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CHAIRWORK IN ACTION

Chairwork represents a collection of experiential methods which utilise chairs, their positioning, movement, and dialogue to bring about change. The aim of chairwork is to facilitate beneficial here-and-now interactions with parts of the self, including internalised representations of other individuals. Chairwork originates from psychodrama (Moreno, 2008) and gestalt therapy (Perls, 1969), and is now incorporated into a number of coaching approaches. Research indicates that chairwork is a powerful and often highly effective intervention for addressing various issues including indecision, relationship difficulties, negative self-beliefs, and problematic internal processes such as self-criticism.

Applying Chairwork in Coaching

Most approaches to coaching rely on the use of discussion. However, modern theories of cognition, emotion, and adult learning converge on the idea that questions and answers sometimes bring about limited change in thought, feeling, and behaviour. In the words of Fritz Perls, there is a risk that “we talk about it and talk about it, and nothing is accomplished”. Chairwork offers a different approach to coaching, which is active, creative, multisensory, and evocative. This makes chairwork not only effective but also a memorable and meaningful experience for the coachee.

The Pillars of Chairwork

Chairwork has gained a reputation for being both powerful and perplexing. In reality, the theory and practice of chairwork rests upon just a small number of principles, processes, procedures, and process-based skills: the four ‘pillars’ of chairwork (Table 1) (Pugh, Bell, & Dixon, 2020).

Table 1

The Pillars of Chairwork

Principles	Processes
Procedures	Process Skills

Principles of Chairwork (SIT)

The principles of chairwork refer to its underlying theoretical assumptions, many of which derive from Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans, 2002). Using the analogy of constructing a house, the principles of chairwork are like the mathematical and architectural concepts that guide and inform a building's design.

Principle 1: Self-multiplicity

The first principle of chairwork is that individuals contain multiple dynamic, semi-autonomous 'parts', 'inner voices', or 'I-positions' (Hermans, 2002). I-positions include parts of the self (internal positions), internalised representations of other individuals (external positions), and representations of groups, institutions, or concepts (outside positions). I-positions are organised both horizontally and vertically: some parts of the self are central to our sense of identity (core positions), while others exist at lower levels of awareness (disowned or unknown positions). 'Meta' I-positions also exist at higher levels of awareness and are capable of 'witnessing' the interactions between other parts of the self. As we shall see, this vertical/horizontal organisation of I-positions has important implications for how chairwork is understood and delivered.

Principle 2: Information exchange

The second principle of chairwork is that I-positions exchange information and engage in 'dialogical relationships'. In other words, I-positions are capable of speaking and listening to one other. While this might seem like a strange idea, research indicates that individuals often experience thoughts, feelings, and other internal events in a partially dialogical manner (e.g. our emotions *tell us* something).

Principle 3: Transformation

The third principle of chairwork is that I-positions and their dialogical relationships create, shape, and transform our internal worlds. This leads to an additional concept: that the

challenges individuals bring to coaching can be understood in terms of problematic relationships between I-positions, referred to as ‘dialogical dysfunctions’ (Dimaggio, 2012; Pugh & Broome, 2020) (Table 2).

Processes of chairwork (SAT)

The processes of chairwork refer to the sequence of actions which guide the implementation of chairwork. Returning to the earlier analogy, we can think of these processes as the building blocks that give a building its shape and structure.

Process 1: Separation

The first process of chairwork is deciding which I-positions will form the focus of the intervention, naming these, and separating them by placing them in different chairs. While there are other ways of separating out I-positions (e.g. representing them with objects), chairs are advantageous because they allow the coachee to concretise and embody these parts of the self. Choosing which I-positions to work with is informed by the coaches ‘dialogical hypothesis’ regarding which dysfunctions are implicated in the coaching issue, and agreed with the coachee.

Coachee: The promotion is a great opportunity, but I’m not sure if I want the extra responsibility.

Coach: [*Presenting a dialogical hypothesis*]. So, there’s a conflict between these two sides of your self. One part wants to accept the promotion and another doesn’t. Is that right?

Coachee: Correct.

Coach: Shall we work on this dilemma?

Coachee: That would be helpful.

Coach: Ok. [*Introduces two chairs*]. Let’s imagine this chair represents the part of you that wants to accept the promotion [*gestures to chair one*] and this chair represents the part that doesn’t [*gestures to chair two*]. Which of these two sides feels strongest right now?...

Table 2

Forms of dialogical dysfunction

Dialogical dysfunction	Within-session marker	Exemplar client statement
Monolithic dialogues	Internal dialogues dominated by a single I-position, e.g. the inner critic.	<i>“I’ve never been able to recognise my achievements at work. All I do is put myself down.”</i>
Uniform dialogues	Stereotyped movement between a limited number of I-positions.	<i>“My approach to work is boom-or-bust – either I postpone projects until the last minute or spend too long on them.”</i>
Barren dialogues	Absence of I-positions in the dialogical mind.	<i>“I don’t feel anything when I think about retiring. It’s just a nothingness inside of me.”</i>
Conflictual dialogues	Persistent conflict between polarised I-positions.	<i>“A part of me is excited about a leadership role, but another part wants to keep doing what I’m doing.”</i>
Disorganised dialogues	Internal dialogues which are confused, incoherent, or cacophonous.	<i>“I don’t understand my reactions to the team. Sometimes I like them, sometimes I hate them, sometimes they intimidate me.”</i>
Dissociated dialogues	Avoidance, denial, or disownment of I-positions.	<i>“People say I ought to feel angry about what my manager did, but what’s the point? I feel fine about it, honestly.”</i>

Silent dialogues	I-positions which are unexpressed or have not been fully heard.	<i>“Being the CEO means being strong for the company. No-one really knows how overwhelmed I feel at times.”</i>
Disrupted dialogues	Unresolved internal dialogues, such as shattered beliefs and lingering grief.	<i>“I can’t get over the way I was dismissed from my last job. I go over and over the redundancy meeting in my mind.”</i>

Process 2: Animation

The second process of chairwork entails enlivening the coachee's I-positions so that here-and-now interactions between parts of the self can occur. Animating I-positions takes two forms in chairwork: embodiment (the coachee changes seats and 'speaks as' an I-position) or personification (the coachee visualises an I-position in a concrete form, as if it were held in another chair).

Animation through Embodiment:

Coach: Let's bring that side of you to life. Change seats and be the part that doesn't want the promotion. [*Coachee moves to chair one*]. Tell that side [*gesturing to chair two*] why this new role is a bad idea...

Animation through Personification:

Coach: How do you imagine the part of you that doesn't want the promotion? [*Gestures to chair one*]. Describe what you see in the chair.

Coachee: I see a relaxed, easy-going version of myself. He looks like a teenager.

Coach: What is that part of you saying about the promotion?...

Process 3: Talk

The final process of chairwork involves initiating here-and-now interactions with I-positions in order to resolve the dialogical dysfunction. These resolutions can take several forms (Table 3), but usually involve two types of chairwork: 'horizontal procedures' in which I-positions talk to one another, to the coach, or to the coachee, versus 'vertical procedures' in which I-positions are witnessed from a standing, self-distanced perspective (Pugh & Broome, 2020).

Table 3

Forms of dialogical transformation

Transformation	Definition
Assimilation	Recognition, expression, and reintegration of I-positions which are unheard, avoided, or disowned
Consolidation	Strengthening existing I-positions which support adaptive functioning
Cultivation	Purposeful development of new, adaptive I-positions
Internalisation	Conscious introjection of adaptive I-positions which are modelled by the coach or other individuals
Organisation	Bringing coherence and order to fragmented or cacophonous I-positions
Reconciliation	Establishing agreement and cooperation between conflicted I-positions
Innovation	Spontaneous emergence of new I-positions as a result of the aforementioned transformations

Embodied Enactment Continued:

Coach: [*Initiating a 'horizontal dialogue'*]. Speaking as the part that doesn't want the promotion, tell that side [*gesturing to chair two*] why accepting the promotion is a bad idea...

The coachee presents reasons against accepting the promotion.

Coach: Switch over. [*Coachee moves to chair two*]. Now, be the part that's attracted to the promotion. What do you say in response? Tell that side [*gesturing to chair one*] why the new role is a good idea...

The coachee switches between the chairs, presenting reasons for and against the promotion.

Coach: [*Initiating a 'vertical dialogue'*]. Now that we've heard from these sides of your self, let's stand up and step back from this dialogue. [*Coach and coachee stand*]. Take a moment to separate from these two parts [*gestures to chairs one and two*]. Notice how it feels to be with them, yet apart from them. [*Coachee looks at the two chairs for a several moments*].

So, what are *you* thinking and feeling right now?

Coachee: I think I know what to do about the promotion.

Coach: Tell me more...

Procedures

Procedures refer to the forms of chairwork used in coaching (Table 4). Returning to the earlier analogy, procedures are akin to the styles of building that could be constructed. However, coaches mustn't be constrained by these procedures: spontaneity and creativity lie at the heart of chairwork (Moreno, 2008), meaning that coaches should feel confident using their own idiosyncratic styles of chairwork. Deciding which procedure to use is informed by the coaches dialogical hypothesis.

Table 4

Common Procedures in Chairwork

Horizontal procedures	Description
Interviews	Questioning the coachee in the role of I-positions
Dialogues	Encounters and conversations between two or more I-positions
Dramatisations	Enacting scenes from the perspective of past, present, or future I-positions
Depictions	Representational mapping and measurement of I-positions and their relationships
Disclosures	Recounting or retelling I-position narratives
Projectives	Projective methods for assessing and identifying I-positions
Vertical procedures	Description
Compassionate Witnessing	Compassionate observation of I-positions, including task engagement
Dispassionate Witnessing	Objective observation of I-positions, including task engagement

Procedure 1: Interviews

Interviews involve questioning the client in the role of I-positions (see Stone & Stone, 1989). This can be a helpful way to explore the origins, functions, and content of I-positions as experienced by the coachee. This typically involves the coachee embodying the I-position in a different seat or moving their chair to a different space. Examples of interviews include:

- *Intrapersonal interviews* in which the coachee is questioned as a self-part, including distressing I-positions (e.g. the ‘inner critic’) and inner resources (e.g. the ‘inner champion’).

Coach: We’ve discussed how much you push your self at work. How about we meet that side of you?

Coachee: How do we do that?

Coach: I’d like you to move your chair to another place in the room and, once you’ve done that, I’d like you to speak as your ‘inner pusher’. I’ll then ask that part of you some questions. Afterwards, I’ll then ask you to come back to this position – the centre – and separate from that part.

Coachee: Ok. [*Coachee moves their chair a few inches to the left*].

Coach: So, we’re leaving Matt in the centre [*gestures to the coachee’s former position*] and over here we’re connecting with his ‘inner pusher’. [*Coachee nods*]. It’s nice to meet you, pusher. What’s your role in Matt’s life?

Coachee: I make sure Matt works hard...

- *Interpersonal interviews* in which the coachee is questioned in role of another person. This can be a helpful way to generate ‘action insights’ into the perspectives and motivations of other individuals. Interviewing the coachee as their role-model is a particularly constructive way to generate self-guidance.

Coachee: I don't know how I should approach the board meeting next week.

Coach: Who could give you helpful advice on that?

Coachee: My old boss, Josephine.

Coach: Why don't we ask her? Change seats and be Josephine. [*Coachee moves to chair one*]. Nice to meet you, Josephine. How old are you?

Coachee: I'm 57.

Coach: How do you know Matt?

Coachee: I used to line-manage him, just after he joined the company.

Coach: Why do you think he's asked for your advice today?

Coachee: Well, I've worked for the company for a long time. I also know the board pretty well.

Coach: In that case, I'm glad you're able to help us out. As you know, Matt will be speaking to the board soon, and he doesn't know how to pitch the conversation. What are your thoughts on that?...

- *Interviewing the coachee as a personification of personal or professional issues* (Dillard, 2013).

Coachee: Retiring brings up a lot of mixed feelings for me.

Coach: Well, we could explore those feelings by having a conversation with 'retirement'. Would you be up for that?

Coachee: I'm willing to try.

Coach: Close your eyes [*Coachee does so*] and imagine that 'retirement' is a colour. What colour do you see?

Coachee: It's reddish-brown, like the colour of bricks.

Coach: Now allow that colour to morph into the shape of a person.

Coachee: [*Coachee is silent for a few moments*]. I picture an old man in a dusty brown suit.

Coach: I'd like to get to know this old man better. [*Introduces a chair*]. Open your eyes and be the old man in this seat. I'd like to ask 'retirement' some questions...

It is important that the coach approaches interviews in a curious and non-judgmental manner: the aim is not to change or challenge the coachee's I-positions, but to create the conditions in which self-parts can be fully experienced, expressed, and understood.

Procedure 2: Dialogues

Dialogues are probably the best-known chairwork procedure and involve facilitating a conversation between two or more I-positions. Dialogues are particularly helpful for addressing polarised or conflicted I-positions (Perls, 1969). Examples include:

- *Dialogues between conflicted parts of the self ("internal splits")*

Coachee: I hate presenting to the leadership team. I worry so much the night before. It's exhausting.

Coach: Let's bring that process to life. [*Coach introduces a chair*]. Come over to this seat and be the worrying side. [*Coachee moves to the second chair*]. Show me how you scare your self about presenting [*Gestures to the coachee's original seat*]. What does this side say?

Coachee: [*Talking to his former chair*]. Matt, you better have your numbers right. What if your calculations are wrong? What if they notice or you can't answer their questions? It would be terrible if you made a bad impression on them.

Coach: Switch back. [*Coachee moves to their original chair*]. How do you feel hearing that?

Coachee: Terrified! My heart is racing right now.

Coach: So, tell that side [*gesturing to chair one*]. "You're terrifying me" [*Process Skill - Doubling*].

Coachee: You're really scaring me. I can't stand it. It's too much.

Coach: What do you need from that side? [*Gestures to chair one*].

Coachee: I need you to give me a break. Going over and over the worst-case scenarios isn't helpful.

Coach: Switch again. [*Coachee moves to chair one*]. So, you've heard how much you're scaring and exhausting Matt. What do you say in response?...

- *Dialogues with other individuals ("unfinished business")*

Coachee: If I could go back in time and speak to my old boss, I'd give him a piece of my mind.

Coach: Let's have that conversation with him. [*Coach introduces a chair*]. Imagine he's sat here. How do you picture him?

Coachee: He's wearing the grey suit he wore every day in the office.

Coach: How does he look at you?

Coachee: He's got that same old expression, like I'm bothering him.

Coach: How do you feel seeing him?

Coachee: Angry!

Coach: Tell him. "When I see you, I feel so angry". [*Process Skill – Doubling*].

Coachee: Yeah! What's your problem? Why did you always make me feel like a nuisance?...

- *Dialogues with constructs and concepts*

Coachee: I'm working 18 hour days and yet I still barely make a profit. Sometimes I wonder if my business is even worth it.

Coach: [*Introduces a chair*]. Say this to your business. [*Gestures to the empty chair*].

Coachee: [*Speaking to the empty chair*]. I don't know if you're worth it. I've put so much into you, but you give nothing back.

Coach: Change seats and respond as the business.

Coachee: [*Changes seats*]. Don't give up on me! I know I'm hard work, but you've always wanted your own business. Work hasn't excited you like this in years.

Coach: Change back. [*Coachee returns to their original chair*]. I notice you're smiling. What is your smile saying? [*Process Skill – Psychosomatic Enquiry*].

Coachee: It's true, running my own business has always been my dream. I'm not ready to give up just yet...

Coachees may feel uncomfortable embodying certain I-positions. For example, taking on the voice of one's 'inner critic' can feel threatening. In this scenario, the coachee might speak to a personification of the I-position (Coach: "What do you want to say to your critic, sat over there?") and relay its responses in the third-person instead (Coach: "What is your inner critic saying back to you?").

Dramatisations

Jacob L. Moreno, the creator of psychodrama and chairwork, believed that important life events should be experienced twice: once in reality and once again through drama. Dramatisations enable the coachee to re-visit past life scenes and experiment with future scenes (Moreno, 2008). Given that dramatisations often involve multiple I-positions, the coach should be prepared to role-play some of these on the coachee's behalf. Examples of dramatisations include:

- Enacting *past scenes* to understand why events transpired and allow the coachee to intervene in helpful ways ("historical role-plays"):

Coachee: I wish I didn't get so nervous before interviews.

Coach: When you think about being interviewed, do any memories come to mind?

Coachee: My first job interview was just awful.

Coach: What happened?

Coachee: The guy who interviewed me was such a jerk. He made me feel so stupid. Ever since then, I worry the same thing might happen again.

Coach: Perhaps it would be helpful to recreate that interview.

Coachee: How would that help?

Coach: Well, sometimes recreating scenes from the past can give us new insights into what happened and why. Maybe there are some things you'd like to say to your self back then, and the jerk who interviewed you too.

Coachee: I think I'd quite like that!

Coach: Shall I play the jerk?

Coachee: [*Laughs*]. Ok.

Coach: [*Changes seats*]. Before we replay this scene, help me get into character. What was this guy like? What did he say to you?...

- Enacting *present scenes* to assess the coachee's current behaviour and develop insights into the responses of others:

Coachee: My colleagues are great at starting conversations with customers, but I find it so difficult.

Coach: When did you last have that experience?

Coachee: Just before our meeting. I called one of our subscribers before the session.

Coach: Let's recreate that phone call. I'll change seats and play the customer [*introduces a chair*] and you play yourself. Can you describe the person you called?

Coachee: Male, old, sounded grumpy.

Coach: What did he say?

Coachee: He said he was busy and that I'd disturbed him.

Coach: Ok, I'll do my best to enact that. Where were you when you made this call? [*Process Skill - Scene Setting*].

Coachee: I was sitting at my desk, in the office.

Coach: Imagine you're sat at your desk right now. This is the office. [*Gestures at the consulting room*]. Who do you see around you?

Coachee: One or two other people. Most of the team are on their lunch break.

Coach: Ok. So, here you are, at your desk, and you've just dialled the number. [*Coach moves to the new chair and pretends to pick up a phone*]. Hello?

Coachee: [*Pretending to speak into his phone*]. Is that Ron?

Coach: Yes.

Coachee: Hi Ron, I'm calling from your mobile phone network.

Coach: Listen, I'm busy right now.

Coachee: Oh. Ok. [*Silent*].

Coach: You're disturbing me.

Coachee: I see. [*Silent for a few moments*]. Shall I call back? [*Puts down the pretend phone*].

Then he just hung up on me...

Coach: On a scale of 0 – 10, how closely did that match what happened earlier today?

Coachee: About a 9.

Coach: Good. I'd like to try something. Let's act out this scene out again, but this time I'd like you to be this customer, and I'll play Matt. I think that could give us some insights into what happens when you speak to customers...

- Enacting *future scenes* to practice and fine-tune new ways of being (“behaviour rehearsal”):

Coach: Rather than just talking about it, let's practice approaching your manager for a pay review more assertively. What's his name?

Coachee: Derek.

Coach: Ok. I'll change seats and be Derek [*introduces a chair*] and I'd like you to start a conversation with me about reviewing your salary. [*Coach moves to the new chair*]. Ready?

[*Coachee nods*]. I understand there was something you wanted to discuss, Matt?

Coachee: Yes, I'd like to talk about my salary. I've worked for this organisation for five years, and I've not had a pay review.

Coach: [*Leaning forwards and speaking in a whisper*]. Don't forget your assertive body language, Matt!

Coachee: I forgot! Back straight, shoulders square, neutral tone of voice. Got it!

Coach: Give it another go. I'll get back into role. [*Sits back and adopts the role of 'Derek' again*]. What did you want to discuss, Matt?

Coachee: [*Sitting more upright and speaking in a louder voice*]. I want to discuss my salary...

Dramatisations are not limited to the coachee's external world – internal events can be role-played too. For example, the coach might enact the coachee's inner critic (chair one), while the coachee (chair two) practices counter-responding to its attacks (the 'devil's advocate' technique; Pugh, 2019).

Procedure 4: Depictions

Depictions utilise chairs to map out and measure relationships in the coachee's internal and external world (Moreno, 2008). These spatial representations are particularly useful during the early stages of coaching, helping to clarify the coachee's current context and prioritise goals. Examples include:

- *Measurements* such as how near or far the coachee is from their goal.

Coach: Suppose this chair represents running a marathon. [*Introduces a chair*]. How near or far does this goal seem right now?

Coachee: Very far away!

Coach: Show me.

Coachee: It's way over here. [*Places the chair against the opposite wall*].

Coach: Looks pretty far away.

Coachee: Yes.

Coach: But not out of the room!

Coachee: No. I know I'll do it one day.

Coach: So, that's your long-term goal. What about running 1km? [*Touches a second chair*].

Coachee: I did that for the first time last weekend.

Coach: Great. You've achieved that goal, so let's put that chair beside your own. [*Places the second chair beside the coachee's chair*]. How about running 2km? [*Touches a third chair*].

Coachee: I don't think that would be too difficult, but I need to do a bit more training first. [*Coachee places the third chair a few feet from her own*]. It's frustrating that things keep getting in the way.

Coach: Let's use the other chairs to represent the obstacles you're facing. What's preventing you from doing the training you need to do?...

- *Internal maps* depicting the coachee's intrapersonal world.

Coach: You have a lot of strengths as a supervisor – an in-depth knowledge of nursing [*introduces chair one*], lots of experience providing supervision [*introduces chair two*], and you care about your supervisees [*introduces chair three*].

Coachee: True, but I'm terrible at having difficult conversations with them.

Coach: What happens when it's time to have one of those conversations with your supervisees?

Coachee: I ask my line manager to do it. However, I really ought to have those discussions myself.

Coach: So, there's an avoidant part of you which sometimes shows up in supervision?

[Introduces chair four].

Coachee: Yeah, I need to change that.

Coach: Hmm. I wonder if any of your strengths *[gestures to chairs one, two, and three]* could help address this avoidant part. *[Places chair four in front of the strengths chairs]*. What do you think?...

- *External maps* depicting the coachee's interpersonal world.

Coach: Tell me more about your team. Who do you work with?

Coachee: Richard, Penelope, Mart, and Danny.

Coach: I see. *[Introduces four chairs]*. Let's pretend these chairs represent your colleagues.

Can you arrange them in terms of your relationships with them?

Coachee: Richard and I get along really well. *[Places the chair in front of her own]*. Penelope and Danny are nice enough, I guess. *[Places two chairs behind the first]*. But I don't know Mart well at all. *[Places the fourth chair far from the others]*.

Coach: How would you prefer this map of your team to look? Show me...

Limited space and limited availability of chairs can make it challenging to construct elaborate depictions. If this is the case, maps and measurements are best drawn out on paper or concretised using figurines.

Procedure 5: Disclosures

The stories we tell ourselves shape our identity and how we understand the world. These self-narratives include both broad ‘life stories’ and ‘small stories’ regarding specific events and experiences (Angus & Greenberg, 2011). Disclosures involve the coachee recounting and retelling key self-narratives in a second chair. This can help identify themes which define the coachee’s personal or professional life, encourage emotional processing of difficult experiences, and highlight exceptions to negative self-narratives. Examples include:

- *Expressive disclosures* (*‘empty stories’*) in which the coachee repeats emotionally-barren narratives in a more candid, expressive manner.

Coachee: I feel pretty bored in my current role.

Coach: What’s that like for you?

Coachee: [*Shrugs*]. It’s boring. What else can I say?

Coach: Tell you what. Move behind your chair and, this time, tell me how you *really* feel about your role. Speak from your heart.

Coachee: [*Coachee stands behind his chair*]. I’m sick to death of this company! If a similar post came up in another firm, I’d leave in an instant!

Coach: Now we’re talking...

- *Novel disclosures* (*‘untold stories’*) in which the coachee shares emotionally-significant experiences which have not yet been told.

Coachee: Leading the redundancy meetings was awful. The staff got so angry and abusive with me. I cried the whole night afterwards. I tried to speak to my head of department about it, but he said it’s just an unavoidable part of working in Human Resources.

Coach: I can tell this experience is still troubling you. [*Coachee nods*]. Come and sit in this chair. [*Coach introduces a chair*]. Let’s leave Matt-the-HR-Manager over there. [*Gestures*

to the coachee's original chair]. Over here, I want to hear from Matt-the person. Tell me about what those meetings were like for you...

- *Multi-storied disclosures* ('alternate stories') in which new outcomes or exceptions to problem-saturated self-narratives are explored (Chadwick, 2003).

Coach: It sounds like you often experience your self as inferior to your colleagues. [*Coachee nods*]. Can we explore that belief a little more?

Coachee: Ok.

Coach: Come over to this seat [*introduces chair one*] and tell me more about your experience of being inferior. [*Coach changes seats*]. When did you first experience your self in this way at work?

Coachee: When I started the graduate scheme a few years ago. I had this sense that I didn't deserve to be there as much as the other candidates...

The coachee goes on to recount the story of being inferior to his colleagues.

Coach: I'd like to see if there's another version of this story. [*Introduces chair two*]. Can you switch? [*Coachee moves to chair two*]. I wonder if there have been any moments where you have experienced your self as being equal to your colleagues, even if it was just for a moment?

Coachee: [*Thinks for a few moments*]. Well, I've always received good feedback for my reports.

Coach: Tell me more about that...

The coachee goes on to recount a new story in which he is equal to his colleagues.

Coach: Let's both stand up. [*Coach and coachee stand up*]. Here we have two very different stories [*gestures to chairs one and two*] and yet both are equally valid and grounded in your lived experiences. What do you make of that?

Coachee: Perhaps I'm not always bottom of the pile...

Coaches may wonder why disclosures make use of a second chair. While it is not essential, disclosing from a second seat offers some advantages. These include externalising life stories and enabling the coachee to reflect on them from different perspectives; concretising the idea that multiple self-narratives exist (thereby challenging negative views of the self as fixed and global); and setting the scene for dialogues with the content of self-narratives (e.g. the coachee's past self and the life story itself).

Procedure 6: Projectives

Projective procedures enable the coach and coachee to examine transferences, reenactments, and other projective processes as they arise in the coaching relationship. Projective enactments can also act as an experiential method of assessment (Corsini, 1966). Examples include:

- *Diagnostic projective procedures* for accessing and assessing the coachee's internal world.

Coach: I'd like to try an experiment, so we can better understand what's going on in your life right now.

Coachee: Ok.

Coach: Here is an empty seat. [*Introduces a chair*]. I'd like you to imagine that something is held in this chair. It could be a person, an object, an emotion, whatever comes to mind. In a moment, I'll ask you to begin speaking to the chair, and I won't interrupt. Let's see what happens. Ready?

Coachee: Ready.

Coach: [*Gesturing to the chair*] "You are..." [*Process skill – Doubling*].

Coachee: You are my wallet, and you're empty, as usual.

Coach: Keep going...

- Procedures to explore *projections arising in the coachee's external world*, including the coaching relationship.

Coachee: You're going to be disappointed with my progress this week.

Coach: Suppose, for a moment, that you weren't saying this to me, but to someone else.

[*Coach introduces a chair*]. Say this again, but to the empty seat.

Coachee: [*Turning to face the empty seat*]. You're going to be disappointed in me.

Coach: What do you feel as you say that?

Coachee: Anxiety, like I've done something wrong.

Coach: Who are you talking to? [*Gestures to the empty chair*]. Who do you see over there?

Coachee: My primary school teacher, Mr Patterson.

Coach: Tell me about Mr Patterson...

- Procedures to *explore projections of the client's internal world*.

Coach: How do you feel about not winning the pitch?

Coachee: Ashamed. I feel it here. [*Touches chest*].

Coach: Put that 'shame' in the chair. [*Introduces a chair*]. "You are my shame". [*Process skill - Doubling*].

Coachee: [*Speaking to the empty chair*]. You are my shame.

Coach: Keep going.

Coachee: You are the weight around my neck.

Coach: [*Process skill - Repetition*]. Say that again.

Coachee: You are the weight around my neck. [*Becomes tearful*].

Coach: What you see in the chair?

Coachee: I see myself as a small boy...

Projective procedures will often cut to the emotional core of challenges and dilemmas quite rapidly. Accordingly, that are sometimes an intense experience for the coachee.

Procedure Seven: Witnessing

While the previous procedures aim to facilitate here-and-now interactions with I-positions, witnessing enables the coachee to step back and observe I-positions from a decentred perspective. Witnessing serves several important functions in chairwork. These include separating from I-positions; practicing mindful self-observation; and supporting reflexive processing. Witnessing also exploits the human tendency to reason and self-regulate more effectively from a self-distanced perspective (Cross & Ayduk, 2017). Vertical chairwork procedures are concretised by asking the coachee to stand during the enactment.

Coachee: This has been an intense session.

Coach: Let's take some time to process the work we've done today. Will you stand with me? [*Coach and coachee stand*]. Take a breath [*Coachee breathes deeply*] and with great thanks and appreciation, let's notice the different parts of Matt we've met today [*gestures to the empty chairs*]. Notice how you can be with these parts of your self and yet separate from them. [*Coach and coachee stand in silence for a few moment's silence*].

Coachee: This feels really calm.

Coach: Witness, what do appreciate about the work Matt has done today? [*Gestures to the coachee's chair*].

Coachee: [*Looking at his chair*]. He's worked hard. It was brave of him to talk to his inner critic. [*Gestures to a second chair*].

Coachee: What's the most important thing for him to take away from this session?...

Depending on the coachee's needs and the work done during the session, witnessing can adopt either a warm tone of self-understanding ('compassionate witnessing') or neutral self-observation ('dispassionate witnessing').

Process skills

Process skills refer to moment-by-moment facilitative acts or 'micro-interventions' coaches use to ensure that chairwork is as immersive, evocative, and meaningful as possible (Greenberg, 1979). Research suggests that process skills directly impact the effectiveness of chairwork and so mustn't be overlooked. Returning to the metaphor of constructing a house, process skills are like the mortar that binds bricks (i.e. the processes of chairwork), so that the building is strong and robust. Examples of process skills have been highlighted in the illustrative vignettes. Key skills include:

- **Doubling:** The coach briefly speaks as the coachee during the enactment in order to name that which is unsaid, unknown, or unclear.
- **Psychosomatic enquiry:** The coach invites the coachee to put words to non-verbal communications, including gestures, postures, expressions, and other bodily manifestations of I-positions (Coach: "What is your clenched fist saying?").
- **Repetition:** The coachee is prompted to repeat key phrases to build conviction in these statements or elicit their deeper meaning.
- **Role consistency:** The coachee is encouraged to remain in role and speak as the I-position which is being embodied in a particular chair.
- **Scene-setting:** Before dramatisation, the coach elicits details about the environment in which these interactions have, or will, take place (Coach: "Where are you? What time is it? Who is with you?").

Using process skills effectively takes time and practice. Demonstrations and transcripts of chairwork are often the best way to learn how to use these interventions.

Coaching Method or Coaching Modality?

Coaches use chairwork in different ways. Chairwork is a key component of some coaching approaches, including psychodramatic (Blatner, 2019) and gestalt coaching (Leary-Joyce, 2014; Passmore & Sinclair, 2020). Chairwork also represents a stand-alone coaching and psychotherapeutic modality (e.g. Pugh & Broome, 2020; Pugh, in preparation). Finally, chairwork can be used to deliver and augment non-experiential models of coaching. Examples of how chairwork can be applied to GROW model (Whitmore, 2009) are provided in Table 5.

Table 5

Delivering GROW through chairwork

Goals: <i>What does the coachee want to happen?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Interview’ the coachee as their ‘retired self’ - what was their best achievement in life? • ‘Dialogues’ between the coachee (chair one) and their goal or aspiration (chair two). • ‘Dramatise’ the end of the best possible coaching session – what happened? • ‘Depict’ the coachee’s goals with chairs and arrange them in terms of priority.
Reality: <i>What is happening for the coachee now?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Dialogues’ between the coachee (chair one) and their challenge or problem (chair two). • ‘Dramatise’ a scene in which the coachee’s problem or challenge arose. • ‘Disclosures’ to elaborate the coachee’s personal or professional life story. • ‘Projectives’ to explore the coachee’s attitudes and feelings towards their situation.
Options: <i>What could the coachee do?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Interview’ the coachee as their role model - what advice would this individual offer? • ‘Dialogues’ between the pro’s (chair one) and con’s (chair two) of a potential solution. • ‘Dramatise’ the implementation of a solution to road-test its effectiveness. • ‘Disclosures’ to elaborate past successes and exceptions to the problem.
Way Forward: <i>What will the coachee do?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Interview’ the coachee as a personal strength – what support can this I-position offer? • ‘Dialogues’ between the solution (chair one) and a potential obstacle (chair two). • ‘Depict’ the timeline and key milestones on the way to achieving the coachee’s goal. • ‘Witness’ the coaching session to process and consolidate learning.

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