

Nothing Compares 2 U: Exploring human coach distinctiveness in an age of AI. An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the role of career-work experience in workplace coaching



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Citation: Passmore, J. & Nobes, A. (2026). Nothing compares 2U: Exploring human coach distinctiveness in an age of AI: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the role of career-work experience in workplace coaching. *Organisationsberatung, Supervision, Coaching*. 33, 219-239. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11613-026-00994-x>

Abstract This study examines how workplace coaches make sense of their career-work experience in their coaching work with senior leader clients and whether it contributes to qualities perceived as distinctively human when compared with AI coaching agents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen coaches from seven countries across three continents and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with cross-case integration. Four themes were developed: (1) using experience for sharpening insight and rapport, (2) balancing shared experience with universal leadership realities, (3) strategic sharing through story and metaphor and (4) coaching maturity guiding decisions on when to use lived experience. Participants described credibility and shared language as accelerating trust, while also emphasising restraint, permission and self-regulation to avoid advice giving and assumption. Coaches also reported that distance from a former domain can protect curiosity. Findings inform coach selection and matching and highlight the importance of context-sensitive judgement when integrating experience.

Keywords Career experience, Work experience, Coaching Relationship, Interpretative phenomenological analysis, AI coaching agents

Introduction

The emergence of generative AI in coaching has prompted renewed reflection on what may differentiate human coaches in practice. Some commentators argue that key aspects of coaching are relational, embodied and emotionally responsive, raising questions about what forms of ‘AI coaching’ can legitimately be described as coaching (Bachkirova & Kemp 2024). A contrasting empirical position emphasises the growing use of AI in organisations and the capacity of AI coaching agents to mirror elements of human coach competencies (Passmore et al. 2026). Some coaches report concern when considering the rapid development of coaching technologies (Diller et al. 2024). However, limited research has examined how human coaches, in the context of increasing AI usage, can intentionally differentiate their practice from new technologies by amplifying distinctively human qualities. This article examines one potential differentiator between AI coaching agents and human coaches, namely the role of career-work experience in workplace coaching. Related work has proposed several areas in which human coaches may differentiate themselves from AI, including humour,

lived experience, affective empathy, embodiedness, values and the use of pauses and silence (Passmore & Haywood 2025).

Exploring the nature of coaching and mentoring

Coaching and mentoring are frequently presented as distinct practices, yet they share similarities. Both are concerned with learning, development and improved functioning at work (Gray et al. 2016; Passmore 2021). A common framing positions coaching as a disciplined conversational process that privileges process expertise over content expertise, with the coach facilitating reflection, insight and self-directed change rather than transmitting solutions (Whitmore 2018). In contrast, mentoring is often associated with a greater willingness to draw upon the practitioner's experience, sector knowledge and organisational understanding to support another person's development and navigation of context (Cox 2003; Passmore 2021). Professional frameworks have also contributed to overlap in how the field is described, with competence models recognising relational skill, ethical practice and contextual understanding across both domains (Ahern 2003; EMCC 2018).

Empirical and practitioner accounts suggest that the separation between coaching and mentoring is frequently less clear in practice than in prescriptive models. The literature on executive coaching, for example, highlights enduring tensions between a pure non-directive stance and the credibility that may be conferred when coaches can understand a client's organisational world (Passmore 2007a). Recent conceptual work has questioned whether coaching and mentoring should be treated as categorically distinct, proposing instead that they sit on a continuum shaped by purpose, contracting, power, expertise and the degree to which personal experience is invited into the dialogue (Stokes et al. 2021).

The role of work experience in coaching

The role of coaches' career work experience and sector knowledge has been subject to sustained debate in the coaching literature, shaped by competing assumptions about what counts as coaching and where professional legitimacy is located. This may be particularly relevant in senior executive coaching, where prior executive experience is often perceived to be valuable by coaches and clients (Hindle Fisher et al. 2023; George & Rose 2024; George & Rose 2025).

Early competency work within organisational coaching positioned business acumen as integral to effective practice. Ahern (2003) included in the competency matrix higher level analytical capability, the 'know-how' of organisational dynamics, and fluency in senior-level discourse. Similarly, coaching providers have at times specified domain knowledge and an understanding of business and leadership among desirable coach attributes (EZRA 2025). These frameworks reflected a prevailing assumption at the time that commercial coaching required not only coaching skill but also substantive experience of the client's organisational world.

Empirical studies from this period reinforced this view. Clients described how sector and business knowledge drawn from prior career paths could strengthen perceived coach credibility and usefulness (Hall et al. 1999). Authenticity and integrity were also emphasised as important attributes (ibid.). Practitioner accounts similarly proposed that withholding relevant experience may risk underserving the client, and that coaches may share selectively when it is directly related to the client's issue and agreed with the client (Passmore 2007a). Such accounts have been linked to broader claims that career history can contribute to perceived effectiveness (Bush 2005)

Historically, coaching's origins lay in managerial job development, where the coach's domain knowledge was a prerequisite for supporting performance (Gray et al. 2016). The transformation of coaching in the 1980s and 1990s, shaped by a wide range of forces including humanistic psychology, and the rise of professional coaching bodies, have cast coaching as a strictly non-directive discipline, although a debate remains (Ives 2008).

Summerfield's (2006, p. 24) suggests a clear division between 'acquisitional' (acquires a new ability) versus 'transformational' (undergoes personal change) coaching, with the former more instructional than the latter. Passmore (2007b) offers a more integrative view, suggesting that effective executive coaching draws on both process skills and an appreciation of organisational context, combining both skills and transformation, directive and non-directive, with credibility in senior settings enhanced when coaches can demonstrate insight into the client's world.

Despite this discourse, coaching is populated by coaches from a range of backgrounds drawing on no single agreed knowledge base (Cavanagh et al. 2005), and little has changed in the twenty years since this analysis. What also remains true is empirical research has paid limited attention to coaches themselves, instead much of the

research activity has focused on tools, outcomes and client perspectives (Fillery-Travis & Cox 2014), leaving the influence of coaches' backgrounds largely under-examined.

A growing body of more recent research reopens questions that earlier practitioner-oriented literature took for granted. George and Rose (2024) emphasise that the coach's character, understood through the cultivation of virtues, shapes the relational quality of coaching. They argue that virtues such as practical wisdom, humility and discernment emerge through experience and are expressed differently across contexts, suggesting that who the coach has become through their background is inseparable from how they coach. Similarly, Jackson and Bachkirova (2018) argued that coaches ultimately coach from 'who they are', rather than from a model alone.

Recent revisions in 2025 to professional competency frameworks have reopened these old debates. The ICF Core Competencies now explicitly legitimise the sharing of knowledge, when offered without attachment and in service of the client's agenda (ICF 2025). This marks a subtle shift in how the profession conceptualises the role of the coach's own experience, expanding what is considered legitimate within a non-directive frame.

Coaching chatbots using Generative Artificial Intelligence are now able to mirror coaching competencies and language at a foundational level (Passmore et al. 2026). But their lack of direct personal experience of work or an individual career in a specific sector or role means that their responses may be experienced as generic rather than grounded in lived, role-specific experience.

The purpose of this research is to understand how experienced coaching practitioners use their career work experience and sector roles within coaching conversations, how they make sense of its value and risks and whether this contributes to qualities of coaching that participants experience as distinctively human in contrast with AI coaching agents.

Method

Research Design

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected because it facilitates an in-depth examination of how individuals make sense of lived experience, including how

experienced coaches interpret the role and meaning of their career work experience within coaching practice (Smith & Nizza 2022). IPA employs an idiographic focus that illuminates nuanced personal perspectives before exploring common themes across participants. IPA is especially well-suited for investigating experiential topics, enabling the research to capture multiple perspectives and rich insights that may be less visible in approaches that do not prioritise idiographic depth (ibid.). This approach also aligns with a double hermeneutic stance, wherein the researcher interprets participants' interpretations of their experience (Smith & Osborn 2008), adding depth to understanding how coaches perceive and employ their career-work experience in their coaching with clients.

Research Team and Reflexivity

The research was conducted by two investigators, both of whom are experienced professional coaches engaged in regular supervision and reflective practice. Throughout the study, the researchers maintained a reflexive stance to account for the influence of their own beliefs, experiences and assumptions on the research process. They engaged in ongoing dialogue and reflexive accounting to make visible how their assumptions, professional identities and prior experience might shape interviewing and interpretation (Smith & Osborn 2008; Smith & Nizza 2022). Bracketing is a recognised method in qualitative research to reduce the inadvertent impact of a researcher's prior assumptions on data collection and analysis (Tufford & Newman 2012). Embracing IPA's interpretative philosophy, the researchers acknowledged the role of their professional backgrounds, as coaches and leaders, and used reflexive discussion to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' narratives rather than the researchers' expectations. This reflexive process enhances the rigour of IPA by making the analysts' perspective explicit and integrating a 'double hermeneutic' awareness into the study design (Smith & Osborn 2008).

Participants

A purposive sample of thirteen experienced coaches participated in this study: nine men and four women, with participants identifying as Asian heritage or White, drawn from seven countries across three continents. A summary of participant backgrounds is contained in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Location and Coaching Experience

Pseudonym	Country Location	Coaching accreditation & Coach experience (Years)	Work experience	Gender	Racial Identity
Adam	India	5 years / ICF	C suite leader	Male	South Asian
Annie	Singapore	9 years / ICF	Director, finance	Female	South East Asian
Clara	United States	7 years / ICF	C-suite, Academia	Female	White
David	United States	12 years / ICF	C-suite leader	Male	East Asian
Elena	Italy	10 years / ICF	Director, Sales	Female	White
Imran	United States	4 years / ICF	C-Suite leader	Male	South Asian
Marc	Hong Kong	5 years / ICF	MD, Finance	Male	White
Martin	United Kingdom	4 years / EMCC	Global Director, HR/Law	Male	White
Peter	United Kingdom	7 years / EMCC	C-suite leader	Male	White
Ravi	Hong Kong	7 years / ICF	Hedge Fund Manager, Director	Male	South Asian
Ryan	Australia	9 years / ICF	Senior Consultancy	Male	White
Vanessa	Singapore	5 years / ICF	Director, Accountancy	Female	South East Asian
Wei	China	7 years / ICF	Management, Engineering	Male	East Asia

Participants were selected based on their extensive personal coaching experience and their background in specific sectors and senior roles. The sample size (n = 13) is consistent with IPA's idiographic approach and supports detailed case-by-case analysis (Smith & Nizza 2022). The sample size was selected to enable idiographic depth and a detailed case by case analysis that is consistent with IPA (ibid.). Recruitment ceased when the research team judged that the dataset offered sufficient richness and diversity of experience to support interpretative analysis within the scope of the study. Each coach provided informed consent and was advised of anonymity; pseudonyms were created in the transcripts and reporting to protect identities.

Data Collection

Data were collected through one-to-one, semi-structured interviews conducted via videoconferencing (Zoom). Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. This format offered participants flexibility in scheduling and a comfortable setting of their choice, accommodating the international sample across different time zones. An interview guide with open-ended questions was used to explore how coaches experience, interpret and use their career work experience within coaching conversations and how they judge when experience is helpful or intrusive. The semi-structured format allowed participants to elaborate on salient experiences and meanings, aligning with IPA's aim to facilitate participants in telling their stories in their own terms (Smith & Nizza 2022). Interviews were recorded with permission. The recordings were then transcribed via Zoom. The transcripts were then reviewed to ensure an accurate dataset for subsequent analysis. Throughout the interview process, the interviewer employed active listening and probing prompts (e.g. "Can you tell me more about that?") to elicit depth, following best practices for IPA interviewing which emphasise a conversational yet purposeful dialogue.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed the iterative, inductive process outlined in IPA methodology (Smith et al. 2009; Smith & Nizza 2022). First, each transcript was read and re-read by the researchers to ensure immersion in the data. Initial notes capturing descriptive details, linguistic nuances and conceptual impressions were documented for each interview (Smith et al. 2009). From these annotations, experiential statements were crafted to succinctly articulate key aspects of each participant's lived experience. Consistent with recent IPA guidance, these experiential statements (analogous to emergent themes in earlier IPA terminology) were then clustered into higher-order personal experiential themes for each coach (Smith & Nizza 2022). This within-case analytic stage preserved the idiographic integrity of each participant's account by treating each interview as a standalone case study.

In the next stage, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify points of convergence and divergence across the individual cases. The personal experiential themes from all participants were compared and integrated to develop broader group experiential themes reflecting shared patterns of meaning related to career work experience in coaching (Smith et al. 2009). The two researchers worked collaboratively, discussing interpretations and resolving any discrepancies through reflexive dialogue.

This collaborative analysis leveraged the researchers’ combined insights while reducing individual bias, thereby strengthening the credibility of the findings. Finally, themes were refined and defined, and illustrative quotations were selected to evidence interpretation and preserve participants’ meaning-making, while retaining the idiographic texture of individual cases (Smith et al. 2009; Smith & Nizza 2022).

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from a university ethics committee in May 2025, prior to commencement. All participants were provided with information about the research and gave informed consent to be interviewed and recorded. In line with ethical guidelines for qualitative research, participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and were assured that their confidentiality would be maintained (Smith & Nizza 2022). All interview data were stored securely, and identifying details were removed or anonymised during transcription.

Findings

The study produced four main themes: (1) ‘Using experience for sharpening insight and rapport’, (2) ‘Balancing shared experience with universal leadership realities’, (3) ‘Strategic sharing through story and metaphor’ and (4) ‘Coaching maturity guides decisions on how to use lived experience’. A series of sub-themes were identified. The set of themes and sub-themes are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes and Sub-themes

Theme	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Using experience for sharpening insight and rapport	1.1 Experience sharpens non-directive questioning 1.2 Credibility accelerates rapport and depth 1.3 Experience supports challenging the client 1.4 Tools and frameworks rooted in prior experience
Theme 2: Balancing shared experience with universal leadership realities	2.1 Industry background as a perceived but contested value 2.2 Value of human-centric over technical experience 2.3 Shared language easing early access to deeper work 2.4 Intentional distance as a safeguard against assumption

Theme 3: Strategic sharing through story and metaphor	3.1 Selective and intentional use of self-disclosure 3.2 Experience as a catalyst for cognitive shift 3.3 Vulnerability and reciprocity as relational tools 3.4 Metaphor, analogy and fictionalised narratives as indirect vehicles of sharing
Theme 4: Coaching 'maturity' guides decisions on how to use lived experience	4.1 Evolution of coaching practice beyond early rigidity 4.2 Resisting the advice monster - self-regulation in the face of impulse and temptation 4.3 Maturity as awareness of bias, attachment and pattern-matching 4.4 Intuition as a cultivated, experience-shaped guide

Theme 1 – Using experience for sharpening insight and rapport

All coaches described a strong commitment to fundamental coaching principles when coaching senior leaders, whose busy and complex lifestyles mean they may lack protected time for reflection and trusted thought partners. Committing to “simple” coaching practice is seen as particularly important for clients with complex work and lives. Clara calls coaching a ‘superpower’ for senior execs, because simply put *“It is rare in a client’s day that somebody will listen without an agenda”*.

There was a divergence of opinion and practice considering the use of experience. Elena and Adam were committed to a non-directive approach with no experience sharing. Adam described his approach as *‘working like a mirror’* and unlocking client potential, totally independent of the coach’s professional background. Nevertheless, nearly all coaches acknowledged that experience helps them ask sharper, more relevant questions and arrive at them more quickly. Coaches like Vanessa and Ryan find they can quickly understand the context of senior leaders early in the discussion. Elena framed this as intuition, shaped by decades of leadership: *“Call it instinct. Call it experience. After 33 years of working as a leader, you feel the things. You have it. You see it.”* Ravi described how his experience as a trader helps him understand clients in his field more quickly.

“...you wake up in the morning and you’ve lost a big chunk of your money, or your clients money. It’s a very emotional experience, and that impacts you differently, right? So having that empathy might allow me to maybe ask a very different question or create a very different space, compared to somebody who’s not had that experience”.

Clara states that her past experience means:

“I ask different questions because of it. I can offer different thought partnership because of it. I understand the nuance and that's where they find, I think the highest value in me as a coach.”

Experience also shapes how quickly trust and rapport develop. Several coaches described an “implicit credibility” gained from having walked similar paths in demanding sectors. Imran believes he earns psychological safety more readily because he has *“been through all this.”* Vanessa finds that sharing parts of her background:

“forms the rapport... that sort of takes us a lot quicker and deeper into more transformational kind of coaching. Then it's more than transactional”.

David thinks this helps him understand and paraphrase back, developing resonance and trust much quicker.

With rapport established, experience can embolden coaches to introduce challenge or provocation. Elena, when chemistry and trust are evident, will introduce provocative questions. Marc uses his financial industry background to inform his questions, which:

“may challenge their thinking, because I've been in that situation, I know where the rough edges can be.”

Peter uses his industry knowledge to ask confrontational questions as a useful technique to disrupt client defensiveness, but suggests this needs credibility behind it.

Beyond questions and challenges, experience also shapes the tools that coaches bring into the space. While some resist sharing biographical detail, they may still integrate frameworks rooted in their experience. David's experience helps him identify similar high performers who are particularly self-critical by nature ((which he linked to patterns he has observed among some clients with similar cultural backgrounds). He will often use Hogan and other tools to help clients identify this issue and support them through it. Elena and Clara know from experience that practical frameworks in areas such as prioritisation, feedback giving and energy management can help senior leaders – and they will often introduce these tools to their clients when spotting common patterns.

Theme 2 – Balancing Shared Experience with Universal Leadership Realities

Most interviewees acknowledged that they are often selected by clients (whether by HR staff or by website algorithm) because of their industry background or senior experience, but state that this isn't always essential to coaching outcomes, and they are happy to coach leaders across different industries.

Several coaches described how experience can play an important role before coaching begins, shaping expectations and perceptions during contracting, matching, or profile browsing. Ryan noted that clients told him:

“my bio and my video resonated... it gives them confidence that I'm in their space at that moment”.

Wei was explicit that clients “browse your background, your bio,” and that experience can be “attractive” even before a conversation starts. Vanessa sees the same dynamic in platform matching, where her finance background places her with clients who assume relevance from the outset.

Marc, for instance, notes that:

“...people choose me because they don't want to talk to anybody with a psychology background... They want to talk to someone who knows what it's like to have a revenue target and have everything blowing up around them because it's not happening.”

Shared domain experience appears to be useful through what several coaches described as a “shared language”. Ravi explained how understanding the “subtleties of language” in finance allows him relate easier and ‘hit the ground running’. Marc understands a ‘common language’ in the world of finance, which means he can hold a space with those in the industry without being “*put off by the jargon and harsh language of exchange traders*”. Wei feels that not understanding a client’s industry language can add extra layers of difficulty in getting to understand and ‘decode’ their internal challenges. Elena perceives that similar language and mindset can be useful:

“Coachees are much more comfortable working with somebody who has a ‘curriculum’ that speaks to them”

However, most of the coaches identified that senior leaders tend to face quite common universal challenges across industries – those that focus on people dynamics rather than industry-specific issues. Annie captured it in simple terms:

“No matter what industry you are in, if you are a leader, it's all about dealing with other humans.”

Similarly, Ryan observed that even when domain language is unfamiliar, the core issues are not:

“The underlying premise of what people want to discuss seems to be relatively universal across all industries, all geographic locations.”

Marc admitted he rarely talked about specific technicalities:

“An organization is an organization, you know, if I work with people who are engineers, I'm not solving their engineering problems.”

Many of the coaches reported that they often find themselves specializing in common issues in leadership – transitioning to senior leadership, influencing skills, and managing teams of people; and also an underlying theme that coaches such as Imran experience – that the main challenge in transition to senior management is the learned behaviour of ‘getting things done’, which actually gets in the way of being a successful manager of people.

One surprising finding under this theme was that some coaches find that some distance between coach and client may actually be useful. For example, Clara resists coaching in education, her former industry, finding that “a little distance” keeps her more curious and less likely to slip into advice-giving. Wei similarly finds it a challenge to navigate advice-giving when he coaches those in the same industry. Martin, who works with senior partners in law firms, has found that ‘being an outsider’ allows him to bypass the some of the internal power dynamics which partners often experience when dealing to peers.

Theme 3 – Coaching through story and metaphor

Many of the coaches used self-disclosure, storytelling, and experience-sharing in different ways. While many preferred to resist self-disclosure unless absolutely necessary, most described moments where they choose to share personal experiences or insights through a range of different techniques, with a view to building rapport, accelerating reflection or unlocking new perspectives.

For many, sharing personal experience is not a default mode but a carefully deployed strategy, used “sparingly,” as Vanessa put it, but “with intention.” All of the coaches are aware of the tension with non-directive coaching norms, but as Ryan perceives, sharing experience is *“powerful, despite what other coaches say”* – acknowledging the balance with best practices and the reality of what works in commercial environment. According to Clara:

“The more I work with executives, the clearer it is that they want a thought partner... and they are generally appreciative of a dialog.”

Yet even in this dialogic approach, she emphasises the need to “*pull before pushing*,” and that clients may not always be ready to receive or act on advice.

Several coaches described using experience to challenge assumptions or provoke cognitive shifts. Peter explained that he often directly uses “worked examples” as a way to “*gently undermine comfort zones*,”. Wei shares his experience,

“not saying, ‘*you need to do this*’, or ‘*you need to follow my advice*’, but ... *I would just use my own experience like a media, to provoke their thoughts*”

Some describe sensing an obvious gap in the client’s understanding or experience which the coach feels they can fill (Clara), or as Vanessa suggests:

“*if I sense that the client is really stuck after we have pauses, and then I’ll share my story with that with no attachment*”,

or put slightly differently by Marc

“... *I realised we’re going in circle, and I tried to break the circle by saying, well, what do you think of this?*”

For some, sharing experience can introduce a different perspective to the client to “open up the possibilities in a client’s narrative” (Imran), and similarly Annie talks of introducing experiences to “get them to think about possibilities they haven’t thought of.”

Coaches who use self-disclosure also reported benefits in how this can evoke vulnerability and reciprocity. Martin noted that sharing experience without disclosing the emotions or “thought processes” behind it can feel “too clinical,” and that personal vulnerability offers a more “authentic” invitation for the client to open up. Ryan echoed this, observing that

“*if I get an opportunity to demonstrate my own vulnerability... it solidifies the relationship even more.*”

Several coaches emphasised that when they do share lived experience, the *how* matters as much as the *what*. Rather than recounting events as ready-made solutions, they described sharing the internal reasoning or emotions behind their choices. Martin described this as “sharing the journey,” where the narrative centres on “*the thought processes that led me to certain actions.*”

Across all these accounts is a careful navigation of permission, pacing, and self-awareness. Techniques to avoid what Peter called “the expert trap,” such as asking permission (“Is it okay if I share something right now?”) or offering “a menu of options,”

as Elena described it when clients were stuck. There was widespread acknowledgement of the “fine line” between coaching and mentoring (or consulting), and an understanding that crossing it requires permission, skill, transparency, and humility. Ravi likened coaching to “a dance,” noting that practitioners may *“cross those lines multiple times in a conversation... being able to do that skillfully and mindfully”* is part of what defines experienced coaching in complex environments. Ryan framed his blend of dialogic sharing and questioning as “not pure coaching,” but something that “gets results.” Annie also recognised that her practice was not ‘pure coaching’: *“Pure coaching to pass the exam – but in reality we do a little bit of blending.”*

Theme 4 – Coaching ‘maturity’ guides decisions on how to use experience

Across the interviews, many coaches reflected on how their approach to integrating - or withholding - personal experience has shifted over time, shaped by training, practice, self-awareness, and growing confidence. What coaches experience is not necessarily a linear progression towards or away from self-disclosure, but a nuanced evolution in how, when, and why experience is brought into the coaching space.

For some, adherence to non-directive frameworks created a kind of rigidity earlier in their career. Marc recalled his early days as a “newly minted coach,” where a strong commitment to the ICF model meant *“react[ing] a bit stronger by saying, well, I can’t give you advice—and that usually puts off people.”* Over time, his practice has broadened:

“I felt that if you use it to the extreme, it becomes an ideology... people like to feel that you’re not a chatbot, you’re also human”.

Clara shared a similar journey, describing how she once felt “anxiety” about making the “wrong move,” but has since developed a more dialogic, fluid approach: *“I feel more confident now in bringing it in—selectively,”* she said, noting how much depends on the client’s readiness.

The role of self-regulation and internal tension was frequently highlighted. Annie described a “deep desire” to offer solutions and the constant “tension and resistance” involved in holding back. Elena spoke candidly about choosing *not* to share even when it might speed things up, emphasising that “maybe it’s not the point I see.” Clara also spoke of resisting the temptation to “geek out” when shared interests arise, recognising that the client may not benefit from such digressions – even if this could feel rewarding in the moment. Annie described the challenge of “fighting against the advice monster”: “I

have to constantly remind myself that what I'm sharing is only for reference". There was also recognition of how maturity sharpens awareness of bias, assumption, and attachment. Adam, who chooses not to share his experience, framed his entire approach around the avoidance of pattern-matching based on his experience:

"I'm afraid I may direct him or her to that pattern... so I want to be fair to the individual who's in front of me."

Ryan spoke of the importance of turning any shared experience back onto the client:

"...switch off and then say, well, what's the impact on them? Otherwise, you go down a rabbit hole, a problem solution. You're not coaching the person".

Wei, too, described experience as a "double-edged sword," and stressed the importance of "staying unattached to the experience", and downplaying his ego in order to give power back to the client. Vanessa, who only shares her experience if her clients are 'really stuck', also makes sure to do so 'without attachment' to the story.

Intuition emerged as both a product and indicator of coaching maturity. Several participants described their decisions around experience-sharing as intuitive, in either deciding to share or holding back. Vanessa reflected that intuition itself is "shaped by lived experience.", and Clara spoke of her key skill of "triangulating" group dynamics based on minimal data from the client, something she links to her experience of team leadership.

Discussion

Credibility and resonance in matching

Participants described implicit credibility, accelerated rapport and psychological safety arising from having been through similar organisational pressures or walked comparable paths. Such events shaped meaning, identity and perceived legitimacy, while also situating the interpretation in prior work on credibility and selection (Hall et al. 1999; Bush 2005; Passmore 2007a; Hindle Fisher et al. 2023; George & Rose 2025).

The accounts in this study are consistent with prior work which shows how previous experience is seen as a critical factor in coach selection for senior executives, clients' value someone who knows what it's like (George & Rose 2025).

However, the participants in this study revealed more nuance about this – they didn't see this shared experience necessarily as essential to rapport and client outcomes. Exact domain experience is not a perfect fit – shared language can be valuable, but sometimes it is rather universal leadership experience at a higher level that is more in demand, and how the coach uses these insights to add value to the client's current challenge.

Participants describe coach selection as shaped by felt resonance and perceived fit rather than solely by signals of competence. The finding that career experience is used by coaches to create empathy, resonance and develop a 'thought partnership'. Such views are consistent with the arguments developed by Passmore (2007a).

Whilst AI tools may be able to replicate industry language, they cannot reproduce the meaning-making reported by coaches or the credibility earned over a career and expressed on a coach's profile. Some clients may view AI outputs as synthesised rather than lived, which may shape how credibility and authenticity are interpreted in coaching conversations.

Experience facilitating better questions, quicker

Coaches describe being able to ask different questions that help reach the heart of issues more quickly, while also decoding the "subtleties of language" within a client's sector. This echoes (Cox 2003; Passmore 2007a) who suggest that domain insight supports deeper challenge, empathy, framing and question quality. The findings also align with Hindle Fisher (2023), who argues that experience gives coaches greater confidence to question and challenge clients and with George and Rose (2024), who suggest that while a shared language may offer an advantage, it is not essential to successful coaching outcomes, given that executive coaching ultimately addresses leadership and influence in relation to other people.

Beyond sector knowledge or shared language, coaches also describe a more tacit form of sense-making grounded in lived experience. This includes emotional resonance, intuition shaped by decades of practice, the ability to "triangulate" subtle organisational signals, and rapid paraphrasing and sense-making informed by emotional familiarity and a felt sense of what a situation "is like". Here, experience does not simply improve the content of questions, but shapes how coaches judge timing, emphasis, and depth in the coaching interaction.

This distinction becomes more pronounced when contrasted with AI. In contrast to participants' accounts of embodied and affective knowing, current AI coaching agents may not be experienced as drawing on lived, embodied experience in the same way. Coaches describe how intuition informed by career experience guides moment-to-moment coaching decisions in ways that differ from statistical inference or probability-based reasoning, pointing to a qualitative difference in how judgement is formed and enacted in practice.

Navigating coaching boundaries and hybrid approaches

Multiple coaches voiced a strong commitment to non-directive principles. This appeared more prominent among some ICF-trained coaches in this sample, although the study was not designed to compare professional affiliations. This maps cleanly onto the long-standing theory-practice divergence identified by Ives (2008) who noted how different traditions were influencing coach development. Building on Passmore (2007a), we find that in many cases, senior-executive coaching moves beyond the non-directive towards a role where the coach is selected for their career experience and draws on this to inform the type of questions they ask. Coaches can 'dance across the boundary', deciding to work within and around coaching models, moving up and down the coach-mentor continuum adopting a more 'hybrid' role. But coaches were conscious of the tensions and temptations, of falling into the 'expert' trap and reflected on ways to manage this, including seeking permission or placing the insights as coming from other leaders as opposed to the coach themselves.

AI coachbots may be designed to follow coaching models, but participants' accounts highlight the value they place on situational and relational judgement grounded in lived work experience.

Self-disclosure as a nuanced, strategic tool

Coaches describe using experience less as the transmission of information and more as a form of felt empathy. Several refer to embodied, emotional memory, "knowing what it feels like to lose money", or "feeling the things", which shapes their capacity to hold space rather than to instruct.

This experiential grounding is often expressed through storytelling, metaphor and selective vulnerability. The way participants deploy these relational tools echoes Bush

(2005) and George & Rose (2025), particularly in relation to authenticity, character, and relational judgement. Stories and metaphors are not offered as illustrative examples alone, but as ways of making meaning together, anchored in situations the coach has personally lived through; and often inviting the clients to respond or to frame their own experiences around what the coach has shared.

Importantly, coaches emphasise not only what they share from experience, but how they think within it. Articulating the thought processes behind past decisions or responses allows vulnerability without advice-giving. Sharing the thought processes in experiences not only does this create a shared vulnerability it's enhances relatability, which is very difficult for AI to replicate. Several participants describe sharing not only events but also their felt sense of events and their thought processes that accompanied these experiences, creating relational reciprocity.

Participants differentiate between metaphor as a conversational tool and the use of personal story as a form of reciprocal vulnerability. The examples shared by coaches in this study reflected events they had actually experienced, and participants appear to treat this truthfulness and authenticity as more significant than data from a business book or an AI tool. Coach stories appear to carry weight because they are lived and because the coach has been shaped by them in ways that continue to inform judgement in the coaching moment.

Distance as a developmental decision

Some coaches consciously avoid working in their own domain, to prevent advice-giving, to maintain curiosity, to avoid collapsing boundaries, or to reduce bias or pattern-matching. This speaks directly to Whitmore's (2018) dilemma about expertise potentially hindering coaching, but the ability to self-regulate one's expertise – to decide not to use knowledge even when available is also a form of metacognition, and it remains unclear to what extent current AI coaching agents can approximate this kind of self-restraint in context.

Coaching maturity as a developmental regulator of experience

There were mixed views amongst the coaches on the relationship between coaching skill, and the use of work experience. They frame this process as developmental, though not in a linear sense from non-directive to hybrid to directive, but a growing

confidence in the effectiveness of their own model through practice, which aligns with their values. This aligns with the argument that practitioners ultimately coach “from who they are”, rather than from models alone. They are conscious and reflective of their own coaching experience and their developmental arc in terms of negotiating ego, managing impulses and temptation to share and advise; with self-reflection, supervision, and feedback are described as mechanisms through which these judgements are continually recalibrated, rather than resolved. This orientation resonates with George & Rose’s (2024) framing of coaching competence as grounded in virtues enacted through practice, rather than static skills or techniques.

Several participants frame this process as developmental, though not in a linear or progressive sense. Rather than implying steady improvement, coaches describe an ongoing negotiation shaped by context, confidence, and identity. The 'arc' here reflects increasing discernment about when experience is helpful, when it is intrusive and when withholding better serves the client, with no suggestion that this judgement ever becomes complete or settled. This contrasts with AI systems, which have no comparable developmental trajectory. While models may improve rapidly through training and optimisation, they do not accumulate self-knowledge, humility or reflective capacity over time.

The coaches in this study represented a group with quite unique identities and levels of coaching maturity, having developed their own approach according to their worldview, work expertise, and the clients that they have worked with in their coaching journey – for example Martin describes an existential orientation to coaching senior lawyers; Peter positions himself as a no-nonsense catalyst for business outcomes; Clara locates her value in a scientific, data-informed approach; Ravi emphasises work with leaders’ intuition; and Adam describes operating through a deliberately non-directive stance, finding “flow” and chemistry by acting as a reflective mirror. Seen through Jackson and Bachkirova’s (2018) 3Ps framework (philosophy, purpose, process), this suggests and increasing coherence between a coach’s worldview, their intentions for the work, and the interventions they make in the room.

For coach education, this suggests a need to balance competency training and guided development of reflective, ethical and philosophical capacity; and also, to avoid presenting the use of personal experience as a binary (permissible or not). Coach education should support coaches in exploring why they choose particular interventions, what assumptions underpin their stance, and how their biography shapes both their

strengths and their blind spots. In an era where AI excels at technical process delivery, cultivating this reflective maturity may become a central aspect of human differentiation.

The revision of ICF Competency 7.11 in 2025 is notable in this respect. The shift to sharing observations, knowledge and feelings without attachment suggests a widening of what is professionally sanctioned within coaching practice (ICF 2025). This recognises the kind of selective, intentional use of lived experience that the coaches in this study describe. This development further challenges the long-standing dichotomy between process expertise and content expertise, and aligns with the findings here, which show how experienced coaches use knowledge as a relational resource and a catalyst for insight, but navigated in ways that avoid attachment to the coach's own narrative and preferred delivery. It also highlights an area where human coaching appears to retain a distinctive strength compared to AI: the ability to judge when knowledge-sharing is appropriate, ethical, and meaningful within a specific relational moment.

Limitations of the study

This study offers an idiographic account of how experienced coaches make sense of career work experience in their coaching practice and it should be interpreted accordingly. The sample comprised thirteen experienced coaches drawn from seven countries across three continents, with nine men and four women, with participants identifying as Asian heritage or White. While this diversity supports a range of perspectives, the sample remains bounded and does not permit claims of representativeness. IPA prioritises depth and interpretative nuance rather than generalisability, so the contribution is best understood as theoretically and conceptually informative. The study also focused on experienced practitioners, which supported the exploration of mature judgement about when experience is used, withheld or blended across boundaries. This means the findings may not capture how novice coaches experience career work experience, particularly where confidence, supervision and professional identity are still forming. A further limitation concerns definitional complexity. Career work experience is not a singular category, and participants' accounts suggest it operates through credibility, shared language, tacit judgement and relational resonance, which are difficult to disentangle analytically. Finally, the findings are based on self-report and meaning making in interview accounts rather than observation of coaching sessions, so conclusions concern how coaches interpret their practice rather than direct behavioural verification.

Future research

Future research could extend this IPA account in ways that preserve interpretative depth while strengthening triangulation and scope. One direction would be comparative qualitative work that examines how clients interpret a coach's career work experience during selection, early contracting and moments of challenge, enabling a relational account that includes both sides of the coaching dyad. A second direction would be observational or micro analytic designs that examine when and how experience is introduced within sessions, including how permission is sought, how boundaries are negotiated and how clients respond in the moment. Such work could help differentiate self-disclosure that supports client agency from experience sharing that drifts into advice giving or mentoring without transparency.

Practical implications

The findings suggest that career work experience can function as a relational resource when it is used with restraint, transparency and attention to client agency. Coaches working with senior leaders may benefit from reflecting on how they present their biography in profiles and chemistry meetings, not as a promise of solutions but as a potential basis for credibility, shared language and psychological safety. In practice, participants describe the importance of permission, pacing and offering experience without attachment, which implies that coach training and supervision should address how to share selectively while avoiding the expert trap and preserving non-directive intent. The results also indicate that experience is not uniformly beneficial, as several coaches described intentionally maintaining distance from their former domain to protect curiosity and reduce advice giving. This points to the value of helping coaches develop meta judgement about when expertise supports the work and when it becomes intrusive. For organisations and platforms that match coaches with clients, the findings suggest that matching on sector similarity alone may be insufficient. Clients appear to value resonance and authenticity as much as domain experience, so matching processes might combine biography, coaching stance and client needs rather than treating experience as a proxy for fit. Finally, in the context of AI enabled coaching, the results indicate that human differentiation may lie less in technical knowledge and more in lived credibility, relational judgement and the ethical, context sensitive use of story and vulnerability.

Conclusion

This study highlights the subtle, yet powerful role career-work experience can play in coaching, acting as a catalyst for trust, perspective shifts and connection. Career-work experience when used authentically and sensitively, strengthens the human dimensions of coaching that may be difficult, if not impossible at present for current AI coaching agents to replicate. While AI may be able to summarise written material, clients may interpret this as different from speaking with someone who has experienced the nuances, stress and emotions of living in senior roles. As coaching evolves alongside technological advances, we suggest career-work lived experience is one of several distinctly human differentiators, with coaches bringing these insights to the table to display empathy while supporting clients to navigate the complexities of the world of work.

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