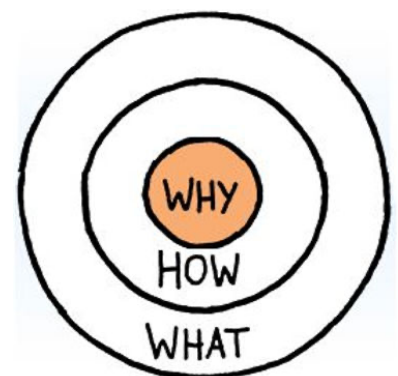


# Quarterly Reflections on Leadership

April – June 2026

## The Purposeful Coach



## Introduction

In this paper we explore why coaches coach. We'll review the outcome of a study in which we surveyed 102 practising coaches, asking them a series of questions to understand their purpose. The results are fascinating. Our thematic analysis revealed six archetypes, all quite different in their focus, and with different implications for the way coaches practice their craft.

As coaches, we are surrounded by people telling us how to coach. Much of this advice is conflicting. For example, those who define coaching in terms of goals. Through that lens, if you're not focussed on helping a client to create, clarify, or deliver a goal, then you're not coaching. Not everyone agrees with that perspective. Some express a concern that focusing too early, too intensely, on creating something specific and measurable is often to create something that has little meaning. Better to engage in deeper, more exploratory conversation, safe in the knowledge that a more meaningful goal will emerge in its own time. This is just one area of debate. There are coaches who are resolutely focussed on the needs of the person they are coaching. There are others whose primary motivation is to be of service to the 'wider system'. There are coaches who like to go deep, into counsellor/therapist territory; there are others who don't believe it is appropriate to explore the client's past - at all. There are those who believe coaching shouldn't go on beyond a certain time frame, for fear the client becomes dependent on the coach. There are others posting articles on LinkedIn providing tips as to how you can prolong the coach-coachee relationship indefinitely. There are coaches advocating the importance of remaining 'neutral' and others decrying that as impossible. Lots of debate.

Those who advocate the value of coaching competencies as an ongoing means by which to measure a coach's degree of skill and capability inevitably have to take a position on some of these debates. They do so, not by seeking primary evidence, but by asking coaches who they believe to be most experienced and capable – what do you do? Then they distil the answers into a generic set of rules. As coaches we deal with relationship. Humans are complex, and patterns of relationship between different humans is more complex. We cannot hope to navigate the terrain with reference to a rulebook. We develop our own sense of what works and what doesn't work, through our own experiences, our values, and an ongoing process of trial and error, a process labelled 'practical judgment' by Ralph Stacey<sup>i</sup>. Competency models may be helpful in scoping the basic terrain, but otherwise they are limited. If we believe in the significance of practical judgment and recognise the limited value of generic competency models, then we need a new reference point.

## The 3Ps

The 3Ps were first described by David Lane with reference to supervision<sup>ii</sup> then further developed by Tatiana Bachkirova and Peter Jackson at Oxford Brookes University with reference both to coaching and coaching supervision<sup>iii</sup>. The 3Ps stand for:

- Your **philosophy** or **perspective**. What personal experiences, beliefs, and values inform your practice. Which theories and frameworks are you drawn to, and why?
- Your **purpose**. Why do you do the work that you do?
- Your **practice** or **process**. How do you go about the work that you do? What would a fly on the wall observe were it to follow you about all day?

Many coaches find it helpful to reflect on their 3Ps, and to continue reflecting on their 3Ps over time. This is a self-awareness piece, the outcome of which is a stronger *internal* reference point enabling the

coach to achieve more clarity as to what kind of coach they want to be, and more confidence in giving themselves permission to be that coach even if discouraged from doing so by others in the community.

I once presented the 3Ps as a teaching framework to a group of psychologists working in the psychology department of a university. They were horrified. You can't tell people it's OK to make up your own model – it's your job to tell them how they should be coaching, based on primary evidence! The problem is, that primary evidence doesn't exist, and yet many of us continue to do as we are told by impressive looking institutions who use the word 'evidence' a lot. It is up to us to put on our critical thinking hats and challenge the basis of this evidence, while at the same time adopting the same rigour in challenging our own personal approaches. Adopting the 3Ps as a framework is a route *toward* evidence-based practice.

In my experience people find it easiest to define their **philosophy** and their **practice**, less easy to dig deeper into their **purpose**. Many people are happy to define their purpose for coaching in terms of 'helping people', without going a lot deeper. Yet philosophy, purpose, and practice are intertwined, and to explore our purpose in more depth is to enable us to gain deeper insight into all three aspects. My purpose defines my philosophy and vice-versa. My purpose defines my practice and vice-versa.

In this paper we present the outcome of a piece of work in which we explored the purposes of 102 practising coaches in the hope it will inspire others to identify their purpose in doing the work.

## Our research

Jackson and Bachkirova invite us to explore our purpose by asking ourselves six questions<sup>iv</sup>. We incorporated five of those questions (questions 6 – 10) in our list of 10 questions:

1. Why do you coach?
2. What gives you most satisfaction as a coach?
3. What (if anything) do you find unsatisfying about working as a coach?
4. What do you hope to achieve with and for the person you are coaching, the paying client and/or the organisation?
5. To which of these parties/ 'systems' are you most committed?
6. When contracting with a coachee/potential coachee how do you determine whether or not you can add value?
7. What tells you during and/or at the end of a coaching assignment whether your coaching has been worthwhile?
8. What would tell you that a coaching session has been a good one?
9. On what basis would you say that a coaching session was a waste of time?
10. On what basis would you stop coaching someone?


We issued a general invitation to participate in a survey via LinkedIn and sent our questions out to more than 100 practising coaches by email. We received 102 responses, which we subjected to a thematic analysis. From that analysis we identified six archetypes.

## Six archetypes

The six archetypes are quite different to each other, though not mutually exclusive. It's likely that more than one of these archetypes will resonate with you. Which ones resonate and which don't?

### The Capacity Builder

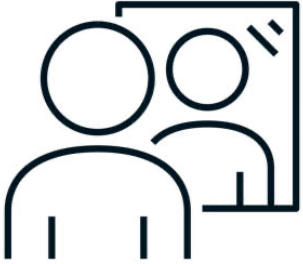
The Capacity Builder’s purpose is to help the coachee to grow their capability and achieve meaningful development. Coaching is presented as a learning intervention designed to help people achieve outcomes they may not have thought possible. The coach’s *orientation* is toward development. Their *energy* is encouragement. Their *goal* is to expand the client’s competence and confidence. Their *strength* is the capacity to build confidence and enable progress. They may not be so good at going deeper, beyond competence, or beyond the achievement of expressed goals – that may be a *blind spot*.

<b>Orientation</b>	Developmental	
<b>Energy</b>	Encouraging	
<b>Goal</b>	Expanded competence and confidence	
<b>Strength</b>	Builds confidence and tangible progress	
<b>Blind spot?</b>	May neglect deeper emotional work	
<b>Says:</b>	<i>What is the opportunity for growth here?</i>	

For example, coach 75 in our survey said that he coaches people to facilitate their learning, growth, and development, a process through which he also grows and develops, and he said he hopes that this development and growth will help the client to achieve whatever goals and dreams they desire.

### The Authenticity Guide

The Authenticity Guide’s purpose is to support people in reconnecting with who they really are. This is coaching as identity work, helping people to become more authentic and whole. This may require exploring the individual’s life history, seeking out patterns of behaviour and looking for consistencies and inconsistencies along the way. We have written elsewhere about the risks of cultivating authenticity with reference to an over-simplistic notion of self (QRL 19, for example) and there is a risk coach and client focus too heavily on who the client is vs their impact in the world. The coach may however, go deeper than the Capacity Builder in cultivating longer-lasting outcomes.


<b>Orientation</b>	Identity	
<b>Energy</b>	Grounded, affirming	
<b>Goal</b>	Wholeness and self-alignment	
<b>Strength</b>	Builds congruence and integrity	
<b>Blind spot?</b>	Can over-focus on the internal vs external	
<b>Says:</b>	<i>What choice would best reflect who you are?</i>	

For example, coach 24 in our survey said she wants to help people be all of who they are. Her greatest joy is when a client steps into being and doing whatever feels most congruent.

### The Space Holder

The Space Holder’s purpose is to hold a reflective space where clarity can emerge. The process, based on dialogue, trust, listening, and safety, is privileged as much, or more, than outcomes. The coach trusts in the process and that outcomes will naturally emerge. The coach is likely to go deeper and generate more

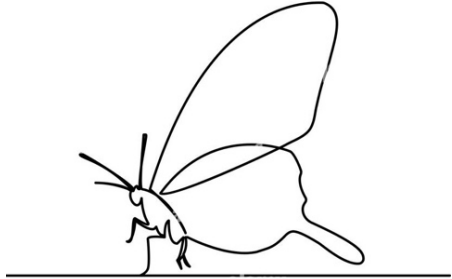
personal insight than the Capacity Builder, but may be overly cautious of challenging the client for fear of jeopardising the safe space.

Orientation	Relational, reflective	
Energy	Calm, spacious	
Goal	Clarity and insight	
Strength	Creates safety and depth	
Blind spot?	May avoid challenge	
Says:	<i>What are you hearing yourself say?</i>	

For example, coach 58 said that he believes people’s potential is best unlocked when they are given the right conditions to thrive. Coaching is about holding a space in which people can explore, test, and ultimately stretch their limits. He said he gets satisfaction from knowing he helped create the environment in which change could happen.

### The Transformer


The Transformer’s purpose is to support profound internal change that leads to big insights, new behaviours, and sustainable change. The process may be intense, with a focus on discovering root cause. Whilst such an approach may lead to profound change, Bachkirova and Borrington question the underlying philosophy<sup>v</sup>. Coaching, they say, is typically positioned as being suitable for people who are already productive, effective and content. Why then is transformation sought? And how will a client feel if they feel they have somehow failed to meet the coach’s expectation to ‘transform’ (whatever that means)?

Orientation	Transformation	
Energy	Intense, deep	
Goal	Lasting change	
Strength	Focus on root cause	
Blind spot?	May neglect immediate needs and actions. Coach may feel inadequate.	
Says:	<i>What are you learning about yourself?</i>	

Coach 51 said that she coaches to help others evolve, transform, and create long-lasting change. She gains most satisfaction when she has a committed client who wants to evolve, to do the inner work, to walk the extra mile, and to ‘turn blockages into stepping stones’.

### The Partnership Practitioner


Like the Space Holder, the Partnership Practitioner is also focussed on process. The process in this instance is specifically the relationship between coach and client. The Space Holder’s purpose is to co-create partnership and connection through which growth is achieved. This is an uber-relational approach in which relationship quality is most valued. As with the Space Holder, there is a risk that in focussing overly on process, outcomes and achievement are neglected.

Orientation	Relational/co-created	
Energy	Present	
Goal	Meaningful connection	
Strength	Deep trust and mutuality	
Blind spot?	Can lack clear direction	
Says:	<i>What's happening between <u>us</u> right now?</i>	

Coach 2 said she coaches because it is a spiritual practice. She gains most satisfaction from the honour of being allowed into another person's life at an intimate level. Developing trust is essential and can take time.

### The System Shifter

The System Shifter's purpose is to make the world a better place, changing dysfunctional systems, and improving outcomes at scale. This coach sees self and client as part of a broad network of people, their actions having an impact on others outside the room, and others outside the room having an impact on the conversations happening inside the room. This coach may talk about their role in tackling climate change, for example, focussed on their role in the 'bigger picture'. There is a risk that this focus distracts coach and client from immediate issues and enhancing the client's impact on the day-to-day.,

Orientation	Systemic	
Energy	Visionary, analytical	
Goal	Healthier cultures and societies	
Strength	Connects to wider context and meaning	
Blind spot?	May overlook immediate reality	
Says:	<i>What's happening in the broader system?</i>	

Coach 3 became a coach after spending time inside organisations which weren't making the world any better. People didn't collaborate or cooperate very well, he said He is committed to helping people to change or 'infect' the wider system of which they are a part.

### What next?

What are we to do with these archetypes? Is it a case of deciding which archetype best describes us and incorporating that archetype into our descriptions of our self as coach?

No.

As we said at the beginning of this article, people often struggle to articulate their purpose as a coach, or else are happy to fall back on a high level generic description of self, a description that doesn't add anything new in terms of self-awareness. The six archetypes illustrate how different some coaches are, in terms of purpose. The Capability Builder, for example, may not value whatsoever, the espoused purpose of any of the other archetypes – they are too focussed on the client's internal world and an overly conceptual perspective of the world and the way it operates. Some coaches shy away from the idea that

a coach's job is to transform people. Some would critique the purpose of the System Shifter as being somewhat pious and detached from the client's specific needs.

At the same time, we don't suggest you simply try and decide which box fits you best. Different aspects of different archetypes may all resonate with you. In which case we suggest you extract and process those archetypes in creating your own personal, unique, articulation as to why *you* coach. A reading of the archetypes may encourage you to ask yourself questions, such as, to what extent:

- am I energised by a client developing a new skill?
- do I care deeply about clients being 'fully themselves'?
- am I comfortable with silence?
- am I willing to go into difficult emotional territory?
- do I pay attention to what is happening between me and my client?
- am I motivated by the impact of coaching beyond the individual?

Likely you will find one, two, or three archetypes resonate with you most. For example the coach who likes to see people become more capable, through providing a deep reflective space, and by paying attention to the system. That coach may identify with Capability Builder, Space Holder, and System Shifter. Or the coach who believes who sees their transformative role specifically in terms of identity. That coach may identify with Authenticity Guide and Transformer. The coach who says all six resonate may be paying lip service to the process. A strong emphasis on capability building and immediate achievement may be at odds with transformation and a slower, more patient, focus on meaning making.

## The 3Ps again

The 3Ps are intertwined. If I decide, for example, that my **purpose** is some combination of Space Holder and System Shifter, then how did that purpose emerge? What of my **philosophy** has nudged me in that direction? What experiences in my life? Which of my values? What have I read or listened to that has influenced the way that I coach? And how does this purpose show up in my **practice**? Perhaps this explains why I spend so much more time stopping, listening, and reflecting than do other coaches I come across? Perhaps this is why I find myself asking so many questions about patterns and interconnections?

There is no best 3Ps. Myers and Bachkirova conducted a fascinating experiment in which they asked some coaches to coach their clients, while other coaches observed. By and large, all the coaches and their clients were happy with the outcomes of their sessions. The observers were much less happy; because the coach didn't coach the way they were supposed to, in line with the observer's 3Ps. This is not surprising in an industry so influenced by the big global coaching associations' focus on generic competencies, a world in which there is a 'gold standard', one best way to coach. It can be hard to pushback on such a philosophy and to advocate for the idea that there are lots of good and effective ways to coach. In teaching the 3Ps I often find people breathing a huge sigh of relief that they are 'allowed' to define for themselves how best to go about their work.

We use the 3Ps in much of the work that we do. In delivering coaching supervision programs in partnership with Oxford Brookes University we encourage coach supervisors to think about their 3Ps. Teaching leaders how to coach inside organisations, we ask them to define their 3Ps. Our team coaching programs refer to *The Wise Team Coach*, which is structured around the 3Ps<sup>vi</sup>. And our most recent book on leadership, *The Wise Leader*, is positioned upon a foundation of 3Ps<sup>vii</sup>.

The 3Ps is a wonderful framework for structuring your own reflections; upon the things you read, things you are told, and your own experiences. Your 3Ps will continue to shift and evolve as you continue to learn and grow, and become ever more confident in the way *you* do your work.

A deeper understanding of your purpose will help you connect with those people who seek what you are offering. Think about the coach matching process. If I am a client who wants help in solving an immediate issue and I am looking for someone to help sharpen my skills along the way, without spending too much time delving into the depths of my psyche, then I may be best matched with a Capability Builder. If I am dealing with a big complex problem and just want to talk things through, without being nagged for SMART goals, confident that new insights and intentions will emerge, then I may be drawn to a Space Holder, or Systems Shifter. And it isn't all about the client – it's about you too. It's about identifying those people who you will most enjoy coaching, those assignments from which you will gain most satisfaction, a sense of being most useful. Again, we don't encourage people to put themselves in a box, but to draw insight from this work to clarify for yourself what kind of work most fulfils your purpose as a coach. Which assignments are you most drawn to? Which might you best refer to someone else, someone you think will do a spectacular job with that client, who be energised and purposeful in doing the work?

## Conclusions

The 3Ps is a simple framework that many coaches find helpful in articulating who they are as coach, a narrative that builds confidence in self-as-coach. In using the framework many coaches find it most challenging to define their purpose. In this paper we presented the outcome of a thematic analysis of 102 practising coaches' purpose in the hope the results would help others discover new insights about themselves, greater self-awareness, and confidence. How would you answer the 10 questions we set to those 102 coaches? Which archetype(s) are closest to yours? What further confidence does this give you to further explore the possibility of being the coach that *you* really want to be?

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- <sup>i</sup> Stacey, R. (2012). *Tools and Techniques of Leadership and Management*. Routledge.
  - <sup>ii</sup> Lane, D. (2006). *The Emergence of Supervision Models*. Presentation at the Annual Conference of the Special Group in Coaching Psychology of the BPS, (unpublished).
  - <sup>iii</sup> Bachkirova, T. (2016). The Self of the Coach: Conceptualization, Issues, and Opportunities for Practitioner Development. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 68(2), 143-156 and Jackson, P. &

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- <sup>vii</sup> Lawrence, P. & Skinner, S. (2024). *The Wise Leader*. Routledge.