination of the coach become a valuable contribution rather than an interference for the coachee”. (p16). He says that sometimes clients reject feedback and he thinks it is usually because they are still thinking and this represents an interruption. This suggests to me bad timing on the part of the coach who needs to be able to differentiate thinking from being stuck.

Zeus and Skiffington (2002) make a similar point - “The coach can disrupt the coachee’s flow, and sometimes confidence, by interjecting too frequently, asking too many questions and controlling the direction of the conversation.” (p 165). Similarly, O’Neill (2002) comments briefly on finding the right moment when she
reflects that there are “pivotal moments” (p xv) when progress hangs in the balance. She says that successful coaching is “Fundamentally about learning to be with leaders as they navigate through their world, finding key moments when they are most open to learning” (p xiv). She notes that coaching top executives as opposed to middle managers requires a tougher approach with different tone and pace. – “less tact with a faster route to the punch line – in other words, more directness, sooner” (p 7) a point also made by one of my study participants (P1).

Whitworth et al (1998) talk about three levels of communication the most skilled of which is level 111, listening in all channels and this touches on NVC. They mention listening for the “tone, pace and the feeling expressed” at level 11 whilst level 111 is more abstract, almost mystical, and includes sensing the energy and “the action, the inaction and the interaction” (p 37). They recommend developing intuition and again this is left as a signpost rather than a set of instructions. Interestingly, the organisation with a three level coaching model also attaches great significance to sensing the energy when coaching groups and individuals.

On a timing point, Whitworth et al (1998) recommend that you share intuitions as they arise in case the moment is lost, which is also the philosophy of the coaching organisation mentioned above and O’Neill (2002). This is a practice that Rogers (1994, 2002) would support as being fully present for the client and open about the self.

Timothy Gallwey (2002, p 74) acknowledges the importance of a readiness to be coached that is more subtle than simple verbal agreement. He states - “the body language of the person you are communicating with would be a better variable (to observe) than ‘gaining agreement’. ” (p 30) He cites a change in expression and also “smoother and more effective movement” (p 30) as evidence of mental processes but otherwise gives no practical advice on reading NVC. However, since his coaching approach encourages the coach to promote the client’s self-awareness of his or her own physiology he is not blind to this aspect of communication but is more concerned with the client’s personal interpretation than with that of the coach.
As might be expected, the NLP based coaching books I consulted, (McDermott and Jago 2001) (O’Connor and Lages 2004) go into more detail about NVC. NLP training does alert people to NVC and the NLP trained coaches in my questionnaire sample were much more specific about what they looked for when timing interventions. Timing is implicit in the NLP observation process (calibration). O’Connor states that it is crucial and that “A question might evoke a blank stare one moment, but a ‘Eureka’ insight if asked five minutes later” (p 78). He feels the result of good timing is better questions. Surprisingly for an NLP writer, he says little about the specifics of how to time interventions and says it is intuition that can be improved with listening and attention to NVC.

Calibrate the client. If you pay attention to their body language and voice tone, you will know when they are open to a question. A good coach can change the second half of a question based on the client’s non-verbal response to the first half. (O’Connor and Lages p 79)

Finally, Flaherty (1999) comments on the overuse of techniques in general and warns that techniques alone will not work. He states that the coach has to know when and what to use implying that there is an art to it, as well as a process and this is a point also made by Grinder (2005). He does not elaborate but perhaps he is implying that simply engaging with the client is more effective and this view would be supported by research that demonstrates that effectiveness in therapy depends much more on the quality of the relationship than the approach or techniques used. (Rogers 2002), (Egan 2002), (Heron 2001) and (Allen et al 2002).

3.5 Emotions and Their Impact on Timing

The literature demonstrates that there are occasions when a coach will have neither the attention nor the willingness of the client. Anxiety has the potential to create these situations. The coaching authors I have discussed acknowledge the role anxiety plays in coaching. As change provokes anxiety, and coaching, as it is currently understood, is about change, coaching authors highlight the need to deal with it. Coaching is also generally understood to entail a degree of challenge, or at least “provocative questions” (Richardson, 2000, p 20) and this too can create anxiety.
One of the problems with anxiety is that it is not always clearly stated or obvious in terms of the client’s mood. Not all clients will feel comfortable with admitting to anxiety - or any feeling – particularly in some business contexts. In addition, clients may not be consciously aware of it. May (1950) asserts that anxiety is a culturally created condition of modern society and therefore an inescapable and also possibly unacknowledged state. De Botton (2004) makes a similar point and cites modern working practices as one of the causes. My experience as a business consultant and coach is that there is almost always some level of anxiety endemic in business culture, and how comfortable people feel expressing it varies tremendously according to culture, personality and status within the organisation. It is important to recognise the more subtle signs of an anxious client.

Dryden and Neenan (2002), taking a cognitive behavioural therapeutic approach to coaching, state that procrastination is always caused by anxiety whether the client recognises it or not. Erickson (2004) also makes this point. This is interesting as coaches routinely deal with procrastination. Certainly one time management author (Forster 2000) supports this although Stack (2004) regards it as an organisational issue and does not address either motivation or emotional blocks. Richardson, who focuses on creating time in people’s lives, notes that “Slowing down means unleashing the pent-up emotions that have built up over time” (2000, p 38) and her theory is that people often stay busy to avoid this. There is support for an emotional component to procrastination although other factors may also be significant and I think it is hard to reject motivation as another aspect.

Dryden and Neenan (2002) also state that information processing is distorted when we experience distress, but that waiting for a client to feel comfortable could produce a long wait. These authors are writing about coaching but they are trained therapists so could be expected to be both alert to early or subtle signs of distress and also well equipped to deal with it. Not all coaches would have the skills, confidence or inclination to deal with distressed clients (or distorted cognitive processing) and it is easy to envisage situations, in-house coaching programmes for example, where it might be wholly inappropriate or a violation of the coaching boundaries to address issues that might cause distress.
There are clues to emotional states as they do have physical components (Argyle 1994), (Carter 2005), (Ekman 1993, 1997). The physical signs can express feelings that people may not wish, or feel able to verbalise because of assumptions about politeness, context, cultural norms or their sense of social identity (Goffman 1956). Argyle (1994) notes that middle class people in particular tend to repress negative feelings and that negativity is particularly difficult to decode. Reading the more subtle emotional states is not straightforward and paying too much attention to physical cues in isolation can lead to attribution errors rather than discovery and this view is well supported by Ekman (1993: 1997), Guirdham (2005) and Dimitrius and Mazzarella 1999).

Dryden and Neenan (2004) note that emotional states, which may change many times in a session, are important entry points into the client’s thinking. Such shifts, if noticed, could identify a good time for a coach to intervene (or remain silent). They too note that emotional shifts can be very subtle (e.g. a narrowing of the eyes) and that the client may also be speaking in an unemotional manner with minimal obvious cues.

Anxiety or resistance in a client could mean that he or she can’t or won’t hear the message. In moments such as these, Grinder (2005) would say that the coach does not have permission to coach. Heron (2001) agrees that all helpers have to have what he describes as a warrant to help. A warrant is not granted simply by the client’s presence. He points out that clients have the right to hang on to their resistance as long as they like and that a helper must carefully consider the conditions for a challenging intervention. Timing as well as depth is critical because a balance must be struck between raising awareness and the client’s capacity to deal with what results. Heron (2001) reminds us:

an intervention is a person to person intention that can have many variations of verbal form, and the right variation depends on who those persons are and what is going on between them. But each of these similar situations is also in some respects unique and the intervention in it needs a distinctive choice of diction, grammar, timing and manner of speech. (p 4)
He devotes a chapter to what he terms degenerate and perverted interventions, and he cites “Dull antennae”, (p 201) missing the moment when the client is ripe for a change, “Feeble integration” (p 199), not allowing the client time for integration, “Coming out to soon” (p 199), breaking the client’s flow, and “Too deep, too soon” (p 199) where the client cannot handle the discomfort caused.

Some coaches (and the company I quoted earlier) may feel that the contract is the warrant but Heron (2001) and Grinder (2005) consider that the situation is more complex and may change in the moment. Bandler (1996) notes that if you lose rapport, which is possible with an unwelcome or badly timed challenge, you can provoke resistance rather than change in a client. Daloz (1999) likening the path of his mentoring clients to a heroic journey, comments that some may refuse the call and that is a choice that must be respected.

3.6 Timing as a Neglected Subject
NVC is an aspect of the coaching communication that has been largely neglected. This is possibly because coaching is more widely understood as a process for change, a method of improving performance or an approach to managing problems rather than a communication. One reason may be that whilst it is generally recognised that there are different degrees of communication skill, it is still something that is regarded as largely instinctive and most people are not trained in it. Those who are trained tend to be so for business purposes or because they are in public life, and this makes it a specialist skill, rather than a fundamental skill like reading. It is the management authors, Goleman 1998), Erickson (2004), Guirdham (1996), who discuss the importance of communication skills in effective interpersonal relationships.

The complexity of NVC as a subject for study could also be a factor. It is not easy to teach a subject where consensus in the research results is sometimes lacking and where the experts emphasise the difficulties of interpretation. Whilst there may be dangers inherent in the non-critical approach taken by the NLP community (Woodsmall, undated article), it does at least become a subject that is practical, useable and observable which may be more useful (if less academically valid) than a purist approach. One popular book on reading body language is written by a method
actress (Jaskolka 2004) turned communications teacher, and this lends support to practical applications and empirical research.

It is easy to argue that a little knowledge is dangerous but focus is a fine way to learn – as Whitmore (1993) and Gallwey (2002) assert – and making a subject simple does show people where to begin to focus. At least one of my interview subjects cited focus as how she had improved her NVC skills. The key is to remember to validate your readings with the client and avoid relying on untested intuitions.

Another reason for its comparative neglect is probably the fact that it is a subject that has only relatively recently caught the attention of academics and the business community. Communications focused jobs such as corporate communications, PR and marketing are relatively new and still mainly restricted to larger organisations. Argyle (1990) mentions that the first conference on NVC was not held until 1987, and Hargie and Dickson comment:

It is only relatively recently though that social scientists have devoted much concerted attention to nonverbal matters. This followed a long period during which the topic was depreciated, being regarded as inconsequential, and those interested in it as academically suspect. (Hargie, and Dickson, 2003 p 44),

Allen et al (2002) also note that academic opinion is divided on its merits but he also points out that people quite clearly do not all communicate with the same degree of skill and that evidence is mounting that the NVC aspects of communication have a serious impact as the primary vehicle for establishing and identifying the quality of the relationships between people.

Different cultures notice and value different aspects of communication. Guirdham (2002) notes that in high context cultures (those that derive a lot of meaning from the situation and role relationships of the participants such as many Asian cultures) more credence is given to NVC than in low context cultures such as American and most of Northern Europe where more meaning is derived from the words than the context. This would not of course mean that low context cultures are not affected by the non-verbal aspects of communication, but that we may not notice them and may be
oblivious to our own NVC signals. All the literature I consulted has been written from an American or European slant and may reflect this low context point of view.

Fundamentally, the coaching authors discussed have developed their skills from practical applications in sport or business and not from an interest in communications per se. The fact that we are reading them and that they influence the course of the profession, is tribute to their personal communications skill levels and these were probably developed instinctively and honed in the context of doing their jobs. It is perhaps, not surprising that they take their skills for granted and think it is their processes that make them successful. However, the quality of their communication skills may be a key factor in their success as teachers and authors. They may be unaware or unable to explain what exactly they do. They write about what they think they do but that is not the whole story. It is other people who experience our communication style and NVC and therefore have the awareness of them so it would be easy to overlook them. It is perhaps natural to assume, in a low-context culture, that it is the quality of our ideas, rather than our communication skills that bring success. Mccluhan however notes that "Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media in which men communicate than by the content of the communication.” (1967, p8)

So far I have focused on using NVC to understand clients better but as all communication is a two way process, it is necessary to look at the coach as the medium. Our personal style affects how people perceive us and how they respond to our messages and this aspect of communication is equally important.

3.7 Timing Factors that Increase Influence

The communications literature theorises about who we believe and why, and what makes us act. Many coaches might protest at the notion of influencing and persuading clients, depending on their coaching philosophy, but however determined coaches are to avoid imposing their personal views and solutions on clients, the literature makes it very plain that they cannot avoid influencing them. Daloz (1999) makes the point that even silence is a powerful intervention and it is a basic tenet of NLP that we communicate all the time.
Guirdham (1996) states that “Non-verbal behaviour is basically a relationship language. It makes it possible to express things like ‘I trust you’ or ‘You bore me’, which would be too embarrassing or difficult to state directly” (p 184). NVC intensifies the emotional content of a message. Trust on both sides is one of the foundations of effective coaching and when levels of trust are high, it is less critical that every intervention is perfectly phrased or timed. As discussed earlier, success may be more to do with the quality of the relationship than technique.

Hargie and Dickson’s (2003) meta-analysis of all the communications literature demonstrates that the degree of interpersonal attraction between people affects the extent to which others communicate with them, and also renders them more influential. We listen more to people we like and we believe them more readily. This perhaps accounts for the emphasis on creating rapport that is currently found in the coaching literature. However, there is more to rapport than matching body language.

Argyle (1994) says that any similarity can create rapport – schools, country, gender, profession or any other group membership. Whilst rapport at this level may be fairly fragile it can give initial confidence to both parties and Grinder (2005) would say that it increases the level of “permission” (openness to the process). Argyle (1994) also points out that our style of dress is a non-verbal communication and the impact of this is supported by several social scientists (Crane 2000), (Lurie 2000) and Barnard (2005). Hargie and Dickson (2003) list the many positive qualities that tend to be attributed to the physically attractive and credibility is just one of them.

Looking at factors that are more under our control, Allen et al (2002) note that people who are rated as skilful communicators are also more likely to be better liked and more influential. Research has shown that there are four areas that predict other’s perceptions of social skill. These are the level of composure of the speaker, the degree of expressiveness inherent in personal style, the ability to focus on the concerns of the other person and the ability to manage the conversation skilfully with regard to turn-taking, (timing) and knowing the differences between pauses for thought and pauses that are one of the signals that the speaker intends to give up the floor.
On a similar point Guirdham (2005) notes that good communicators have two other related skills. They can discriminate between different elements of behaviour in others, thus they can identify what is happening in a communication. They are also better at expressing their own emotions so enabling others to read them more accurately. Skilful communicators show who they are: and in Rogers (1994) terms this equates to greater congruency and in O’Neill’s (2000) more presence.

Another tool for increasing persuasiveness and which also depends on good timing is humour. Hargie and Dickson (2003) note that humour inclines us to like a speaker and more importantly perhaps, it also reduces the tendency to scepticism and cognitive processing. When we are laughing we are not busy thinking. Fundamentally it opens us up to receive a message. Mood affects what we pay attention to and a good mood lowers our defences – as stage hypnotists appear to recognise. Laughter also puts people into physical rapport and shows that you have paced your audience well (Grinder 2005). Collett (2004) states that laughter is a gesture of appeasement in subordinate people and attempting to get people to laugh is a way in which dominant individuals retain the upper hand.

3.8 Gender, Status and Timing

Other issues that affect the message are status and gender. People tend to disclose most freely to those of a perceived equal status (Hargie and Dickson 2003). This is unlikely to be a great problem for external coaches who are probably perceived to be of equal status, but may have an impact on those coaching within organisations where this may not be the case. Most organisational schemes I have come across tend to adopt a senior to junior model. There may be a difference in how people respond to suggestions too as it may feel difficult to resist a suggestion from a perceived superior.

Gender has an impact in that men and women have a tendency towards different communication styles (Tannen 1991, 1992), (Pease and Pease 2001), (Hargie and Dickson 2003), (Allen et al 2002). This can lead to misinterpretation. (These authors make the point that there are no absolutes in male and female behaviour, and that either gender can behave, occasionally or routinely, in ways that resemble those
of the opposite sex.) From a timing perspective there are some useful points to consider. Men might need to restrain their need to jump in too quickly with suggestions or solutions. Clients of either sex must be allowed time to think. Women may need to be allowed sufficient time to talk through the problem. It might feel to a coach that no progress is being made but speech for some is a necessary part of the thinking process and therefore not something to be hurried. A small but potentially important point, made by Guirdham (1996) is that men tend to regard head nodding as agreement whilst women tend to use a head nod to demonstrate attention (there are also cross cultural differences in head nodding cues). This underlines the importance of checking with each client and bearing in mind that we too could be misread.

Popular books on body language tend to reflect Hargie and Dickson’s (2003) comments that interest in NVC tends to focus on personal relationships and the arts of persuasion. Nevertheless, there are helpful hints about understanding a person’s approach to time and also on timing in social interactions in Quilliam (1997) and Collett (2003) explains the mechanics of turn taking and how conversations are controlled (consciously or not). In the preface Quilliam writes body language is every kind of human behaviour except the words spoken – from gestures to breathing from the way muscles move to a person’s use of time (1997 p v)

### 3.9 Communication in Different Fields

As I began thinking about timing for this study it became quite clear that many skills and professional disciplines require a sense of timing. I have already mentioned comedy and performance and Allen et al (2002) mention law, medicine and education amongst others. Timing also plays an important part in the sales cycle (Lewis 1996).

Whilst some coaches might protest at the comparison, I looked at three fairly recent books on selling. I found that although the intention is decidedly different, some of the authors’ comments apply equally to coaches. All tackled rapport and Bandler and La Valle (1996) warned not to make assumptions about it. They assert that you have to earn the right to influence and recommend paying close attention both to the
responses of the client and to personal NVC. They suggest that there are times when you “might as well stop and realise that you’re not getting information through to them” (p 74) and he gives the visual and verbal clues that demonstrate this. He also emphasises that successful sales involve not just the right choices, but the right timing and that time is a relative concept – a characteristic that was noticeable amongst my interview participants.

Neither Bandler and La Valle (1996) nor Khalsa (1999) are afraid of challenging the client. Yule (2000), who is influenced by the concept of emotional intelligence (Goleman 1998), writes extensively about body language cues and also about how to use space to increase the client’s degree of comfort. Like Grinder (2005) he also advocates reducing eye contact at times so that the client is free to think and relax. Both suggest standing or sitting to one side of the client as this reduces the intensity of the interchange and allows the client to “go inside” without having to worry about the relationship. Grinder advocates sitting side by side for coaching. These authors reflect that sales, like coaching, is a process that relies on developing trust, listening, following a flexible structure and moving a client to a commitment or action.

Finally, as I was writing this section, I happened to hear a radio programme, “Good Timing” (Perry, 2006) on this subject. Written by a composer, the programme explored the impact of timing in a wide range of skills – drumming, cooking, jogging, squash, meditation, orchestral music, and comedy. She concluded that in all these arenas, the sense of timing of the participant had an enormous impact on the final result. The comic actually demonstrated how he could change his results through timing alone.

The conclusion was that timing is a discipline. It can be learnt and it must be practised consciously and consistently until the performer is able to access a flow state (she seemed to have in mind Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), and cease consciously to think about it. The participants shared a belief that timing is critical to their success and they focused on it to achieve mastery in their particular fields.
4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Theoretical Perspective

The starting point for my study was the question - “How do coaches know when, or if, to intervene in a coaching conversation?” But the question was abstract and apt to provoke a wide variety of responses when I talked to colleagues about it. Furthermore I could find very little reference to timing as an issue in the coaching literature. It seemed I wanted to explore a question that few other people were interested in. Whilst I personally am very comfortable with the idea of taking a look to see what I might find, I was mindful of Sayer’s (1992) comment that researchers need to be clear about what they want their research to do and Clough and Nutbourne (2002) and Robson (2002) also emphasise that there has to be a point to the proposed study. My intention was to open up the area for reflection and perhaps throw some light onto why the subject has been largely ignored to date. If timing is important, it could be a neglected area in coach training. The study had to be based on practice as there seemed to be little theory, and this pointed towards a grounded methodological approach. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that in this approach “one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge” (p 23).

Strauss and Corbin (1990) developed the grounded methodology as a way of discovering more about processes that lead to change and so there was an obvious synergy with coaching. My interest lay very much with the process and action – what happens when coaches coach and so this also indicated a grounded methodology. If timing is not key to success - and this might account for the absence of reference to it - then other more important variables might emerge. I wanted to know how coaches make timing decisions, and I would ask them directly via a questionnaire or interview.

(Robson 2002) and Lee (2000) note the pitfalls of both interviews and questionnaires. Clearly any approach that relies on self-reporting is subject to any number of distortions, conscious or otherwise, and much depends on participants’ ability to dissociate from their own processes and experiences in order to remember them or reflect on them. There may be concerns, conscious or not, about appearing in a socially or professionally acceptable light.
On another level it might be simply very difficult to talk about, particularly if the participant feels that the knowledge is intuitive. Lee (2000) notes that

“Humans have a well-developed cultural sense. They also have a perceptual apparatus highly sensitive to interactional cues. As a result they often apprehend and understand the activity of others in ways they find difficult to articulate” (p 13).

Goffman, (cited Flick et al, 2004 p 27) also warns of the difficulty in trying to understand “the intuitive-unconscious knowledge of life-practitioners” However, as coaches are an articulate group I felt confident that they would be able to talk about their experiences. The subjectivity of their responses is important and would help identify the range of views.

Clough and Nutbourne (2002) propose that the methodology creates the research, so it would be difficult to reach firm conclusions given the exploratory nature of the study. Asking coaches to verbalise highly intuitive practices and then subjecting their words to my own interpretation would create at best, tentative conclusions. There is also the risk of there being very little common ground.

Sayer (1992) has proposed that reflection on the beliefs and concepts we use tends to change. I was already experiencing this effect as my early thoughts and reading had made me much more “timing-aware” in a general sense. I was starting to notice timing effects in different arenas – comedy, theatre and narrative being obvious examples.

If timing did prove to be out of the conscious awareness of my coaching colleagues then drawing attention to it would have an impact. This did not seem a problem to me as I saw the increase of knowledge and understanding - which Strauss (1990) notes as a result of immersion in data - as the purpose of the study. However, Webb (Cited Lee, 2000) warns that obtrusive research methods such as interviews and questionnaires create attitudes and atypical responses and I had to take this into account. I could be creating an issue where none existed simply by talking about it. I decided that the data would demonstrate if the responses were atypical since
presumably they would all be atypical in different ways and effectively useless in helping me draw conclusions. My questions, discussed later, would help me avoid imposing my own attitudes, and, in any event, having conversations and creating new attitudes seems an essential part of adding to knowledge. This seemed part of the point of an exploratory study rather than a danger. As an explorer, it did not matter to me if what I studied changed in the process as Lee (2000) and Sayer (1992) warn. With the help of my research participants I hoped that I might be able to create a more tangible, less abstract version of appropriate timing that could be of practical benefit. The risk was that I might create confusion rather than clarity.

In any event, I did not have any non-obtrusive research methods available to me. Whilst it would have been extremely useful to shadow coaches as Becker (1998) shadowed Doctors, I would not have been able to do this without upsetting the confidential nature of the coaching relationship and creating a situation that was unnatural in a different way - even supposing anyone would be willing to allow this. Watching taped interviews would be one way of overcoming some of the discrepancies between what people say and what they do, but this would require willing clients as well as coaches and Flick (2004) notes that this approach reduces the number of people willing to participate. It occurred to me that some training companies may record their trainee coaches but I was more interested in practicing coaches than coaches in training and this would also create confidentiality issues. I do not believe that recording is un-obtrusive unless it is covert and that is clearly unethical.

My early inclination had been to get out and talk to coaches as soon as possible. I thought that a questionnaire would have severe limitations in the discussion of an abstract topic. There is no scope to probe the circumstances of the responses nor an opportunity to clear up any ambiguity which my choice of words would inevitably create. As the topic matured in my thoughts, it began to seem less straightforward. I had to decide how to approach the coaching fraternity with something abstract and a bit vague that the literature and their training did not address, and which they may not care about. I realised that a preliminary questionnaire would help by giving me an overview of how coaches are thinking about timing at the moment and highlighting any other relevant aspects I may not have considered. I also thought it
would be a useful form of cross-reference that could serve to highlight any very atypical responses that my interview participants might reveal.

On a practical level a questionnaire would help me keep my sample broad and act as a sense check for me. Being a practising coach, and a student of Grinder seemed to be a double-edged sword. As a coach I was clearly close to the field and I had to accept the potential downside noted by Becker (1998) that professional knowledge can blind the researcher. I clearly had to be wary of accepting the possibly unquestioned attitudes of my profession but I had to find out what they are. Strauss and Corbin (1990) caution that proximity can both enrich and blind.

4.2 Sampling
I wanted as wide a sample as possible in terms of background and training, both of which I thought might have an impact on attitudes to timing. I have access to a large network of business people, several of whom coach as part of their activities. I knew that this network could provide a very broad sample in terms of training and experience and that they all work in business which was my one fixed criterion. Also, they were mainly unknown to me and I thought that it would increase the objectivity of the study if I did not restrict my sample to coaching friends or other like-minded individuals. The network was international so I knew not all the coaches would be British. I felt that if there were any generalisations to emerge from such a broad sample, then they would generalise across a number of coaching contexts.

In some ways it was not important what kind of coaching people pursued as I believed that the issue would be the same for life-coaches as well as business coaches. However, my own experience inclined me to think that people in business might encounter a greater proportion of people who had been “sent” for coaching or who were offered coaching as part of a company wide development initiative. I think that this gives rise to a different attitude to commitment to the process than if a client is spending personal resources. It seems to me that it is in coaching less committed individuals where timing, in the sense of the client being ready to hear and act upon the message, might play a greater role.
As work place coaching increases in availability and as more line managers coach, it seems to me that more coaches will be dealing with sceptical or less committed clients. Whereas an external coach might decide to end such a relationship, business situations are often complex and personal and political agendas might preclude this. Instinctively it seems to me that the more complex the situation, the more significant will be coach’s sense of timing. Therefore I decided to concentrate on people who coach in business.

4.3 Interview Style

My own experience in interviewing leads me to agree with Robson (2002) and Becker (1998) that the words and images used by the interviewer have an impact on the result. I wanted to minimise my questions and leave the direction of the interview and the choice of topics largely to the interviewee. I felt that a fairly unstructured interview format would give both myself and the interviewee scope to explore the issue adequately. Robson (2002) comments that values and beliefs are difficult to get at and he recommends using self-measuring scales. I felt that imposing some sort of scale on my interviewees might break a natural narrative flow. As I am experienced in eliciting beliefs and values with the use of questions (for recruitment as well as coaching purposes) I was comfortable to allow a free flowing narrative such as the episodic techniques described by Flick (1997). Becker (1998) believes that a narrative can lead to the “discovery of the circumstances that lead people to think an idea seems good at the time” and this was exactly what I wanted.

The narrative account of why someone thinks they acted as they did seems to me a valuable addition to knowledge about a subject. Episodic interviewing offered the freedom I needed to explore both general attitudes and conceptual approaches along with specific examples drawn from the experience of the interviewee. Flick (1997, p4) states that “episodic knowledge is linked to concrete circumstances (time, space, persons, events, situations)” and this was part of what I wanted to know. He also describes what he calls semantic knowledge which is more abstract and generalised but which can still be revealed in an interview. This gave me the scope to ask “What did you do in a specific situation?” as well as “What do you think about this generally?”
Flick (2004) considers that this style of interview has its own internal form of triangulation if the researcher checks the data with the interviewee who provided it. The triangulation comes with the consensus about interpretation. Initially, I thought I might do this but in the end, did not. The interviews created a considerable amount of data and the themes that emerged were very wide-ranging. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that data can become overwhelming and that the interviewer will never capture it all. I decided that checking my interpretation would add a further layer of complexity and possibly confusion rather than clarification. In addition the interviews to a certain extent mimic the coaching process in that one individual is asking questions, clarifying and interpreting replies in a highly subjective way.

Flick (1997) says that to uncover both the specific and the semantic aspects of the interviewee’s experience, the interview should meet specific criteria. Broadly, these are that the interview should invite the participant to recount specific events in which he or she has had the type of experience under investigation, and it should also allow the interviewee to choose those events. The interviewee subjectively decides the relevance of his or her narrative. Flick also stresses the importance of ensuring that the interviewee has had an opportunity to say everything that seems relevant to the topic, so that the interviewer hears the full context in which the event took place.

He compares episodic interviewing with other interviewing styles such as critical incident and narrative and it was clear to me that the topic of timing would not lend itself to a critical incident approach. My early conversations had made it apparent that my interviewees would have different understandings of timing and that I would not be able to define criteria for an experience that all coaches would share. Neither would they necessarily coach in the same way as each other so they were not a homogeneous sample and too small in number to fit the criteria for effective critical incident interviewing. There would not be time, or perhaps inclination on the part of the interviewees, to take a totally free, narrative approach. Flick (1997) comments that these can take hours and I had to assume that my interviewees’ time would be limited and that they would want some focus. On page 17 he states that “The episodic interview is more oriented to small scale situation based narratives” which are then easier to focus. This seemed ideal for my purposes.
4.4 **Role of the Researcher**

The purpose of this study was to explore the views of other practising coaches. I saw my role as guiding the general direction of the study, without imposing my own views except in the discussion of the data. Specifically I considered my role to be:

- setting the framework for the study and the interview process
- ensuring a balance between the participants’ more abstract ideas and specific examples that would illuminate them
- asking follow up questions for clarification and to check understanding

As I started the interview process, I came to realise how difficult it is to avoid influencing a conversation but that was my intention.

4.5 **The Questionnaire**

My first step was to send out an email to an international business network inviting business coaches who would be willing to participate in a study to contact me. I thought this would address a broad coaching community with a range of different training and approaches. I was keen to keep the sample as wide as possible at this stage

24 replied and to these I sent out a short questionnaire (attached as appendix 1), also by email. I included an address and phone number should anyone prefer to post their response or ask further questions. On the questionnaire I asked respondents to indicate if they were willing to participate in an interview. 19 questionnaires were returned and 16 people expressed a willingness to participate further.

The purpose of the questionnaire was:

- to check whether the issue of timing had any significance for coaches
- to get an overview of the criteria currently being used by coaches for timing interventions
- to see what other views might be expressed around the topic of time
- to establish if there was sufficient consensus around which to build a semi-structured, episodic interview
- to identify possible participants for the interview stage
After the first few questionnaires were received, I changed the wording of question 8 as it became obvious that I had not worded the question sufficiently clearly.

I also invited three other coaches from outside the network to participate. I chose them because of their particular training backgrounds as I thought training would have a bearing on how coaches approach time. Two, I knew, had no coach training but extensive NLP training. A third had trained with three different coaching schools so had explored the training options more than most.

**4.6 Choosing the Interviewees**

Because I wanted a wide focus, the only two absolute criteria I used were that interviewees:

- worked at least part of the time as external coaches in a business context
- described timing as vital or very important in the questionnaire

I wanted to balance male and female coaches and I wanted to interview at least one person without formal coach training (there were 3 who fitted this criterion). For practical reasons they were all based in the South East except one who lives in the North.

I chose two participants because their replies to the questionnaire were not detailed and I thought it might be interesting to contrast their views with the participants who had more to say.

All the participants coach mainly, but not necessarily exclusively, senior executives. Participants 1, 2 and 3 are male and Participants 4, 5 and 6 are female.

I wanted to avoid interviewing coaches I knew very well but it was not practical, geographically, to restrict the sample to coaches I had not met. In the end I interviewed two coaches I had never met, two I had met briefly at networking events, and two I knew slightly. I restricted the number of interviewees to 6 as I thought that within the timeframe, this would give me a sufficiently broad range of views without creating an unmanageable quantity of data.
4.7 Conducting the Interviews

I selected venues that would be convenient for the interviewee and four took place in hotel coffee lounges, one in an office and one in the participant’s home. This was practical and I also decided that an informal setting would be conducive to the relaxed and open style of interview I wanted. The interviews were recorded and I transcribed them personally.

The interviews followed a very open framework as suggested by Flick (1997). I described to the participants the overall aims of the project and began by inviting to them say what time, in a coaching context, meant to them. I responded with questions but tried as far as possible to allow the interviewee to choose the topics we discussed. My follow up questions were mainly aimed at eliciting specific examples from the interviewee.

The only other set question on my agenda was about how the coaches timed their interventions.

I regarded the first interview as a pilot and, as this worked well, I followed the same procedure with the others. Nothing arose in any of the interviews that made me change my focus.

4.8 Data Analysis

I attempted no data analysis until all of the interviews were completed and transcribed. I then grouped and regrouped specific points until the major themes emerged.

Once the themes had emerged I reorganised them into the concrete themes and the more conceptual ideas, so both Flick’s (1997) criteria for an episodic interview were met.

4.9 Ethical Considerations

I did not consider that this study entailed any ethical problems. All participants were self-selected for both the questionnaire and interview stage. The agenda and purpose
were open and all contributions would be anonymous with minimal personal detail so no individual could be identified.

Although I was asking the participants to give me specific examples from their coaching practices, no client names were required or given, only details pertinent to the coach’s timing were recorded and no confidentiality was breached.
DATA ANALYSIS – MICRO ASPECTS OF TIMING

5.1 Introduction
An analysis of the data revealed that there were many different ways that timing had an impact on coaching. Some of these factors were controlled by the coach, some by the client and there were also overarching themes that emerged. In this and the following two data analysis chapters, I have merged the questionnaire results with the interview results in the discussion because there was a high degree of consistency between the two.

This chapter presents and discusses the aspects of timing that are controlled largely by the coach and relate to moment by moment decisions coaches make in a session. Three major themes emerged: the use of silences, the pace or speed of the session and the specific cues coaches use to time their interventions.

5.2 Personal Style and Pace in Communication
My six interview experiences were all very different and whilst I was somewhat aware of this at the time, it was transcribing them that really brought it home to me. It might seem obvious that interacting with different personalities will result in a different style of interaction but this was very marked. Since I was a constant factor, some of the differences must be ascribed to the style of my interviewee and our mutual impact on each other. The length of each interview was reasonably similar, about an hour, but some were more dense with language than others. Listening to the interviews word by word really highlighted the differences in the volume of words used, speed of response and length of pauses, voice tone and volume. Some interviews were more focused and business like than others and some had a more personal tone and more laughter. Some progressed in a fairly linear way and some were more discursive. In short, I had six very different experiences in terms of the pace and overall “feel”. Part of this may have been the level of rapport that existed through previous contact - I knew two interviewees slightly in a business context, two I had met briefly in a networking situation and two I had never met – but primarily, the participants’ personalities affected the interview.

The other noticeable characteristic was the effect of my personality, interests and therefore questions, on the interaction. Apart from my specific interest in the timing
of interventions I had decided to adopt a very open interview frame as I wanted to explore the interviewees’ own thoughts about time and timing. I tried hard to let them pace the interview and to follow their natural preferences although I found it difficult always to be conscious of this and there were occasions on the tapes when I influenced both the speed and content inadvertently. Again this is hardly surprising, but it was salutary to see how easy it was to change the direction of the conversation and how natural it seemed in the context. It emphasised both the difficulty of adjusting personal style and the way in which personal agendas and interests can arise with subtlety and despite good intentions – which is a possibility that Heron (2001) highlights.

5.3 Pauses and Silences

The use of silence is the one area in which the participant group was unanimous and this was the only aspect of timing that had been explicitly addressed in their training. All the participants agreed on the need to pause after a client has spoken. One coach mentioned a three second pause as a minimum but it was the maximum that varied noticeably.

Participant 1 gave his clients the shortest time. “5 seconds is very, very long. You know if you and I stop talking for 5 seconds it’s long so it’s probably no more than 5 seconds. Then I’ll know it’s time to move”. Participant 3 had a preference for short pauses and he commented that he had trained himself to wait for the client and to suppress his natural instinct to fill the silence.

Other participants showed a willingness to allow clients more time.

“I am quite happy to sit in silence and wait for someone to come up with an answer for as long as it needs” (P2). He mentioned waiting a full minute in another example. Participant 4 and Participant 6 are also prepared to sit with long silences and they both actively monitor these to establish norms and consequently, departures from them. They both commented that it gets easier to fine-tune interventions as they get to know the individual and in this respect, they echo the dance and harmony metaphors mentioned in the coaching literature.
Participant 5 has a strong belief in allowing clients to take time even though “snappy” is a favourite adjective of hers. She was the only coach who commented on her fast speaking pace and the need to avoid bringing the client up to her speed. In her view this is undesirable as she thinks she should move at the client’s “mental pace”, but it shows her awareness of the impact of her personal style on the conversation. Participant 3 also commented on the need to allow people to “move at their own speed”.

This contrasted with Participant 1 who considered himself a “slow person” but who was the most time focused with regard to silence length and who talks of “getting things moving again” if the silence is too long. He says, unlike some of the others (P5, P3 and Participant 6) that he never wants to hurry his clients. It is possible that this is because by controlling the pace through his interventions, his clients are, in effect, working at his preferred pace so there is no need.

There was a great deal of subjectivity about time and the participants talked about time in terms of feelings, not the clock. Some authors discuss the subjectivity of time (Bandler 1996), (James and Woodsmall 1988) (Quilliam 1997) and the relationship between time and personality characteristics. James and Woodsmall correlate their theories with the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) axes of Judging and Perceiving. Unfortunately I did not explore this aspect so am not able to draw conclusions. I think it would warrant further study.

5.4 Factors that Impact the Length and Pace of Sessions
A further factor in the pace of a session is the time available, which was not always decided by the participants, and also the coaching method. All the participants work both face to face and by phone but they have different preferences. Three participants coach mainly on the phone (P1, P2, P3) and three (P4, P5, P6), work mostly face to face. All agreed that telephone sessions are shorter and more condensed, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. The face to face coaches have longer sessions – from one to two hours.

There appeared to be a relationship between gender and preferred coaching method, although the sample is very small, in that the female coaches have either a distinct
preference for face to face (P4, P5), or in practice work that way (P6). One possible reason is that the women all share a belief that there should be plenty of time and “space for listening” (P5). (Participant 2 also echoed this so it is not an exclusively female view).

Shortness of time was one reason given for hurrying the client along in a 40 minute session. This was from Participant 3 who spends most of his time coaching for a company that works to a structured formula with a specific sales focus. He also uses the company’s debrief tool and this imposes a certain structure. This does seem to create a slight content pressure although he finds this approach very helpful. Two questionnaire respondents (Q1, Q2) also commented that they timed interventions by using a structured process (but did not say that this caused pressure).

Participant 4 also considers that the phone can create pressure - “Because if you’ve got a short amount of time you’ll be going chung, chung, chung” although she also notes that if a session is too long, it can get “watered down”. Her approach to questioning tends to be softer and more conversational and rather than point out a new perspective or idea to clients, she prefers to lead them with questions to their own insight. This approach can be time intensive so it affects the length and pace of her sessions.

Because if you ask in an appropriate way, people will be curious and go ‘what do you mean?’ If you phrase a question wrong they can take it as an attack ..... If people feel that coaching is an interrogation they will clam up. If you master the art of asking questions conversationally, I think then you get more. Because now they feel they’re valued ..... and that’s about the speed. (P4)

Sometimes the female coaches valued the relationship above time efficiency. One commented that it was easier to be “ruthless” (P5) with time on the phone and this perhaps reflects Argyle’s comment (1994,1996) that the phone is less personal. This participant also said that she felt this benefit is outweighed by the loss of NVC cues.

Another thought that longer sessions could be very good for the relationship even though it could also allow time for “waffle” (P6). On a similar relationship note, Participant 4 gave an example of where she added extra time outside the official
session because she judged that “he needed something else” because he had had a
difficult week.

These views support Tannen’s (1996) contention that most women place a high
value on the quality of the relationship and value talk as a means of creating rapport
as well as solving problems. Tannen cautions against stereotyping and one male
participant did show a willingness to listen to some waffle if necessary:

Somebody could be waffling but saying what needs to be said but if it’s just waffle,
I’ll tell them straight away. Other times you get fooled and you think somebody ’s
going in a particular direction and it turns into waffle (P2)

It is noteworthy however that he will tell them straight away if he judges that it is
pure waffle so he is listening for relevance rather than regarding waffle as the price
of establishing a relationship like Participant 6. The words chosen also reveal the
attitude of the coach and I feel sure that a coach who is listening to “their story” (P5)
is listening with different ears from a coach who is listening to waffle. It seems
likely that they will listen longer to a story.

note that men when listening, are more attuned to facts than emotion and they are
also very action focused and direct in their speech. There seemed to be some
support for this in the data. Two men, (P1, P3) expressed a need to cut straight to
the chase in their sessions. Both commented on the necessity of getting the session
moving quickly and the need to intervene within the first two or three minutes to
achieve this. Participant 6 allows 10 minutes depending on the time available.

The female coaches also all expressed some concern about moving too quickly into
deciding the focus of the coaching or action planning.

You can go in too early. Especially when you are a bit pushed for time (P6).

I like to get whole picture – its very revealing and sometimes I am sure it’s not the
real issue – if there’s no animation, no energy (P5).

What I found out in the early days was that if I interrupted too quickly, it gave them
a get out clause (P4)
It was also the three female coaches who mentioned that the presenting issue was often not the real focus of the coaching and that it tends to take time for this to emerge. None of the men commented on this – although it does not mean that they did not have the experience. One (P3) spoke about an incident where he believed that there might be a deeper issue creating the client’s problem but because he was in a group coaching situation, he believed he should stick to the presenting problem. It is interesting that this problem was not resolved - possibly because it was not the real issue - and this illustrates one of the dilemmas of coaching – whether or not the coach has the right, the responsibility or the courage to push beyond the stated agenda. Whether this was the time or place is also part of the dilemma.

For the female participants, time appears to be bound up with listening and supporting and is therefore something that must be given freely. The men, with the possible exception of Participant 2, tended to control time more closely and keep up the momentum towards actions. The women, whilst aware of the need to move towards actions, also saw that this created pressure and therefore possible errors of timing or judgement.

5.5 Timing Interventions in the Moment

This was the question that sparked my initial interest in this study. I wanted to know what coaches use to determine the right moment to ask a question, make a request or comment or stay silent. Since there is very little guidance about this issue in the coaching literature I was expecting to find a range of personal approaches and techniques. This questionnaire results supported this.

16 out of 22 people (72%) thought timing was very important or critical. Two thought it moderately important and one rejected the whole idea as “reactive nonsense” (Q1). Three did not answer this question and did not explain why. Overall it seemed that timing of interventions had some meaning for coaches but that they approached it in different ways. The questionnaire responses revealed a range of different cues or signals. The first column represents the number out of the total 22 responses who cited each particular cue. Most respondents use more than one
channel except for the two who use experience and one person who judges on content alone.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cues or Signals</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Client’s words or content</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gut instinct</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NVC signals</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional atmosphere</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results or agenda</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage in structured process</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When I interviewed the study participants, I covered this aspect of timing very specifically. Unsurprisingly, the coaches who preferred face to face interactions used the widest range of NVC signals to identify when to intervene.

*I prefer being there in person. It is easier to know how someone is likely to react ……. I think it makes a difference if you are looking at someone and timing is key to the process. You get more feedback if you can see them……….. I do it by intuition, how people react to you, what do we need to be being, to talk about? (P5)*

All the face to face coaches (P4, P5, P6) listen for the level of energy in the client’s voice. Participant 4 and Participant 6 also watch faces and eye movements and listen to voice rhythms. They both describe listening for pauses “outside … normal speech patterns” (P4). And Participant 6 notes that pauses lengthen in the “heart” of the session.

“If their speed of voice starts slowing down to a more thoughtful tone. If I sense they are speaking in a thoughtful way, that would tend to make me feel that they are, that they’ve got more to come. You can almost hear them thinking. Then I’ll allow more time. If they’re giving short answers, if they are talking quite quickly and they stop ….. So often it’s about how they are processing. I think silence magnifies on the phone too. *One of the big clues for me is the silence*” (P6)
One participant commented on a physical component to her gut feeling.

*Actually, thinking about that I almost got a knot in my stomach and that tells me that there’s something amiss. Something is not right here. Or it can also be a slight heart thing*” (P6)

This tells her whether she has to clarify something or that she needs to ask another question.

The communications research (Argyle 1990) (Allen et al 2002) indicates that women rely more on visual cues to assess a situation and are considered better at reading emotions because they have a wider range of cues to work from. This might be one explanation why the female coaches all preferred face to face coaching – women may receive more information than men in face to face meetings. According to Argyle (1994) men receive more information from voices so the phone for them is just as effective as a meeting and the men in my sample prefer telephone coaching. One man (P3) had initially believed that phone coaching could not be as effective as face to face but his experience has demonstrated that this is not the case.

Participant 2 does coach senior people face to face but comments that “*you and I know that the phone works just as well*” and he generally tries to move them towards phone coaching once he has established the relationship. Participant 3 uses voice tone and pauses and he commented that a “*startled*” tone lets him know that he had got through to someone. He also senses the level of attentiveness on the phone.

As discussed, men are more inclined to listen for facts and Participant 1 mentioned that phone coaching enabled him to take extensive notes (3 or 4 pages per 30 minutes session) which he reviews before each session. It was also noticeable that the men in my participant group discussed content and the coaching process when timing interventions much more than the women.

*My gut instinct isn’t always right. It’s usually right but it’s been wrong enough times that I don’t just trust it 100% and maybe because I’m towards the intellectual end of the spectrum, I supplement gut instinct with evidence so it’s trying to put the two together”* (P3)
He gave an example of timing an intervention as “when someone has said something inherently ridiculous or internally inconsistent. It’s a reaction to the content”. On another occasion he challenged a client when “I simply reached the conclusion that he was making excuses and it just wasn’t going to happen.” (P3)

Both Participant 1 and Participant 2 had less to say than the others about the specifics of timing interventions as they both believe that getting it right in the moment is relatively unimportant to the success of the coaching. Participant 2 was unable to give me any specific insight into how he judges timing. He believes that timing is completely intuitive and that you can only learn by practising.

*I think it is just through experience. The more coaching hours you’ve got, the easier it is to make those decisions .......it’s just something I do naturally. (P2)*

I was curious to know what he thought he was practising but he could not say. He is aware of the result – easier decisions – but not the process. Since Participant 2 does not think timing is important this is perhaps an example of how conscious awareness links to values and therefore focuses attention. It was interesting that Participant 3, who had been trained by Participant 2, commented that he had been taught how to “get the messages without the visual side of it”. Clearly Participant 2 is aware of NVC – he also mentioned that he uses it to assess whether people are lying – but it plays no conscious part in his timing.

Participant 1 actually uses time quite strictly to judge his interventions and after a short pause he will move the conversation on

*then I’ll know it’s time to move, if it’s time to say right, so those are the three areas you want to discuss. (P1)*

He also has very clearly defined content boundaries for coaching and these can guide an intervention.

*It ceased to be a coaching session and more veering towards marriage guidance and I had to intervene and say, look you can’t do that, I’m not qualified to do it. (P1)*
He later stated - “I think all life coaching is quite personal but if it gets in the way of clarity of goals then I intervene.” Participant 3 also thinks that when he gets stuck it is because he has not clarified the goals properly or has missed out a step so again, content and process are used to time the intervention.

Although the literature supports the view that women are more skilled at reading NVC, two of the women coaches (P5, P6) did not believe that phone coaching was less effective than face to face, it simply reflected their preferences. The third woman (P4) has no formal coaching training but she is an NLP practitioner and trainer so she is attuned, by training, to working primarily face to face. She considers telephone coaching a back up to the main programme. If, as Argyle (1996) states, the phone is less personal, perhaps the gender difference lies as much in a female preference for relationship as the increased exposure to NVC.

One man shows a strong preference for reducing the relationship aspects of coaching. He focuses on actions rather than the personal, believes personal disclosure is inappropriate and likes the fact that the phone helps keep the relationship business like.

*I’ve had some really good results. I never feel it’s a barrier. Sometimes it’s the other way that can be a barrier. Like that woman that cried, if she’d been there you would have to offer a tissue or something. Perhaps that sounds a bit cold. I don’t mean it like that. (P1)*

Of course this may be personality and not gender but Argyle (1996) also notes that the phone is ideal for solving simple practical problems and the phone might therefore support a practical, fact driven and time efficient approach which the men in the participant group seemed to prefer, if not all as strongly as Participant 1. McLuhan (1967) says that the medium affects the message and Argyle supports this.

Experiments show that no-vision encounters were marked by greater formality, they were more task-oriented, depersonalised and less spontaneous. They were experienced as more socially distant, with less social presence. (1996 p119)
5.6 Timing Challenging Interventions

One of the coaches who replied to the questionnaire commented that if a coach was concerned about timing, then he or she must be worrying about challenging the client. I thought this was an interesting perspective, particularly as another questionnaire respondent (Q1) had thought that concern for timing was “reactive nonsense” - his view being that the coach should be in control of all timing.

Presumably, the client has to fit in. Basically they think timing in an issue if the coach is in some way afraid or incompetent. Whilst these views may sound harsh there does seem to be some validity as challenging is something that some of the participants have become more confident about with experience. Whitworth et al (1998) also ascribe missing the moment to speak to fear on the coach’s part.

At the beginning lots of things went past me and I wasn’t picking up. I think it’s having the confidence in challenging and that comes with experience. I am quite happy to challenge anybody on anything now. And I really wasn’t at the beginning. (P2)

Participant 3 also believes in direct and timely challenge - he describes one client he was about to challenge as “a tough nut to crack” and this choice of words reflects a hard-headed approach. He works with an organisation that coaches with a concept they call “tough love” so this statement is perhaps a reflection of this. Much of Participant 3’s coaching is around sales but he did also mention a challenge he did not pursue on the grounds of context – a group – and content, which he thought might be too personal. He said he might have challenged had he been in a one to one situation.

Participant 6, who describes herself as a very non-directive coach, stated that her ability to challenge had improved with experience but she also said that a direct challenge was never her first “port of call” and she always tried “other avenues” first. She described a difficult situation she had been in where she considered that the client was resisting the process but she had not raised this issue.

Participant 4 approaches challenges carefully. She believes that it can be important to challenge.
Sometimes they need to sort of move in their seat, this is reality check type thing but if it’s something I know is going down the personal realm and could have too much of a negative impact, then I won’t unless I’ve got the time to deal with it. Because I do have a philosophy that they have to go out of the door feeling great about themselves and the session”

She also comments that she ensures her voice tone is soft and her questions curious rather than interrogative. She may handle more therapeutic issues outside the coaching session but it is mainly a consideration of whether it is necessary to provoke negative emotion or, if inevitable, of having sufficient time to deal with it. Rather than directly challenge, she also thinks it is more effective to lead the client to self-realisation. She says “I do a lot of drilling down, what I call purposeful questioning. She uses this technique when “I want to get to a particular issue, or I want them to get it or understand what’s driving them and I don’t want to tell them.”

Participant 5, who says that you have to be “tough”, is nevertheless sensitive to the emotional repercussions of potential challenges.

However, he didn’t mention this and I didn’t know how to ask if this was a problem. He was not resilient and could be emotional. I felt I was walking on eggshells and this was delaying progress, slowing things down. But I had to adapt to his mental timing (P5)

Whilst all the participants believed that challenge was part of the remit they do time their challenges differently. Again the participants reveal gender preferences with the men being more direct in their approach and also tending to challenge sooner. The women were more sensitive to the emotional repercussions and timed their challenges very carefully as a result. The male decisions to challenge tended to be more content driven and were made at the time when the process seemed to demand it.

Participant 2, who expressed the most forthright attitude to challenging, does not think timing interventions is important. Nevertheless he goes with his feelings so there must be some unconscious timing in his decision.

I do it when it feels right and I might stop someone mid flow and I might wait until the end and then challenge someone on what they’ve said. (P2)
On being asked if it had ever caused a problems he said:

“Not a problem that wouldn’t have come up anyway, I don’t think.”

One advantage of willingness to challenge directly does seem to be speedier resolution of some issues. Participant 3 talked about a time when a direct challenge achieved almost instant results. He had let the problem slide for several weeks but his challenge, when it came, was very direct and effective.

Participant 2 believes that “time is about commitment” and this leads him to take a firm line with clients who do not honour their commitments. “You can’t make anybody do it, but if it was agreed and it wasn’t done, then that becomes the issue.” He only allows a client to slip on a commitment once without a good reason as his belief is that if clients will not commit time, they should not be in a coaching programme. This is consistent with his view that success depends on it being the right time for the client to embark on coaching, and fulfilling commitments is evidence of the time being right. – “and that was her stage, where she was at, perfect timing for her and perfect timing for me”.

Participant 4, by contrast is quite relaxed and she feels over-commitment is part of self-discovery (which she prefers to her direct intervention).

*If they haven’t done their actions, that’s okay but I’m disappointed. And sometimes they put so many actions down you know they are never going to achieve it,* (P4)

What did emerge from the data was that each coach had a distinct view of the appropriate time and approach for challenging and whether these are related to gender or personality, it is worth bearing in mind that what would be good timing for the client may be counter-intuitive to the coach. 13 out of 22 (59%) of the questionnaire respondents rely on intuition or gut feeling when coaching and it is possible that this is unreliable with people who are different from ourselves. Clients of the opposite sex might have a preference for a more, or less, direct style of
challenge. More direct challenging could also speed up the coaching process which would be desirable to task focused clients.

Another point to bear in mind is honesty within the relationship. Some of the coaches discuss feeling frustrated with the clients (P5, P6, P3) and Rogers (1994) recommends that all people in helping relationships are completely open and honest about their feelings, including negative ones, in the moment. He says this is about being congruent and that it has an impact on the relationship. This approach requires a high degree of courage from the coach and might be difficult to live up to – especially in business cultures where feelings are not often discussed. However, it would almost certainly move the coaching relationship to a new level – and model the type of honesty a coach needs from the client. O’Neill’s (2000) idea of signature presence is also based on this idea of bringing all of yourself - attitudes, beliefs and feelings - to the coaching relationship. Rogers (1994) thinks that if both parties feel free to express their feelings in the moment, no one has to worry about when, or if, to speak as the relationship would be strong enough to deal constructively with the effects. This might seem idealistic to many coaches, particularly to those coaching within their own organisations.

Zeus and Skiffington (2002) note that challenges can be tentative or confronting depending on the coach and Daloz, (1999) whilst declining to enter into the gender argument he hints at, also notes that some mentors are better at supporting and some at challenging. As coaches it is important to become aware of how we deal with challenges and confrontation in both a general sense and in response to particular individuals. We may need to alter our approach to suit an individual. Gut instincts are part of our personalities - and personalities are coaching tools according to Zeus and Skiffington (2002) - and so may be more gender or personality specific than we know.
6 DATA ANALYSIS - THE CLIENT’S IMPACT ON TIMING

6.1 Introduction
In the previous chapter I discussed how the coach’s approach to time affected results and in this chapter I look at other aspects of timing over which the coach has less direct control. The themes that emerged were:

• the use of coaching tools or psychometric instruments to identify the client’s preferences
• the effect of resistance or emotion on the process
• the psychological depth that the coaching can achieve

6.2 Psychometric Instruments and Coaching Tools and Timing
Some of the participants discussed the use of psychometric or other tools to help them decide how to approach clients. This is broadly related to timing in that it helps them decide the pace and style that the client is likely to prefer.

This approach is not widely discussed in the coaching literature although Julie Hay (1999) describes client styles with a view to giving the coach a clue to personality. This was an interesting approach as it uses dress styles as well as physical characteristics to identify people. Similar approaches to identifying communication preferences through observable characteristics are proposed by McCallister (1994) and Erickson (2004). Whilst some coaches might protest at the apparent superficiality of this approach, the social science research mentioned in the literature review supports it and Argyle (1994) says that dress is a style of behaviour. It also has the advantage of being something that can be done unobtrusively unlike psychometrics which can alienate people who dislike the idea of being pigeonholed.

Psychometrics have the advantage of being validated and many people would find it more acceptable than being judged by their clothes, physical characteristics and offices but the communications literature makes it clear that we are being judged on these things, like it or not (Hargie and Dickson 2000), (Tannen 1992), (Lewis 1996)

Participant 4 is currently working on her MBTI accreditation. She thinks this will be useful in helping her know how best to approach a client. At the moment she relies on her NLP skills. Participant 3 who is training in the use of the DISC psychometric
tool, is encouraged by the company he works for to use observed behaviours to make an educated guess as to the client’s likely profile. He finds this helpful in deciding his approach in terms of pace and task orientation. He also uses a debriefing tool to get to the heart of a client’s problem on a content level and he uses this to decide when to intervene.

The participants do not use the psychometric tools to assess the development needs of their clients. They use them simply to help identify clients’ preferences and moderate their own styles to fit.

Participant 6 uses a coaching style inventory that assesses the client’s preferred approach for coaching and she finds this very useful even though it is not a validated tool. However, she also says that once she knows a client, her interventions rely much more on her intuitive sense of appropriateness. A questionnaire respondent also makes the point that it is much easier to time interventions once you are “close” (Q4) to the client.

The participants see the coaching tools as an adjunct to and not a substitute for listening to and observing the client and this is important. There is an inherent danger in thinking that you “know” your clients before meeting them. It is not the validity of the tests as such, but the effect on the coach’s expectations. Education research supports the finding that children perform according to their teachers’ expectations (Dryden and Vos 1994). Daloz (1999) warns that what we see depends on where we are standing. Tools could be counter-productive if they become another form of stereotype and if they limit the possibilities by defining the clients. However, coaches do need to be very perceptive about human behaviour and realistically not all coaches will be able to claim the levels of expertise that Zeus and Skiffington (2002) assume. The participants in this study all consider themselves to be professional coaches but there are now many people coaching as part of a role. They may lack the time and inclination to become an expert in human behaviour and for such people, tools have potential as shortcuts to the best way to approach individual clients. From a timing perspective, it could provide an insight into individual preferences and how best to time and pace a coaching session so that the client starts to experience benefits early on.
6.3 How Emotion Affects Timing

Coaching at any level may induce resistance, anxiety or other unforeseen emotional states. As previously discussed, change of any kind affects emotions and it may be experienced as confronting or challenging.

All except one of the coaches (Participant 3 who was also the least experienced) had experienced emotional clients. None of the coaches were disconcerted by emotion and they all agreed that the coaching has to stop until the client recovers. Emotional responses that occurred through the coaching were not a problem for the participants. Participant 6 said that she thought crying often marked the time when a client opened to change, and Participant 1 also talked of an incident in which crying brought about an insight that opened the client to change. Emotion can be positive for the coaching process.

A more challenging issue is underlying anxiety that may not be expressed or immediately obvious but which may result in non-achievement of goals or procrastination as suggested by Neenan and Dryden (2002) (Erickson 2004) and Forster (2002). Participant 6 thought it an interesting idea and agreed that a current procrastinating client was probably fearful. Participant 2 felt that the reasons for procrastination were very varied and he disagreed with the fear hypothesis. Fournies (2000) proposes fear as one of 16 reasons for procrastination. He thinks these reasons are the specific components of what could be called lack of motivation.

Participant 4 in one example links procrastination to lack of motivation.

*But there was this one action that she never quite completed, so this was about the second or third time, she sort of did it, but not quite. That made me start asking “So what’s stopping you?” It’s obviously not important enough for you.* (P4)

I have already discussed how unwilling clients would be experienced as resistant clients and Heron (2001) also states that a badly timed intervention can create resistance. There was some recognition of this in the participant group.

*If people feel that coaching is an interrogation they will clam up.* (P4)
What are they frightened of? You have to be careful when you ask that question as it can get defences up. If you ask the wrong question at the wrong time, you get resistance instead of change. Yes, when you get pushback. The interesting thing is depending on the severity of the pushback, that often tells me whether that’s true or not. So if you say to someone, ‘What are you frightened of?’ and they say, ‘I’m not frightened of anything.’, to me that says, they are. Whereas if it’s a much calmer way that they answer that, then that’s okay. (P6)

The male coaches said they had not experienced resistance although this could have been a semantic issue as Participant 1 and Participant 2 talked about the clients’ readiness for change and what they call lack of readiness could be termed, or experienced, as resistance. Participant 3 also talked about coaching not working even though he thought his clients were all serious about coaching, so there may be unrecognised resistance in some of those situations.

Generally the male coaches said they had not mistimed interventions. Participant 2 said that he had never regretted anything he had said, as it had seemed the right thing to do at the time, and Participant 3 said that he had taken conversations off in a a “less than optimum direction” but he had corrected them quickly. Participant 1 mentioned a personal disclosure he had considered inappropriate but said it had little impact on the conversation (which is not surprising as communications research (Allen et al 2002) demonstrates that in fact people tend to respond positively to disclosure). They consider that mistimed interventions are not serious and usually retrievable and this view has support from Egan (2002) and Rogers (2002) who think that good intentions and relationships can be more influential than technical expertise. One questionnaire respondent did think that interventions can be mistimed.

The right timing is critical. You have to pose questions or instigate action at exactly the right time. Too soon and it is both inappropriate and it may prevent you re-raising the issue when it is the right time (Q4)

Obviously the participants’ perceptions depend on their levels of awareness of self and others as well as their knowledge of human behaviour. Resistance is not widely discussed in the coaching literature (again Zeus and Skiffington (2002) are exceptions) as it is a therapeutic concept. How coaches respond is subjective. One coach might see resistance and decide to try and help the client recognise and
overcome it whereas another might see a client who is not ready for coaching and walk away. Either response would be reasonable and depends on the level or type of training, personality and personal decisions about the suitability of the client for coaching. Sometimes resistance may not become apparent until the coaching has started.

The way that I saw it today was that whenever I went back to challenge something there’d be another reason why that happened or something thrown in as to why that was the case. She’d then take it off into a different story. So she was saying she was open to change and that she needed to, but she was resisting it. Deflecting (P6)

The decision then is whether to confront the behaviour or discontinue the coaching. Either choice is a potentially challenging intervention with implications in which timing may feature.

In a broader sense, it has to be the right time in the client’s life to address the issues and to commit time to the necessary actions. Two participants thought this was the key to successful coaching.

If you get it right then the effect can be great, at inappropriate times, it just won’t work. I think coaching works in most cases. (P2)

Success depends on the coachee’s willingness and seriousness about change (P1).

Another put it less strongly and mentioned as an afterthought:

I sometimes wonder if people are ready for coaching (P6)

Participant 2 also made the point that if coaching can be delayed too long. He gave as an example a performance issue that was not addressed in time and which then became a dismissal problem.

The ability of the coach to recognise the more subtle emotions would enable them to address them if appropriate and it would certainly affect the timing of interventions by preventing them from falling on deaf ears. It might also prevent the coach from taking on too much personal responsibility for the apparent failure of the coaching which may be due to factors the coach cannot influence. One coach talked about sitting in coffee shops giving herself “a hard time” (P4) if things went badly and
another (P3) mentioned feeling short of resources and imagination when a client got stuck. One aspect of Grinder’s (2005) philosophy is that knowing when or if to intervene, recognising the level of permission, removes guilt from the process. He encourages people to look at how well they do in relation to the level of permission they have. He contends that some of the factors that reduce permission are activities or situations that are new, difficult or emotional and these cover practically any coaching situation. This approach ensures the responsibility for results stays with the client.

6.4 The Possible Effects of Time on Psychological Depth

There are difficulties in talking about coaching on different levels as it is a subjective experience and only the client really knows how deeply he or she has been affected by coaching. It is not easy to assess the level of impact coaching might have on an individual’s life but Zeus and Skiffington (2002) consider dialogue in a way that helps illuminate. They see dialogue as ranging from transactional through to transformational. Learning occurs through acquiring information in transactional dialogue and through changes in thinking, feeling and acting in transformational dialogue. There are clients who want to work on very practical issues – business plans or goals - and others who want to change the way they interact with the world and the latter is closer to transformation. The difference lies in the how much psychological change will be required of the client.

Dilts (1995, p 353) espouses Bateson’s theory of different levels of learning, and in this framework, timing (when and where or “environment”) is at the bottom of the hierarchy, that ascends to include behaviour, capabilities, beliefs, values and identity. Whilst he believes that change at one of the higher levels is more “widespread” (p 353), he also notes that environmental factors “determine the opportunities or constraints a person has to react to” (p 354) and this sounds similar to Grinder’s notion of levels of permission that will vary with each individual.

Grinder (2005) differentiates between approaches that are psychological (inside – out) and others that are behavioural (outside – in). What Grinder terms a psychological approach correlates with the higher levels of change on Bateson’s hierarchy. Grinder thinks that in many business situations the behavioural approach
is more appropriate and it also requires a lower level of permission and is less confronting than change at the belief level. Neither author is making value judgments about the different levels. It is not that any level is better but that different levels are appropriate at different times and that the coach should be aware of how and why he or she is working at a particular level. Dilts (1995, p353) states “Behaviours without an inner map, plan or strategy to guide them are like knee jerk reactions, habits or rituals”

The problem with talking about levels is that it seems to imply that higher is better whereas in practice, it is not possible to be categorical about what will transform an individual’s life, nor indeed how long it will take. TV makeover programmes often have a transformational effect on confidence and self-esteem by changing a wardrobe (and there is support in the literature for a correlation between improving appearance and recovery from depression (Argyle 2004). Bandler (1992), speaking from an NLP perspective states categorically that change can only happen quickly although many therapists would disagree with him. There are no rules about what will work or how long it takes but nonetheless there are differences in the psychological depth of coaching that could be termed levels.

The subject is not widely covered in the coaching literature. Zeus and Skiffington (2002) are exceptions and they imply that there are different levels of coaching and that coaches must be willing to tackle difficult areas such as resistance and emotion for deep level change to occur. I have already discussed the coaching organisation whose model involves three levels of coaching and there is evidence in the data to support the idea that coaching occurs at different levels or depths.

Depth is partly determined by the attitude of the coach. One participant said that he is very happy to coach at a deep level and he ascribes this to his personality

*It’s very much because of the person that I am. I’m never been frightened to go where angels fear to tread and I think one of the biggest things in my coaching experience is empathy. (P2)*

Depth is also often affected by the amount of time available for coaching.
I might be asked can I give a hundred people a one off coaching session and then that is almost scratch the surface type coaching and you just want to get a very quick win. It’s much better if you get six sessions and coaching will be completely different, you can get much deeper and you will get a different result… you get a much greater emotional depth. (P2)

At the beginning of the coaching relationship we are getting into action planning and as the coaching relationship goes on , it is more at , getting into the why it’s happened……otherwise it’s quite goal oriented. (P6).

Participant 5 does a lot of career coaching and she comments that the client often moves onto much deeper, and more emotionally charged, areas such as self-esteem. However there are other clients who just want a job and Participant 2 and Participant 1 both discussed this type of example.

The client’s commitment is usually a subject for the first meeting and part of the contracting process but the issue can be problematic, particularly in business. Many business clients are offered coaching for either developmental or remedial reasons and all the participants had experience of people who had been given, rather than requested, coaching and were not therefore 100% committed to the process, especially early on. In many business cultures it would be difficult, or even career limiting, to refuse coaching so in these circumstances achievements may be hampered by the unwillingness of the client. Participant 4 discussed such a situation where the client was initially quite hostile and her response was to avoid anything “personal” until the client became more open to the process.

Depth is very much an area in which the coach has to be sure that they have the permission, in Grinder’s (2005) terms, or the warrant in Heron’s (2001). It might be tempting for a coach to push a client into areas they are not ready or willing to confront. In a previous unpublished study I found that coaches are excited (or not) by their clients’ goals and that there can be a temptation to push, rather than encourage, them out of their comfort zones. One of the participants in this study echoed this

I have got to be excited by what they want too. If I think they will only look at safe areas I lose interest. (P5)
Assuming that the coach has the permission of the client, emotionally deep interventions do require careful timing as three participants mentioned (P2, P4, P6) because they have to be resolved within the session. Zeus and Skiffington (2002) point out that the behaviour and the emotion can be separated and handled in two separate sessions and this could help when time is short.

Some of the participants elect to take a more behavioural than psychological approach. Participant 1 likes to focus on goals and action he talked about halting a conversation about relationships and Participant 3 also mentioned avoiding an issue he thought was too deep for the time and context. Both these participants saw emotional issues as having the potential to cloud the clarity of goals, whilst some of the others saw them as gateways to real progress (P5, P4),

One participant noted that depth remained in the hands of the client.

_and it very much depends on the person themselves. How much they want to do. Some people are quite happy to take things to a deeper level very quickly and others just won’t go there so it all depends on the client. (P2)_

Whilst this is true, it also depends on the coach who has to accompany the client. Coaches who opt for depth require confidence, a high level of skill and, according to, Heron (2001) a finely tuned sense of timing if they are to avoid making clumsy or harmful interventions.
7 DATA ANALYSIS - OVERARCHING THEMES

7.1 Introduction
In this chapter the overarching themes are presented and discussed:

- the relationship between influence and good timing
- aspects of time management
- good timing as a learnable skill

7.2 Timing in the Creation of Rapport
The communications literature discusses the positive impact of good communication skills, and, as we have seen, skilful communicators are more persuasive, better liked and also receive more personal disclosures. The participants did not make any specific links between their timing skills and their level of personal influence. This is probably because it is others who experience and judge our influencing skills. Nevertheless, Participant 3 had learnt that

*A lot of it is about rapport and mutual respect, and those things driving progress, and I find that before you can start getting results, you have to get rapport."

Rapport is one of the results of effective communications skills. Establishing rapport is the first stage in a coaching relationship and essential if the relationship is to move on from the first exploratory meeting. The pacing aspects of rapport building imply good timing in that it means harmonising rhythm between two, or more, people.

Some of the participants in both the interviews (P5, P6) and the questionnaire (Q5, Q6) commented that timing becomes easier with knowledge of the client, and also that trust grows over time. Good timing may then have the potential to speed up the coaching and to move to deeper levels more quickly, achieving more in a shorter time. There is though, a balance to be struck between business imperatives and individual needs. A coach will always need to be able to create, and hold, the reflective space for the client. Learning depends on time and space to reflect (Clutterbuck 2002) so speed is not automatically desirable.
As we have seen, the literature demonstrates that good communicators are more credible and this is an important factor in persuading the reluctant to commit - a situation several of the participants commented on (P2, P4, P5, P6.) Participant 6, talking about reluctant clients, commented that in these circumstances she feels she is “selling”. I have already commented on some similarities between coaching and sales and there is also the commercial reality that external coaches do have to win business and credibility, and effective influencing skills will play their part.

Another factor that the literature reveals can affect rapport and credibility is status. This subject did not arise much with the participants in this study, possibly because they perceived themselves to be of equal status with their clients. However, one interviewee (P2) mentioned that he always saw very senior people face to face, at least initially, in spite of his preference for phone coaching. Another (P4) commented that because she worked at senior levels, her client’s time was very valuable and so she fitted in with them so perhaps this does indicate that even external coaches treat high status individuals (and their time) differently.

### 7.3 Time Management

How a coach thinks about time will have an impact on the pace of the session and several of the participants (P1, P2, P3, P6) raised the point that managing the time in the session reflected on their professionalism. One point raised by two participants was the time of day for coaching. Participant 2 commented on the impact of the time zone differentials. He noticed that when he was coaching Australians, he was starting his day and they were finishing theirs. He felt that this made them very “mellow” which was good for reflective work but not for high activity. Participant 1 also noticed that clients’ moods could be different in the evening. He found them more “pessimistic”. Both considered themselves morning people and noticed that their own energy levels were reduced in the evening.

### 7.4 Training in Good Timing

There are a number of different aspects to communication and timing has a supporting, rather than a lead role. Time is a concept and does not exist in its own right. There is always something else - an action, a vocalisation, a silence - that is being timed and timing is a non-verbal component of it. Timing is therefore
usually treated as a subset of broader communication skills – listening, speaking persuasively or reading NVC for example. Grinder (2005) and Heron (2001) are the only two authors I found who really emphasise and teach it. It is not surprising, in view of the lack of authoritative literature, that it is currently a subject that excites little interest amongst coaches and that only 6 out of 22 questionnaire respondents cited NVC as a guide to timing their interventions. As previously discussed, communication is taught in business and media training is given to those in the public eye, so it seems to me that communication skills are teachable and can be improved through focus or training. Lewis (1996) states his view categorically.

Great Communicators are not born – they are made. The ability to get your message across, clearly, confidently and persuasively, is a skill which anyone can learn, practise and perfect. (p1)

Not all the participants in the study agree. One questionnaire respondent (Q1) felt strongly that training shouldn’t be necessary as coaches should have these skills before embarking on a coaching career.

If coaches had any education and training background with some understanding of developmental psychology, had actually taught and had the necessary personal pre-requisites this is an unnecessary question. This is the silliness of such programmes (coach training) in that it has turned into stagecraft. Follow the recipe (Q1)

This makes sense in terms of assessing basic suitability for the role but it is not just professional coaches who coach. Many organisations are now training many managers in coaching skills and it is not reasonable to assume that only those with excellent communication skills are being selected. Management populations will reflect the full range of skill levels and some will need help. The other point is that all skills can be improved - as the term mastery implies.

The interview participants reflect a full range of views from timing as completely intuitive (P2) to a strong belief that timing, as part of communication skills, can be improved through focus or training (P1, P3, P4, P6). One participant (P5) thought that it was basically intuitive but could be taught “to a certain extent”.
Participant 2 and Participant 6 both run coaching training but Participant 2 thinks practice, rather than training, is the way to improve coaching skills. He ascribes his own success as a coach to empathy. Participant 6 said that training coaches has ensured that she continually focuses on her NVC skills and has therefore improved them. She was eloquent in her ability to identify and name the processes and indicators she uses and she has a high level of self-awareness. She believes focus is the key to developing skills – and Gallwey (2002) supports this view.

Participant 4 is the only participant who has had no specific coach training but as an NLP practitioner she is self-aware and also able to articulate how she works with people. She teaches communication skills. It was noticeable that the questionnaire respondents with NLP training were also able to specify how they timed their interventions so it does point to the fact that certain aspects of NVC can, and are, being taught.

Participant 4 and Participant 5 actively work on their coaching skills and attend courses, and Participant 6 has a supervisor and a coach mentor to keep her skills honed. Participant 3 expressed interest in further training but both he and Participant 4 mentioned that it was difficult to know what the next stage in coach training would be. Participant 4 thinks that related areas such as communication help her more than coaching training would but she, like two of the other participants (P1, P2), feels comfortable with what she is doing and does not feel the need for further coaching training.

Perry’s radio programme (2006) gave many different examples of the significance of good timing in a variety of disciplines and the consensus was that it is definitely a learnable skill. They almost all practised their skills in performance-based fields and with the exception of meditation, evidence of good timing would be very visible. This is not the case with coaching where the result of good timing would be more likely to be an internal experience for the client, although coaches too experience flow states as described in this programme. All the study participants were able to talk about coaching that had flowed particularly well. Perhaps it is performing that makes us concentrate on timing and most coaches do not see coaching as a performance but as an experience co-created with the client.
Flaherty (1999) warns against the overuse of techniques and one participant also expresses similar reservations.

To be honest with NLP, I think some of it is absolutely brilliant and some of it is rubbish. Manipulative as well at times (P2).

Perhaps it is the idea of performance that is worrying to coaches as it seems to be about pretence, appearances and potentially, manipulation. The idea that if we communicate more effectively, we have more power (an idea borne out in the communications literature (Allen et al 2002) (Hargie and Dickson 2003) may not sit comfortably with some. This is recognised – Daloz (1999 ) and Heron (2001) both discuss the dark side of the helping professions. The business literature is very open, and not at all apologetic, about the connection between power and communication skills (Jackson 1988), (McCann 1996), (Erickson 2004), (Lewis 1996), (Khan-Panni 2004).

It is reasonable to be concerned about manipulation but it is also worth remembering that few people have the acting skills required to hide the mismatch between their intention and their communication. Mehrabian (cited Erickson 2004) discovered that we do notice incongruity in communication and unconsciously respond to the NVC. Even if we cannot interpret the NVC we respond with lack of trust. Clearly power, whether in tools, personalities or words, can be subverted but this increases the need for training as we are less vulnerable to what we know. It is intention that subverts, not whether the skills are innate or have been improved through training.

It is easy to criticise “recipe” (Q1) training but most skills teaching, at a basic level involves learning a recipe. Grinder (2005) identifies four levels to mastery in communication of which the most basic is the recipe - the content (what) and the process (how). The art comprises timing, (when) combined with readiness (if). It is not the only way to learn. Gallwey (2002) approaches learning through focus and it is certainly how Participant 6 has improved her skills, but it is probably the most widely used.
A high degree of motivation is required to become really proficient and this was underlined by the participants in the radio programme who all made the point that you had to practise until you no longer thought about it and only then, was good timing innate. It is perhaps only at this point that timing is elegant and the skill ceases to look like a technique.
8 CONCLUSION

8.1 Results

My intention in this study was to explore the idea of good timing in relation to coaching and whether or not it is important. My results suggest that there are two levels to take account of when considering the impact of timing.

Firstly, there is the micro level at which the coach is making decisions about when to speak or remain silent. What is clear is that there is no real consensus on the number and type of cues that are being used. Much depends on the training and attitude of the coach and some participants were unable to be specific. People with experience of NLP tended to be more explicit about how they made timing judgements, whereas others said they used experience, intuition, or gut reaction. The timing cues used by the questionnaire respondents can be classified into the following categories:

- eye movements
- body language
- facial expression
- silences
- use of language
- content
- stage in coaching process
- time pressure

Only six out of 22 study participants (27%) used a combination of the first four categories, which constitute NVC, to time their interventions. The literature demonstrates that NVC is more expressive than words, which, when accurately decoded, is a more reliable indicator of what people are feeling. Therefore, the results suggest that coaches are missing a valuable tool if they are relying on the last four factors alone to time interventions.
Timing is also affected by the beliefs of both coach and client. Time is very subjective and both parties in the coaching relationship bring an attitude that may be unconscious, but which has an impact. Aspects of this are:

- personality and communication style preferences
- voice speed, energy levels, thinking speed
- how much time is necessary to achieve change
- realistic time frames for the number of goals the client presents
- subjective responses to time (e.g. is a long pause five seconds or a minute?)

These beliefs affect the pace at which the coaching proceeds and also may have an effect on the number of goals considered appropriate for the coaching programme.

Secondly, at the macro level, the stage in the client’s life at which the coaching takes place influences the effectiveness of the intervention. Some aspects of this are obvious. The client must have the time and resources available to achieve the desired outcomes. The goals must also be achievable in the wider context of the client’s life. There can be systemic reasons why progress is not made, particularly in business when the client does not control all the salient factors.

There are also psychological states that impact good timing. At the heart of success is the client’s willingness to address particular issues but often there is a mismatch between stated intention and the readiness to act. NVC, rather than words, reveals this state.

An ability to identify emotional states that may impede progress will help a coach decide when, or if, to make an intervention. It will help focus questions and give the coach choices about whether to help the client overcome the blocks, to revise the goals to what realistically can be achieved or to stop the coaching until the client is able to commit wholeheartedly to the process. The coach must have the client’s permission to address a particular issue. This needs to be monitored during a coaching session as there may be times when a client withdraws consent.

The study participants were divided as to whether good timing could be taught but there is plenty of evidence in the management and communications literature to
indicate that effective communication is a learnable skill. Every communication takes place in a time and context, so timing is vital to this process. Communication is a complex subject in which mastery requires effort and practice. This may explain why it is not routinely taught but as communication skills underpin all coaching, it would be foolhardy for coaches to ignore this aspect.

8.2 Limitations of the Study and Further Questions
The main limitation of the study was the fact that I could not observe coaches working. I think this would have added a valuable additional source of information, particularly when participants cannot articulate their own processes. It would have been fascinating to attempt to match observed behaviours with the coach’s own interpretations of what they were doing. It would also highlight patterns of behaviour that are out of conscious awareness, as I believe that gut reaction and instinct do have a pattern.

In retrospect, I think it would have been interesting to explore further the subjective attitudes to time of each participant. I was struck by the interpretations of terms like long, short, fast and slow used by the interviewees. Some participants reported never feeling rushed in coaching whilst some, myself included, often feel pressed for time. It would be interesting to explore the attitudes to time that were revealed in the interviews with personality factors measured in psychometrics such as the MBTI (which highlights attitudes to time on the judging/perceiving axis) or the NLP concept of “in time” and “through time”. Zeus and Skiffington (2002) make the point that personality is a coaching tool and the process brought home to me that who you are is how you coach, and who you are affects your sense of time and timing.

The other question that arises for me is the impact of gender. The sample was much too small to make any judgements about gender but it was interesting how the preferences of the participants did support some of the research findings about gender. With only six participants, the effects could just as easily be caused by personality differences and I did not explore this in the interviews, primarily because I had not considered gender relevant in coaching and these differences only became apparent to me at the analysis stage. However, the preference of the male
participants for shorter, phone sessions contrasted with the female preference for face to face coaching and this may be due to gender differences. That gender would have an impact is perhaps not surprising as this is an essential part of who we are.

8.3 Implications For Practice

Success in coaching will be elusive without the ability to identify the moment when the client is open and willing to listen and act. Good timing will increase success rates and it will also create other benefits such as increasing credibility and influence.

It is reasonable to hope that professional coaches already possess high levels of communication skills but I am not aware of any coach training schools that assess the aptitude of trainees for coaching. In any event all skills can be improved with training and focus so even good communicators can improve. I think there is a serious implication for the training of non-specialists in coaching skills and from my experience this is becoming an increasingly common, and not necessarily welcome practice in business. Last week a business manager told me she was “sick of coaching and sick of coaching courses” and whilst this attitude is understandable – she is not a coach and did not choose to become one – it does not create a climate in which good communication is likely to flourish. Neither is it likely to create the motivation to acquire and practise what can be a complex set of skills. If organisations are wondering why their in-house coaching and mentoring schemes are failing, they might look at how they are training their coaches. Perhaps they are handing out “recipes”, to quote my questionnaire respondent, without emphasising or teaching the vital communication skills that make the recipe work. Success in coaching depends on good timing.


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APPENDIX 1 - Questionnaire

Dear Coach

This study is for an MA dissertation in Coaching and Mentoring Practice that I am completing at Oxford Brookes University. I am looking for coaches who work in business, either internally or externally. I am interested in the topic of timing in coaching relationships. Primarily I am investigating how coaches decide when or even, if, to intervene with a question or suggestion. If you have any thoughts on this topic I would very much appreciate it if you could take a few minute to fill in this questionnaire. All replies will be treated as strictly confidential.

Name (optional)  Gender (optional)

1. What coach training have you had?

2. Do you typically coach face to face or via the phone or internet?

3. Who is a typical client for you?

4. Is there any other training that you draw on extensively in your coaching?
5. In the course of a coaching conversation, do you have a sense of there being a right, or most effective time to ask a question or otherwise intervene?

6. How important do you think it is to get the timing of questions right?

7. If you answered yes to the question 5, how do you know when, or if, to time a question or intervention?

8. If you can, please be specific about what you look or listen for in deciding when to ask a question.

9. Has the subject of timing of interventions been addressed in any of your training?

10. If you would be prepared to participate in a face to face or telephone interview to discuss the subject of timing further, please indicate how I can best contact you

Mobile
Email
Land line