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## Human Resource Management Review

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/hrmr](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/hrmr)

Full Length Article

How executive coaches *actually* coach: Leveraging a relational lensRebecca M. Chory<sup>a</sup>, Evan H. Offstein<sup>a</sup>, Ronald L. Dufresne<sup>b</sup>, J. Stephen Childers Jr.<sup>c,\*</sup><sup>a</sup> Frostburg State University, College of Business, Engineering, and Computational and Mathematical Sciences, Department of Management, 101 Braddock Road, Frostburg, MD 21532, United States of America<sup>b</sup> Saint Joseph's University, Haub School of Business, Department of Management, 5600 City Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19131, United States of America<sup>c</sup> Radford University, Davis College of Business and Economics, Department of Management, Box 6954, Radford, VA 24142, United States of America

## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Executive coaching  
 Personal workplace relationships  
 Friendships  
 Working alliance  
 Multiple relationships  
 Relational dialectics  
 Ethics

## ABSTRACT

Despite the widespread acceptance of executive coaching as a relational phenomenon, how these relationships play out in practice tends to be overlooked and under-researched. In this conceptual paper, we argue that the “caring, yet professionally distant” clinical approach to executive coaching is unrealistic. Challenging this approach, we propose a relational communication perspective on coach-client friendship development, which we situate within the larger relational triad of coaches, leader-clients, and organizational sponsors/decision-makers/superiors. Adopting micro and macro perspectives, we detail the forces that spark and sustain these friendships, including coaches' relational communication, the sincerity and instrumentality of coaches' relationship motives, and coaching's occupational characteristics. We consider the web of multiple relationships within which executive coaching occurs. Along the way, we discuss challenges to the practice of executive coaching as it relates to personal workplace relationships, and we discuss the ethical implications of these relationships. We conclude with provocative questions to guide future research and practice in both executive coaching and personal workplace relationship arenas.

## 1. Introduction

Organizations are increasingly turning to executive coaching to develop their employees' skills, talents, knowledge, and emotional aptitude ([International Coaching Federation, 2023b](#)). Coaches teach leaders<sup>1</sup> certain skill sets and/or help them develop in ways that ultimately lead to positive changes in performance ([Ely et al., 2010](#); [Graßmann et al., 2020](#); [Ting & Hart, 2004](#); [Wasylyshyn, 2017](#)). Coaches are to achieve these goals by developing strong, trusting relationships with the leaders they coach ([Ely et al., 2010](#);

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<sup>1</sup> Executive coaches develop, teach, and coach organizational leaders, C-suite executives, members of upper management, and other organizational actors such as supervisors. These leaders, executives, etc. are the executive coach's clients or protégés. In this paper, we use the terms “leader,” “executive,” “client,” and “leader-client” interchangeably to refer to the individual being developed by the executive coach. We use the terms “organizational authority,” “organizational decision-maker,” and “sponsor” interchangeably to refer to the organizational member(s) with authority to grant, extend, or cancel coaching contracts or to recommend such actions.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2024.101055>

Received 30 March 2024; Received in revised form 6 September 2024; Accepted 12 September 2024

Available online 23 September 2024

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International Coaching Federation, 2021b; Ting & Hart, 2004). The precise nature of the coach-client relationship, how coaches are to build such relationships, and the effectiveness of the various types of coach-client relationships, however, remain unclear.

Unlike fields such as psychology or psychotherapy, in which credentialing and licensing are highly regulated (American Psychological Association, 2017; European Psychoanalytical Federation, 2021), virtually anyone may adopt the title of “executive coach.” For this reason, the field is vulnerable to fraud; indeed, investigative journalism compares the darker corners of the coaching industry to a pyramid scheme (Bishop, 2024). To combat such misconduct and to preserve the reputation of the industry, the International Coaching Federation (ICF) has worked to professionalize executive coaching by promulgating coaching competencies (International Coaching Federation, 2021b), a code of ethics (International Coaching Federation, 2021a), and educational certifications (International Coaching Federation, 2023c). Embedded in the International Coaching Federation (2021b) core competencies is the coach's ability to develop a professional, arm's-length, contract-based relationship with the protégé-client through openness, transparency, vulnerability, and trust.

The normative coach-client relationship is akin to that of a therapist and client, a formal relationship that effectively balances the tensions between distance and closeness (Ely et al., 2010; Hall et al., 1999; Kilburg, 2016; Offstein et al., 2023; Ting & Hart, 2004). Early on, Arnaud (2003) offered directions for a psychoanalytically-grounded executive coaching approach. Later, scholars conceptualized the relationship between coach and leader as a “working alliance,” an approach originating in psychotherapy (Baron & Morin, 2009; Graßmann et al., 2020). Offstein et al. (2023) recently added the coach-as-pastor metaphor to describe coaching orientations centered around the practices of “sensemaking, consoling and coping” (p. 329). They also offered the alternative metaphor of coach-as-physical trainer, which emphasizes performance, accountability, role modeling, active practice, and motivation.

Despite the admirable intentions of those seeking to professionalize the field of executive coaching, we contend that coaching relationships may manifest in ways that are decidedly not arm's-length or therapist-like. We assert that the International Coaching Federation (2021a, 2021b, 2023a) recommendation that the coach's affection for and emotional involvement with the client should remain unchanged throughout the coaching process is unrealistic. We maintain that the clinical, sterile coach-client relationship ideal is impractical (and may not be as effective as other approaches).

Consistent with workplace relationship scholarship as a “cornerstone of management research” (Methot et al., 2017, p. 1790), in this manuscript, we argue that scholars and practitioners should consider the nuanced personal workplace relationships (PWRs; Chory & Horan, 2023; Horan et al., 2021) that develop in coaching, and the challenges and opportunities presented by such relationships. *Personal workplace relationships (PWRs)* are defined as “voluntary, informal, mutual, and consensual relationships between two members of the same organization that are marked by a strong emotional component and the partners' knowing and communicating with each other as whole, unique persons” (Horan et al., 2021, p. 47). PWRs blend the work and personal life domains (Chory & Horan, 2023; Clark, 2000; Horan et al., 2021) and require the partners to manage their blended relationship with regard to the domains' different norms and expectations.

In this manuscript, we focus specifically on PWRs in the form of coaching friendships. Grounded in the relational communication perspective (Guerrero et al., 2021), we introduce the notion of relationship motives (Quinn, 1977) and describe how these motives, along with coaching's occupational characteristics and work conditions, may influence the nature of coaching relationships, particularly their development into PWRs (Grayson, 2007; Horan et al., 2021; Sias, 2009). We introduce and discuss the dialectical tensions (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Rawlins, 1989, 1992) inherent in coaching's PWRs, the management of said tensions, and the ethical implications of these blended relationships (Clark, 2000). Notably, we adopt a multi-level perspective in exploring the organizational web of PWRs by situating the coach-client relationship within the larger relational triad involving coaches, their leader-clients, and organizational sponsors/decision-makers/authorities.

We begin with a brief review of some conceptual and theoretical issues in the executive coaching field. We then detail the theoretical contributions of our manuscript before delving into our relational communication perspective on executive coaching.

## 2. Conceptual issues in executive coaching

There is scholarly convergence that our understanding of the executive coaching phenomenon is woefully lacking (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2015; Boyatzis et al., 2015; Ellinger et al., 2008; Myers, 2017; Western, 2012). Bachkirova and Borrington (2019) lament that theory development is “far less than satisfactory” (p. 338) and that despite coaching becoming more mainstream in applied and academic circles, many of the conceptual frameworks are practitioners' “opinion-based marketing devices” (p. 338).

Even the basic building block of theory—the definition of the central construct (Solinger et al., 2024)—has not yet been agreed upon (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019). For instance, “executive coach” is often used interchangeably (but incorrectly) with mentor, teacher, therapist, consultant, and trainer. Seeing that the executive coaching construct is unmoored within a larger nomological network, researchers continue to argue for its conceptual and theoretical development (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Offstein et al., 2020, 2023). Likewise, the coaching field has been critiqued for its failure to uncover comparatively little about the coaching *process* as opposed to its outcomes (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2015). Scholars are called upon to move beyond asking whether coaching works to explaining *how* and *why* it works.

Conceptual and theoretical development efforts must also consider the assumptions upon which theories are built (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991). In executive coaching, some long-held assumptions and scholarly traditions may be readily identified. For instance, many scholars ground their conceptual rationales in the learning and human development literature (Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999; Hurlow, 2022; Olivero et al., 1997). Others borrow from performance improvement and goal-setting research to build and test theory (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2015; Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Offstein et al., 2020, 2023; Stern, 2008). Another approach depicts coaching as a practical, skill-building intervention with a strong vocational grounding (Feldman, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

Finally, work on conversations (de Haan et al., 2010; Kilburg, 2000; Whitmore, 1992), language (Joullié et al., 2022), and coach-client harmonic fit (Feldman & Lankau, 2005) have primarily been prescriptive or focused on the mechanics of the interpersonal relationships and communication processes that occur in executive coaching.

Underlying the aforementioned approaches is the assumption that executive coaching is a prescribed, rational, logical, development-focused process that occurs within a bounded role-based professional relationship. The notion that the coach has pure relational motives when engaging with clients is also assumed. Said differently, it is taken for granted that the coach, much like a therapist, will always put the client's needs first. Furthermore, the informal, emotionally intimate, and personal nature of the communication required to build the prescribed trusting relationships between coaches and clients is rarely acknowledged. As a result, the close PWRs (Chory & Horan, 2023; Horan et al., 2021) that naturally develop from these interactions, and the tensions and ethical dilemmas they may present, have been left relatively unexamined.

Herein lies the essence of our conceptual argument and our theoretical contribution. Namely, we assert that unlike a therapist, an executive coach's relationship motives are not always pure and in the best interest of the client. We argue that the coach may be motivated by the desire for companionship or the need to secure future business when engaging with a client. In addition, we dispute the received view that coaches and clients can or will choose to keep their relationships from progressing beyond the professional to the personal space. Instead, we propose that PWRs, such as friendships, can, do, and will develop, perhaps even more frequently, than distant, professionally-bounded coach-client relationships.

Lastly, we remain purposeful and intentional in keeping our discussions at the *meso* versus the micro or sub-construct level. In line with Bachkirova and Borrington (2019, p. 341), we ascribe to the belief that "precision and high levels of detail in defining organizational coaching are currently unreasonable" given coaching's nascent theory development and the complexity of organizational needs. Similarly, drawing lines too sharply around coaching's domain may inadvertently communicate that the boundaries separating coaching from related concepts (e.g., mentoring) are more clearcut in practice than they truly are. Shutting down the debate on coaching's theoretical domain at this stage also runs the risk that scholars and practitioners will fail to appreciate the benefits of related practices and the insights their referent disciplines have to offer (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019). Furthermore, we view the coaching literature in the same way as Solinger et al. (2024, p. 2) view the Human Resource Management (HRM) literature in general—as "an open playground that has proven fertile ground for scholars with different theoretical interests." Therefore, we introduce, at a broad level, the theoretically novel relational communication perspective (Guerrero et al., 2021) on executive coaching. In doing so, we aim to inspire fresh dialogue on coaching's domain and practice.

### 3. Theoretical contributions

Our manuscript contributes to HRM and executive coaching theoretical development in at least five ways. First, our paper responds to calls for "serious conceptual work that problematizes coaching practice in organizations" (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019, p. 338). We challenge the normative view and theoretical assumption that coaching is a rational, controllable, altruistic process characterized by trusting, yet arm's length, relationships between coaches and clients. We question the received view by applying perspectives from other fields, an important, yet often ignored, step in theoretical development (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019; Thatcher & Fisher, 2022; Whetten, 1989). Here we adopt a relational communication perspective and the concept of PWRs (Chory & Horan, 2023; Horan et al., 2021) from the fields of Interpersonal and Organizational Communication and Behavior, as well as Industrial/Organizational and Social Psychology, to encourage another reading of the coach-client relationship.

Second, our manuscript contributes to theory development by offering a reconceptualization of coaching that is both novel and useful (Solinger et al., 2024; Thatcher & Fisher, 2022; Whetten, 1989). We introduce relational communication as an original approach to understanding executive coaching. The *relational communication perspective* focuses on the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages within close (or potentially, close) interpersonal relationships (Guerrero et al., 2021). In advancing this approach, we encourage readers to see coaching as a social and emotional process, potentially resulting in close personal relationships, as opposed to accepting coaching's standard definition, i.e., as a methodical and rational process occurring within a professionally-bounded relationship. By acknowledging coaches' potential struggles managing personal-professional role boundaries, our relational perspective offers a conceptualization of executive coaching that is more readily identifiable and relevant to coaches engaging leader-clients in real organizations.

As part of our reconceptualization of coaching interactions and relationships, we introduce relationship motives (Quinn, 1977) and their role in the development of coach-client friendships. Using PWRs as the prism through which coaching is viewed may better account for the complexity and diversity throughout coaching practice and thought (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019). This relational perspective is a significant departure from previous coaching research, which has tended to rely on arguments and theoretical assumptions associated with goal theory (Saporito, 1996; Sperry, 1993), problem-solving and solution attainment (Cavanagh & Grant, 2014), cognition and learning (Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999; Olivero et al., 1997), human and personal development (Kilburg, 1996, 2000), performance improvement (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2015; Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Stern, 2008), personal change (Hall et al., 1999; Wasylshyn, 2017), and/or vocational skill-building (Feldman, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

A third notable theoretical contribution of our work is that it moves beyond exploring coaching solely at the dyadic (coach-client) level to considering coaching in the organization's larger relational network. Indeed, the dyadic focus is largely assumed throughout the coaching canon and is, perhaps, best illustrated through the shared sentiment that coaching may be defined as the "professional development of executives through one-to-one conversations with a professional coach" (de Haan et al., 2010, p. 607). While some scholarship has centered around group or team coaching (Hackman & Wageman, 2005), our work is pioneering in that we explore how coaching impacts, and is impacted by, the larger web of organizational relationships within which the coaching dyad is situated.

Specifically, we consider a third actor, the organizational sponsor (i.e., the billpayer) who is not directly involved in the dyadic coaching process, but nonetheless may alter how it unfolds or be affected by it. Importantly, our approach considers context by situating the coach-client dyad in a broader system comprised of diverse actors and motives. Thus, we leverage the explanatory power of systems theory and relationship network research in many of our arguments (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Methot et al., 2016; Methot & Cole, 2023; Scott, 1992). In sum, our work contributes to theory development by encouraging scholars and practitioners to image coaching beyond the simple dyad and to consider how relational networks in the organization influence its enactment and outcomes.

Fourth, our relational perspective contributes to coaching theory by identifying the occupational characteristics and working conditions that characterize much of executive coaching and the role these play in coach-client relational communication and PWRs. For instance, we introduce dialogue around the structural flexibility and ambiguous performance criteria inherent in coaching, and we cite empirical evidence from prior research linking these job factors to the coaching communication that leads to friendship formation.

The final, and perhaps most important, theoretical contribution of our work lies in our exploration of coaching's ethical implications. For at least two decades (e.g., Feldman & Lankau, 2005), scholarly examinations of ethics in coaching have been relatively absent from the literature, which is surprising given that the dominant practitioner actor in the discipline, the ICF, places considerable emphasis on the topic. Furthermore, prior executive coaching scholarship and practice have drawn from psychotherapy (Smither, 2011), a field celebrated for its strong ethical focus. In the present manuscript, we take up the conversation on ethics through our introduction of the dialectical tensions (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Rawlins, 1989, 1992) that result from coaches simultaneously performing the roles of professional coaches, friends, and, in some cases, business developers. We draw scholars' attention, for the first time, to the challenges coaches encounter in managing these relational tensions and the personal and professional risks involved in the process.

We begin this discussion by identifying the paradox revealed by our relational perspective on executive coaching. We then introduce and describe our theoretical approach to understanding the PWRs that develop between executive coaches and their leader-clients. We detail how coach-client relational communication and behavior leads to coach-client friendships. We identify the PWR motives with which coaches may enter the coaching engagement and the aspects of the executive coaching occupation that influence coaches' relational communication. Next, we discuss the dialectical tensions in coach-client PWRs and the strategies used to manage these tensions. We then present our triadic relational perspective on friendships in executive coaching. Finally, we explore the ethical implications of PWRs in coaching and we conclude with implications for scholarship and practice.

#### 4. Personal workplace relationships in executive coaching

Following in the steps of mental health care professionals, the [International Coaching Federation \(2021a, 2022\)](#) urges coaches to initiate authentic, honest, and transparent coaching relationships that avoid conflicts of interest that may yield advantages to them. Like other client relationships, coaching relationships are initially established for “utilitarian, rather than affect-based, purposes” and are “explicitly characterized by instrumental exchange,” such as coaches receiving a fee in exchange for coaching leader-clients (Sias, 2009, p. 157). Consistent with this view, the [International Coaching Federation \(2021a\)](#) ethical standards urge coaches to create a contract specifying the responsibilities and roles of the coach and client, thereby couching the relationship in terms of formality and reciprocity. Not only are executive coaches advised against engaging in sexual or romantic behavior with clients or sponsors, but they are instructed that “a new level of intimacy may not be initiated during the coaching relationship” and that “the nature of the relationship prior to beginning coaching is where it should remain throughout the duration of the coaching arrangement” ([International Coaching Federation, 2023a](#)).

Although this guidance may effectively protect clients and coaches from conflicts of interest and ethical breaches, it also creates a paradox for coaches. That is, coaches' essential job functions and behaviors include rapport-building, openness, affinity-seeking, self-disclosure, active listening, and communicating support ([DiGirolamo et al., 2016](#); [International Coaching Federation, 2021b](#); [International Coaching Federation, 2022](#); [Offstein et al., 2023](#); [Ting & Hart, 2004](#))—the very behaviors that characterize the progression of relationships from coworkers to friends ([Altman & Taylor, 1973](#); [Canary et al., 1993](#); [Knapp et al., 1980](#); [Oswald et al., 2004](#); [Reis et al., 2004](#); [Sias & Cahill, 1998](#)).

##### 4.1. Theoretical model of friendships in executive coaching

Our relational perspective asserts that coaching communication practices such as listening, expressing empathy, and engaging in self-disclosure are relational communication practices. *Relational communication* is the dynamic exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages within close (or potentially, close) interpersonal relationships. *Close relationships* are marked by emotional attachment, the fulfillment of belonging and affiliation needs, and the perception that the relational partner holds a unique, irreplaceable place in one's thoughts, emotions, and social circle ([Guerrero et al., 2021](#)). Close relationships develop through partners' relational communication, such as through reciprocal self-disclosure ([Altman & Taylor, 1973](#)) and mutual attentiveness, supportiveness, and affirmation in response to self-disclosures ([Reis et al., 2004](#)). For example, Sias and Cahill (1998) observed that increases in the breadth and depth of self-disclosure marked the progression of coworker relationships from acquaintances to very close friends. In addition, coaching behaviors such as communicating openness, listening, giving advice, expressing empathy, showing support, and displaying optimism are relational communication behaviors associated with friendship development and maintenance ([Canary et al., 1993](#); [Oswald et al., 2004](#)). Similarly, expressing positivity, offering support, and displaying openness (e.g., self-disclosure) are coaching behaviors positively correlated with friendship satisfaction and commitment ([Oswald et al., 2004](#)).

Because coaching is largely a relational communication phenomena, interactions between coaches and their leader-clients are

likely to cultivate coach-client PWRs, namely, friendships. A *coach-client friendship* may be defined as a relatively enduring relationship between a coach and a leader-client the coach is charged with developing that is voluntary, informal, mutual, consensual, platonic, personalistic, and has a strong emotional component (Horan et al., 2021; Sias, 2009). As we focus on coach-client relational communication and PWRs, it is theoretically relevant to consider other factors that influence coaches' communication and relationships with their leader-clients. Among these factors, we examine the roles of coaches' relationship motives and the unique aspects of their jobs and working conditions in coach-client communication.

We present our ideas in Fig. 1. Fig. 1 reflects our thinking that coaches' occupational characteristics and work conditions and their PWR motives influence the relational communication that occurs between coaches and their leader-clients. Furthermore, this relational communication leads to coach-client PWRs, namely friendships. We emphasize that coach-client relational communication and resultant friendships are not dependent on coaches' occupational characteristics or work conditions or their relationship motives—they are only influenced by them. In this section, we first discuss the link between coach-client relational communication and friendships. We then discuss the impact of coaching's occupational characteristics and coaches' relationship motives on coach-client relational communication and friendships.

#### 4.1.1. Coach-client relational communication and behavior and friendships

The essential job functions and duties of executive coaches include engaging in the types of communication that cultivate not only effective coaching relationships, but PWRs (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Bell & Daly, 1984; Bell et al., 1987; Canary et al., 1993; DiGiralamo et al., 2016; International Coaching Federation, 2021b, International Coaching Federation, 2022; Knapp et al., 1980; Offstein et al., 2023; Oswald et al., 2004; Reis et al., 2004; Sias & Cahill, 1998; Ting & Hart, 2004). For instance, the affinity-seeking typology encompasses many core coaching competencies and values (e.g., equality, empathy, optimism, listening, encouraging disclosure; Bell & Daly, 1984; International Coaching Federation, 2021b, International Coaching Federation, 2022; Offstein et al., 2023; Ting & Hart, 2004). Those who are skilled in affinity-seeking enjoy greater social success (e.g., friendship; Bell et al., 1987). As such, coaches may inadvertently foster friendships with their leader-clients simply by fulfilling the formal coaching role.

Likewise, Blanton and Wasylyshyn (2018, p. 342) acknowledge the “intensity and intimacy of the experience” of long-term coaching engagements with top executives. The Center for Creative Leadership's framework for formal executive coaching also implicates the importance of PWRs in coaching. It encourages coaches and their leader-clients to build rapport, i.e., to “connect, understand each other's perspectives, and appreciate each other as people.” The Center emphasizes the client's need to reciprocate the rapport-building by appreciating the coach “as a person” (Ting & Hart, 2004, p. 119, emphasis added). Even the psychoanalytical “working alliance” is described as a partnership in which the coach and client “share the feeling that they care for each other” (Graßmann et al., 2020, p. 39).

Factors such as proximity, time spent working together, and perceived similarity also contribute to the development of PWRs (Cowan & Horan, 2014; Mano & Gabriel, 2006; Quinn, 1977; Sias, 2009). PWRs grow in closeness through reciprocal self-disclosure that becomes more intimate as the relationship progresses (Altman & Taylor, 1973). For instance, coaches may mention their interest in wine or travel to their clients early in the coaching relationship but may later talk with their clients about the marital difficulties they are experiencing. In these blended relationships, coaches and clients may voluntarily blur the border between their work and personal lives by choosing to spend time with each other outside of the workplace and apart from their coaching assignments.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, coach-client PWRs perform some of the same functions as mentoring and multiplex peer developmental relationships (Methot & Cole, 2023), namely offering instrumental (career) and psychosocial support to at least one of the partners.

In short, coaches are required to engage in behaviors shown to cultivate intimacy and friendship, while at the same time, they are expected to preserve formal, arm's-length relationships with their clients. We perceive this as untenable. We acknowledge that some coaches do maintain professional distance from their leader-clients, but we contend that many others develop PWRs with them.

#### 4.1.2. Coaches' occupational characteristics and work conditions

Whether one endorses or discourages coach-client friendships, the occupational characteristics and conditions of executive coaching undoubtedly set the stage for PWRs to develop. In this section, we describe four coaching factors that influence coaches' relational (friendship-building) communication and behavior with their leader-clients. Consistent with our goal of presenting a broad view on PWRs in coaching, we do not specify precisely how these factors influence communication with leader-clients, though we do contend that they are likely to affect the topics, depth, types, forms, intensity, frequency, and/or breadth of the communication.

##### 4.1.2.1. Relational expertise.

The relational versus technical nature of executive coaching is the primary occupational factor associated with the development of PWRs in the coaching process. Unlike vendors such as software consultants or financial auditors who possess salient technical expertise, executive coaches' expertise is in building strong, trusting relationships with leader-clients that result in skill development and performance improvement. Active listening, relationship building, and information gathering are among the

<sup>2</sup> Despite their similarities, the personal relationships that develop between executive coaches and their leader-clients or sponsors may differ from those detailed by Horan et al. (2021), especially in the case of external coaches. External coaches are not employed as full-time, long-term employees by the same organizations as their leader-clients or sponsors, whereas internal coaches are (International Coaching Federation, 2021a). External executive coaches may be employed by consulting firms, or they may work as sole proprietors. They may also be under contract with more than one firm in more than one industry. External coaches, then, are boundary-spanners who float in and out of the leader-client's /sponsor's organization (Chory & Horan, 2023; Sias, 2009).



Fig. 1. A model of executive coach and leader-client friendship development.

most important skill sets for coaches (DiGirolamo et al., 2016). In addition, and in contrast to software vendors or process analysts who possess specific knowledge of leaders' core business problems, executive coaches focus on their leader-clients' mindsets, worldviews, and leadership behaviors (International Coaching Federation, 2021b). Coaches deal with vulnerable executives facing stressful circumstances as opposed to technology or machinery, thereby exposing them to the details of the leader-clients' personal and professional lives (Graßmann et al., 2020; Harms, 2011), a phenomenon that few other vendors experience. As a result, coach-client relationships may naturally move from the professional arena to the personal realm. As leader-clients self-disclose to coaches, and coaches, in turn, choose to disclose personal information to their leader-clients, trust and attachment are built and "beyond formal roles" relationships, such as a friendships (Harms, 2011; Horan et al., 2021), may develop.

**4.1.2.2. Structural flexibility.** A second factor encouraging executive coaches to engage in PWR-cultivating communication with their leader-clients is the structural flexibility of coaching. Coaches lack many of the rules, processes, and physical arrangements that help individuals in related professions, such as therapists, priests, and professors, to maintain distance from those with whom they may otherwise engage in a very personal manner. For instance, university policies increasingly prohibit student-professor romantic relationships (despite increasingly encouraging close, personal, non-romantic relationships between them; Chory & Offstein, 2017).

Therapists, in particular, are supported in maintaining an appropriate professional distance from their clients through significant education and training in this regard. They are also bound by a strong code of ethics and licensing regime (American Psychological Association, 2017). Furthermore, therapists use time, location, and in some cases, distance, to maintain arm's-length relationships with their clients. They meet with their clients in scheduled, discrete sessions of pre-arranged length at locations designed for this purpose, such as hospitals or behavioral health centers. In contrast, coaching sessions may occur after hours in places away from organizational peers or authorities, such as restaurants or hotel lobbies. They may last for extended periods of time, depending on the coaches' and leader-clients' needs and schedules. They may occur on the weekend and/or while socializing (Arnaud, 2003; Ely et al., 2010). Importantly, research indicates that such work environments foster the development of PWRs (Mano & Gabriel, 2006).

**4.1.2.3. Ambiguous performance criteria.** Positive evaluations are vital for coaches' economic survival, as organizations use them to decide whether to retain or extend future business and external coaches use them to secure future clients (Ely et al., 2010). The importance of stellar reviews underlies the third factor encouraging the relational communication that leads to coaching friendships—ambiguous performance criteria.

Consider traditional vendors, such as software engineers, who provide highly technical products or facilitate technical processes. These vendors are able to point to objective, factual outcomes to describe their performance; e.g., either the software patch works or it doesn't. This is not true for leadership development, in general, or executive coaching, in particular, as evaluating leadership training is often perceptual, open to interpretation, and socially constructed (Ely et al., 2010; Graßmann et al., 2020). Unlike evaluating a valve system, software program, or robotic upgrade, it is difficult to assess changes in executives' behaviors or mental models. Furthermore, tracing the source of any improvements in leaders' performance directly back to the coaching received is even more difficult given the multitude of variables influencing executive performance (Okwir et al., 2018). Indeed, much of this subjectivity can be explained by the ambiguous, complex, and cloudy nature of executive work itself (Grabke-Rundell & Gomez-Mejia, 2002; Mintzberg, 1973). The intricate interplay among these elements may help to explain the empirical research showing executive coaching's relatively limited effects on leader/executive performance (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Graßmann et al., 2020; Smither, 2011).

Put plainly, most vendors can illustrate objective performance outcomes, whereas executive coaches usually cannot. Coaches must often rely on the impressions of their work created through multiple interactions with clients and sponsors. Evaluations of coaching performance are considerably more subjective than objective (Graßmann et al., 2020) and are likely to be heavily influenced by liking and affection for the coaches themselves (Bell & Daly, 1984; Marks, 2000). In such evaluation situations, individuals both consciously and subconsciously behave in ways to obtain favorable evaluations of their performance (Gardner & Martinko, 1988; Rowe-Johnson, 2018). For instance, they may engage in ingratiation, impression management, ready appeasement (Gardner & Martinko, 1988), or affinity-seeking (trying to get others to like them; Bell & Daly, 1984, p. 91) to positively influence the evaluation of their work.

**4.1.2.4. Generalist nature.** A fourth aspect of executive coaching that encourages coaches to engage in relational communication with

their clients is the generalist nature of coaches' expertise. With few exceptions, coaches' skills are universal in that they are applicable across industries and sectors. Indeed, the [International Coaching Federation \(2021b\)](#) core competencies include listening, asking questions, and sharing observations to create new learning, all of which are relevant across contexts. Furthermore, most external coaches do not have industry-specific knowledge, let alone firm-specific familiarity, when they engage to develop executives. They also do not enjoy the luxury of focusing on a narrow set of firms as potential clients. As such, generalist coaches, like those evaluated with ambiguous performance criteria, may be inclined to engage in impression management ([Gardner & Martinko, 1988](#)) or affinity-seeking ([Bell & Daly, 1984](#)) as a means of becoming inimitable.

In summary, executive coaching's relational and generalist nature, along with its flexible structures and ambiguous performance criteria are likely to influence the relational communication behaviors that nudge coaches out of their primary professional role as coach into the more intimate role of friend. This influence on coaches' relational communication with their leader-clients may occur in a variety of ways (e.g., via the depth of the coach's self-disclosure).

#### 4.1.3. Coaches' relationship motives

In addition to coaching's occupational characteristics and work conditions, coaches' relationship motives are expected to impact coach-client relational communication, which leads to friendships. When entering a coaching engagement, coaches may be motivated to competently execute the essential coaching job functions, i.e., to pursue a friendly, yet professional client relationship marked by empathy, openness, and trust ([International Coaching Federation, 2021b](#); [Ting & Hart, 2004](#)).

Coaches may also approach the coaching engagement with PWR motives. Borrowing from the Communication and Organizational Behavior literatures on workplace romances ([Dillard et al., 1994](#); [Quinn, 1977](#)) and coworker friendships ([Gillen Hoke & Chory, 2018](#)), we propose that coach-client friendships may be motivated by the coach's *sincere* desire for companionship or by a desire for job-related advantages. We discuss each of these in turn.

**4.1.3.1. Coaches' sincere personal workplace relationship motives.** Executive coaches with sincere PWR motives are expected to communicate with leader-clients in a manner designed to initiate, establish, and maintain friendships with them. For instance, the coach may be new to the geographical area and desires to meet people with whom to socialize and share hobbies. Such a coach may self-disclose about personal insecurities in the hopes that the leader-client will reciprocate by self-disclosing at a similar depth, thereby beginning to build a PWR apart from the coaching relationship. In the case of sincere motives, coaches do not seek to use the friendships for financial or job-related purposes.

**4.1.3.2. Coaches' job (instrumental) personal workplace relationship motives.** In contrast, coaches may establish friendships with their leader-clients for the express purpose of achieving instrumental goals. Among these job motives are the desire for power, promotion, financial rewards, and economic or employment security ([Quinn, 1977](#)). For instance, coaches who cannot afford to be laid off by their employer may build friendships with their leader-clients in hopes that the clients will "sing the coaches' praises" and recommend they be retained by their firm. Perhaps instinctively knowing that individuals demonstrate upward bias in evaluations of friends ([Bridge & Baxter, 1992](#)), some coaches seek friendships with clients to influence positive evaluations of their coaching performance when evaluation criteria are ambiguous, a common condition in coaching (see 4.1.2.3. *Ambiguous performance criteria*).

Probably the most important factor influencing coaches' job relationship motives is the economic imperative faced by many executive coaches. External coaches, like those most frequently hired to coach C-suite executives and leaders ([Abel & Nair, 2006](#)), are especially sensitive to the financial implications of their coaching relationships. External coaching businesses are rarely corporate entities, and unlike private partnerships such as large law firms, most coaching "firms" are sole proprietorships consisting of one or two individuals ([Brocker, 2021](#)). As such, their ongoing viability, like most small businesses, tends to be precarious ([SBA, 2012](#)). External coaches who lack industry- and firm-specific knowledge (*generalist* coaches) are at a further disadvantage for securing future business as they offer little or nothing to tie them to particular organizations, which are usually the paying parties ([Kilburg, 2002](#)). In short, external coaches are charged with developing leader-clients, but they are mindful of the need to also develop business. As a result, they may approach their coaching relationships with a view toward creating "stickier" bonds with clients and/or sponsors as a means to secure and expand their business.

Importantly, regardless of the coach's relationship motives, the normative and recommended coach-client communication (e.g., empathy, active listening) sets the stage for friendships to develop ([Altman & Taylor, 1973](#); [Knapp et al., 1980](#); [Sias & Cahill, 1998](#)). As with coaching's occupational characteristics, and in line with our goal of providing a general overview of coaching PWRs, we do not theorize precisely how coaches' motives influence communication with leader-clients. We do, however, maintain that motives will impact the types, forms, intensity, frequency, and/or breadth of the communication behaviors and topics. In the next section, we explore the challenges presented by these friendships in executive coaching.

## 4.2. Relational dialectics and executive coaching friendships

The aforementioned executive coaching friendships require coaches to balance the needs, desires, and expectations of a friendship with that of a professional coaching relationship while blending the work and life domains ([Clark, 2000](#)). As partners in professional coach-client relationships, coaches are expected to adhere to professional coaching norms, which include working in their clients' best interest, protecting the confidentiality of clients, and sharing feelings and insights without forming attachments to clients ([Ely et al., 2010](#); [International Coaching Federation, 2021b](#)). As friends, however, coaches are expected to abide by the rules of friendship, which

include sharing additional organizational information gleaned from other conversations, showing emotional support, offering additional help, confiding in clients, and otherwise developing relational and personal closeness (Argyle & Henderson, 1984).

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT; Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) helps to frame this challenge. According to RDT, when the *discourses* (i.e., norms, expectations, and meaning systems) of the coach and friend roles are interdependent, yet contradict, compete with, or oppose each other, *dialectical tensions* occur. These tensions may result in *ambivalent relationships* between coaches and their clients, i.e., relationships marked by the simultaneous experience of positive (approach-oriented) and negative (avoidance-oriented) feelings and attitudes (Methot et al., 2017). Furthermore, if the friendship and coaching roles make incompatible demands on coaches, ethical and practical dilemmas may result (Bridge & Baxter, 1992). Coaches are expected to manage these dialectical tensions within their relationships with their leader-clients (the internal dialectic; Baxter & Erbert, 1999). In this section, we discuss four dialectical tensions coaches are likely to experience due to their friendships with their clients.

#### 4.2.1. Dialectical tensions in executive coaching friendships

**4.2.1.1. Instrumentality-affection.** In executive coaching friendships, the primary dialectical tension of interest is *instrumentality-affection*, which encompasses instrumental-socioemotional goals, exchange-communal norms, and instrumental-intrinsic orientations (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018; Price & Arnould, 1999; Rawlins, 1992). Instrumentality, exchange norms, and instrumental goals and orientations are emphasized in formal work relationships, as employees' interdependence encourages them to reciprocate the assistance and support they receive from their coworkers (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018). Instrumental relationships, such as job-motivated workplace romances (Quinn, 1977), some business friendships (Grayson, 2007), and likely some coaching friendships, may also be driven by the desire to acquire advantages that are useful outside of the personal relationship (e.g., financial rewards).

In contrast, sincere friendships are marked by expectations of affection, socioemotional goals, communal norms, and intrinsic orientations. Support is given without an expectation of reciprocation, and fostering affective and relational well-being and enjoyment are rewards unto themselves (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Price & Arnould, 1999; Rawlins, 1989). In their personal lives, people tend to form and maintain friendships for reasons apart from what they can do for the partners, save the pleasure they bring (Rawlins, 1989). Coaches who become friends with clients due to proximity, shared interests, time together, or another factor shown to encourage workplace PWRs (Cowan & Horan, 2014; Mano & Gabriel, 2006; Sias, 2009), exemplify the intrinsic orientation of friendships (Grayson, 2007; Price & Arnould, 1999).

Coaching friendships are most obviously instrumental, however, when coaches and/or leader-clients pursue friendships to obtain benefits that are useful outside of the friendship. For instance, instrumental coaching friendships may benefit leader-clients by providing access to useful work-related knowledge in exchange for the leader-clients assisting the coach in securing future business. Although some instrumental friendships are mutually beneficial, they carry the risk that the utilitarian help and support received by a partner may lead to feelings of obligation, indebtedness, and exploitation (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Rawlins, 1989). In sum, this tension represents the push-pull between coaching friendships being driven by genuine care, liking, and the desire for companionship as an end in itself (*affection*, sincere PWR motive) and the friendships being motivated by the benefits or advantages they may bestow on the partner(s) (*instrumentality*, job motive).

**4.2.1.2. Openness-closedness.** A second dialectical tension associated with friendships in coaching is *openness-closedness* (Bridge & Baxter, 1992). Friends are expected to share most, if not all, information with each other and to keep other information "just between friends." Similarly, leader-clients make themselves vulnerable by sharing sensitive information with their coaches that they expect their coaches to hold in confidence (Graßmann et al., 2020). In executive coaching relationships, as in other workplace relationships, however, coaches are expected to also abide by organizational policies and/or laws. For instance, laws requiring mandatory reporting of sexual harassment by certain classes of employees may conflict with the friend-client's request to keep the disclosed harassment a secret. Coaches who are friends with leader-clients and others throughout the organization obtain scores of information with varying privacy rules. Because of this, they may be asked to share information that could benefit or harm leader-clients or their chains-of-command. These requests can lead to tensions in which coaches are torn between loyalty to their clients as friends and compliance with formal employee or contract requirements.

**4.2.1.3. Judgment-acceptance.** A third dialectical tension in coaching friendships is *judgment-acceptance*. This tension involves the workplace norm of occasional criticism negating the friendship norm of acceptance. Friendship's unconditional love and support are at odds with work expectations of occasional judgment, hard feedback, evaluation, and competition (Bridge & Baxter, 1992).

For instance, Offstein et al. (2020) suggest that coaches need to be direct and firm to enhance executive performance more quickly—especially for those who are at career risk. However, individuals often soft-pedal feedback or fail to deliver needed criticism to their friends (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018). When coaches and clients engage in friendships, the coach's desire to provide honest and unfiltered feedback to the leader-clients will likely conflict with the coach's desire to maintain the friendships. As a result, coaches may be reluctant to communicate negative performance feedback to clients, thereby failing to perform fundamental coaching duties and responsibilities.

**4.2.1.4. Equality-inequality.** Finally, a fourth dialectical tension posed by coaching friendships is *equality-inequality* (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Rawlins, 1992). Friendships assume equality between the partners, whereas coaching relationships are marked by some degree

of inequality. There are no status or power differences between friends, and the satisfaction of each partner's needs and desires is equally important. Friends emphasize personal attributes and communication styles that foster equality between them (Rawlins, 1992). Although the coach's formal role assumes greater knowledge, wisdom, or insight regarding the topic or skill being coached (inequality; Arnaud, 2003), coaches are encouraged to display equality and non-superiority with their clients (International Coaching Federation, 2022). They are also expected to actively manage any perceptions of power or status differences that may emerge within their coaching relationships (International Coaching Federation, 2021a).

However, in contrast to friendships, coaches are expected to put clients' needs first and honor the terms of their contracts with sponsors (International Coaching Federation, 2021b), which may include complying with undesirable requests. As such, the coaching relationship is decidedly unequal in that coaches are more expert in some regard (Arnaud, 2003) and leader-clients' needs are generally supposed to take precedence over those of coaches (Graßmann et al., 2020). This inequality may also be found in coaches and leader-clients being afforded different privileges and access to resources, as well as being subject to different policies and rules.

4.2.2. Dialectical tension management strategies

Executive coaches may manage these dialectical tensions through various strategies. *Separation* involves efforts to prevent the two relational domains from intersecting (Baxter, 1988; Grayson, 2007). For instance, coaches and leader-clients may avoid discussing the firm and the clients' development while engaged in social activities or they may agree to only discuss client development (and not shared hobbies) during coaching sessions. *Selection* involves giving priority to one domain over the other. Pillemer and Rothbard (2018) contend that very close or "best" workplace friends tend to give precedence to the friendship's socioemotional goals over the work role's instrumental goals because the dissolution of a close friendship carries heavy socioemotional costs. Similarly, Methot et al. (2017) suggest that individuals may respond to ambivalent relationships they deem more positive than negative with increased commitment. The strength of a close friendship also better enables the partners to "find integrative solutions" to managing tensions (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018, p. 643), a strategy Baxter (1988) refers to as integration. *Integration* involves satisfying the demands of both relationships through ambiguity or reframing, thereby enabling the competing discourses to co-exist. In coaching friendships, integration may occur through coaches and clients giving each other greater latitude in fulfilling the expectations of the friendship and coaching roles and adhering to the "spirit" versus the specific stipulations of these expectations (Grayson, 2007).

Each method has its drawbacks. Selection forfeits the benefits of one of the relationships and separation forfeits their mutual complementarity. Integration is difficult to execute. The method used to manage the tensions in coaching friendships is crucial to the overall impact of the relationships (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Grayson, 2007). Notably, the method will only be effective if the relational partners agree on the strategy (Sias et al., 2004).

Alternatively, when inter-role conflicts cannot be managed, some partners may terminate or limit the development of one of the relationships. When termination is not an option, they may choose to simply live with the competing demands. Others may avoid friendships with work associates to avoid the tensions altogether (Grayson, 2007; Price & Arnould, 1999).

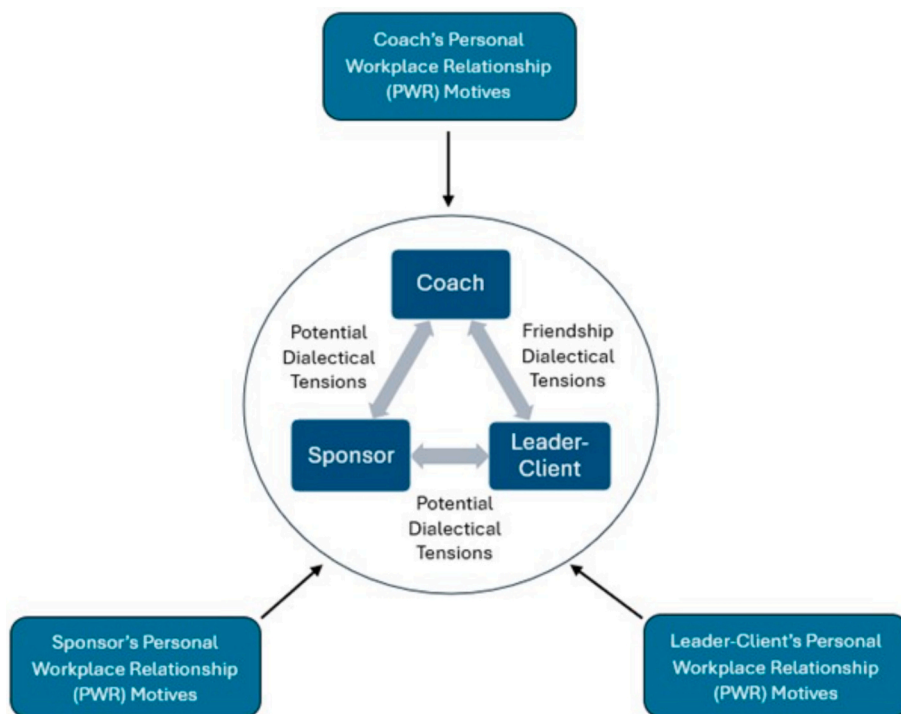


Fig. 2. Triadic relational perspective in executive coaching friendships.

### 4.3. Triadic relational perspective

Although executive coaches focus on the individual needs of their clients, they are to develop leader-clients “with particular consideration of the client’s organization” (Ely et al., 2010, p. 588). Accountability to the organization and its overarching goals acts to maintain binds in these dynamic, complex, social systems (Frink & Klimoski, 2004). Successful coaches, therefore, span level boundaries as they gather information from, interact with, and form relationships with leader-clients’ supervisors, subordinates, and peers, as well as sponsors and human resources (Blanton & Wasylyshyn, 2018). In light of the connections among coaches, leader-clients, and organizational sponsors or decision-makers, a triadic relational phenomenon emerges. This network of relationships sets the stage for both genuine and instrumental friendships to develop between some or all parties. It also means that, consistent with systems theory, the communication and relationships that occur between two interactants in the system affect all other members of the organizational network (Horan & Chory, 2011).

In view of our triadic relational perspective on personal relationships in executive coaching, we consider the motives and behaviors of coaches and leader-clients in coach-client friendships and those of the coaches and organizational sponsors/decision-makers in the coach-sponsor relationship. Our theoretical framework proposes that job-motivated and sincere workplace friendships involving executive coaches may be mutual in nature, i.e., leader-clients and organizational sponsors/decision-makers may use their friendships with executive coaches to further their own career, social, or personal interests. Leader-clients and sponsors in friendships with executive coaches are also likely to experience the aforementioned dialectical tensions, necessitating they employ the previously described dialectical tension management strategies. See Fig. 2 for the representation of the triadic relational perspective.

#### 4.3.1. Leader-clients’ personal workplace relationship motives

In Fig. 2 we turn our attention to the friendship motives and uses of the leader-clients themselves in coach-client relationships. In entering coaching relationships, leader-clients (like executive coaches) may have PWR motives. As the coaching progresses, the relationship may develop into a friendship, either purposefully or inadvertently. Leader-clients may simply seek or appreciate the affection and companionship the friendship provides (sincere motive), or they may choose to establish and/or use it to further their instrumental goals (job motive). For example, leader-clients may see coaches as conduits of helpful company political information due to their boundary-spanning role, contact with formal leaders, or their coaching conversations with other clients in the same organization. Leader-clients may be motivated to form friendships with their coaches to elicit privileged information from them, to secure them as champions for their advancement, or to aid them in pursuing their career goals outside of the given firm.

#### 4.3.2. Organizational sponsors’ personal workplace relationship motives

Friendships between executive coaches and organizational sponsors may also develop. Such friendships may naturally arise, or they may be motivated by coaches’ or sponsors’ purposeful desire for companionship or job advantages. When a given coach is not the sponsor’s personal coach, risks associated with violating professional coach-client boundaries are less apparent, paving the way for genuine friendships to form. Coaches may also engage sponsors in friendships with the express job motive/purpose of renewing, enlarging, or continuing a contract.

Similarly, organizational sponsors may desire sincere friendships with coaches. Executives’ peer groups shrink as they ascend the organizational hierarchy; it may, indeed, be “lonely at the top.” Friendships with subordinates may be inappropriate and risk negative coworker attributions, while friendships with peers may carry professional risk; those very peers may be in harsh competition for the increasingly limited promotions ahead of them (Bowler et al., 2010). Senior executives, then, may seek sincere companionship with executive coaches.

In addition, senior executives may seek or develop instrumental friendships with coaches to meet the challenges associated with their role. For instance, senior executives are increasingly forced to emphasize succession planning and talent development (Saporito & Winum, 2016) and are rewarded for doing so (Barton et al., 2018). To reduce information asymmetry related to advancement prospects, executives may use their friendships with coaches to acquire more intimate and otherwise confidential information about a given leader-client (Blanton & Wasylyshyn, 2018; Ely et al., 2010).

#### 4.3.3. Dialectical tensions and tension management in the triadic relational perspective

In the prior example of sponsors desiring confidential information from coaches, coaches are likely to experience the openness-closedness dialectical tension. Coaches are expected to manage this dialectical tension, as well as others, within their relationships with both their leader-clients and the organizational sponsor/decision-makers (the internal dialectic; Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999). As our triadic approach suggests, coaches must also manage these tensions within the larger network of formal and personal workplace relationships in the organization (the external dialectic; Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999). The external dialectic calls to mind the ethical issues associated with multiple relationships, i.e., relationships beyond that of coaches and leader-clients, in coaching and psychology (Blanton & Wasylyshyn, 2018).

### 4.4. Ethical implications of friendships in executive coaching

Coaching friendships and their dialectical tensions and management present ethical challenges for coaches, leader-clients, and organizations. These challenges occur regardless of PWR motives and the PWR’s authentic or instrumental nature (Blanton & Wasylyshyn, 2018; Horan et al., 2021). Among the challenges are ethical questions concerning whose needs, and which of those needs, are prioritized in coaching friendships. We consider these questions here.

#### 4.4.1. Whose needs come first or matter most?

Certainly, the potential to run afoul of the long-held primacy that the “client always comes first” in the coaching process is open to debate and dialogue. Despite the generally accepted belief that leader-clients' needs come first (Graßmann et al., 2020; International Coaching Federation, 2021b), coaches must consider the organization's needs (Ely et al., 2010) and may consider their own retention, compensation, and professional growth needs. As previously discussed, the oft felt need for economic self-preservation may encourage coaches to draw on existing coaching friendships or establish new ones in furtherance of their goals. Some of these behaviors may not be consistent with the needs or expectations of clients or organizations. Coaches pursuing their own goals through relationships that leader-clients believe are anchored in psychological safety and trust presents a plethora of ethical dilemmas with potentially far-reaching negative consequences. Coaches' betrayal of their leader-clients in this manner may be the most ethically objectionable outcome stemming from friendships between coaches and leader-clients.

#### 4.4.2. Whose needs come last or matter least?

Coaches' economic imperatives and their friendships with organizational decision-makers or their leader-clients' superiors may also present ethical dilemmas. Ely et al. (2010) recognize the difficulty internal coaches face in terms of trust, confidentiality, and role boundaries in fulfilling their responsibilities to the organization and the leader-client. Even though external coaches are believed to be less susceptible to the organization's politics, more objective, and at times more credible (Abel & Nair, 2006), they are also more likely to be faced with economic imperatives. Therefore, to survive and thrive in the industry, coaches, especially external ones, may give precedence to their friendships with organizational decision-makers and their needs over their friendships with and needs of their leader-clients.

For example, in mutually instrumental friendships between coaches and organizational sponsors (or other high-ranking executives), coaches may yield to the executive friends' request for privileged information about given leader-clients in exchange for the promise of future business. In doing so, coaches not only violate the expectations inherent in their friendships with their leader-clients (i.e., confidentiality, trust), but they violate coaching's code of ethics requiring coaches to “maintain the strictest levels of confidentiality with all parties as agreed upon” (International Coaching Federation, 2021a, p. 4).

More insidious and destructive, this type of exchange between coaches and decision-makers in the clients' chains-of-command could irreparably harm the coaches' ability to develop the leader-clients. Coaches who trade on information gleaned during coaching sessions destroy any semblance of the psychological safety needed to promote healthy coaching relationships. Such coaches lose credibility with their leader-clients because people behave differently when they know or suspect they are being assessed (Dickson & Roethlisberger, 1966) and/or when they fear their communication privacy will be violated (Chory & Gillen Hoke, 2023). As a result, leader-clients will be less forthcoming, vulnerable, and coachable. In short, the coaches' needs and those of the organizations/executives will be satisfied at the expense of the leader-clients' needs.

#### 4.4.3. Which client needs come first or matter most?

Even if coaches put their clients' needs first, the ethical issue that arises is *which* client needs comes first? Do the leader-clients' professional development needs or their friendship/affective needs take precedence? Is the professional coaching relationship privileged or is the friendship? As Arnaud (2003, p. 1140) aptly asks in considering the ethics involved in executive coaching relationships, “for who, indeed, can say what will be good for the subject?”

## 5. Discussion

The relational, trust-laden, and sometimes informal and flexible nature of the executive coaching process naturally encourages the development of coaching friendships. In addition, executive coaches—especially sole-proprietors or members of small firms—understand it may be economically beneficial to engage in such friendships. Be they sincere or instrumental, these friendships give rise to relational tensions, ethical dilemmas, and questions about the efficacy and practicality of coaching's prescribed arm's-length relationships. To support our theoretical model, we draw from the fields of Communication Studies, Organizational Behavior, Psychology, HR and Career Planning, and Economics. This research responds to calls from Management, Organizational Behavior, and Communication scholars (Chory & Horan, 2023; Horan et al., 2021; Methot et al., 2016, 2017) and marks the first formal theoretical inquiry of executive coaching in the context of personal workplace relationships (PWRs).

Given the centrality of relationships in executive coaching, more research is required to understand the nuances of how these relationships play out in practice, specifically in ways that may run counter to accepted codes of ethics. To better grasp the constraints and opportunities presented by coaching PWRs, the relational triad within which they are situated also demands consideration. Below we suggest several avenues for scholarly investigations and theorizing.

### 5.1. Research implications

From an empirical vantage, it would be quite interesting to revisit assessments of coaching effectiveness, while accounting for coach-client friendships. Absent clear, objective data on coaching effectiveness, friendships may increase the chances of the coach being rehired or referred on to other clients. We may find that coaching effectiveness is mediated by coach-client friendships. This could raise some compelling ethical questions. Namely, are coaches nothing more than friends for hire? Is forming friendships an essential job function and, moreover, an implicit or explicit expectation of leaders being coached? These are just some of the intriguing ethical questions that emerge from our discussion here.

The coach-client friendship lifecycle certainly merits further research. Our theoretical model provides a rough approximation of how a limited number of variables may impact the development and management of coach-client friendships, but it needs to be tested. How the development, maintenance, and dissolution of these relationships compare to other types of PWRs is also a fruitful line of inquiry (Chory & Horan, 2023). For example, scholars may ask whether the strategies used by executive coaches to maintain their friendships with clients are similar to those used by peer coworkers to maintain their friendships (see Canary et al., 1993). Another question worth pursuing is what happens to coach-client friendships after the coaching contract ends? Is the fate of the friendships influenced by the coaches' relational motives? Others may wish to answer questions such as how do coaches' PWR motives impact the dialectical tensions they experience and the tension management strategies they use?

Besides the empirical inquiry needed to test theory, there is considerable room for more conceptual and theoretical development in its own right. Given that ours is one of the first endeavors to apply a relational communication framework to the executive coaching domain, we urge other scholars to build upon our work. We purposefully and intentionally advance an “anchor” or “big tent” conceptual model that invites more, better, and fuller theoretical specification. Indeed, the journey to refine, build upon, more fully specify, and challenge theoretical models is a core aim of all scholarship (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991).

Relatedly, the extant empirical and conceptual scholarship on coaching almost exclusively assumes or focuses on the coaching dyad. To our knowledge, we are among the first to identify and emphasize the importance of the relational triad in the practice of coaching. The potential for this triad to influence the dynamics of the coaching dyad seems a worthy cause for empirical and theoretical inquiry. For instance, scholars dating back to Simmel (1922) suggest an element of opportunism when a triad emerges around an existing dyadic relationship. Simmel's notion of *tertius gaudens* or the “third that benefits” would go on to inform the work of network scholarship (e.g., Krackhardt, 1999; Offstein et al., 2006). Importantly, our introduction of the relational triad perspective in the executive coaching domain holds theoretical and practical appeal in terms of how coaching relationships actually develop and function in organizations.

Finally, although we focus on friendships in executive coaching, much of our theory building extends to other PWRs, such as coach-client romances. For instance, the factors driving coach-client friendships, such as structural flexibility and the relational nature of the work, also set the stage for romantic coach-client relationships to develop (Mano & Gabriel, 2006). The instrumental nature of coach-client romances may also be informed by scholarly work on job-motivated workplace romances (Quinn, 1977). Workplace romance theory and research on self-disclosure, trust, and credibility (Chory & Gillen Hoke, 2023; Horan & Chory, 2009, 2011, 2013; Malachowski et al., 2012) would also inform studies of coach-client friendships. For instance, scholars may wish to explore how coach-client friendships influence third-party coworkers' perceptions of coaches' and leader-clients' credibility.

## 5.2. Practical implications

Executive coaches wishing to be seen as professionals would likely welcome the prospect of workplace friendships with leader-clients if those friendships were indeed marked by mutual trust, reciprocity, and consensus on boundaries (Sias et al., 2004). One of the International Coaching Federation (2021b) core competencies is to “establish and maintain agreements” pertaining to the coaching relationship. Without a doubt, these types of agreements can be beneficial for all parties. However, such agreements also insert artificiality or formality into friendships.

If coaches' relationships with leader-clients are defined with precise parameters to keep the relationship professional, how coaches and leader-clients deal with the liking, affection, and bonding that naturally occur in coaching must be addressed. Does the “all business” relational parameter lead the partners to reframe the developing friendship in terms of instrumentality or professional goal achievement? If all parties—inclusive of the dyads and triads detailed above—agree on the instrumental means fulfilled by coaching relationships and coaches do not violate confidentiality or other ethical norms, such instrumental relationships may be mutually beneficial. However, if one party sees the friendship as genuine and authentic while the other views it solely in instrumental terms, feelings of misalignment, manipulation, and, even, deceit are likely to occur; a contract, explicit or implicit, is unsustainable in such a scenario.

On the other hand, not specifying the terms of coaching relationships beforehand and allowing coach-client friendships to naturally develop also cause ethical dilemmas, as described earlier. Although genuine workplace friendships are characterized as beneficial in terms of performance, retention, satisfaction, and career development (Methot et al., 2016; Navarra, 2023; Sias, 2009), they, too, carry risks. Workplace friendships have been associated with employee distraction, emotional exhaustion, clique formation, and threats to team decision-making (Gillen Hoke & Chory, 2015; Methot et al., 2016; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018). They may tether individuals to jobs that no longer serve them, prevent the friends' advancement, and cause both friends to exit the organization if one of them leaves (Navarra, 2023; Sias, 2009).

In the event that such dilemmas present themselves, we urge executive coaches to openly discuss the issues with their leader-clients. Boundaries or relational parameters may need to be renegotiated. Handing the client off to a different coach may also be called for. We also encourage coaches to reach out to their mentors and colleagues in the coaching community for advice on how to deal with sensitive situations. In addition, we recommend coaches consult professional associations that offer resources to assist members in successfully navigating their way through difficult circumstances (e.g., ICF's Communities of Practice, ICF's Ethics FAQs).

## 6. Conclusion

The field of executive coaching wishes to be viewed as a profession, with coaches who maintain professional arm's-length relationships with their leader-clients, similar to those seen in therapist-patient/client relationships. However, we posit that genuine and

instrumental friendships may flourish between coaches and their executive clients and between coaches and organizational decision-makers/sponsors. Through our relational communication-grounded theoretical perspective, we describe coach-client friendship development and management, which we situate within the larger relational triad involving coaches, their leader-clients, and organizational sponsors/decision-makers/superiors. As reflected in our framework, we propose that these friendships create dialectical tensions and ethical dilemmas that coaches must manage to effectively serve clients and their organizations. If the executive coaching field aspires to be seen as a profession along the lines of licensed professional counselors or therapists, we strongly suggest more theoretical and empirical inquiry into genuine and instrumental workplace friendships between and among coaches, leader-clients, and those who pay the bills. By leveraging a relational lens, HRM and coaching scholars and practitioners may better understand and improve how executive coaches *actually* coach.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

No AI or AI- Assisted Technologies were used.

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