

DProf thesis

**Getting in, getting on, getting out, getting over it. An exploration
into the inner work of an executive team coach**

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**Getting in, Getting on, Getting out,
Getting over it.**

An exploration into the inner work
of an executive team coach

Thesis for a Doctoral Degree in Professional Practice
(Organisational Change) from Middlesex University, London

April 2020

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to improve the professional practice of executive team coaching by paying greater attention to the inner work required to resource coaches from within. Particular emphasis is given to where an executive team coach might encounter significant difficulties and struggle to recover from challenging assignments. The existing theory has neglected to account for the potential to learn from these experiences, a shortcoming this thesis addresses.

This thesis asks what inner work is necessary to improve the quality and range of interventions as an executive team coach in the specific context of working with top management teams in large, multi-national organisations.

Utilising a pragmatic action research approach, this first person inquiry draws from practice vignettes, autoethnography, five-factor analysis, personal reflection, and literature to explore the research question. I show that resourcing from within is central to the ability to work systemically with ethical dilemmas and power in organisations.

The significance of this thesis is that it informs our understanding of team coaching at the most senior levels of an organisation. It concludes that resourcing from within involves considerable inner work on one's system of origin and offers several practical methods to begin to explore this.

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The Ashridge faculty, particularly Dr Kathleen King, for “seeing beyond” my initial inquiry and accepting me onto the doctoral programme, and Dr Kate McArdle, whose encouragement to stay with not knowing and generosity in extending her Getting in, Getting on, Getting out framework to me, I am very grateful for.

Finally, thanks to everyone who has trusted me to bring some of the ideas contained within this thesis into practice within organisations.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

360	A feedback survey that seeks feedback from multiple sources
ADOC	Ashridge Doctorate in Organisational Change
ASAP	As Soon As Possible
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFO	Chief Financial Officer
DJ	Disc jockey, mixing different music together
FTSE	Financial Times Stock Exchange
HR	Human Resources
L&D	Learning and Development
MP	Member of Parliament
NDA	Non-Disclosure Agreement
NLP	Neuro-Linguistic Programming
NYSE	New York Stock Exchange
OD	Organisational Development
PLC	Public Limited Company
RFP	Request for Proposal

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FOREWORD

The inspiration behind the title of this thesis comes from McArdle's (2008) work on cooperative inquiry in which she noted there was plenty written about the theory of action research, but very little written about the practical aspects and messiness of actually *doing* it. I found a similar pattern in the field in which I worked – Executive Team Coaching. That which does exist usually only covers the shiny stuff.

This thesis tells the story about the often overlooked, behind-the-scenes *inner work* that team coaches need to do, which enables *Getting in*, *Getting on* and *Getting out* of large, global organisations.

In my endeavours to deepen my practice and work more systemically “with” teams, rather than “on” them, a new stage emerged which I have called *Getting over it*. These were team coaching assignments which felt as if they had failed. They did not have the outcome that I or the client had intended.

“Surely there is no such thing as failure, only learning!” I hear you cry.

Let me assure you, “learning” sounds better, but these were things that most definitely made me *feel* like a failure. We’ll get into that later. For now, I’d like you to know that I didn’t set out to inquire into this, but rather I arrived at this previously unknown stage as a result of shifting worldviews and systemic practice.

In the chapters ahead, I explore how by paying attention to phenomena within myself during cycles of action and reflection, I introduced a series of new practices to keep myself safer and encourage recovery from difficult situations. This in turn shifted the way I *get in* and *get on* in organisations.

Don’t worry, this isn’t one of those hero stories set to rousing strings about how I “bounced back” and became more “resilient.” I still don’t manage to recover every time, not even most of the time, but just enough of the time to recognise *Getting over it* as an important feature that is rarely, if ever, spoken about in the realm of executive team coaching literature.

More than most, I'd love all of this to be neatly explained and packaged in a two-by-two matrix and toolkit, but there is a sort of epistemological slipperiness about some of aspects of this work, which I hope that you will celebrate and be curious about, rather than admonish.

As you read this thesis, my hope is that something helpful may emerge in the space between you and me. Perhaps there is a piece of work that you too struggle to *Get over*. Maybe you find yourself reexperiencing difficult conversations and struggle to push the thoughts out of your mind? If so, I hope some of my own experiences might be of service to yours.

So, if that all sounds ok with you, we'll get cracking.

Chapter 1: Introducing my inquiry

1.1. Voice, form, and the rules of the game¹

THE DREADED CLIENT RFP (Request for Proposal)

What it actually says:

Dear Learning Provider,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a competitive tender for the provision of **Top Team Development** for VeryImportantCompany PLC.

Please find the attached Request for Proposal (RFP) document.

Please find appendices 1-3 also attached.

Timings as below:

- **Please confirm receipt ASAP**
- Please provide your intention to bid on or before 25th September
- This is intention only, not the final proposal
 - o Please also return a completed and signed Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA)
- Provide your proposal on or by 10am 14th October
- Please note, this is capability rather than a finished solution, please refer to the programme requirements section (3) for full details of the required solution
- All submitted proposals require confirmation of your compliance to General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR)

I have listed questions to be received by **this Friday**. If you have any questions please submit them when they are ready. All responses will be anonymised and issued to all participants in this tender with the relevant response.

Should you have any questions on the above timings or the process please contact myself, Just Doingmyjob at just.doingmyjob@vervimportantcompany.com

Regards,
Just Doingmyjob

¹ A friendly warning that there is a little swearing on the next page. No offence intended.

THE DREADED CLIENT RFP (Request for Proposal)

What it actually means:

Dear Minion,

Someone (who possibly dislikes you A LOT) has suggested that you might want to bid for a tender to run some **Top Team Development** at VeryImportantCompany PLC. My boss thinks they are a bunch of overpaid psychopaths and says that someone should give them a good talking to.

Please find attached a document that will bear no resemblance to the work that really needs doing.

Please also find attached Appendices 1-3 which my boss has added as he felt this needed to look a bit more "Executive" than the Customer Services Supervisor Training RFP from which I copied and pasted this.

Timings as below -

- **Please confirm receipt ASAP. I was meant to get this out two weeks ago.**
- This indicates your intention only, not the final proposal (you will have a load more hoops to jump through before then hahaha!)
- Please also return a completed and signed Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) because honestly, if this stuff were to ever get out, it would literally destroy us.
- We will expect you to provide your full design of how you plan to conduct life changing experiences in the 25 min you will have with the team from 10:00 - 10:25am on the last day. (Note some will probably walk out early as they have planes to catch). Please also include a detailed framework of how you intend to measure these incredible behavioural shifts.
- Please provide a full 12-month team development road map that our L&D manager can steal, pass off as his own and use with other teams.
- Provide your proposal **now and definitely before you go to sleep tonight.**

- **Important:** Please note, this work is likely to drag up all sorts of childhood shit for you and will create general feelings of unworthiness and anxiety.
- We may or may not pay you. If we do, please don't expect this until you have chased payment at least 6 times. We reserve the right to cite a random international tax regulation and withhold up to 30% of the value of your invoice for no reason.

Please also note the amendment to the Travel & Expense policy which now only permits Business Class travel if your one-way journey time exceeds 2 years.

Regards,

Just Doingmyjob

just.doingmyjob@veryimportantcompany.com

Hello there.

Just in case you hadn't already noticed, I have deliberately adopted a particular “voice” throughout this thesis and I'd like to take a moment to explain and account for that choice.

In my practice, I see many decent team coaches relegated to the sidelines, agreeing amongst themselves in an echo chamber of cleverness about how things in organisations need to change. The thing is, they are literally loaded with good ideas and theories, but unable to *get in* and influence the discussion on organisational culture.

A good idea, theory, or practice is, in itself, not enough to effect change in an organisation. Organisations are not short of theory. Like any living system, organisations have an immune response that is readily triggered by what it sees as over-complicated theory. For most (but not all) organisations, I have found that theory must be coated in some way to find its way through the organisational immune system, to deliver new practices where they are needed most.

For this paper, I am choosing to adopt a voice that seeks to *get in* by abiding by what I see as the rules of the game for modern organisations (more on this later). Unless you actually *Get in*, you don't stand the chance of being heard and changing the conversation.

(Journal entry, June 2017).

I'm having breakfast in the Ashridge dining room. I'm due to attend a doctoral workshop where I have to present my work to other doctoral students and am nervous that I will mess it up. On the table next to me, I overhear the conversation of a group I do not know, who are attending an “Advanced Management Development Programme.” They are having a very animated discussion about Colours (the Insights Discovery tool). I know the tool. It categorises personality types into different “colours” in a very confident, certain way.

They are discussing how their boss is very “Red” and how they are really “Blue.” Everyone is in agreement that this is a serious problem. I am experiencing some serious dissonance between the native, everyday language spoken in organisations and the doctoral language of organisational change.

Richardson (1994, p. 959) confesses to yawning her way through countless “exemplary qualitative studies” that have been half read or scanned through. She advocates that qualitative research should be “read, not scanned” and how foolish it was to spend so much time producing research that had no impact on anything. She asks “How do we create texts that are vital? That are attended to? That make a difference?”

I hope you will find the voice of this thesis straightforward to understand and perhaps even mildly amusing at times. Not spit-out-your coffee amusing, but a little chuckle here and there would be just fine. Humour can be powerful. It often shines a light on conversations that are difficult to initiate or are in some way undiscussable. I also recognise that humour is culturally rooted and can cut both ways. As Meyer (2000, p. 328) writes, humour “can be a kind, human, friendly, pleasant means of communication ... or it can be wry, cynical, cutting, and even mean ... Thus, does the duality paradox of humour allow rhetorical unification or division - or both at the same time.”

Through this inquiry, I discovered that part of my practice to develop psychological safety with teams involved this duality paradox, carefully bringing some humour and lightness into the room, whilst at the same time deliberately inducing conflict.

For these reasons, I have tried to bring this voice to you in this thesis.

Use of form and its value to both practitioner and academic

If you are a practitioner of team coaching, my sense is that you are likely to appreciate this style of writing and may quickly find interest, resonance, and utility in the pages ahead. If you have come to this work as a practising academic, allow me to stake my claim for this form and help you to take its recommendations seriously.

Perrow (1995, p.213) describes the deeply frustrating experience of his work getting “asphalted” by mainstream journals. His research typically contained elements of story-telling, humour, gentle irony, and evocative phrasing. He refused absolute truths and reproducibility in favour of rich accounts of practice. On receiving his work back from the manuscript editor, much to his dismay, he noticed it had been rolled flat and covered with “asphalt”, removing the “hills, valleys and green grass” he had included. Marshall (2008, p.684) also notices how the received style of conventional academic scholarship communicates

a deadening and suppression of voice, depersonalization, acquiescence to norms. Well established conventions favour linear arguments, rationalized discourse, quantitative analysis (or similar principles applied to qualitative data), value neutrality and so on. Understanding is expected to confer potential control. These are political, gender-associated issues about how knowledge is framed. And much of the resulting writing is dull, boring and poorly contextualized as a result.

Van Maanen (1995, p.687) shares this frustration noticing how impersonal, sanitised, and formulaic academic discourse has become. He wonders if the only way to get into print is to put forward our passions impassionately and selectively use “facts cloaked by scientific ideals of a century long past.” He suggests the primary measure of this paradigm’s worthiness is measured in terms of journal space, recruitment of students to a particular programme, and the tenure of the academics who administer them. More often than not, it leads to a competition of who can have the last word in the “academic blood-sport called debate.”

Just as the corporate world has its own rules, norms of behaviour, and language that make it sound very grand and exclusive (see Section 1.3), so too does conventional academic scholarship. I find it just as disengaging to read glossy, “new” practitioner models which present mnemonic devices without any connection to the existing theoretical stance that underpins their ideas, as I do to read dry, uncontextualised, and unusable academic papers presented with absolute certainty and universal application. My intention in writing this thesis is to widen *both* spaces by using descriptive, resonant, first person practice accounts interwoven with theory. In doing so, I hope to make direct eye contact with you as the reader and make the *utility* of the research central – an aspiration that I believe both academics and practitioners share.

Form is central both to the uniqueness of this thesis and the value to the academic discourse on executive team coaching. By form, I am referring to the “shape of the writing, its pattern, style, flow and eventual structure” (Marshall, 2008, p.684). I am not attempting to separate form and content. To do so might be misleading (Czarniawska, 1997), as it suggests form is something external holding the content within in. Rather, I am aiming for an “analogic appropriateness” (Marshall, 2008, p.685) where form and content are congruent in some way.

The form of thesis can be thought of as an “impressionist tale” (Van Maanen, 2016, p.102). An explicit attempt to combine a “confessional tale” and a “realist tale” which brings together the knower and the known. Confessional tales claim honesty and represent an attempt to take seriously the dialogue between experience and interpretation. They highlight the limitations of positivism, recognising that social facts are co-constructions rather than neutral observables. A realist tale claims authenticity and offers precise, concrete images of what the situation might really be like.

Weick (1989, p.307) suggests that impressionist tales are built upon an “expansive recall of fieldwork experience, that epitomize both the culture and the fieldworker’s way of knowing.” An impressionist tale of the field emerges when these complex experiences are brought to life with words, imagery, and are told in the first person.

A “tightly focused, vibrant, exact, but necessarily imaginative rendering of fieldwork” (Van Maanen, 2016, p.102) is created.

In their attempt to reveal the alchemical process by which behaviours form unwritten rules, impressionist tales introduce a complexity and texture which create a demanding test of researcher comprehension. Researchers put “more on the line, in a smaller space, with greater risks...there is no hiding” (Weick, 1989, p.309). Indeed, it took many years of this doctoral process for me to summon the courage to “accept and seek to express what is, rather than what should be” (Marshall, 2008, p.688).

Going beyond traditional conventions of academic writing can be risky and political. It is perhaps no wonder that some academics struggle with this type of data analysis that is not just dependent on the event itself, but on a textualised, researcher-dependent version of the event. The key argument by guardians of the scientific crown jewels is that because forms such as impressionist tales are somehow not neutral and replicable, they lack validity. I am suggesting that by excluding the stance of the researcher, it makes uncertainty, multiple realities, and organisational messiness (which are at the core of team coaching) virtually impossible to write about. It removes the ability to communicate multiple ways of knowing (intuitive, emotional, tacit, embodied) alongside the propositional (Marshall, 2008) and asks that the researcher contort themselves into a neutral shape in order to be taken seriously. It also risks creating a perception of elitism through exclusion, by lacking fluency in specialised academic terms and not being able to quote from the right author (worse still, mispronounce their name). Ironically, academics themselves may be excluded from the corporate space by not contorting themselves to use more accessible language, which may give an impression that they lack understanding of organisational reality and “how it really is.”

In writing this thesis, I take a position that the researcher is always located *somewhere*. We cannot be neutral observers and *not* have a point of view. Even the most neutral, flat, facts-only approach declares its stance by what it chooses to leave out, in the same way an impressionist tale does by what it chooses to include of the researcher’s position.

I am arguing that we all select a form to give strength to our arguments. More often than not, this choice leads to circular arguments between objective reason and socially co-constructed knowledge, whilst the main “action” and opportunity to *practically create solutions to real life organisational problems* is happening elsewhere. Schön (1983, p.42) describes these areas as the “swampy lowlands, where situations are confusing messes incapable of technical solution and usually involve problems of greatest human concern.”

I find it striking that many recent advancements in team coaching practice (e.g. forum theatre, systemic constellations) emerge not from academics in universities, but from practitioners and private organisations in the field. This is not lost on Levin & Greenwood (2001) who note that many universities exhibit few of the characteristics of learning organisations, frustrating learning and social change in most of their internal processes and engagement with surrounding society.

Raelin (2007, p.513) also observes that

although universities are often depicted as centers of creativity, like most institutions, they develop their own orthodoxies and conventions that often resist innovative methodologies, including practice-based learning.

The form of this thesis, combined with a pragmatic action research approach (see Section 2.5), demands a rigorous, disciplined research effort combined with a critical reflexivity to draw conclusions from evidence. In my opinion, it insists on stronger criteria for creating new knowledge than traditional academic scholarship. It must pass the demanding validity test of creating solutions that *actually work* to help solve real life organisational issues by giving primacy to the practical (Heron, 1996). This is central to my practice. I am not suggesting that every thesis should take the form of an impressionist tale, but that this complex form has the ability to reveal a texture of practice unavailable in traditional academic discourse.

In the seven years of research to get to this point, there are some areas I would have preferred to “asphalt” over because they were either confusing, messy or painful (usually all three together), but I have chosen to include them because that is my

authentic, lived experience as an Executive Team Coach and the nature of practice for many others. I hope my chosen form will enable you to absorb the spirit, not just the literal words of this thesis.

Use of photos

Throughout this thesis, I have included photographs of myself and other important people who have influenced my inquiry. I have chosen to do this because I would like to bring a more embodied presence into the story - both mine and theirs. The photos are more than a moment frozen in time: they are a pathway inside. As you will learn in the forthcoming section, the death of my father when I was a young boy has contributed both to my skills and susceptibilities as a team coach. A camera was one of the few items I inherited from him and I have found photography to be a way to connect with someone I wish I'd had the chance to know more. I hope by seeing these photos you feel a little closer to my inquiry.

Use of literature

In addition to finding inspiration from the literature of the theoretical framework within which this inquiry is situated (see Chapter 2), I have also drawn inspiration from poetry and creative writing. These are pieces of writing that found me at *exactly* the right moment and articulated something that I had been trying to say – yet couldn't quite find the right words to do so.

My reaction to the literature was a visceral one, I would get excited and start copying it out before I had even finished reading it. I would quickly find myself quoting it in my work with others. It would validate something going on for me, which up to that point, I was unable to put into words. This willingness to borrow from and integrate different methods is discussed in Chapter 2.

Having introduced the form of this thesis, allow me to attempt to introduce myself and my work, in the hope that it “adds context and layers to the story being told about the participant” (Ellis, 2004, p. 62).

1.2 Introducing myself – how did I get here?

Have you noticed how anything personal about the researcher typically disappears after the abstract in some academic texts? For me, it results in a “thickness” that often leaves me feeling a little thick. I end up becoming disengaged from what could be useful work. In this thesis, I do not want to disappear. Although it didn't begin this way, my thesis has become a living inquiry where all the pieces of my life, past and present, have become potential areas for inquiry and learning (Torbert, 2001). My past, in particular, contributes to the uniqueness I bring to the work I do and yet, at the same time, creates problems for me.

It feels appropriate then to first give you a sense of who I am and nest my inquiry within this. In the pages ahead, I will introduce myself, explain how I got to this point, describe the work I do, and what it is that I am trying to find out in this inquiry.

Introducing myself

I sit staring at my screen and wonder what I can share with you that will *really* help convey the texture of my experience and how it shows up in my work today, without feeling like I am being solipsistic or self-indulgent. Much like the safety briefing that a hotel manager will do before one of the team workshops I facilitate, I worry you will smile politely, but take little notice, perhaps quietly hoping we can just get on to the main event quickly.

I know I have a tendency to condense my stories and writing down to business shorthand, a “one-slide, no more than 5 bullet points, please” type of communication. Part of this is probably explained by a long-term conditioning to the rules of the game in the organisations in which I work, but there is almost certainly another part, which is about me feeling uncomfortable having to take centre stage, preferring to slip quietly into the chorus behind. To explore this and its impact upon my research, it feels *necessary* to situate this inquiry in my life story first.

As the poet David Whyte describes²:

“One of the things the Irish say is – the thing about the past is, it's not the past.
It's right here. In this room. In this conversation.”

My past is not easy to write about.

Mainly because I'm honestly not sure what is true anymore and what isn't.

If I had written this section before the death of my mother, it might have been easier, but since her death in 2012, my understanding of how I grew up continues to be reconstructed in the light of letters, legal documents, audio cassettes, and family conversations that were previously hidden from me. I don't know how I might share this feeling of constant recalibration and decentring with you, but I will try.

I grew up in a North London suburb. I was the only child to Anthony Richard Pope, born in Kolkata, India. He worked in the insurance industry and had come to the UK with the rest of his Anglo-Indian family in his early twenties.

My mother was Evelyn Joan Pope, born in Carlisle, UK. She was a bookkeeper.

This is what is printed on my birth certificate and at the time of writing this thesis I believe it to be true.

For now, at least.

² Tippet, K. (Producer). (2016, April 7). *On Being with Krista Tippet: David Whyte, The Conversational Nature of Reality* [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <http://www.onbeing.org>

Image 1: My father and me



I remember very little about my childhood until the death of my father when I was eight years old. We were walking to our car, having enjoyed egg and cress sandwiches and a cream tea at Fenwick department store in Brent Cross, when he had a sudden heart attack and collapsed in front of me. It happened in parking space G17. I can still hear the thud as he hit the concrete. I can still see my father lying on the ground, with a cracked tooth and blood pouring from his mouth. As I write this, I am instantly taken back to the terrified little boy running around the car park shouting for help. It is still hard for me to write 37 years later.

He survived the heart attack but died a few months later of another on January 6, 1983. The official diagnosis was untreated angina. His sister, Valerie, would tell me, some 34 years later, that he died of a broken heart – but one that was broken by a painful relationship, not a cardiovascular condition.

The only memories I have of my father were walking for what seemed like hours in the forest and playing with Lego together. In my practice today, I often find myself on walks with clients to help them find a different way of being and have even used Lego to explore different ways of knowing. I had no idea before this inquiry how deeply connected these activities were to the memories of my father.

My biographical reconstruction process began when I received some of my father's personal belongings shortly after he died. I was given a torn cardboard box that contained three things: a camera, a wallet, and a pair of binoculars. In the wallet there was a folded picture of a baby, dressed in pink. "How curious to dress me in pink," I thought, and asked my mother about this. In a moment I'm sure she later regretted, she blurted out that it was *not* me, but my sister Sarah Jane, who had been born 10 years before me and had died of a cot death when she was a few days old.

Within the space of a week, I had lost my father and found out that I also had a sister who had died.

Some nine years later, that sister would knock three times on our front door. I would meet Sarah Jane, now known as Lynn and very much alive and well.

I mention religion here slightly hesitantly, in fear of offending or polarising us, which is sincerely not my intent. It's important context for this inquiry because experiencing shame has been a theme in much of the work I have done on my inner critic. As I have reflected, I notice that shame was a key theme in the doctrine I received at that time.

I went to an all-boys Catholic school. My mother was a practising Catholic and that meant getting involved in the church throughout my childhood – from being an altar boy, to playing the church organ, to playing with my Dinky cars along the church pews on a Saturday morning, while watching her water oasis blocks and arrange flowers. Such was her commitment; I can even remember her strongly suggesting I enter the priesthood (can you imagine the confusion at Father Pope?)

According to my school reports, I was a quiet child.

In my report cards, my teachers would write comments such as: "Nicholas is rarely heard from in class ... rarely participates." A few teachers would write something completely different. My science and music teachers would write comments like "mature, sensible lad, contributes well to class discussions." I was clearly "seen" by some and not others.

IMAGE 2: Early school reports

SUBJECT REPORT FORM

Student Form

Grade/Mark

Comment: Religion 2 Kells
Nicholas Pope

Although an outgoing person outside the class, Nicholas is rarely heard from in class. He listens to class discussions but rarely participates. He participates fully in all other aspects of the class.

19 July 1988

Signed Bio Paul S.C. Date

SUBJECT Science REPORT FORM

Student Nicholas Pope Form 2K.

Grade/Mark

Comment: *A mature sensible lad who has produced work of a good standard. Well done!*

Signed Ewart Popkins Date 20/7/88

As I progressed through school, I found that languages and music came easily to me but I had to work much harder with science and mathematics. Unfortunately, what really interested me was science and from an early age I went about trying to understand how the body worked and set my sights on a career in medicine.

As I reflect whilst I write this, perhaps my interest in medicine was linked to one day being able to prevent the early death of someone else's father.

An area I missed out upon completely was sport. The sports teachers at school acted more like army drill instructors and only seemed interested in those who could play sport well. There was only an “A” team and if you didn't make that, you were pretty much discarded. There was no one at home to kick a ball about with or shoot some hoops. I also lived eight miles away from school and without a car, I couldn't make training or matches. On top of this, and perhaps more significantly, I was absolutely rubbish.

In all of my school years, I did not represent my school once in any competitive team games. I was too worried I would let others down with my sporting inability. The first team I was ever a part of was when I joined the corporate world after university. When we did play during games lessons – unable to be the star goal scorer, I would instead bring encouragement, problem solving, conflict resolution, and motivation to the team. This is how I found my place in teams.

On a positive note, I was very grateful that my school experience was largely without any significant bullying. In my work today with executives from large corporations, as I learn about their personal stories, I find it extraordinary how many of them suffered terribly with being bullied at school.

So far, I hope you have got the picture of someone who preferred to keep in the background, encouraging others to score the winning goal – believing he wasn't quite good enough to do it himself. Someone who found their own place to belong by being helpful and helping others to belong. Someone who developed really good skills of “fitting in” and strived to be helpful as their way of getting their needs met. Perhaps my mother's proudest moment was when I became Deputy Head Boy and at the same time received the “Gentleman of the Year” trophy in my penultimate year of school (an award my old school friends today still gleefully remind me about).

Whilst not involved with sports, my helpfulness was put to good use with the school's charity work and the music department. I developed good friends and I felt happy.

In my last year of school, my trajectory towards a career in science was well on-track. Going into my A-level exams, I had received conditional offers for a place at two decent Medical Schools. I needed three B grades.

If you are not yet too bored by this story, you might remember I mentioned earlier that my sister Lynn (who did not die, as my mother had told me) would find her way to me. Ten years before I was born, my mother had fallen pregnant (I assume to my father but there is no way of knowing this for certain) and left home for six months to give birth to Lynn in secret. When she was born, she was put up for adoption, a pain that I cannot imagine. 27 years later, when Lynn's adopted parents died, she decided to find her birth parents.

So it was that one day I found myself responding to a knock on the door and opened it to meet my biological sister. There's way too much *stuff* to unpack here (it finds its way into the inquiry in Chapter 4); the key point is that this experience happened a few months before my A-level final exams and, perhaps unsurprisingly, was deeply unsettling. I missed a lot of school, which contributed in some way to me failing to meet the grade requirement in one of my subjects. Faced with the failure of the only plan I had, I entered the clearing process and found a degree course that interested me, Genetics. It also provided a shortened route to study Medicine should I decide to pursue it afterwards.

Despite not following the plan I had intended, I enjoyed studying genetics. I was studying at the university where genetic fingerprinting had recently been discovered so the institution was well funded. The applications of genetic research and gene therapy seemed almost limitless at that time. I found fascinating the idea of being able to identify the particular genetic sequences that were responsible for different conditions and indeed began this doctoral inquiry in a similar fashion (I will say more about this in Chapter 2).

It became clear to me in my last year of university that I was not destined for a life at a laboratory bench. I deeply missed the relational aspects of getting to know people and struggled to find a sense that my work really mattered. I was not able to find a place to belong by pipetting reactant into sequencing trays. I was also not in a

financial position to fund myself through medical school and had noticed that my original ambition to become a medical doctor had drifted away. Perhaps spending a year with the medical students and getting a taste of the harsh reality of the public health system had dampened my enthusiasm.

After graduation, I immediately started work with a life science company. I developed a reputation for helping the new recruits get up to speed quickly and was promoted into a training and development role. Since then, I have spent the last 22 years in various learning and development, talent, and leadership development roles within the Human Resources functions of large, multinational organisations. I have designed and delivered development experiences for thousands of people, across all corners of the world. During this time, I set out to professionalise my expertise by attending nearly every certification available for psychometric instruments and leadership 360s³. I have been trained in many different coaching models and approaches, such as Gestalt, NLP⁴ and Transactional Analysis. Perhaps this is because I love to learn new things. Perhaps this is because I never quite got over failing to get into Medical School and have been compensating ever since to show (to whom?) I was good enough.

With each new course or qualification “badge,” I became increasingly convinced that one could arrive at a similar (or better) level of insight through deep listening, paying attention, and a kind intention. I gradually slowed down the course collecting.

In 2012, my mother died of pancreatic cancer. She was in poor health for as long as I can remember, suffering from diabetes and various other chronic health conditions. She contracted an infection which resulted in her leg being amputated, then shortly afterwards cancer was found throughout her body. During her life, I never remember my mother being happy. She had a gift in always being able to find something wrong in any situation. I wonder if she could never quite allow herself to be happy after giving away her child. Whilst Lynn and I had developed a strong relationship, the two of them were never able to reconcile what had happened.

³ A 360 is an individual development tool that collates feedback from multiple respondents.

⁴ Neuro-Linguistic Programming

I was 36 years old when my mother died. I remember having a dual sense of relief and responsibility now that both of my parents had died, instantly feeling 20 years older. I returned to the flat in North London that I had grown up in to empty it of her belongings and it was here that, once again, I underwent another biographical reconstruction. I found a stack of paperwork – letters between my mother and father, private investigator reports, and court documents. I learnt that my father had never actually lived with my mother and me. They had been separated before I was born and he had lived with someone else. I always thought it odd that I had so few memories of my father and suddenly it all made sense.

He wasn't there.

How did I not know that?

If I had known, I may not have buried them together (as per my mother's wishes) in the same grave in a North London cemetery.

Image 3: Father & Mother



I still wonder how I *just didn't know* this.

A glance through old photos will not find a single photo of my mother and father, except on their wedding day and honeymoon.

And yet I somehow missed this. What else might I have missed? As will be discussed in the following chapter, these frequent reconstructions have influenced my epistemology and relationship to concepts of truth and certainty.

The necessity to *redescribe* events has even turned out to be helpful.

In 2013, a year after her death, I enrolled for the Ashridge Doctorate in Organisational Change (ADOC). At the time, I had climbed the ranks within HR and held the role of Global Learning Director for a large, multi-national consumer goods company. I was responsible for the Learning & Development of the company's 183,000 employees globally. As part of our Executive Programmes, I had set up a Top Team Development practice (I'll explain what Top Team Development is in the pages ahead). Having grown weary of traditional development programmes that used all the tools I had decided to leave behind, I hoped to develop my own practice and understanding in a different way.

In 2014 (a year and a half into ADOC), two significant things happened.

Firstly, I was becoming increasingly called upon to work directly with the most senior leadership teams in the organisation – teams that are responsible for several billion Euros of company revenue. I was once described by a senior leader as “one of us but will keep us honest.” Perhaps through this work, I was aspiring to Meyerson's (2001) concept of a “Tempered Radical.”

Tempered radicals bear no banners; they sound no trumpets. Their ends are sweeping, but their means are mundane. They are firm in their commitments, yet flexible in the ways they fulfil them. Their actions may be small but can spread like a virus. They yearn for rapid change but trust in patience. They often work individually yet pull people together. Instead of stridently pressing their agendas, they start conversations. Rather than battling powerful foes, they seek powerful friends. (Meyerson, 2001, p.100)

Meyerson's description of working individually and pulling people together seemed to resonate well with how I found myself working within the organisation. You may also notice that it is similar to the role I described in the teams growing up. I was starting conversations that, in some small way, seemed to help “unfreeze” (Lewin, 1947) the senior teams that had sought out my assistance.

Meyerson also describes the *tempered radical* as somehow being at odds with the dominant culture. She argues that one of the reasons that they are able to think outside of the box is because they are never quite fully in it. I was finding that the more exposure I had to working with increasingly senior teams, the less I felt I belonged in that box.

To illustrate this, consider a movie scene from L. Frank Baum's children's book *The Wizard of Oz*. Having finally made it to Oz, Dorothy and her companions are transfixed by a huge projected image of the wizard, who talks with a loud booming voice. Special effects help to create the impression of a real, powerful wizard.

Dorothy's brave dog, Toto, picks up the scent of something suspicious and sniffs out a booth with a curtain pulled across it. He yanks open the curtain, revealing an old man who is talking into a microphone whilst furiously pressing buttons and pulling switches.

There is no all-powerful wizard. Just an old man. Having been found out, the old man seems to ignore the fact he has been exposed and yells into the microphone, “pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!”

Image 4: Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!⁵



When I pulled back the curtain, I found most leaders were just trying their best to manage the multiple pressures upon them. Some were deeply purpose-driven. But I was also finding that seeing behind the curtain sometimes involved witnessing a painful incongruence between stated and *actually lived* values. Leaders who worked hard to be *seen* to be doing the right things, behind closed doors might be bullying their teams. Perhaps it was naïve of me to think otherwise, but each time I came across this, I moved further outside the box. Meyerson unfortunately doesn't offer much advice here except to be patient and keep going in the face of setbacks. Which I may well have done, were it not for the second significant thing to happen that year.

In October 2014, one of my close friends from secondary school developed pancreatic cancer and died, aged 40. Harry was the same age as me and, like me, he also had three children. After my mother died, I had set up a band to play gigs that would raise money for various pancreatic cancer charities. In selecting a singer for the band, Harry was my first choice for his confidence, popularity, and all-round good-natured manner. Two years after setting up the band, he was taken by the very cancer we were raising money to fight.

⁵ Gerling, K. (2019, August 8). *Pull back the curtain* [Web log message]. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@KellyGerling/pull-back-the-curtain-2019-earth-day-talk-video-and-transcript-6b520d6b856e>

His death and the death of my own father at a similar age, provoked me to ask myself some difficult questions about whether I was really living a purposeful life and doing enough of what I loved. “We only have one life,” people will often say. I decided that we only have one death and have the potential for many lives. I made the decision to resign from work.

In November 2014, I set up my own business, The Academy of High Performance Teams. Having been a buyer of corporate learning and development services for many years, I felt it was important to have some sort of “edge”; something to be known for, rather than a catch-all development solution. I would sigh inside when I met vendors who claimed to *specialise* in “leadership, management, coaching, strategy, and negotiation skills.” How can you be a specialist in all of those things? I created a proposition to specialise in top team development and set an aspiration to work term-time only, allowing me to be around more for my family. The company name “The Academy” sought to honour my scientific roots and project a professionalism of practice that “fitted in” with the dominant narrative of many large organisations.

A final (for now!) biographical reconstruction occurred in 2019. I had found an old cassette recording of my father telling me stories, set to the sounds of birdsong in the background. My children today have gigabytes of photos and videos of their life growing up and have seen themselves many times on video. For me, it was the first time I had heard my father's voice for nearly 40 years, as well as listening to my own (weirdly cockney) voice as a child. I found it overloaded my emotions upon listening, violently tripping a fuse. If I listened too deeply, everything would shut down and I could feel nothing. I took my time with it, returning from time to time to listen.

On one occasion, I took the tape to my father's two sisters as I thought they might like to hear their brother's voice, whose death they still mourned deeply. I wondered if it might be helpful and perhaps even joyful for them to hear his voice after nearly 40 years.

I play them the tape.

I wait for the moment of recognition and associated love and emotion.

One minute in and there is nothing but silence.

Two minutes in and they are looking quizzically at each other.

My Aunt stops the tape.

“I’m sorry Nicholas,” she says, “But that’s not your father.”

I do what I believe most rational people would do in this situation – I suggest “best of two.”

I play them the tape again and they become more certain that the voice on the tape is not my father. They recognise my voice, but the man I identify as my father appears not to be known to them. My reaction is to laugh and wait for the drums that signal the end of a soap opera.

I cannot explain this. Perhaps in the years ahead I will learn more. I am not inclined to today. For the moment I am happy to leave it unprocessed. Reconstructions are exhausting. I have built new foundations and am happy about the depth to which they are dug.

I finish this introductory section with some critical reflections on what I have written and summarise how these themes might help you understand the chapters ahead.

Critical reflections and summary

- These frequent biographical reconstructions have contributed to becoming much less absolute and dualistic in my thinking. This willingness to “redescribe” has become a source of strength and strongly contributes to what I will describe in the next chapter as a Pragmatist's worldview. At the same time, such reconstructions have made me less certain of my own identity and roots, which I find is also a source of vulnerability in the work I do. I have become very alert to signs of not quite belonging. This in turn has contributed to an over-developed critical inner voice which is ready and waiting to let me know I do not belong in certain situations and senior teams. I explore this phenomenon more in Chapter 4.
- I learned to get *really* good at fitting in. In doing so, I think I developed an ability to rapidly scan the people I was with – noticing pace and patterns, then adjusting my own to fit in. I gave primacy to fitting in and, in doing so, forgot that I too had a voice. I explore finding my own voice and not just fitting in throughout this thesis.
- The aspect of enabling people to be “seen” – helping others understand them, their stories, their vulnerabilities, their gifts – has become central to my work today. I liken it to the Zulu greeting *Sawubona*, which translates as “We see you.” It acts as an invitation to witness and be present. The response to the greeting is *Ngikhona*, which means “I am here.” There is a subtlety to the gesture and response which is perhaps lost in the translation. Embedded within the exchange is a sense that until you saw me, I didn't exist. A person is a person because of other people. The concept of a relational, socially constructed reality has informed my choice of methodology and will be discussed in the next chapter.
- Experiencing the death of my father at an early age has left me with a deep sense of my own mortality. I think about my own death regularly and despite the fact that I am active and in good health, I fully expect to die young. Unlike my mother, I tend to see the positive in virtually all situations. It mostly creates energy in the teams I work with but is also sometimes to my detriment. I have a tendency to

underplay the negative and highlight the positive, but sometimes negativity is so powerful it can undermine any positive efforts.

- I notice I have not said much about my life today at the time of writing this thesis. Some of this will come through in the chapters ahead. I am a father to three children (two girls and a boy) and in a strong and happy marriage. My wife is a unique source of reassurance, loud laughter, and love. I have laid new roots. The business I set up has grown considerably and allowed me to largely work term time to become the father I was not able to have. We spend our free weekends adventuring, wild camping in the forest, and playing Lego (as well as bickering and staring at screens). I can often be found on the sidelines of a sports pitch, happily cheering the kids along at rugby, football, netball, lacrosse, cricket, and cross-country – not quite understanding the rules but simply delighted that all three children are having the experiences I never had of representing their school at sports. Music continues to play an important part in my life and I have once again turned to this to help me express aspects of this inquiry.

In the next section, I'll introduce you to my world of team coaching and orient you to the organisations in which it is done.

1.3 The organisational context and introducing team coaching

If I could choose only one word to describe my experience of corporate life today, it would be “impatient.”

Organisations are full of impatient leaders who expect that if they have communicated a direction of travel for the business, then it should just happen, right? Invariably, when it doesn't happen instantly, they get frustrated and try something else, which often results in added complexity and organisational inertia.

As we begin to consider teams and the concept of collective leadership, it's worth noting that much of what is considered modern management practice today has evolved from a highly individualistic and mechanistic view of institutions and human behaviour.

Beginning with Frederick Taylor in the 1880s, there have been several attempts to apply scientific principles to management, through analysis and synthesis of workflows. It reduced effects down to individual causes, offering great certainty in the stability of the solutions. Performance was assessed using a scale. People were given numbers – as parts of the machine, focussing only on what could be observed and measured. As a result, there are certain things that most organisations believe today: (a) there is usually a root cause to all problems and (b) we can control and objectively assess human performance.

Most large organisations, despite “de-layering” programmes, are still incredibly hierarchical with a complex organisational matrix that details who has control, authority, and responsibility. Terms such as “managing the matrix” are common.

Tremendous amounts of time and energy are ploughed into the planning and execution of these solutions, despite the fact that similar solutions failed on previous occasions. Very few have the courage to publicly admit that they are getting better at playing yesterday's game, for the technical change illusion is so seductive. Openly admitting that we don't have the answers for these complex, interdependent problems is rarely an option, which Menzies (1960) calls a “Defence

against anxiety.” In times of uncertainty and high anxiety, the analytical expert approach offering a “turn-key” solution is rarely turned down. Those who can argue their position and defend their assumptions tend to get rewarded as they have a “bias for action” and a “can-do attitude.” *Less debate, more action* is a common mantra at leadership team tables: “Managers hate to sit looking at something from all angles, they like to get on with it,” says Weisboard (2012).

Taking time to unpack the assumptions often serves only to emphasise and enhance the sense of anxiety. In such a world, science is seen as the only way to reveal the truth. But such truths and certainties are hard to find in these “Liquid Times,” as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2005) calls them. An unprecedented climate and unexpected geopolitical events are becoming increasingly more common. At the time of completing this thesis, my home country of the United Kingdom is just recovering from exceptional flooding over the last few months, having spent the last three years in a chaotic process to exit the European Union, and is now facing a period of unprecedented lockdown and self-isolation to combat a new worldwide viral pandemic. Organisations are constantly restructuring in the hope of delivering certainty – but we live in a deeply uncertain world, hoping for a certainty that never comes.

Organisations can also have a tremendously positive impact upon their employees and communities through social mobility, providing purposeful work, and personal development. In my own experience and that of others (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996), the culture of the top leadership team within the organisation is a strong predictor of how employees will experience the organisation.

The “Top Team” is typically comprised of a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and six to twelve direct reports. Each direct report leads a particular geography or function within the business and collectively this group is often referred to as the “Top Team,” “Executive Leadership Team,” or “C-Suite.” Beneath this team, there is often an “Extended Leadership Team” of typically 30–40 people, who are considered to be some of the most important change leaders in the organisation.

The top team has to govern across a number of territories, dynamically allocating resources in response to changing business needs. The stakes are usually very high, with a constant pressure on short-term results, particularly for those publicly-owned organisations which have to report to the stock market on a quarterly basis.

This unique high-altitude view over the organisation has the potential to cast a long shadow and the leadership tone set by the board heavily influences the wider organisational culture (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Indeed, Finkelstein and Hambrick (1996) suggest that the top team is a better predictor of an organisation's performance than the CEO in isolation. I would largely agree with this, except in cases where the CEO sets such a loud beat (see entrainment in Section 3.2) that he or she overpowers the team.

To illustrate the impact of leadership culture, consider the following example of Thomas Cook, a travel firm founded in 1841, which failed and went into liquidation in 2019 with an estimated cost to the taxpayer of £156m⁶.

The following is a transcript of a parliamentary inquiry where former Chairman, Frank Meysman, was interviewed by Rachel Reeves MP, Chair of the Business Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee⁷.

⁶ BBC (2020, March 19). Thomas Cook: Taxpayers face £156m bill for company's collapse. *BBC News*, Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news>

⁷ Johnston, J. (2019, October 15). Rachel Reeves slams “deluded” Thomas Cook bosses as they refuse to hand back bonuses. *PoliticsHome*, Retrieved from <http://www.politicshome.com>

Reeves: "In the end, this focus on underlying profits caught up with you, didn't it?"

Chairman Frank Meysman denies it – saying there was "a lot of effort" underway to reduce debts, offer exciting new holidays.

He tries to paint a picture of success ... saying the firm had 20 million happy customers, exciting new routes, a joint venture in China was looking good. There was a lot of restructuring underway, he insists

Reeves has heard enough!

She reminds Meysman that he has been summoned to the committee because 9,000 people have lost their jobs, and 150,000 holidaymakers had to be brought home at a cost to the taxpayer.

"With all respect, Mr Meysman, you can point to as many successes as you like, but you have brought down a 178-year-old business with huge repercussions for customers, staff, and taxpayers."

"So, you can point to the successes, but I'll point to the failures and they hugely outweigh the successes."

Reeves points out that Meysman and his former colleagues began the session by apologising, but was that contrition genuine?

"I think you're deluded about the business you ran."

"You chaired a business that has gone under because of the decisions made collectively by your management team."

Teams make up the front and middle layers of most organisations, yet within the ranks of the top team of an organisation there is often very little evidence to suggest real team behaviours such as collective accountability, interdependency, and shared purpose.

Despite the prevalence and increasing value of team performance as you progress further to the front line, non-team behaviours continue to prevail at the top with an individual, siloed working style being, in my experience, the norm. As Katzenbach and Smith (1998) have commented, this paradox is not easy to explain. I will offer my own observations in Chapter 6 on how busyness, uncertainty, and fear contribute to the formation of these non-team behaviours.

Introducing team coaching

Katzenbach (1993) describes two main classes of teams:

- (i) single-leader unit
- (ii) real team.

A single-leader mode of behaviour fits the expectations of the established hierarchy that governs most organisations. In this mode, a single leader will direct the work of their team, focussed primarily on integrating agendas and executing decisions. This mode of leadership conserves executive time, a valued currency of executive life. This hub-and-spoke autocracy is the dominant mode of working I see in most top teams.

Katzenbach's definition of a real team mode of behaviour is characterised by a more common level of commitment among its members, rather than its leader. A real team tends to become self-motivating, anchored by a deep sense of common purpose.

Through working together, the team are able to deliver performance results greater than the single-leader unit approach. McKinsey found that 90 percent of investors think the quality of the management team is the single most important non-

financial factor when evaluating an initial public offering. They estimate that there is a 1.9 times increased likelihood of having above-median financial performance when the top team is working together toward a common vision⁸.

However, this approach is more demanding on its members and Katzenbach (1993) argues that in the beginning it is less efficient in achieving key governance tasks. In practice, the issue is that once this way of working is established, it is very difficult to shift an autocracy to democracy as relationship norms and habits are quickly established and require energy to reset them.

(Journal entry, March 2015)

"Are you a team or a meeting?" I ask the group.

They smile. They know they are a meeting.

Paradoxically, the use of teams in the workplace is both a response to complexity and a further element of complexity. Ineffective teamwork can mean very high coordination costs and little gain in productivity. In some corporations and governments, the formation of teams, task forces, and committees is a defensive act that gives the illusion of real work while disguising unproductive attempts to preserve the status quo.

At best, this does little harm because fundamentally it does nothing; at worst, team building becomes a ritualistic technique blocking important actions that might actually help the organisation change.

⁸ Keller, S., & Meaney, M. (2017, June). High-performing teams: A timeless leadership topic. *McKinsey Quarterly*, Retrieved from <http://www.mckinsey.com>

1.4 Introducing my practice

In the UK alone, there are over 30,000 registered training providers⁹ who offer some form of team-based development. Globally, there are thousands more. Winning business is a business in itself. As you read in Chapter 1, finding and winning a piece of work can often involve lengthy procurement processes which take several weeks and pit potential vendors against each other. I know several highly-skilled team coaches who are simply not able to find enough work to support themselves. They often end up going out of business and going back into the very organisations they chose to leave.

I mention these points because I feel it is important to acknowledge a commercial reality in team coaching that is often omitted from the literature. It is a competitive field and winning new clients is not easy. Some team coaches are reliant on one or two big clients and deeply fear losing them. It is very easy to busy yourself with delivery and not do any prospecting for new work, which creates a significant risk should anything happen to your main client.

Additionally, clients generally do not ask you to come in to work systemically, hold up the mirror, and shake up the system (if they do ask you to do this, rarely will they actually expect you to do it). Look carefully and an organisational path naturally appears where, for good reasons (paying your bills, feeding your family), a team coach must decide exactly how much they want to disturb the equilibrium of the very system that is feeding them. The space and permission to disturb is socially constructed and negotiated on a second-by-second basis. Step outside it at your own peril. An ethical maturity is fundamental to navigating these spaces and is considered in Chapter 6.

I receive all of my new clients through recommendations from existing ones. I don't run any referral schemes or do any marketing of my services. For me, it doesn't seem to work or fit with my "backstage" style. My strategy for business development is to try to be as useful as I can to existing clients. Increasingly, prompted by this inquiry to move towards an extended epistemology (see Chapter 2), one of the ways I am

⁹ Education and Skills Funding Agency (2018, January 23). *Register of training organisations*. Retrieved from <http://www.gov.uk>

doing this is by convening spaces for clients to reflect, reconnect with themselves, and use different ways of knowing to redescribe their experiences of working in organisations. Creating the opportunity to pause and reconnect is perhaps the most powerful way I can thank them for their business and generate future opportunities.

I work with around 20–25 international leadership teams each year. Most of these teams are CEO-led Executive Leadership Teams and Extended Leadership Teams from FTSE and NYSE 100 organisations. Most are global organisations with very recognisable brands and high-profile CEOs. This creates some ethical dilemmas for me in how I might share these stories, which I will cover in the next chapter.

Clients most often seek me out to help them with three scenarios of team development:

- new teams
- teams in trouble
- teams facing a significant business challenge.

New teams

It's rare that a brand-new team is formed in an existing organisation, but more commonplace that a new leader joins and significantly restructures an existing team – which in effect gives rise to the feeling of a new team. The initial brief is typically concerned with new members “getting to know” each other, aligning on a new vision, and committing to team ways of working.

Teams in trouble

This is my term for dysfunctional teams where there is significant interpersonal conflict between some of the team members. Top teams are watched a lot more than they realise and these conflictual behaviours trickle down to their direct reports: “leaders get the culture they behave.” At some point, the real economic impact of the dysfunctions is felt – information is withheld, resulting in poor decision-making

which has a material impact. It is at this point that help is often sought externally to help resolve difficulties amongst the team.

Teams facing a significant business challenge

Sometimes teams get “stuck.” The behaviours, rituals, and ways of working built up through years of working together no longer seem able to respond in a substantial way to the shifting circumstances of the business. The team is typically not dysfunctional; rather, it is characterised by polite exchanges as members have learned to anticipate and accommodate the triggers of their teammates. Prompted by a sudden shift in the competitive or political landscape, teams often reach out for some external help.

The sequence of my team coaching

In this thesis, I describe four stages to a typical team coaching assignment:

Getting in, Getting on, Getting out and Getting over it.

I will lightly introduce each stage here. I will be expanding on these in later chapters.

Getting in

In my practice, the *Getting in* process happens from the first moment I respond to a request for information from a potential client, who is typically the Head of HR, the Strategy Director, or the Team Leader themselves.

Choosing a team coach is deeply relational. A client once described it as like handing the keys of your most prized car to someone you don't know. Drive it too fast or carelessly and you may do untold damage. Drive it too slowly and you miss the opportunity to experience what it can do. Crash it and never be forgiven.

At this stage, what I am trying to do is manage my client's anxiety – they are worried about making the wrong choice. I am leveraging everything I learnt in my childhood about fitting in. How to be familiar-but-different and project a confidence that I can

genuinely help. I make use of anything “that works” (we will explore this idea in the next chapter). I share articles from *Harvard Business Review* and introduce my own team frameworks. I am paying attention to everything in this process, from how easy it is to set up a call, to the language they use in their emails; everything they no longer notice that may be significant to the culture of the team. I am referring to work I have done in similar organisations and testing the commercial viability of working together.

Getting on

Getting on marks the start of the team coaching process. This stage is characterised by joint sensemaking, co-designing a team development journey, and supporting the team through physical, virtual, collective, and individual coaching. Broadly, my work here is about forming and holding a space to enable the team to do the work they need to do, without getting in their way too much. At some point, it usually requires having both the courage and creative form to be able to speak something risky into the room in order to help reveal the team and organisation to itself.

A typical assignment with a team will last nine to twelve months. In that time, I will work with them three to four times. The behind the scenes work with the various team stakeholders could involve 20–50 interactions.

Getting out

One of my goals throughout the team coaching process is to make the team less dependent on me as their coach. If a team requires me to be present in a conversation in order to challenge the leader, or have more heated conversations, then I have in some way failed them by not building their confidence and capacity to do this by themselves.

I have found it important to have a defined moment where I *Get out*. It's very easy as a team coach to end up being a piece of the furniture, or personal support to the CEO as a surrogate Chief HR Officer. When I have not paid attention to this, I have found myself sitting through meetings wondering what smart comment I can make that might justify the investment of me being there with the team.

Getting over it

Over the last 20 years, I estimate that I have worked with more than 400 different leadership teams in over 60 countries. The vast majority of these assignments have felt to me as though they were fairly purposeful, enjoyable, and in some small way, I hope, helpful to the work of the team and the wellbeing of the individuals.

However, in undertaking this inquiry, I have tried to shift my professional practice away from the set pieces like personality inventories and strategy development towards the navigation of difficult and contested territories, such as vulnerability, psychological safety, collaboration, and wilful blindness (Heffernan, 2012). The actual amount of space available in organisations to do this work is very limited and sometimes, despite my best intentions, I have felt as if I've made a complete mess of it. This has resulted in a handful of team assignments where I have found myself unable to *Get over* an experience in which my approach didn't work in the way the client and I had expected.

The common factor in all of these experiences was some level of organisational pain that was not dealt with by the organisation itself. As a team coach, and particularly as someone who owes much of their sense of belonging to being helpful, I have found myself in (or have put myself in) situations that required working with difficult, "toxic" emotions. In Chapter 4, I describe the work of the Toxic Handler (Frost, 2003) and my experience of how this toxicity can be absorbed by the coach.

In my case, I kept reexperiencing the emotions of difficult conversations and re-enacting these somatically. In one example, I became paralysed with a back spasm on the morning of a difficult workshop and had to phone the CEO to tell them I couldn't make it. I became so unwell that I was in a constant state of exhaustion and anxiety.

The places where I ended up getting really hurt may well have been the places where I really helped, but at a tremendous personal cost to my physical and emotional wellbeing. *Getting over it* is about working with these difficult experiences in a different way that seeks to be more generative than toxic. It is not about today's

buzzwords of resilience or bouncing back. It is about recognising that these are difficult situations, trying to stay inquiring despite the pain, and deploying whatever works to speed up recovery.

Summary

In this section, I have introduced the organisational context in which I work and said something about the work of team coaching itself. A further review of team coaching theory, alongside my practice experience, will follow in Chapter 3.

I have built upon McArdle's (2008) *Getting in, Getting on, Getting out* progression by adding a fourth stage, *Getting over it*. A further exploration into this stage follows in Chapter 4.

Having introduced the territory and how I got here, in the next section I will set out what this inquiry is seeking to find out.

1.5 Research question and aims

I am going to be deliberately concise in this section.

I feel that if my research question takes a long pre-amble to introduce and contextualise, it's probably the wrong question (I have watched the eyes of my clients and fellow researchers glaze over as I attempt a lengthy explanation of what it is that I am trying to find out).

My research question is:

How can I improve my practice of executive team coaching through paying greater attention to the inner work required to *Get in*, *Get on* and *Get out* of large corporations, as well as *Get over* difficult assignments?

The aims of my inquiry are:

- to research into my own professional practice and use myself as an instrument to help understand what works in improving the quality and range of interventions as an executive team coach
- to be of service to others, particularly those in coaching professions who might be struggling to *Get over* difficult assignments, by documenting my own struggles
- to offer an original contribution to the field of team coaching by detailing practice from senior teams in large, multi-national corporations.

1.6 Why and to whom this work might matter

I sincerely hope this inquiry is useful to many professionals working in the field of Organisational Development, particularly external team coaches and internal HR professionals who support leadership teams from within as part of their core responsibilities. Particularly when things don't go as intended, I hope my research into *Getting over it* helps you to continue your important role as Tempered Radicals.

Outside of large corporations, I often meet team coaches who work in the public and not-for-profit sectors who express an interest in doing more work in the corporate sector, but can't quite seem to *Get in*. I hope this inquiry acts as a Phrasebook and Rough Guide to those seemingly foreign lands.

Finally, I hope this work might in some way resonate with senior leaders in the types of executive teams I work with. Their desire and *necessity* to do inner work is so often ignored and denied by the organisations they work within, in favour of short-term business delivery. As you reflect on my own struggles and what I experience as I work with you, perhaps like me, you will also start paying attention to the man or woman behind the curtain.

1.7 My original contribution to knowledge

“Original” is a bold word.

In my world of team coaching, I find the need to be original is generally unhelpful. Here's what it looks like in practice:

Consider a typical leadership team, sitting together discussing some kind of business issue. If the team have something in their culture about needing to be original or particularly clever, what you will observe is very little dialogue and collective listening and a lot of advocating positions. If they are a polite team they may say something like “Can I build upon that?” and then say something completely unrelated, which in no way builds upon the contribution of the previous person.

Paradoxically, I find hunting for the original and unique contribution often shuts down my creative processes as I frantically search for an idea, test for its uniqueness, and discard it when I realise it's not “new,” then repeat the process.

Rather than consider originality as singularly new and unique, I rather like Pat Thomson's perspective. Pat is the editor of the *Educational Action Research Journal*, Professor of Education, and regular PhD examiner. In addressing the notion of originality, she refers to the idea of originality as expressed by the novelist David Lodge, who describes the notion of *defamiliarisation* – giving the reader a different perspective on something familiar.

As David Lodge argues, originality is taking the reader, and I'm suggesting the thesis reader/examiner too, somewhere which is simultaneously familiar and not. Original thinking and writing defamiliarises and in doing so, recovers a newness about the topic no matter how well trodden it is.

An original contribution to knowledge offers the reader a chance to re-view and re-think the event/text/phenomena in question. That's the kind of original contribution I'm interested in.¹⁰

The spirit of originality is for me a chance to review and rethink what we believe about team coaching. This thesis seeks to make an original contribution in the following areas:

a) Contribution to the context of team coaching – Executive Leadership Teams

With a few helpful exceptions (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss & Hackman, 2007; Hawkins, 2014), there are surprisingly few case studies written about executive team coaching in very large, complex global corporations. This inquiry contributes to the context of team coaching with practice illustrations from FTSE 100 executive leadership teams.

I believe the lack of case studies could be due to two reasons. Firstly, the opportunity to coach an executive leadership team does not occur very frequently. Once a new CEO joins, norms of behaviour are established very quickly and are reinforced at every meeting. It is only when the leader changes, the team gets stuck, or relationship dynamics begin to materially impact the business that team coaching is considered.

Secondly, as I discussed in the *Getting in* stage, there is a reputational risk for the client. A team coach typically learns very sensitive information about the culture of the business and its people. There is also a hard, commercial reality for the coach that if they were to write freely about their experience, they risk not being invited back. Holian and Coghlan (2013, p.401) also recognise some of these challenges to insider inquiry. They pick up on the aspects of role duality, power/coercion issues, and commercial confidence. I will expand on these in Chapter 6.

¹⁰ Thomson, P. (2015, May 11). What is an original contribution? [Web log message]. Retrieved from <https://patthomson.net/2015/05/11/what-is-an-original-contribution/>

b) Contribution to the inner work of team coaching

This thesis aims to shift the conversation on team coaching inwards, drawing attention to the significant inner work a team coach must do in order to serve their clients to the best of their ability. They must navigate the moment-by-moment choices on whether and how to intervene and survive.

It hopes to invite a different quality of response. One that is more humble, honest, and speaks to the vulnerability present in the work that many team coaches do. I do this by sharing what didn't work and how I worked with the resulting feelings of failure, shame, and anxiety.

Much of what is written in the practice of team coaching is packaged up as “best practice.” These are stories that have some sort of positive outcome and are seen as replicable in other organisations. Whilst they definitely have some use in inspiring action, every organisational context is different and there is a risk that such stories end up becoming self-serving to the coach, as a strategy to make the client look good and, in doing so, secure another assignment.

The practice vignettes presented in Chapters 3 and 4 detail the messiness of practice without the gloss of a hero coach or leader. These inquiries contribute to the literature on field theory, dialogue, systemic team coaching, organisational trauma, and recovery.

c) Contribution to the outer work of team coaching

As I situate this inquiry in my personal story, being helpful has been an important theme to me throughout my life. Whilst this thesis is primarily concerned with the “inner work” of a team coach, I also offer some of the “outer work” I have created in the hope it might be of service to other team coaches.

- During the early stages of this inquiry, I co-authored a paper (see Appendix A) for the British Academy of Management which offered an alternative to Tuckman's (1965) stages of group development: Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, and (added in 1977) Adjourning. This paper was

developed into a framework to define six distinct levels of performance in a leadership team: Competition, Communication, Coordination, Cooperation, Collaboration, and Co-creation. My thanks to Professor Peter Hawkins for his advice to add the final stage.

- Taking inspiration from Hawkins's five disciplines of high performing teams (Hawkins, 2011), I created an expanded framework to emphasise the importance of team purpose and team renewal. I built a survey to support exploration into this (see Appendix B).
- In Chapter 3, I explain how I have positioned and facilitated several exercises that aim to help build trust in teams, where typically doing such exercises would be considered completely inappropriate. I detail experiences that I have created in the space of deep listening and dialogue.

1.8 Thesis structure

Chapter 1	Provides an overview to the inquiry as a whole and seeks to nest the research questions and aims in me, as the instrument at the centre of my professional practice.
Chapter 2	Seeks to articulate my ontology, epistemology, methodology, and the inquiry methods I have used in this inquiry. It describes my shift towards an extended epistemology throughout the course of this the inquiry and how this created an unexpected phenomenon. I also consider validity and ethics.
Chapter 3	Offers an integrated theory and practice review of the different theoretical frameworks that I have drawn upon in this inquiry. I distinguish the literature between “Core” and “Thesis” projects.
Chapter 4	Offers a further integrated theory and practice review to explore my experience of <i>Getting over it</i> . Two extended practice vignettes are offered: Polonium and Radium.
Chapter 5	Describes the transition of taking my first person inquiry into individual client work to explore their own phenomenon of inner critic.
Chapter 6	Reflects on issues of ethics and power throughout the thesis and the need to resource from within to work with these.
Chapter 7	Summarises the conclusions and claims of this thesis.
Chapter 8	Provides a short passage to reflect on my overall doctoral journey.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have sought to introduce you to my inquiry as a whole and how I, as the team coach, am the instrument of my work and centre of my professional practice.

I hope my personal history hasn't read as too self-referencing and indulgent, but rather helps illuminate why I do this work and how some of my early life experiences both help and get me into difficulties.

I have said something about the organisational context in which I work and how I hope this inquiry may help others who do similar work.

Having explained who I am, how I got here, and what it is that I am trying to find out, in the next chapter I will explain how I have done the research. I will lay out my ontological, epistemological, and methodological perspectives and describe my inquiry methods.

Chapter 2: Methodology, ethics, and validity

2.1 Introduction and summarising the research frame

Creswell (2011) highlights that all research has philosophical foundations. He argues that inquirers should be aware of the assumptions they make about gaining knowledge during their study as these assumptions shape the research process. Correspondingly, the purpose of this chapter is to clarify and account for the way I went about my research and how I articulate the philosophical assumptions that underpin this inquiry. I also introduce the ethical considerations presented in my inquiry, along with a discussion on validity.

I will lay out the research arc of my inquiry and how I dealt with the epistemological, methodological, and ethical choices along the way, describing how I moved towards an extended epistemology throughout the course of the inquiry. In doing so, I will try to resist the temptation to hide the emergent form the research took.

In the previous chapter, I attempted to explain where some of my deep rooted attachments to scientifically generated discoveries originated from, particularly in biology and medicine. I quickly found that a methodology rooted in a positivist worldview was unable to access the inner phenomenon I was interested in studying, which prompted me to explore and create other methods that might work better.

In moving towards an extended epistemology and learning to explore different ways of knowing, it allowed me to be “in” the experience more, rather than observing objectively from afar with my doctoral clipboard. As a result, it simultaneously created the phenomenon of *getting over it* and allowed inquiry into the emotional territory surrounding it using a variety of inquiry methods.

A worldview can be thought of as a particular set of beliefs and assumptions about knowledge. The term is often used interchangeably with Kuhn's (1979) concept of *paradigm* but, along with Creswell (2011), I refer to worldview as it is associated with a set of shared beliefs and values of a community of researchers, of which I am a part.

My inquiry can be summarised as sitting within a pragmatist worldview, informed by a social constructivist ontology where truth is multiple, relative and contingent. Epistemologically, since starting the inquiry I have moved towards a constructivist set of beliefs about knowledge, where I am co-creating reality as I go and what I can know is always subjective and an approximation.

As a pragmatist, I am most interested in the usefulness of the inquiry and finding better ways to cope with the environment (Reason, 2003). Epistemologically, I haven't fully left positivism but rather I stand at its edge wondering how it might be useful. Neither am I fully at the extreme end of a social constructionist epistemology, which suggests there is nothing in the world except that which we create. I recognise both singular and multiple realities and work within the space I have at that moment, co-constructing as I go. In this respect, epistemologically, I position myself as a pragmatist *in the space between* positivism and constructivism, interested in what might be helpful at any given moment. The relational spaces between people are an important part of my practice as a team coach and in this respect my epistemology has driven both my selection of methodology and choice of inquiry methods.

My methodology is Pragmatic Action Research, where I become a “bricoleur” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1999), open to any and all sources of knowing that will help me better understand my inquiry question. This inquiry is largely a first-person inquiry interrogating my own experience. I make use of a variety of methods (detailed in the pages ahead), including noticing inner and outer arcs of attention, autoethnography, and a version of five-column analysis that I have modified to help *redescribe* my understanding to allow it to speak differently to me.

Anything I claim as knowledge is offered as an invitation for critical reflection and further discussion. Standing *in the space between*, I am offering knowledge neither as deterministic, law-like universal truths nor as a completely relative, socially-constructed phenomena. Rather, I seek to move towards what the Gestalt approach calls *The Fertile Void*, where through the ability to stay with the uncertainty of not knowing, we allow the possibility for surprise.

Critical reflection and testing the legitimacy of any claim are key to both the positivist and constructivist worldview and in this respect I have taken this inquiry out into practice to enter into deeper, critical dialogues with clients and other coaches. As a pragmatist, I am more concerned with “what works” than arguing for a better or worse approach. Both, done well, are in the spirit of producing practical knowing.

I did not begin this inquiry with this philosophical frame. In the following sections, I will outline what led to this shift, as well as introducing my methodology and range of inquiry methods.

2.2 Noticing “what works” – accepting emergence

In Chapter 1 and previous papers (Pope, 2013), I have written about my attachment to the positivist worldview. Particularly in the fields of medicine and biology, I loved the singularity of truth and certainty of knowledge it offered – a knowledge that may have prevented my father's heart attack and saved his life.

This worldview continued to be reinforced through my undergraduate degree in Genetics and by my experience of working in large organisations, where practical knowledge is given primacy and even reified for its implied universal application, irrespective of the context in which it is used.

When I began this inquiry, I was unaware of a tendency I had to hold theory that fitted my lived experience a little too tightly. In practice, this meant that I would end up strongly aligning myself to one idea and, in response, diminishing others. It inevitably set up an either/or frame, where I was looking to reinforce my current understanding of a singular reality, rather than holding the possibility that there could be multiple realities.

It's very difficult to find the words to describe the epistemological shift from positivism to constructivism. I cannot point to an exact moment in the inquiry where I felt something happened to extend my epistemology; rather, it has been a gradual stretch across worldviews prompted by feedback from my supervision group and a realisation in my inquiry that there was something I could not reach with positivist methodology. I have not come to view positivist situated data as incorrect, just incomplete.

To help illustrate this gradual stretch across worldviews, I include an early piece of writing (Pope, 2013) where I am still rooted in a positivist worldview of an objective, singular reality that I can work “on,” rather than “in.” I notice my vulnerability as I include this. It feels like a much junior version of myself. Not in a gentle, sweet, nostalgic sort of way, but more of a naïve, inexperienced sort of way. Ah, did you hear that? There is my inner critic talking! Alive and well! Trying to protect me from

the places where I may get hurt. It's ok, you can stand down for now. I know this Reader; they are a friend. They won't judge me too harshly.

“Come with me back to October 2012. It's a lovely sunny day. The following is an extract from my inquiry proposal about the workshop that summoned me to ADOC.

It's Tuesday 28 October 2012.

I am in sun-drenched Miami delivering a three-day offsite for the executive board of our American operating company. This is a workshop that I have designed and, along with some external partners, subsequently delivered to several other executive boards around the world. It is called “Synergy” and it invites a team to explore some of the components of a high performing executive team.

I am feeling well prepared for this workshop, over and above what is usually required. This is due to my previous interactions with the Chairman of the Board who initially strongly challenged me on the value of discussing subjects such as trust, interdependence, collaboration and accountability.

He is an intense and very directive man, who recently took over as Chairman after five years at the helm of another operating country, where his pacesetting style of leadership thrived. Through in-depth interviews with his board members in advance, I have a sense of the discussions that the team needs to have in order to move forward. I have learnt with this type of workshop that it's what you do before what you do that often makes the difference.

We have begun well, establishing rapport, credibility, and a sense of urgency and opportunity. We have used a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to provide a common language for the current reality in their team. I notice I am beginning to feel my inner sense of “flow.”

In my conversations with each of the board members, there were many stories recounted to me about a profound lack of trust between many of the team, which in turn causes misinterpretation of intent and results in cordial but inauthentic relationships. My interpretation of trust within an executive team environment extends beyond credibility and reliability. I am sharing with the group the concept of vulnerability and how despite being excruciating at times, it allows a deeper sense of authenticity to emerge, allowing them to begin to act without concern for protecting themselves. This allows them to fully focus on the task at hand, rather than invest time in political activities. It allows them to engage in meaningful dialogue, rather than a series of posturing presentations.

Vulnerability as an intellectual concept is easy enough to grasp. The organisation I work within benefits from having some very, very smart people but in my experience there is a rapidly widening gap between knowing about something and knowing how to do something (Ryle, 1945).

To inoculate against misconceptions that this is “soft stuff,” still a key challenge in working with exec teams is to do the soft stuff in a way that feels like the hard stuff ... “Look, we just don't do soft and fluffy here” (quote from a participant at a recent workshop in July 2014). I have started the session by showing a video from Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston; in her own words:

“You know how there are people that when they realise that vulnerability and tenderness are important, that they kind of surrender and walk into it? A) That's not me, and B) I don't even hang out with people like that. For me, it was a yearlong street-fight. It was a slugfest. Vulnerability pushed, I pushed back. I lost the fight but probably won my life back ...” (Brown, 2005)

Her talk explores themes around shame, numbing of emotions, and vulnerability as the birthplace of worthiness and joy. I remember watching the video for the first time and experiencing a profound sense of connection

to the messages, although at the time I didn't quite understand my relationship with the themes.

After the video, I offer the group the opportunity to let themselves be truly seen by their colleagues. They are invited to bring a part of themselves to the group that does not usually get seen – a personal moment of vulnerability – but without the hero bit. Often when you ask individuals about vulnerability, they'll give you the hero story – how they overcame it and how everything is just fine now. I wanted them to stay with the vulnerability, to leave it in the room, to fully immerse and experience how it feels to be vulnerable. I explain that people engage with this exercise at different levels. You can go through the motions or you can take the opportunity to help your colleagues understand the events that have shaped you and influence your behaviour today. I make it safe to contribute, or not to contribute.

The session progresses with several participants taking the opportunity to access a level of authenticity previously unseen and in doing so experiencing the pain-pleasure that is vulnerability. A new climate is emerging, deeper connections are forming.

And now it's the turn of the Chairman.

It is an important moment. Not just about setting the tone, but more his chance to be seen.

He begins to tell his story. I am aware of the reactions of his team in my peripheral vision. They are willing him to go further, to tell the story he has not yet told. He finishes. I read signs of disappointment from the group. There is a pause.

“OK, now it's your turn” he says to me.

I pause and am taken aback. I was not prepared for that comment. I have run the workshop several times before and have not been asked that before. It's in

those few seconds that life seems to be suspended and I try to simultaneously process at least a dozen questions.

Firstly, I'm wondering whether I should or not. The fact that I haven't shared my story with the group does not mean I can't, but with a natural contained and selectively private style I'd prefer not to. What is my relationship with vulnerability? What does the group need from me right now? Will it help or hinder? What emotions am I experiencing? Why am I experiencing them? What would I share? Am I willing to be vulnerable like I have requested of them? If not, why not? What's his intent behind asking me? What impact would it have on the rest of the workshop?

I liken this moment to the scene in the film "The Matrix," where without any announcement, the "matrix" appears and Neo is acutely aware of the interconnectedness of everything.

I feel alive."

Looking again

As I look again at this vignette, some seven years later, from the space between a constructivist and positivist worldview, I notice how I am becoming aware of the “living field” (see Chapter 3) and beginning to notice how my understanding of reality is more subject to my relational interactions and environment than I realised.

Barrett et al. (1995, p.353), in their commentary of social constructionism in organisations, note how “we decenter the individual and instead begin to view relating as the place where meaning is made ... instead of seeing meaning centered in the individual’s head, we should view meaning as occurring in our relatedness with one another.” Meaning, then, is not centred in the surveys and pre-workshop conversations but in how we are relating together.

I am also being asked to be a part of what I am trying to observe, rather than remain an independent, detached, expert diagnostician – a typical feature of the positivist worldview. In stepping into this new space, I notice the many questions and permutations this creates for me, what Stacey and Griffin (2005) might describe as the “complex responsive processes of relating.” I am starting to build my critical subjectivity, a “consciousness in the midst of action” (Torbert, 1991, p.221).

I have left the independent, value-free territory of positivism and am now in the territory of socially-constructed phenomena.

2.3 The catalyst

I entered the doctorate process with an assumption that the team coach was acting as some sort of “catalyst” to help create high performance in the team. I find this metaphor useful to help explain my move towards an extended epistemology throughout the course of the inquiry. It also speaks to why I began to struggle with the work, physically and emotionally, as I related to the team more by being a part of it, rather than as a separate observer.

What is a catalyst?¹¹

- A catalyst is a substance that can be added to a reaction to increase the reaction rate without getting consumed in the process.
- Catalysts typically speed up a reaction by reducing the activation energy or changing the reaction mechanism.

From the positivist worldview with which I began this inquiry, this metaphor of the team coach as a catalyst was helpful for a number of reasons:

A catalyst reduces the activation energy required or changes the reaction mechanism

At the start of my inquiry, I considered my role as a team coach to be about bringing my own energy *into* the team, in order to overcome the inertia and energy the team would need to expend in order to shift their current ways of working.

As we approached the last afternoon of the workshop, I would find myself driving them to lock in an action plan, key performance indicators and a team charter to “change the reaction mechanism.” If you had stepped into that room after the final coffee break, you would find me working the hardest, driving an energetic shift largely to manage the anxiety of the team leader, who needed something “concrete”

¹¹ *Types of catalyst*. Khan Academy. Retrieved from <https://www.khanacademy.org/science/chemistry/chem-kinetics/arrhenius-equation/a/types-of-catalysts>

to come out of our time together (of course, very few, if any, of the agreed actions would actually stick, because it was my work – not theirs).

For me, bringing energy as a team coach *is* important and I lay out my reasons for this in Chapter 7, but as I shifted towards an extended epistemology, energy became something that we co-created together – perhaps still sparked by me, but received and kindled collectively by the team.

“Reducing the activation energy required” therefore became more about experimenting with different ways to make it psychologically safer for team members to speak out about how they were really feeling, rather than nod politely to action plans they knew would never go anywhere.

“Changing the reaction mechanism” became less about theoretical ways of working and team charters and more about helping teams experience the difference in using dialogue to tackle difficult decisions, rather than just debate.

Towards a catalyst that is willing to be changed in the reaction

Perhaps the most significant challenge to my starting positivist worldview was the idea that a catalyst is inert. It should be able to be removed from the reaction, without itself having taken part in the reaction. This is perhaps where the shift towards a constructivist epistemology had its biggest impact upon me.

Constructivism is influenced by Piaget's theory of cognitive development and has significant differences on the concept of knowledge as suggested by the positivist worldview. For constructivists, knowledge is not something fixed, but is constructed in real time and can frequently change as individuals make sense of their environment. For me, constructivism invites inquiry into my view of reality and how I am making meaning in that moment. It involves change and indeed for Etherington (2004, p.15) it is a reminder “that we are constantly changing and developing our identities and that they are never fixed.” Positivism, whilst also encouraging critical subjectivity, in some ways seeks stability and repeatability. It could be criticised for a reliance on maintaining the status quo.

In an early supervision group session, an ADOC faculty member commented on her experience with past doctorates, “If the sole purpose of the participant was getting a doctorate, the research failed to come alive. Only when we are willing to engage in the process and be changed in profound ways, does it come alive” (K. King, personal communication, 2014). Fletcher (1999) might refer to this as a position of mutuality, where we honour our own humanity and that of the other. To do this I had to shift my gaze – from looking at, to looking with – “the status and significance can only be explored from within, by full engagement in the human condition” (Heron, 1996, p1).

A word here from Gregory Bateson, whose work was helpful for me as I faced into the questions of whether I was willing to allow the possibility of being changed through the process. I felt some affinity to the Bateson family as coincidentally his father, William Bateson, was also a geneticist, introducing the word “genetics” to describe the study of biological inheritance. Gregory himself was named after Gregor Mendel, the founder of modern-day genetics.

Bateson speaks to the space between, where on one hand there is a purely external reality in which I cease to exist and another where I make it all up. There is, he says, a region where you are “partly blown by the winds of reality and partly an artist creating a composite out of inner and outer events” (as cited in Brockman, 1977, p.245).

He argues that a view of reality structured on what is only conscious, empirical, and excludes our tacit knowing has brought us to an impasse. For him, there is a limit to the trust of any scientific explanation. He urges us to reunite facts and values and, in doing so, accept that the aggregate of interacting parts creates differences that are “non-locatable.” However, as if to speak to my discomfort, Kuhn (1979, p.10) observes “the practising scientists will not lose faith in the established paradigm until a credible alternative is available; to lose faith in the solvability of the problems would in effect mean ceasing to be a scientist.”

Rather than debate the merits of each paradigm, I agree with Creswell (2011), who encourages us to abandon the forced-choice dichotomy between positivism and

constructivism, echoing Kuhn's (1979) assertions that different epistemological paradigms are incommensurate and operate from different assumptions that frame the rules – making comparisons difficult.

Moving from not getting consumed in the process ... to combusting as a result of the process

I had moved from the positivist influenced role of the team coach as an inert catalyst, to the constructivist influenced role of the team coach as a catalyst that would allow themselves to be changed through a relational, co-constructed process.

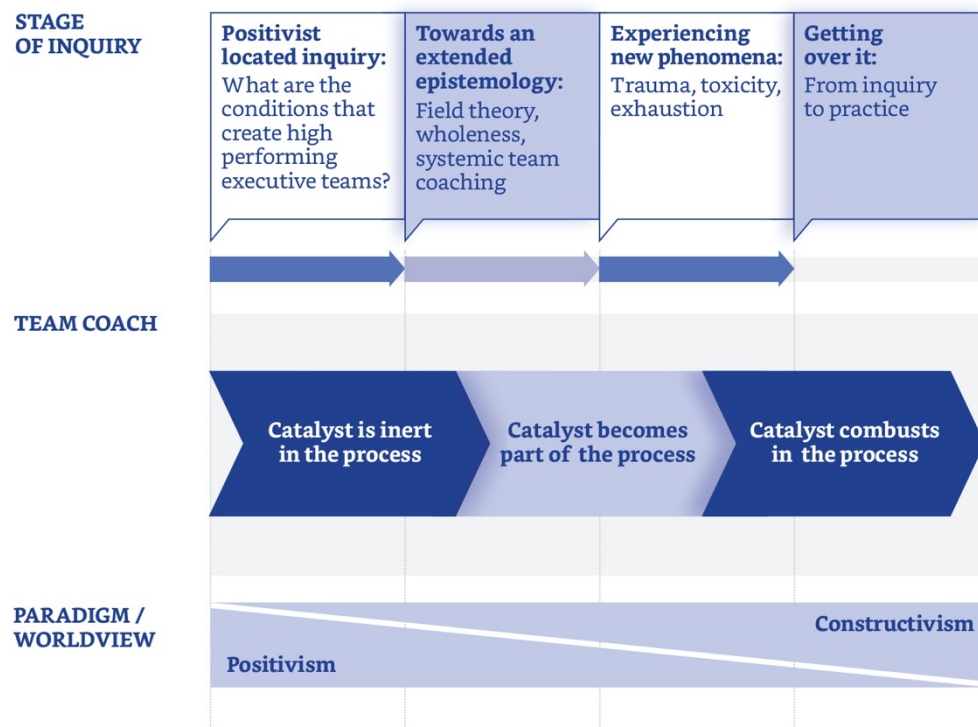
Whilst creating a completely different quality of engagement with the team, I also found myself so far *within* the team that I began to mirror and deeply feel their lived experience.

If the team or system were dealing with some sort of trauma that was unresolved, this would often give rise to a level of toxicity in the system that, now I was within the team, and as someone who values helpfulness, I would feel compelled to resolve. When I wasn't able to, I realised that through my efforts I had become damaged and needed help *Getting over it*.

This was the most difficult stage of my inquiry. It is what Coghlan, Coughlan and Abraham (2019) might describe as my "Thesis Project," having spent some years already on my "Core Project" of systemic team coaching.

I started to embody some of the "toxicity" and difficulties I knew the team were facing. As I will account for in Chapter 4, I suffered a heavy physical and emotional impact of working in such a way. I would suffer from panic attacks at airports watching myself float across the concourse. I would reexperience and replay difficult conversations in my mind for months after the workshop. I would become personally reclusive, avoiding conversation with anyone and everyone I could.

Figure 1: Evolution of the inquiry worldview



2.4 Embracing pragmatism

In experiencing this new phenomenon of trying to *Get over* experiences working with teams that were dealing with a great deal of unresolved trauma in the system, a further epistemology emerged.

In trying to *Get over* the experience, I found that I was able to explain what had happened from a positivist, group dynamic theory point of view. I was also able to articulate a constructivist ontology of the multiple realities and participant perspectives in order to build up to a generalisation of what had happened.

But neither seemed to actually help in *Getting over* the experience.

"I think what's happening is that I've become the face of their organisational injustice. I've done a textbook switch from Rescuer to Victim in Karpman's Drama triangle. This all makes sense and yet it doesn't seem to help. I can't stop thinking about what went wrong."

Audio journal transcript (Jan 18)

It was at this point in the inquiry that I began to explore pragmatist philosophy and corresponding plurality of methods, to find something that might help move towards a place that felt healthier and more sustainable.

Pragmatism as a worldview encourages researchers to use whatever philosophical or methodological approach *that works* for the particular inquiry they are interested in. It places greater emphasis on the research question than on the method itself and, in this respect, I have always identified with the pragmatist worldview. At this stage of the inquiry, a new research question had emerged: "How do I *Get Over* these difficult experiences of team coaching?"

The philosophical movement of pragmatism has its roots in a discussion group in Massachusetts, which in the early 1870s brought together educator and social reformer John Dewey, psychologists William James and George Herbert Mead,

philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce and many other academics and non-academics who have since developed pragmatism over the last century (Maxcy, 2003).

As a research paradigm, pragmatism accepts that there can be single or multiple realities that are open to empirical inquiry. Similar to constructivist inquiry, central to pragmatist philosophy is that knowledge and reality are based on beliefs and habits that are socially constructed, but some versions of those social constructions match individuals' experiences more than others (Morgan, 2014). Pragmatists doubt that reality can ever be determined once and for all and maintain that reality is what works (Pansiri, 2005).

There is perhaps a misconception that pragmatist inquiry means “if it works then it's true” (Boisvert, 1998, p. 31). Pragmatist researchers are interested in the philosophical arguments that underpin their inquiry; they have come to the conclusion that the broader philosophical arguments can never be solved because meaning is inseparable from human experience and is dependent upon context (Dillon et al., 2000).

Dewey in particular was interested in inquiry as a form of experience that helps to work in unsettling situations. I wondered how it would help me work with my *Getting over it* phenomenon. He considered inquiry as a conscious response in situations in which the course of action was not immediately clear. His focus was helping to gain control over our actions, not as mastery, but to direct our action to achieve desired consequences. In the upcoming section on inquiry methods, I set out how I have been influenced by Rorty (1989, p.7) to *redescribe* my experience, to see knowledge not as reality, but to better manage my existence and take part in the world.

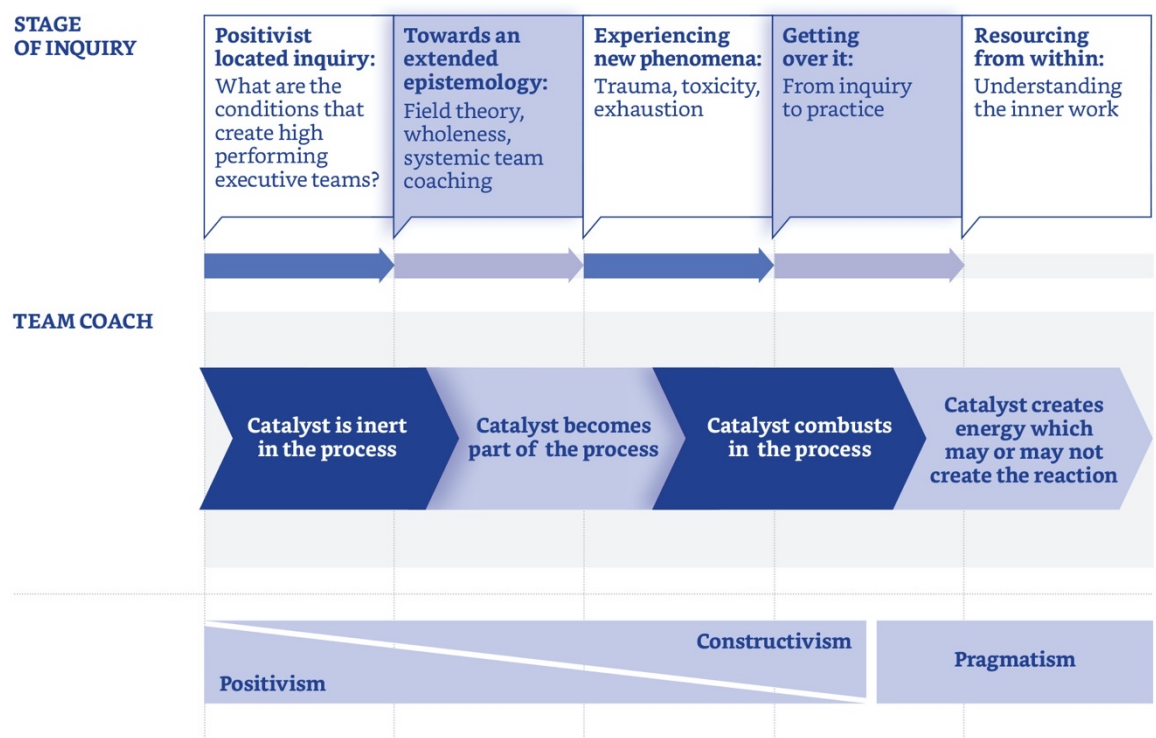
Finding a new centre-ground

Rather than working from two opposing and mutually exclusive poles of positivist objectivity and constructivist subjectivity, the inquiry mode of pragmatism is situated in the centre of the continuum (Goles & Hirschheim, 2000). It embraces the two extremes and allows a more flexible and reflexive approach to research design.

Moving between deduction and induction, I am actively involved in creating data as well as theories (Goldkuhl, 2012; Morgan, 2007). I am paying equal attention to what works for them (the teams I work with) and me.

Critics of pragmatism (Feilzer, 2010), and indeed this inquiry more broadly, might question how a multi-layered research problem can be tackled methodologically in order to measure and observe each layer. In this inquiry, I have endeavoured to attend to this criticism by employing a diverse selection of methods combined with critical reflexivity. But perhaps, as Lather (1991) said, “in an era of rampant reflexivity, just getting on with it may be the most radical action one can make” (1991, p.13).

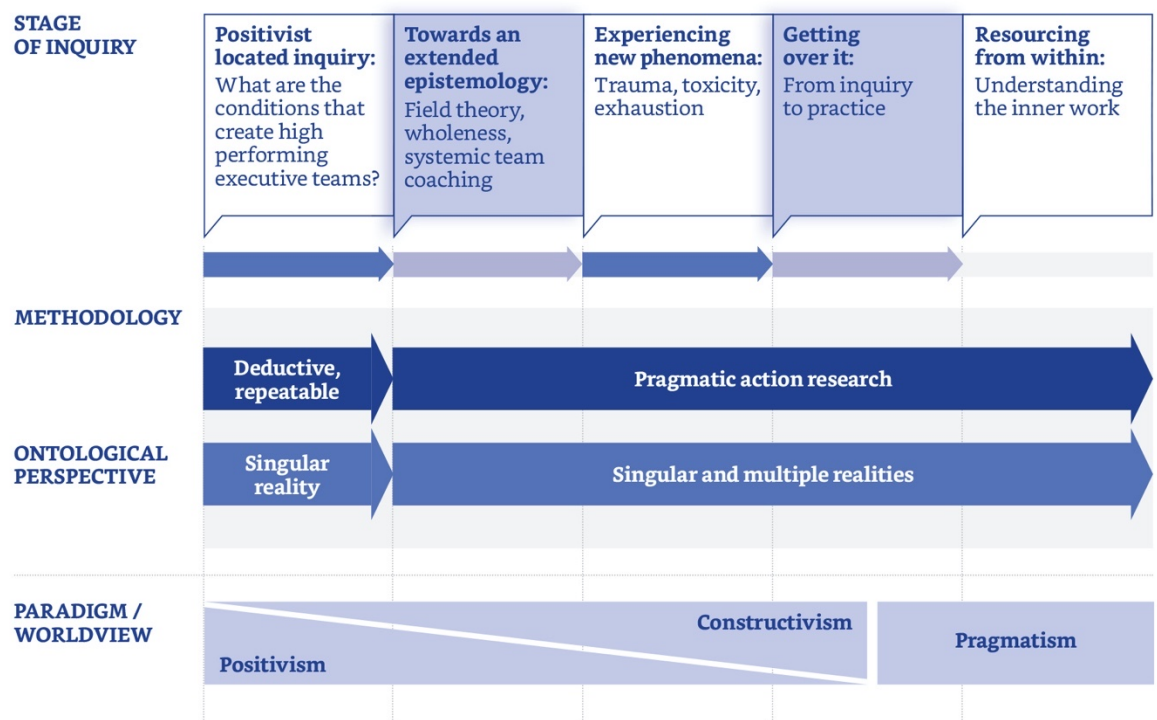
FIGURE 2: Inquiry stages, moving towards pragmatism



2.5 Methodology

My inquiry methodology developed in parallel with my ontology and epistemology. I began with a positivism-informed deductive framework, designing surveys (see Appendix B) and correlating the results with business outcomes to try to draw some repeatable conclusions. With my move towards an extended epistemology, so I moved towards a different methodology that I felt might work better to access the phenomenon I was experiencing. As a pragmatist, I was interested in finding useful approaches to answer the research question which I felt sat well within a methodology of pragmatic action research.

FIGURE 3: Methodology develops in parallel with epistemology



Action research emphasises that the process of inquiry is as important as the specific outcomes (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Particularly at the beginning of my inquiry when I made a choice to step out of the positivist world view, I had no idea what the specific outcomes of my inquiry would be but was committed to a process of inquiry. Reason and Bradbury discuss how “action without reflection and understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p.2).

This focus on action and creating practical knowing sat well with my pragmatist worldview. “Action research is research into current, ongoing practice by practitioners for practitioners. Its focus is on problem-solving in existing professional performance and related organisational structures” (Heron, 1996, p.7).

An Action Research approach seeks to bridge the space between theory and practice and “produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Within this, I have adopted an approach where the researcher is often described as a “bricoleur” using whatever is at hand and working between and within competing paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 1999). The bricoleur is known for their willingness to borrow from, integrate and move back and forth between non-commensurate paradigms and disciplines. An example of this is where I might integrate a team survey, situated in a post-positivist paradigm and combine it with an exercise to explore shared meaning together, situated in a constructivist paradigm.

Marshall, Coleman and Reason (2011) suggest that action research “asks the individual to discover something by doing, and reflecting, and in the light of that reflection, doing some more. It brings the kind of knowing that is only generated through action into connection with the kind of knowing that comes through reading, listening and discussing ideas with others.”

Action research should speak to three different audiences – me, us and them: it makes a difference to the researcher's “being in the world,” it has practical use to a group of people exploring similar themes, and it produces generalisable theory for use by third-parties.

Starting with the first audience – me – Reason and Bradbury (2001) describe first-person action research as the ability “to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act with awareness, and to choose carefully and assess effects in the outside world while acting.”

Action Research honours intuition and tacit-knowing. I felt that the teams I worked with had this kind of knowing yet were not well served to access it by existing surveys and tools. It is the kind of knowing that arises as we engage with others in the process of living, staying alert for patterns and synchronicity between different ways of knowing, across different territories (Reason & Torbert, 2001).

Heron and Reason (1997) indicate four ways of knowing:

1. Experiential knowing – feeling and imagining the presence of some energy, entity, place, person. Knowing through participative empathetic resonance.
2. Presentational knowing – grounded in experiential knowing and symbolised through art, music, and verbal art forms.
3. Propositional knowing – knowing in contextual terms, generating knowledge by description.
4. Practical knowing – knowing how to do something, demonstrated in a skill or competence.

This extended epistemology has been built upon by a number of action researchers, including Marshall (2008), Seeley (2011), and Gergen and Gergen (2012). Many of them share the impression that presentational knowing helps access a deeper understanding of situations in a way that positivist-generated knowledge does not. With this I would completely agree but would also offer a word of caution. Working with an extended epistemology in large corporations does not come without its own risks. Epistemologies have sharp edges and you step over these boundaries at your own peril. As I have introduced in Chapter 1, the careful attunement to organisational culture in the *Getting in* and *Getting on* stages are critical to working

with an extended epistemology, in a place that absolutely doesn't value it (I will offer some practice vignettes to this point in Chapters 3 and 5).

As a team coach you risk silent (and not so silent) ridicule – knowing looks between people and being verbally beaten up during the coffee break for introducing knowing that is grounded in non-traditional forms.

Consider a recent public example at the time of completing this thesis, on the use of Lego in a workshop to explore how a group of council leaders in the UK might go about working together to build more resilience in their local community; a topic that requires joint meaning-making on what resilience means for the community and co-creation of a way forward; a topic that surely cannot be solved by a questionnaire and PowerPoint presentation alone.

However, in this example¹², the facilitator was ridiculed for running a “patronising” and “baffling” session.

Image 4: Warning: Sharp edges.



¹² BBC (2020, February 13). Walsall council accused of “baffling” Lego training session. *BBC News*, Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news>

How I felt for the facilitator as I read the headline and photo caption. I would bet that somewhere in this organisation they have a value or competency framework on “innovation” or “creativity” and yet when someone prompted the system to work differently, it triggered a defensive response and they were ridiculed.

In Chapter 3, I share some examples where I have attempted to “stack the deck” to make a team more receptive to the possibility of exploring an extended epistemology.

Stacking the deck doesn't guarantee it will work. In fact, for me there is usually a moment of doubt and anxiety when I wish I just had some surveys to hand out and discuss, rather than (for example) try and express a conversation artfully. How I have worked with the team stakeholders prior to this point is usually the “difference, that makes the difference” (Bateson, 1972) – working carefully to manage the anxiety that often comes when working with experiential and presentational knowing. In working with these different forms, as a pragmatist it is often more about “what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying” (Rorty, 1979, p. 176).

Reflecting on the link between pragmatism and an extended epistemology, Rorty makes the point “there is no transition that needs explanation or mediation” (cited in Brandom, 2000, p. 57) as different ways of knowing will have their own qualities and criteria for justification. Reason (2003) feels that Rorty privileges cognitive knowing over other forms of knowing and argues that along with social constructionists such as Gergen (1999), he is more interested in the linguistics of what we say, rather than what we do. I tend to agree but also feel that linguistics are very important. As you will read shortly, I make helpful use of Rorty's idea of “redescription” (Rorty, 1989, p.7) in my methods.

Perhaps where I differ from Rorty is working with the extended epistemology to honour “knowing of the third-kind” (Shotter, 1993) as a useful source of knowledge. Rorty might criticise this as being less about generating knowledge and more about being better or worse able to justify my views to other people.

Summarising methodology: The contribution of pragmatic action research

Pragmatic action research focusses on solving context-specific, real-life problems. It facilitates inquiry questions emerging from real-life situations as opposed to questions arising from within the academic community. Important organisational issues do not come in neat, discrete bundles. The most significant problems have messy boundaries and require the mobilisation of a broad and eclectic array of forms of expertise, none of which is predictable in advance (Levin & Greenwood, 2001).

Pragmatic action research is not just a matter of epistemology and method. Implicit is a possibility of hope and opportunity for change, fuelled by an explicit choice of seeing one's research as contributing to this. Hope as a resource is often in short supply in organisations. Constant change initiatives that fail to live up to their promised efficiencies result in change weary leaders. Pragmatic action researchers Greenwood and Levin echo this need for hope, describing the importance of an "ongoing, collective process of social improvement" (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 60), which is strongly influenced by Dewey's notion of democracy at work.

Let me speak to a critique that all action researchers are pragmatic. What do pragmatic action researchers specifically emphasise?

The measure of effectiveness in pragmatic action research is based upon the utility of the solutions generated. Validity is governed by the collective judgement of those knowledgeable about the outcomes, not detached expert opinion. Separation between thought and action is rejected. This directly challenges the conventional academic model where judgement of validity is determined by "expert" peers. As Greenwood and Levin (1998, p.73) point out, for Dewey "the only real sources of knowledge were to be found in action, not in armchair speculation."

There is no one single form of pragmatic action research. For Greenwood (2007, p.134), it is

a broad array of practices, epistemological beliefs, ontological commitments, and processes. Action Research practice, thus, is highly personal, built around

the abilities, mindsets, experiences, and ethical/political commitments of the action researchers who practice it.

This willingness of pragmatic action research to draw upon a wide array of practices and beliefs from sometimes apparently contradictory sources undermines traditional notions of triangulation, where multiple sources of complementary information are usually drawn from within a single paradigm. This introduces an element of ontological complexity.

A “double ontology of complexity” (Kincheloe, 2005, p.334) is created which combines the complexity of objects of inquiry and their being-in-the-world, with the nature of the social construction of human subjectivity, the production of human “being.” Reflecting on subjectivity, it is important to understand that social structures do not determine individual subjectivity, rather they restrict the possible ways in which subjectivity might develop. Pragmatic action research, as I understand it, is more interested in developing alternative ways to help specify how subjectivity is shaped. This multiple way of seeing is encouraged by the bricolage approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 1999) which values the interplay between the domains of the physical, social, cultural, psychological, and educational.

There is, perhaps, a critique of the bricolage approach that the research lacks rigour and is done randomly. When I am in active bricolage it feels far from random and more like artful craft, building my next move with whatever is at hand “on-site” and doing it with skill and thoughtful placement (an example of this approach can be found in the case vignette in Section 4.2).

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) issued a rigorous conception of the bricoleur, understanding that the problems faced by the world are too complex and interconnected to be revealed as an objective reality. They argue the bricoleur must seek multiple methods to provide richness and depth to their research and be intellectually informed, widely read, and aware of diverse paradigms of interpretation.

Such an approach allows identification of what is absent in particular situations, a feature typically ignored by objectivist paradigms restricting analysis to only that which can be observed, often leading to a “haste in wanting to know” (Raelin, 2007, p.506). To notice what is absent, one must slow down and build what the poet John Keats (1970) termed as “negative capability”, described by Simpson, French and Harvey (2002) as the capacity to sustain “reflective inaction” by resisting the tendency to disperse into action.

I am aware that in identifying myself as a pragmatic action researcher and bricoleur as I undertake doctoral-level research, I am taking a risk in two directions. Firstly, I have drawn widely on literature that comes ‘to hand’ and seems to fit, without necessarily digging deep into each of the territories within which the literature stands. This is a direct challenge to the notion of expertise as being held only by those who can claim a deep domain knowledge about a specific subject area. Secondly, there may be ontological discontinuities between the different ideas I have drawn on: some are based on positivist science (Katzenbach, 1998), some on social constructionism (Gergen, 1999), and some on a participative world ontology (Wheatley, 1992).

Scholarly research is widely assumed to rest on depth of knowledge within a paradigmatic position which aligns ontology, epistemology, and methodology. As I have argued here, practice in action, which for the pragmatist is of primary importance, is not necessarily so coherent. The pragmatic action researcher, in their focus on what works, makes a choice not to be restrained in this way. In this respect, my expertise is based more upon an understanding of the multiplicity of contexts and *knowing* what might be most useful at any given moment, and I have felt enriched by the range and varied tones of the literature I have drawn on.

In academic terms, though, this may give rise to a degree of discomfort: boundaries are being trampled on. I am not unaware of this and have been prepared to live with it in order to honour my commitment to improve my practice and widen the action-possibilities open to me and the teams I work with. I hope the practice vignettes, particularly in Chapter 4, will go some way to convince you that this is a risk worth taking and I ask that you follow me in this as you read this thesis.

2.6 Inquiry methods

Setting the foundations

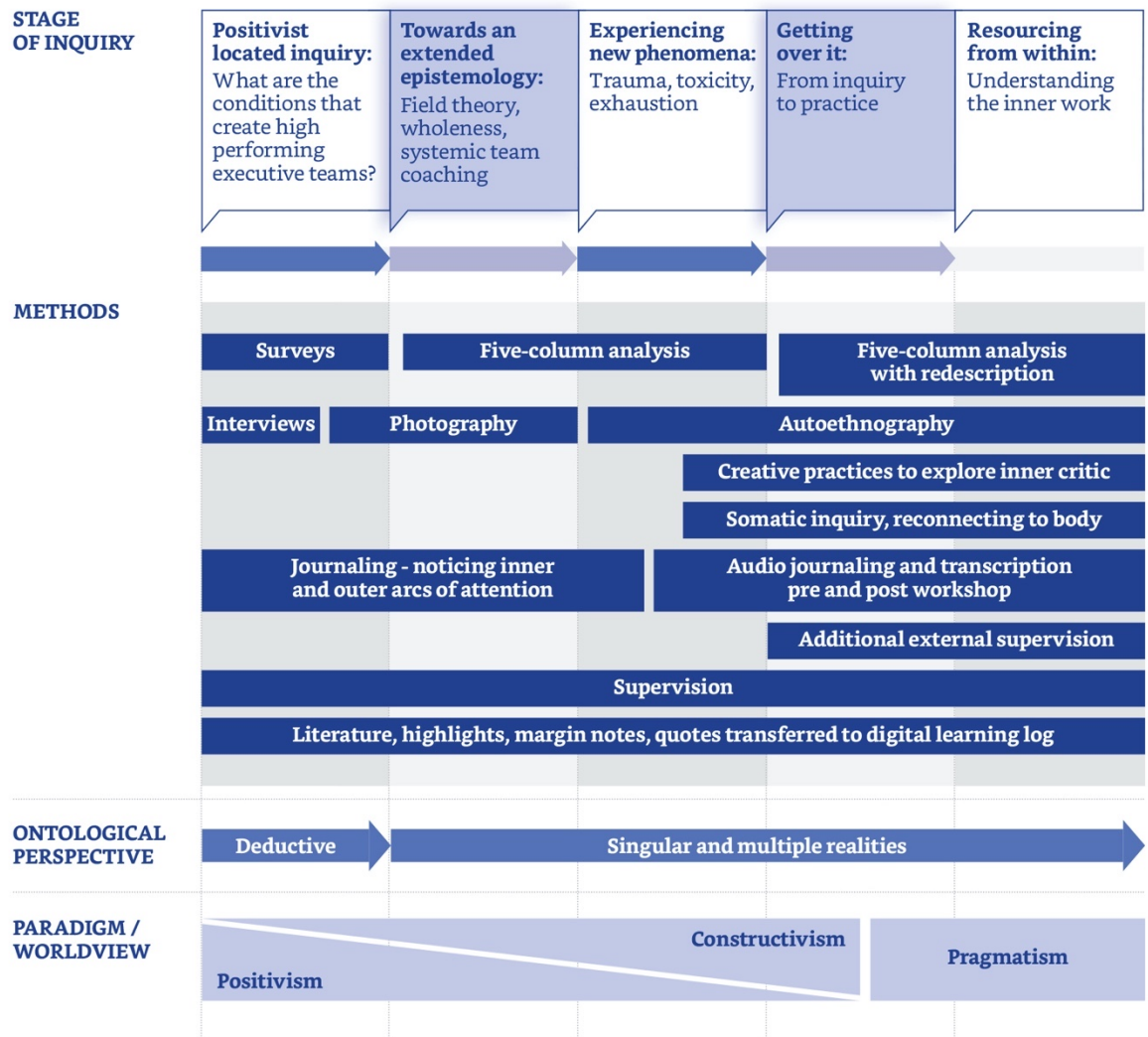
During the first three years of the doctoral process, the ADOC programme provided a helpful learning structure. Both faculty and participants designed and led various workshops on Action Research, alongside formal examination of participant papers by faculty members. I was also part of a supervision group of four doctoral students who met every six to eight weeks to offer support and challenge on each other's writing in order to deepen our inquiries. This helped me to establish a regular cycle of reading, writing, and giving and receiving feedback. I recorded these conversations electronically, which I later transcribed, listened to, and made meta-commentary upon. In addition to this, I had a less structured process of journaling, scribbles in the margins of books, and making notes on my phone as I listened to podcasts or came across something that felt relevant to my inquiry.

I cycled between what Marshall (1999) might describe as “inner and outer arcs of attention.” The outer arc involved literature, concepts, metaphors, quotes, and images from a variety of sources that would appear with such a resonant intensity that it would demand my immediate attention. This in turn would cause an inward reflection on how I was making meaning and constructing the world around me.

As I carefully track all of this feedback, I can in hindsight see the outline of distinct cycles of action and reflection. There was an eclectic, iterative, and progressive nature to each cycle. As I listened to the transcripts, I would notice new things in the data and start a new cycle of inquiry. I would notice how one cycle of inquiry might call me back to a previous one and sometimes I would end up going back into cycles of inquiries I thought I had completed (this was particularly true as I reflected on my personal upbringing). Moreover, I began to notice how each cycle of inquiry had a holographic quality to it where “each step in the process contains the entire process” (Seidel, 1998, p.2). Whilst it wasn't a neat, linear action–reflection process, it *did work* to progressively reveal new aspects of the inquiry and deepen my understanding of the themes I wanted to address.

In addition to these foundation methods, which have been consistent throughout my inquiry, I drew upon several others at different stages of my inquiry – broadly in line with my epistemological shifts (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4: Emerging inquiry methods



Qualitative surveys and structured interviews

In the early stages of my inquiry, as part of my preparation for team workshops, I conducted structured interviews in which participants shared their views on what factors were most important to the effectiveness of their team. I grouped these factors thematically into six different areas and created a survey to measure what I called “The Six Practices of High Performing Teams” (see Appendix B).

My initial intent was to conduct a statistical analysis to look for correlations between survey items and various business outcomes related to the team, specifically individual and team performance metrics, team engagement results, and employee retention.

As I engaged more deeply with cycles of reading, writing, and feedback, my inquiry quickly moved towards working in a more systemic and relational manner. I noticed an energetic shift away from completing the large statistical study. Drawing a correlation between a line item and a business outcome might help me *Get in* to organisations by meeting them with the familiar, propositional, *Harvard Business Review* shareable soundbite – but would it actually help to increase the quality and range of my interventions as a team coach? I doubted it. Anyway, I was already pretty good at *Getting in* (I had spent 20 years learning the language and rules of the game).

I was also finding that the complex, socially constructed and inter-related nature of how a team generates performance outcomes cannot, with any integrity, be attributed to one single factor. For Rorty, the question of proof is an attempt to escape from the world and we should instead worry about whether we have been “imaginative enough to think up interesting alternatives” (Rorty, 1999, p. 34).

I decided I would shift my focus towards *Getting on*, becoming more interested in exploring a more imaginative range of being and doing as a team coach. From time to time, my six-practice questionnaire still serves as a useful lens for participants to open up a conversation about their team, but my initial questions of the predictive validity of various items have become less important.

The evolution of five-column analysis

Part of my practice as a team coach involves connecting with team members in advance of any time I might spend with them on a workshop. These conversations are typically 1:1, by phone, and very rich in joint sensemaking and data. I wanted a method to show how I was being a researcher, not just a reflective consultant. I wanted to catch myself as I moved from data to conclusion and to think more critically about what I was really finding out. The summary notes in my journal did not seem to capture the nuances and inferences of the conversation, nor did they capture why I might choose to ask a particular question, at a particular time.

Tsoukas (1994, p.767) comments that “every event, specified at a particular point in time, can be apprehended in terms of two additional features: quality and texture. Quality is the intuited wholeness of an event: texture is the details and relationship making up the quality ... when we intuit the whole we suppress its details (i.e. its texture), and when we analyse a pattern we tend to underplay its wholeness (its quality).”

Paying attention to the whole was key to my interest in systemic team coaching and I began to search the wider literature on qualitative methods that might allow the quality and texture of these conversations to be captured.

I became interested in five-column analysis (Reitz, 2017) which draws from the work of Senge's “left-hand-column” exercise as detailed in his book *The Fifth Discipline* (2006). Senge himself builds upon the action theory approach of Argyris, Putnam and Smith (1985) and it is recommended for use in Action Research by Friedman and Rogers (2009).

Figure 5: Five-column analysis

1	2	3	4	5
Speaker	Transcript	First-person reflections and memos	Initial theme	Final theme
Specify the person speaking.	Verbatim comments.	The sense I was making of what each person said, the feelings I experienced, the judgements and assumptions I was aware that I was making.	Exploring texture – summarising, concluding, reducing and constricting on a theme of the conversation.	Final conversation theme, felt to be most figural.

I initially followed Reitz's method of recording the calls, making notes in my journal during the call and then transcribing them into the five-column analysis format some days later. It certainly helped to convey the texture of my experience, but I found myself thinking “I wish I had asked them about ...” By the time I listened to the recording, it was typically too late to do so and it felt like a missed opportunity.

I modified the approach to use it live in the call with the participant, always making it clear to the client that they may hear me typing in the background making notes to help me follow our conversation. It allowed me to very practically build my critical subjectivity and “consciousness in the midst of action” (Torbert, 1991, p.221).

Examples of how I have used five-column analysis in this inquiry can be found in Chapter 4.

Evolving five-column analysis

As discussed in the previous section, pragmatists such as Rorty and Peirce placed a great deal of emphasis on linguistics and how we make sense of what we do together in the company of others. Wittgenstein (1953) describes a “language-game” and how problems do not emanate from the real world, but from our language itself. He argues that we should pay more attention to the meaning of ordinary words, or risk overcomplicating things and confusing ourselves. Language then does not represent the world; it *makes* our world.

As the phenomenon of *Getting over it* appeared more frequently in my work, I began to wonder whether I had missed something important in my earlier conversations with participants. Had I fallen foul of Wittgenstein's language game and overcomplicated things or misrepresented my world? Could I redescribe the final theme to something that might help me *Get over* my feelings of failure and inoculate against the same thing happening again?

For Rorty, the idea of redescribing is important. It refers to “a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well as the chief instrument for cultural change” (1989, p.7).

It is less about whether the experience accurately captures “the way things really are” (as pragmatists believe it is wasted effort to try and capture something that cannot be known) and more about whether, in the redescription of events, it becomes useful to stop feeling some things and start feeling others. I used redescription as a restorative way to look more imaginatively on a difficult situation and ask myself what I saw *now* that I did not see *then*.

Figure 6: Adapted five-column analysis

1	2	3	4	5
Speaker	Transcript	First-person reflections and memos	Initial theme	Redescription
Specify the person speaking.	Verbatim comments.	The sense I was making of what each person said, the feelings I experienced, the judgements and assumptions I was aware that I was making.	Exploring texture – summarising, concluding, reducing and constricting on a theme of the conversation.	After the assignment. What do I see <i>now</i> that I did not see <i>then</i> ?

Autoethnography

In my team coaching practice, I noticed the group would become most engaged in a conversation where one of their colleagues broke with the convention of giving fairly objective reasoning, in favour of telling a personal story, letting their colleagues in, just a little, to the stories that have shaped them. As *Homo narrans* (storytelling humans), we seem to have a primordial predisposition for storytelling to make sense of the world. Seeing the power of this in the groups I worked with to convey the nature of lived experience led to me to incorporating autoethnography as a method.

In autoethnography, researchers use personal experience, writing, and self-reflection to describe and systemically analyse their personal experience. This does not mean that all personal writing is autoethnographic. Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis (2013, p.22) describe the additional characteristics that distinguish autoethnography from other kinds of personal work.

- 1) Purposefully comment on/critique cultural practice.
- 2) Make contributions to existing research.
- 3) Embrace vulnerability with purpose.
- 4) Create a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response.

With echoes of Rorty's *redescription*, Griffiths (1994) describes “critical autobiography” as using personal experience to rethink and reinterpret the past in order to change the present and the future. It is not simply therapy-by-writing or some sort of confessional experience. It has the power to transform.

An example of this method can be found in Chapter 4, where I am seeking to explore what Boje and Tyler (2009) refer to as the “multiple layers, multiple selves” in order to inquire purposefully into a situation triggered by a difficult team coaching experience.

Autoethnography is recognised as a legitimate research tool within qualitative research (Chang, 2008) despite receiving criticism for being nonanalytic, self-indulgent, irreverent, sentimental, and nonscientific (Denzin, 2014). These criticisms are often situated in a positivist worldview rather than the pragmatist worldview from which this inquiry speaks. I return to this and questions of validity later in this chapter.

Moving from journaling to comparative audio recordings

There were certain parts of my inquiry where it just wasn't possible to stop what I was doing, take out my journal and write. I tried to make a mental note of what was going through my mind at that time, but invariably, as I sat down later to write, both the quality and intensity of the moment were missed.

For example, in speaking with team members before a workshop, I would get a growing sense that this was going to be a difficult engagement, usually because of unspoken issues that had festered in the team. Often team members would feel a sense of futility about the workshop. I knew at some point that I would face a

difficult choice of how and whether or not to name that which many had told me in private but would not *dare* say in public.

On the morning of the workshop, having not slept well the night before, I would lie in the hotel bed until the last possible minute. I wasn't tired, but I was exhausted and experiencing a sort of fear about getting out of bed to face the world. Eventually, I would propel myself to the bathroom, stare at myself in the mirror, and run the shower. I felt that seeing my reflection in the mirror and hearing the water running was a key transition moment between my inner arc of fear and my outer arc of needing to act.

Journaling in these moments was not possible. I had already left it to the last minute to get ready and I felt that even if I were to write something in that moment, it would be hard to capture the native, real-time experience. I started to record what I was thinking in these “mirror moments” using an audio-recording app on my phone, saving each file with the team name, date, and time of the recording.

Fast forward to the end of the workshop. On most (but not all) occasions, I had found a way to work with the privately felt, but unsaid thoughts of the team and it had all worked out ok. Due to the international nature of the teams I was working with, often the workshop would be overseas, which would involve taking a plane home.

Once again noticing my inner arcs of attention, I would notice the moment that I got in the taxi and clipped in the seat belt would be the sweetest moment of all. I could finally relax! What was I worried about? Of course it was going to be ok!

I began to talk to myself in a more self-compassionate way than my mirror moments a few days before. I wanted to capture these thoughts, but they came too fast and writing in the back of a moving vehicle reminded me too much of my furious attempts to complete my overdue homework on the school coach. I once again opened the audio-recording app on my phone and just downloaded how I was feeling and gave myself some advice for next time.

I set aside most Fridays for doctoral review work and used a programme called Dragon Anywhere to transcribe my audio recordings. Reflecting on these two transcripts, I would add my meta-reflections in a different colour. Tracking through these transcripts have allowed me much deeper access to my *inner* voice, both the critics and the carers. Examples of the outputs from this method can be found in Chapter 4.

A word on other inquiry methods

The bricolage approach allowed for a number of opportunities to explore experiential knowing through different methods. I used journaling as described earlier to record my reflections. Whilst not as systematically applied as the previous methods, they were nonetheless helpful in creating a progressive depth to my understanding of the inner work required in *Getting in*, *Getting on*, *Getting out* and *Getting over it*.

Use of body

Trauma specialist Bessel van der Kolk suggests that during times of trauma, our felt connection between our mind and body becomes severed.

In helping patients with traumatic experiences, he recommends they “see somebody who helps them to really feel their body, experience their body, open up to their bodies.”¹³

As I experienced the physical phenomenon of *Getting over it* – excruciating back issues, a constant state of tension, complete exhaustion – I began working with a Yin Yoga teacher to help bridge body and mind. Body work as a response to *Getting over it* is discussed in Chapter 4.

¹³ Tippet, K. (Producer). (2013, July 11). *On Being with Krista Tippet: Bessel van der Kolk How Trauma Lodges in the Body* [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <http://www.onbeing.org>

Use of masks

Exploring the “inner team” of critics and carers has been fundamental to the inner work I have done throughout this inquiry. To access this experiential knowing, I attended several workshops with Steve Chapman, an artist and facilitator to whom I am deeply grateful for helping me explore what could be difficult and painful territory, in a way that felt generative and fun.

My selection, creation, and response to different masks prompted me to cycle between a deep sense of experiential and presentational knowing. I would experience floods of emotions but could not tell you why and at that moment, in some respects, I didn't need to know why. The significance of the mask work would show up in future cycles of inquiry, as I found myself drawing back on the experience. Mask work is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Artful knowing

Ashridge has a long and rich tradition of using art in inquiry, thanks to the leading work of Seeley (2011). Many of my doctoral colleagues would use artful forms of knowing to express their inquiry. At one point, it even felt to me as part of the rules of the game. Would my work be considered doctoral enough if I didn't include something that I had painted or sketched? This perhaps says more about my own insecurities in my ability to draw and paint, something I can never remember enjoying. Energetically, it felt too much of a stretch to work with a form that whilst I very much appreciated, brought me little joy to actually do. Fortunately, Seeley's invitation to artful knowing also included poetry, music, drama, dance, and natural history – knowing in its widest sense.

As discussed in Chapter 1, music has always been an area that provided a sense of community, belonging, and opportunity to get better at something I had some natural affinity for. As part of this inquiry (see Chapter 3), I took up a new instrument as a vehicle to explore how I might develop my ability as a team coach to work “live” and in the moment, leaving behind any pre-prepared scripts and co-creating as I go. Once again, I used journaling to capture the learning cycles.

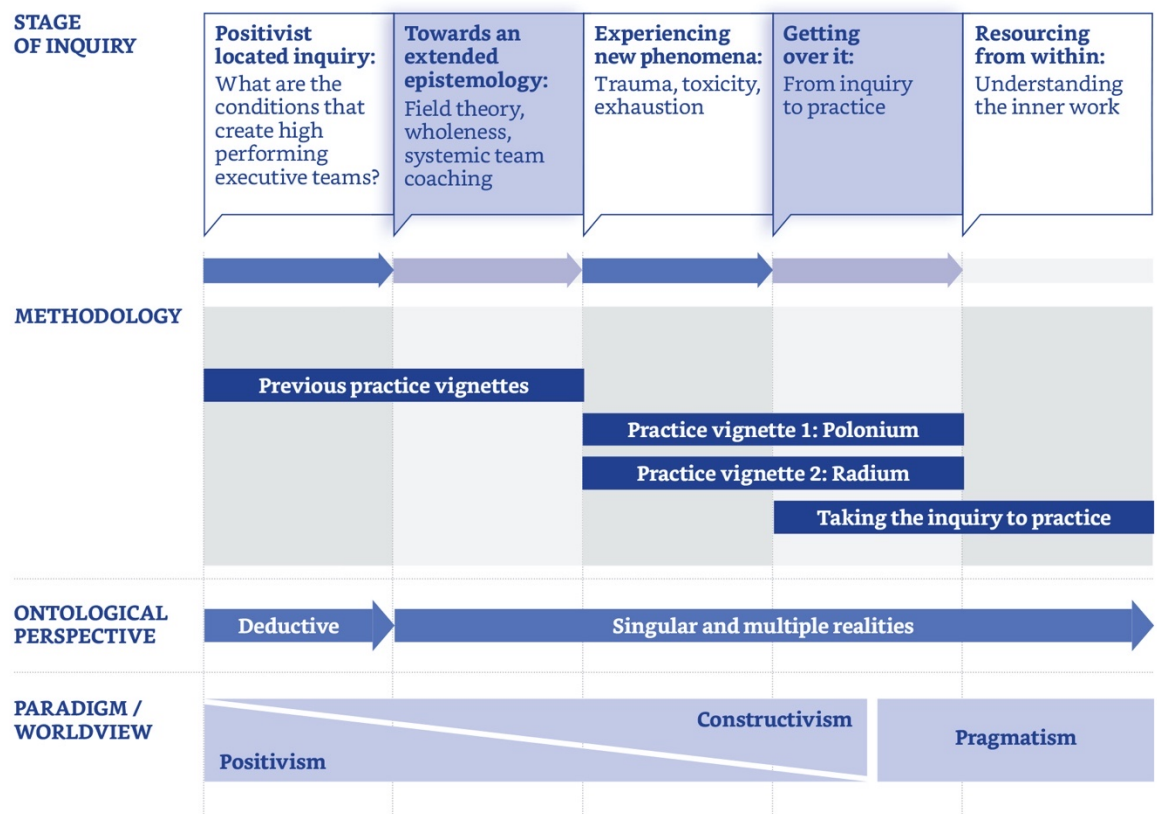
Use of practice vignettes

Woven into this thesis are practice vignettes where I attempt to show both the gritty reality and messiness of the work of a team coach. To bring you into that very moment in time and give you a sense of being alongside me.

Rather than give a polished, perfect view of reality, I have selected team coaching experiences that I found particularly difficult. I hope this expression of vulnerability is far more effective in conveying to you why I think inner work really matters as a team coach.

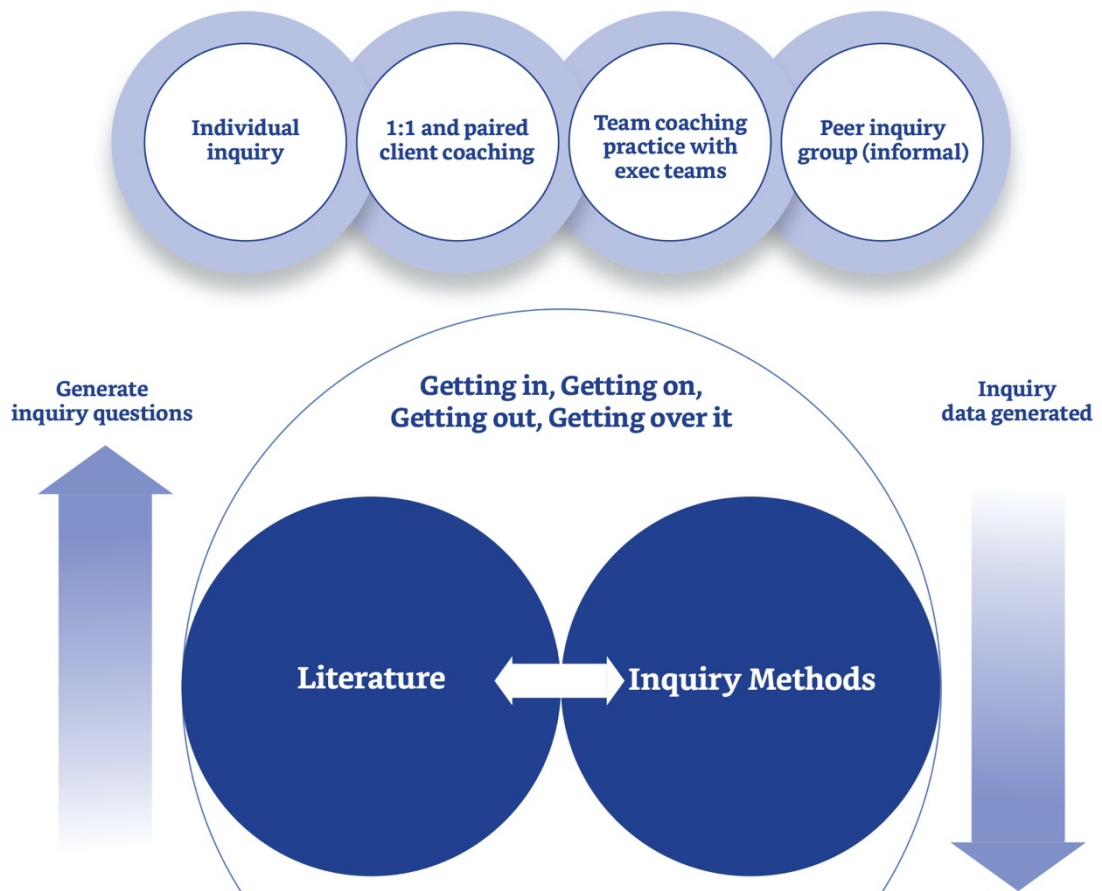
The two vignettes are named after radioactive elements, which speaks to the unpredictable, unstable, and at times toxic nature of the assignments. They document the emergence of the *Getting over it* phenomenon during the course of the inquiry.

FIGURE 7: Timeline of practice vignettes



Summarising the methodological framework

FIGURE 8: Summarising the methodological framework



The upper half of the diagram shows the main places of action in my inquiry. This practice field included my individual inquiry work, individual and paired client coaching, team engagements over a course of six to twelve months, and informal peer inquiry.

I would emphasise that whilst these were places of action, they were also places of inquiry in the midst of action. The data generated were taken into the bottom half of the diagram, where reflection, dialogue with theory, and the planning of further action took place.

Into this space, I took the questions that had been generated through experimentation with my inquiry methods and engagement with relevant literature. These questions were framed with the *Getting in, Getting on, Getting out,*

Getting over it team coaching metaprocess as a lens to view the data coming out of the inquiry. This ability to see the whole process was important, as data generated in the *Getting over it* stage would often inform a change of practice in an earlier stage.

My methodology could be critiqued for its emergent form, rather than selecting one from the start and sticking to it throughout the course of the inquiry. Given the epistemological shifts as a result of the inquiry itself, it would have felt incongruous to remain with a methodology of the previous paradigm. Pragmatism is interested in what works and following this approach supported the creation of the knowledge which follows in later chapters. I reflect on this in Chapter 7.

2.7 Ethical considerations

Ethics is central to the inner work of a team coach. At times, it can feel as if there are ethical tripwires, land mines, and hidden cameras surrounding you – ready to sound the alarm if you should break a confidence or over-step your boundaries.

Much of the discourse on ethics is concerned with setting out principles *before* the work starts. This is incredibly important but as a famous philosopher (the boxer Mike Tyson) once said, “*Everybody has a plan 'til they get punched in the mouth.*”

In this section, I set out both my ethical stance and acknowledge the idea of acting ethically in the moment. Several of the practice vignettes in Chapters 3 and 4 describe in the moment “micro-ethical dilemmas” (Traeger & Warwick, 2018) that a team coach may encounter and how they might deal with them. A common one is trying to please the client, whilst at the same time challenging the place the client is sitting.

A broader consideration on the ethics of team coaching, particularly in the context of power, is considered in Chapter 6.

Ethics statement

My personal ethics statement was created and approved by Ashridge Business School at the beginning of this inquiry. One of the objectives of this process was to ensure that no research participants came to any harm during the research. It also set out a position on informed participation, confidentiality, and anonymity.

One of the things I neglected to account for in the statement was how to keep *myself* safe during the research. When I did come to some harm, where was my plan to deal with this? I didn't have one. For me, this is one of the key issues with such statements – they are an important, yet static, signal of intent as opposed to a living, emergent set of personal questions.

To move beyond the ethical statement and ensure I acted responsibly and ethically towards myself (given the first-person nature of this inquiry) and towards my clients, in addition to my ethical statement I developed the following safety principles.

Keeping myself safe

There is a fine line for me between turning to your edge as a practitioner and feeling unsafe. Turning to your edge involves working with the emerging present, having a hyper-awareness of the group, and quickly noticing how you are bracketing and making meaning. Feeling unsafe, whilst having some similar qualities, to me is a more ancient form of knowing. It is located deeper within and triggers an alertness of an impending attack.

If at any time I felt unsafe in the research process, I would not feel compelled to complete that particular inquiry thread. I would leave it unprocessed. I would pause and do whatever I needed to do to take care of myself and close out whatever action was taking place. On a quarterly basis, I would take these issues to my team coaching supervisor for a safer inquiry.

I also faced questions on how much of myself I would put into this thesis, particularly my personal story and the most difficult team engagements, which could in theory be read by existing and potential clients. In the main, I chose to include everything, with a hope that this gesture might contribute to a world that is a little kinder and more patient as a result of vulnerably seeing each other.

Keeping my clients and research participants safe

All individuals and organisations outside of my first person inquiry process were made anonymous by using pseudonyms and by changing certain key features in their descriptions. By doing this, I sought to go “beyond anonymity” (Holian & Coghlan, 2013, p.407) to protect confidentiality. Any research participants whom I have referred to directly by name have formally approved the use of their quote.

2.8 Validity

As discussed in this chapter, a key feature of pragmatism is that it is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality. How then to respond to Bradbury and Reason's (2006, p.343) question of "am I doing good work?" Indeed, they question whether "having standards of criteria of validity" is even relevant when an inquiry is located within a constructivist worldview.

Oleson (2000) goes further and describes the "absurdity of validity" in the post-modern era where it is suggested that there is no one single correct interpretation. It's no wonder that "validity is virtually synonymous with trouble these days" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Kvale (1995) advises against trying to force fit the qualities of action research into a typical positivist discussion. But nonetheless, whatever the paradigm, it is important that the grounds for the research and the methods and processes used are understood by the audience. Heron (1996) agrees, suggesting that the concepts of validity and truth are too important to the integrity of everyday life to be ignored by Action Researchers. Picking up the challenge, Denzin and Lincoln (1985) suggest that criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformity should replace positivist criteria such as internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity.

I rather like Kvale's (1996) suggestion that knowledge can be validated through practice as it becomes the ability to perform effective actions. This moves us closer to the pragmatist worldview and Rorty's concept of truth as what our peers "will let us get away with."

Within Action Research, selecting and justifying one's own criteria for research validity is encouraged (Heron, 1996).

I attempt to express these through a set of questions:

1. Utility

Is this research in the service of creating useful and practical knowledge to other team coaching and OD professionals who do similar work?

2. Resonance

Is this research easy to relate to and believe in? Do the practice vignettes and first person inquiries resonate with others' experience of organisations?

3. Research not just reflection

Have I worked with my data in a way that shows I have been actively researching, not just reflecting? Are my methodological choices congruent with my ontological and epistemological positions?

An evaluation against these criteria can be found in Chapter 7.

Summary

My methodological aim in this inquiry has been to make visible the whole inner work of *Getting in*, *Getting on*, *Getting out* and *Getting over it*, without diminishing any part.

Denzin (2014) uses the word “pentimento” to describe research that makes something visible, that has been painted out of the picture or obscured by another image. Each gesture invites a response that makes the world visible in different ways and it is the researcher who must decide which practice or practices will best suit them to make sense of the problem (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I hope that in the chapters ahead, that which is usually painted out of the picture becomes more visible.

In this chapter, I have accounted for my shifts in worldview during this inquiry. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) echo the importance that one's ontological and epistemological view has on your inquiry.

For Coleman (2015, p.393), “epistemology is best seen as a philosophical stance, not a ‘given’; it is adopted rather than discovered.” As my inquiry emerged and I adopted different stances, so my choices of method shifted.

In the following two chapters, I lay out the theory that has informed this inquiry. I integrate practice vignettes to demonstrate, firstly, how theory has shaped my practice and, secondly, how this practice then shaped my relationship with theory.

Chapter 3: Theory in practice

3.1 Introduction

Over the next two chapters, I lay out the different theoretical frameworks I have worked with throughout the inquiry. Rather than a separate, potentially disconnected chapter on theory, I have chosen to present it alongside practice and inquiry examples to demonstrate how I have been in dialogue with theory at different stages of my inquiry. I will highlight those particular aspects that have helped to inspire new practices and make sense of my experiences.

When organising my theoretical frameworks, Coghlan et al. (2019, p.53) make a helpful distinction between Core Project and Thesis Project.

The core action research project is a collaborative venture whereby the cycles of action and reflection are enacted in multiple successive and concurrent cycles in first and second person practice. The thesis research project involves the action researcher in independent work, at both ends of the entire process.

As discussed in the opening chapter, I began the doctoral programme whilst employed within an organisation and my Core Project was the study of executive teams and the practices of team coaching. In line with my positivist beginnings, I grounded myself in the literature surrounding organisational development and the mechanisms and performance conditions for executive teams. These models and buzzwords are essential reading for *Getting in* (as many clients will quote from them), but often less useful for *Getting on* when you leave the theoretical proposal and make contact with the realities of the team.

As I extended my epistemology (see Section 2.3), correspondingly I extended my theoretical foundations beyond the mechanistic team literature, towards systemic team coaching, field theory, wholeness, dialogue, and vulnerability. I had left the organisation I was employed by and set up my own business. During this stage, I worked with theory in order to inspire new practices. This chapter captures the theory and resulting practice.

Methodologically, I tested and iterated these practices through cycles of action and reflection, noticing inner and outer arcs of attention and recording these in an electronic journal.

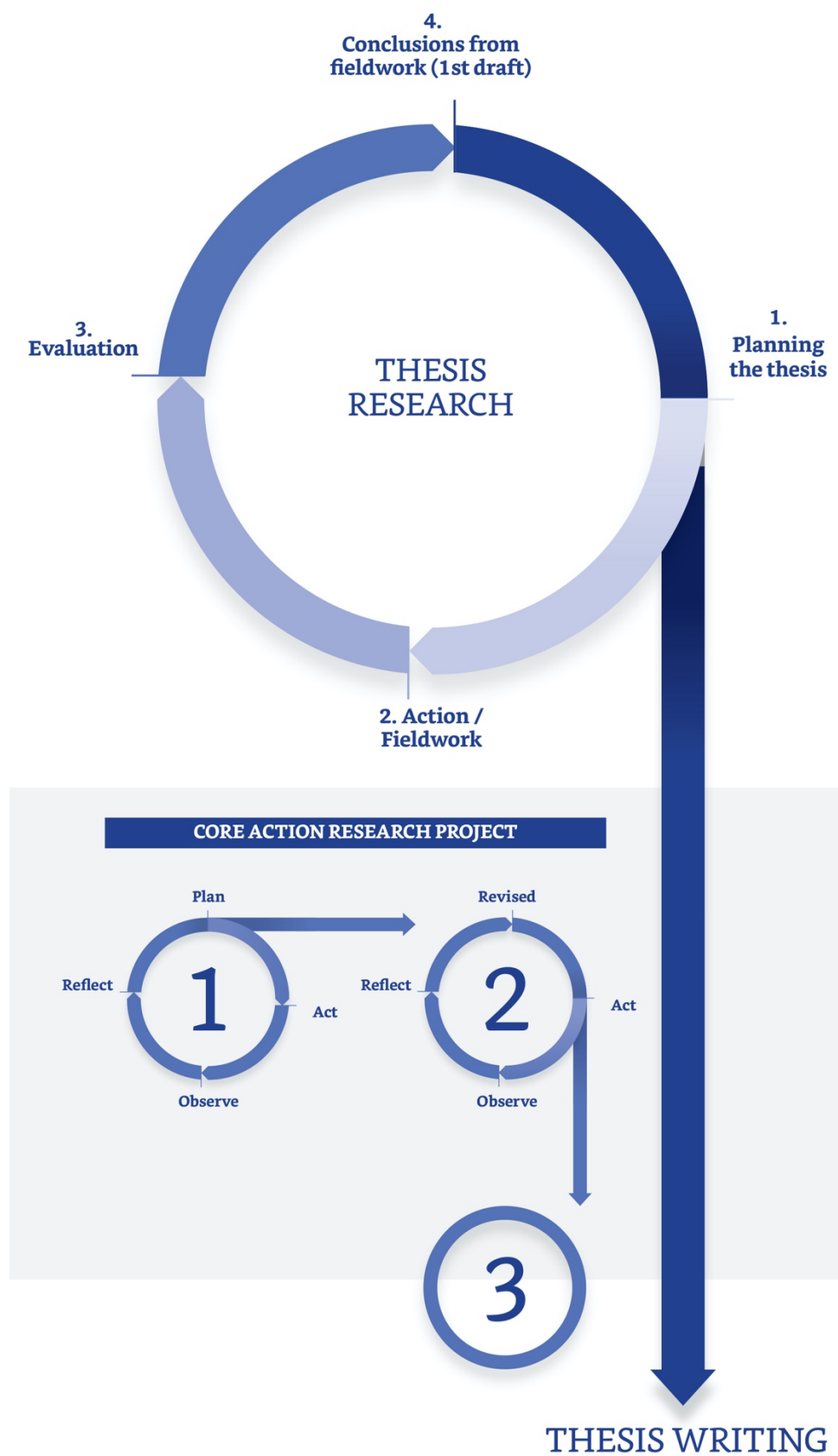
In my endeavours to genuinely shift from theory into practice, I became reasonably skilled at accessing and working with team systems. I found an affinity in the concepts of field theory and wholeness. I became more aware of systemic dynamics and led with my own vulnerability in order to encourage others to follow. I generated and held more vulnerable spaces where team members would begin to drop the social masks they had long worn and start to speak honestly about what they *really* thought, often for the first time. I felt my inner expectations for each assignment getting higher and higher. During this time, I had also won a lot of international clients and rarely a week went by without a plane and waking up to work in a different time zone.

It was at this time I started to experience a new phenomenon. I was beginning to suffer from paralysing fear and anxiety, characterised by a very vocal, loud inner critic who was readily on hand to tell me how bad a workshop was going to turn out because of my inept facilitation. I started to experience episodes of anxiety, excruciating back pain, and complete exhaustion. Also, during that period, I had some difficult assignments that didn't go as well as I'd hoped. Despite everything I tried, I could not *Get over* these experiences. I would reexperience conversations over and over again in my mind. It was at this point that my Thesis project emerged.

During this stage, I turned to theory to help me make sense of my experience. I found the literature surrounding organisational toxicity, trauma and self-compassion particularly useful. Methodologically, I worked with autoethnography, adapted five-column analysis, comparative audio journaling, and somatic inquiry to inspire new practice. Chapter 4 details the practice vignettes that led to this stage, the theory I engaged with to make sense of them, and the methods I employed to work with this new phenomenon of *Getting over it*.

To help visualise the link between these Core and Thesis Projects, Zuber-Skerritt and Fletcher (2007, p. 421) have a useful conceptual model of an action research thesis.

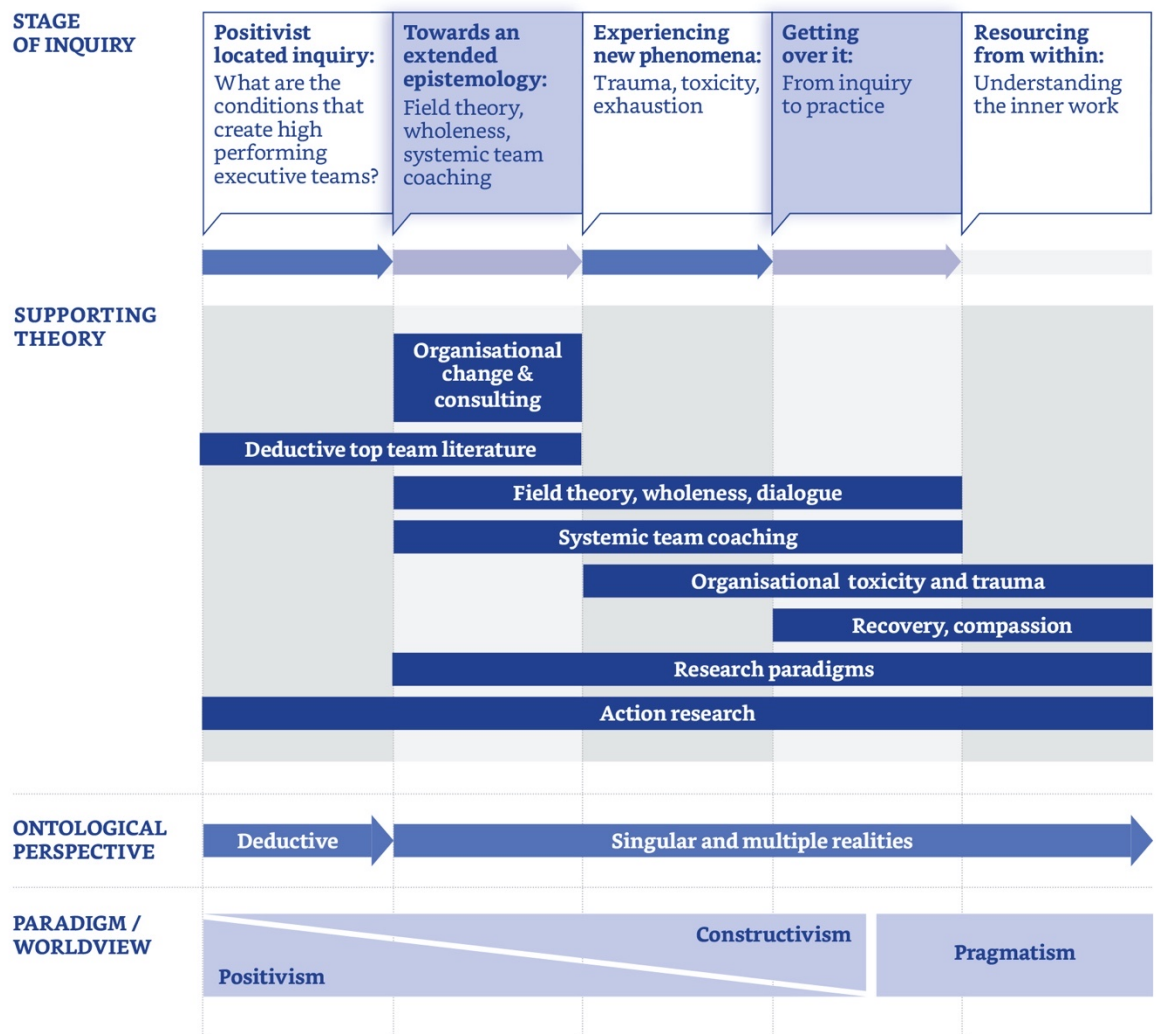
FIGURE 9: Conceptual model of an action research thesis (edited)



They describe spirals of action research in the core project stage and how these continuous spirals of plan, act, observe, and reflect generate and integrate into the thesis project. My interpretation is that the core action research spirals do not stop when the thesis project begins. The thesis project transcends and includes the learning.

The following diagram summarises the various theoretical frameworks that have informed different parts of the inquiry.

FIGURE 10: In dialogue with literature



In the next section, I begin with selected literature on organisational change, field theory, wholeness, and dialogue.

3.2 Field theory

I have a fond memory of a supervision group, early in the inquiry process, where I found myself very inadequately trying to describe a phenomenon I was experiencing in some team workshops. The harder I tried to explain it, the more their heads would tilt, politely suggesting I was making even less sense. I hope to do slightly better here, but I apologise for any neck strain. It's slippery stuff.

During some team workshops, it is almost as if I can reach out and touch something emerging in the physical space between participants. It feels like a very real kind of bond, created by an energy from where two or more people witness the purest form of themselves, perhaps for the first time. I can just see a glimpse of it in the corner of my eye, but if I try and bring it into central focus, it's gone. I notice subtle changes to the participants' physiology and posture. Eyes become softer, opening a little wider. Shoulders sink. Breathing finds a new place to grow from. The jaw and neck relax, creating a wider space. Whilst I'm noticing this, I'm also noticing the same corresponding shifts in my own body. I am part of this same process, part of the same relational field.

The living field

Perhaps the nearest approximation to my experience is that of the “living field.” Field theory can be traced back to Lewin (1946) and suggests that people, their surroundings, and their conditions are highly dependent on each other. According to Jaworski and Flowers (1996), these fields are states of energy and invisible structures that connect and, although inaccessible through our senses, can be detected by their effects.

The idea of momentarily being “in synchronisation” with one's teammates is linked to the concept of entrainment, suggested by Christiaan Huygens in the 17th century. Huygens was a Dutch physicist who transformed how we keep time by inventing the pendulum clock – an innovation that wasn't improved upon in terms of accuracy for some 300 years with the invention of the quartz crystal clock. He noticed that the pendulums of two clocks that were standing on the same floor began to synchronise

and tick in time with each other. Two interacting, oscillating systems that normally function independently assumed a common pattern.

Huygens described the clocks as having “odd sympathy” for each other. I find this to be a perfect expression to describe executives who start a workshop believing their challenges and views are so different, only to find out later that they are identical. He suggested that entrainment occurs due to the transfer of small amounts of energy being transferred between the two systems. What he observed was that one of the pendulums was sending a reverberation signal through its case across the wooden floor to the other clock which then became “entrained” by that signal. The concept of entrainment is now a well-documented mathematical concept and suggests “any complex system that has a repeating signal, beat, pattern or rhythm will always synchronise to the strongest and most powerful pendulum or beat” (Watkins, 2013).

This is a phenomenon often seen when we clap to express our appreciation – at the theatre, a couple of people will start clapping loudly and everyone else follows. Within moments all the clapping is synchronised. Strogatz (2004) researched swarms of fireflies in South East Asia and noticed how their flashing synchronises in seconds. Similar effects are seen in shoals of fish and flocks of birds.

We might think of this as “the tone at the top.”

Watkins (2013) suggests that in the human body the biggest pendulum, or the most powerful beat, comes from the heart – producing 40 to 60 times more electrical power and 5,000 times more electromagnetic power than the brain. When we train our heart to generate a coherent signal instead of a chaotic one, it has a much greater impact on all other biological oscillators.

These moments of connection felt so powerful to me that even I would feel a new connection and real *gravity* and depth to my relationship with the team. It would be typical for someone to say something like “I’ve learnt more about Jim in the last two hours than in the last twenty years we’ve worked together.” But how could I create more of these moments?

From my experience, I noticed practice in this area fell into roughly three different types:

Type 1:

Use some kind of personality inventory (e.g. Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) and through the process of sharing and understanding each other's style, a different connection might occur.

Type 2:

Teach the physiology of coherence through an approach such as HeartMath¹⁴ to help the team send more coherent signals to each other.

Type 3:

Create a session where the team are encouraged to share what Bill George (2007) might call their "Crucible Stories."

Each of these approaches has their utility for participants, but none seemed to invite *me* into the field as part of the relational process. Personality inventories are well established within leadership development and I still use them occasionally, offered very lightly as one of many lenses to look through and make sense of the team. I am constantly astonished at how very senior executives still look forward to the thought of labelling their personality style. The conversation quickly shifts to whether they've changed since they last completed it and the styles of their colleagues, which tells me they serve a purpose to label and normalise behaviour, making it (slightly) safer to offer feedback.

Approaches such as HeartMath are intellectually interesting, but given my shift from a positivist worldview, much less meaningful. They speak from a largely "scientific" paradigm, which provides a safe conversation starter, but in my opinion do little more than momentarily raise awareness.

Making space to share crucible stories, like *Homo narrans* has done for many years, I have found to be very effective. You'll recall from Chapter 2, this is the moment that

¹⁴ *Heartmath*. Retrieved from <http://www.heartmath.com>

led me to the doctoral programme, when I wrestled with the invitation into the field to share my own story. Whilst they are effective to help reveal the living field, through tracking my journal I began to notice a reoccurring issue. Senior executives in particular are called upon to give many internal speeches to managers throughout the organisation. Many have developed a bank of stories to illustrate a particular point. I guess this is to be expected, but for the team coach it is troublesome. Rather than witness a pure form of each other, executives were bringing these well-rehearsed stories to share with their colleagues, many of whom had heard them several times before.

"It feels as if they are just going through the motions, ticking the box, telling the same old stories" (Journal, April 2015).

I am reminded of the quote by the author Cormac McCarthy (2009): "He thought each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins ... so be sparing." Instead of helping to reveal the living field, with every recalling of the story, it was having the opposite effect of concealing it.

In the workshops where I did sense the living field emerging, it was having a real impact on the quality of conversation.

"What's different now? They're actually listening to each other. They're more forgiving, they assume positive intent" (Journal, June 2015).

As I journaled after each session, I began to notice two important themes of the living field: Attention and Intention. I set about creating an experience that might help nurture this in a different way.

One of the validity criteria for this thesis is its utility, hence I recorded and transcribed my briefing of the exercise in the hope that it might move towards a text that is vital, attended to, and makes a difference (see p.14). The transcription also provided an opportunity for further reflection and inquiry as I wrote this thesis.

Anything written in italics is to demonstrate where I have iterated the exercise in response to cycles of action and reflection.

Attention and Intention Experience

Offered as an alternative to the “Let's go around the circle and check-in” typically done at the beginning of a workshop, which some love, but some also silently (and not so silently) groan at because of its expected nature. It signals the start of something different and is designed to help notice, connect, and inquire into the living field.

Getting started

Find a partner whom you'd like to use this exercise to connect with in a different way, beyond your roles. Someone that you don't get the chance to work with all the time. Someone whose input you'd like into something that is important to you.

I noticed that certain audiences, particularly from the UK and Western Europe, would feel a social obligation to choose the person next to them – as if to choose someone else might offend. I now ask the group to stand up and move around a little and I point out that if you're British, you're probably feeling a huge pressure to choose the person next to you and that I will 100% release them from that obligation. There is a knowing laughter in the room. Once again humour points to a felt difficulty that is hard to voice.

Once you have found your partner, please sit next to them. Decide who will be person A and person B. Person A hands up?

OK. Now we need to practise getting into two different positions. Position 1 is when you sit with your chairs facing exactly opposite each other.

Put your chairs in Position 1.

Position 2 is a bit like sitting in British Airways Business Class, before your procurement team probably withdrew your opportunity to fly in British Airways Business Class. Your chairs should be side-by-side, but importantly you should not be able to see each other. You should be ear-to-ear and easily in reach of your partner's voice, but make sure you cannot see each other.

Put your chairs in Position 2.

Perhaps one of the most difficult things for a team coach to do is simply get senior people into groups. Seriously. Imagine the typical process "I'm going to give you a number, then get into that group." I don't think I've ever seen it work without a "You were number 3, no I WAS NUMBER 3." A small, seemingly insignificant detail but at the same time seems important (to me at least) because there is something about trusting me as the facilitator. If they can't do something as simple as get people into groups, then how will he hold the room when we get into some really difficult conversations?

So we have Person A, Person B and Position 1 and Position 2. We are ready to get started.

Please get into Position 1.

I'm now talking to Person A: Person A, I'm going to invite you to share with Person B something that falls into one or more of these criteria:

1. Something that I describe as a bit "scratchy." You find yourself coming back to think about it when you'd really rather not. It feels unresolved, incomplete. It is something that just does not sit right with you. It can be to do with work, or something entirely personal.
2. A decision coming up, where you know what you should do, but can't for some reason get yourself over the line. Perhaps you haven't yet come to terms with what the impact of your decision will be, or perhaps it isn't painful enough yet for you to act. Maybe you can't imagine what life on the other side will look like.

3. Whatever you choose to talk with your partner about, it should be something significant to you. Don't choose something half-solved or some bullshit topic just for the sake of getting the exercise done. This is a genuine chance to get a different perspective on something that is important to you. I'll say this twice so you really hear me – I will not ask you to share with the group what you discuss with your partner. I will not ask you to share with the group what you discuss with your partner. This is between the two of you.

So, while Person A is thinking about that, I will now speak to Person B.

Person B, your job is really easy – or maybe really difficult. Whilst Person A is talking, you are not allowed to speak. They are going to talk for 2 minutes and you must not interrupt, question, clarify, or give any opinions. You can make listening type sounds and do listening type body language. But you must not speak. If they finish before 2 minutes, just sit and enjoy the silence.

Questions?

Your 2 minutes starts now.

What do I notice? When listening to Criteria 1 and 2, Person A immediately knows their story. The question is ... are they willing to make themselves vulnerable enough to share it?

This is where their vulnerability is a choice, not a given. In those split seconds, they must decide how much of themselves they want to show to the other person and create a very different level of connection, beyond professional courtesy and respect.

It is perhaps for that reason I have developed the third criteria "not half-solved or some bullshit topic just for the sake of getting exercise done. This is a genuine chance to get a different perspective on something that is important to you." Generally speaking, when working with a team, I will rarely, if ever swear. I am very conscious of how it can unintentionally offend. But interestingly, I have come to deliberately emphasise "bullshit topic." I notice that it jolts. Perhaps it is my way of getting attention and interrupting thinking at that very moment to say – hey, wake up, this is important. It is important enough for me to use a swear word.

I notice I now say, "it can be to do with work or something entirely personal." The most common question I used to get was "Does it have to be to do with work, or can it be something personal?" which I find interesting. Is work not personal? What does this tell us about the implicit permissions in the team about what can and cannot be said here? It also links back to my belief that Person A immediately has their personal story to tell and is now probably furiously trying to figure out if they want to make themselves vulnerable, or think of a non-bullshit work story instead ...

That is 2 minutes. Time's up.

Please get into Position 2. Move your chairs if you need to so you can't see each other.

Person B – I'm now going to ask you a series of questions and I'd like you to answer the question quietly to your partner. Keep facing forward.

Person A – it's now your turn not to speak. No interrupting or answering. Just sit and listen.

So, first question for Person B. Remember, answer quietly to your partner (not the whole room like someone did last week). Person A, remember, no responding or interrupting.

[I choose a selection of 5–6 questions from the list below]

- How would you describe your partner's underlying mood? How did this make you feel?
- What's the bigger picture or context for their story?
- What underlying assumptions/beliefs about this issue do they have?
 - Which of these underlying assumptions might they want to revisit/hold more lightly because it doesn't seem to be helping them?
- What values did you hear in your partner's story?
 - Could it be that some of the values are in conflict with each other and that is what is causing some pain for your partner?
- What are they NOT saying about this issue?

- What might they not be seeing about this situation or pretending not to know about it?
- What's the boldest action they could take?
- If they knew they could handle any fallout from any decision they make, what steps would they take to resolve this issue?
- Could it be that your partner is somehow unconsciously contributing to the very problem they are trying to solve?
- What strengths are in your partner's kit bag that they may not be fully leveraging?
- How could they be a bit kinder to themselves about this issue?

In the briefing, I notice I deliberately add in “answer quietly to your partner (not the whole room like someone did last week).” It usually gets a little laugh and it helps give a momentary pause to the weight of the room, accompanied by an intake of breath. It's ok, this is intense, but he gets us, he's not going to make a fool of me. Stretch, release, stretch a little more, release. I am finding these deliberate moments of micro-practice striking. Are they really necessary, I ask myself? In the moment I am noticing something in the room out of the corner of my eye, a flickering of the field? It leads me to think that they are, but less so in the re-telling.

When I started experimenting with this exercise, I took a fairly relaxed approach if, rather than staying quiet, Person A started responding. I might say something with a smile like “Hey, ssshhh, you two are terrible at following the process.” I notice I am now far more directive, often using the participant's first name “James, you're not allowed to talk” and I might move my position to stand nearer that pair. I really believe in the power of this exercise, which might explain my unusually authoritative approach.

I use the volume level in the room to judge the right time to ask the next question. I cue up the next question by saying “Next question coming up” and then wait for 10 seconds or so. This has shifted since I started the exercise. Previously, I might notice one or two pairs that would finish the question early and I would panic, worried they were judging me for doing such a terrible exercise. They would look at me with slightly bemused looks, possibly annoyed because everyone else was still talking and they had finished. Perhaps they were cross at themselves for doing it “wrong.” In most cases, I think they had taken the path of

superficial bullshit and consequently, there really wasn't much to say about it. Now, I still notice those that finish early and I hear my inner critic telling me to hurry up. Maybe sometimes I do. More often than not I force myself to hold and take a room level reading of the volume, not one pair.

Certain questions seem to really create a pause in the room. "What are they not saying about this issue?" is often greeted with a long exhale. Some will ask for clarification of what I mean. Others know what they want to say but are experiencing a corresponding vulnerability to what their partner felt in the opening round. What are they thinking, but not disclosing? Can they say that? Here is where not seeing their partner is particularly helpful. They have no way of calibrating if their responses are "right." The exercise requires them to answer the question and they know the next question will be coming soon so they just talk, from a slightly different place – that of good intention. Because they can't see each other, there is also no pressure from their partner to receive the advice. As I'm writing this, I've just realised that the intent of some of my earlier micro-practices are to have them be compliant to my instructions and follow the exercise. I think there must be a tussle going on between:

- wanting to follow the process and answer the question*
- wondering if they should/can say what they are thinking*
- feeling some time pressure as they know the next question will be coming up soon*
- not being able to see the person and having no immediate feedback to know if what they are saying is helpful or deeply offensive.*

One participant said:

"I think the questions you asked were really powerful. They really made me think ... I'm not sure I would've ever said that to {partner's name}."

I watch Person A listen to their partner.

I see some smiling and gently nodding, some are rocking forward.

Some are looking up at the ceiling.

Some are crying.

Something is shifting in the room. Perhaps this is the living field emerging.

I finish with “How could they be a bit kinder to themselves about this issue?” I have noticed it creates a new energy in the room, one rooted in compassion, perspective, and empathy. I see some pairs turning to each other and hugging spontaneously. After answering the last question, we move on.

Please get back into Position 1.

So, you only had 120 seconds. Let me remind you of that. You didn't book out an hour and have a meeting, you had one hundred and twenty seconds (*I emphasise this*) of listening.

In this last round, you can both speak and I'd like you to talk about what resonated. Person A what are you thinking about now? Person B what else would you like your partner to know? In other words, please have a good chat. You have about 5 minutes.

There is an intensity to this round. There is noise, animated gestures, some laughing, some close-up secret conversation flying around the room. The last two rounds have released something and it wants to come out and play. I am watching the whole room in my peripheral vision. Checking in simultaneously on those who may have cried earlier, those who seemed uncomfortable, the boss – how are they doing now?

Complete this round by thanking your partner.

There is appreciation. More hugging.

Before we reflect on that experience, let's work the other side. So, this time Person B is going to share an area they'd like a different perspective on and Person A is going to listen. I have different questions to ask you, perhaps a little more challenging.

Participants will often remark that they like that there are different questions the second time around and I notice that I make a point of mentioning that I have “different” questions. It seems necessary but I'm not certain why. Perhaps they believe that the previous questions lose their potency on the second time of asking.

Perhaps it feels fairer to them to experience the internal tussle first-hand and were the questions the same, it might not be as intense. Perhaps I have a need to be new, novel, and different in order to keep attention.

This time around Person B is usually straight into it. I guess they have been thinking in the back of their mind what they are going to discuss and assuming they have experienced some vulnerability they are ready to go, maybe even wanting to discuss this and seek help. This is a difference from the first round.

When discussing potential values in conflict, I notice the person listening will often start nodding and silently agreeing. Like they have been revealed to themselves for the first time.

In describing the boldest action and how their partner may be contributing to the very issue they are trying to solve, I feel the person answering the question working really hard, desperately grappling around. They are not used to speaking from this “live” place; so often we pre-cook our ideas and bring them to our meetings for re-heating in the corporate meeting microwave. Thinking is live.

Despite saying there are different questions, I hear myself saying I make no apologies in asking the same last question – “How could they be a bit kinder to themselves about this issue?” As you will read in the next chapter, this became important in my own practice to help recovery from difficult situations. I encourage them to help each other more with this.

The group need little instruction on what to do next and most move naturally into Position 1 to begin talking. I am not needed now. I get out of their way. There is a focus and intensity to their discussions, even more than the first round. They seem eager to discuss the secrets that have been shared and the volume once again peaks. I give them longer this time and notice how the volume and proximity between pairs shifts. I eventually ask them to come a natural pause and thank their partner to close the session.

I invite them to come together in a circle to reflect on their experience, being clear to leave the content of the conversations with their partner but bring the process for collective reflection.

In response to my question of *"How was that?"* I notice that most groups will typically offer a one-bullet point opening gambit.

"Surprisingly emotional"

"Very therapeutic"

"Deep"

"Exhausting"

"Very powerful"

Ah – the organisational conditioning of a one- or two-word bullet point answer, no need to take up too much airtime please. You see how difficult it is for me to write this thesis now! I recognise it well and gently offer a *"Tell me more about that?"*

Themes that emerged

"I noticed at some point that whilst the stories were different, we were actually struggling with the same thing."

This brings to mind the concept of odd sympathy I referred to earlier, describing the phenomenon of entrainment. It goes beyond synchronising though. Perhaps another description would be "sympathetic resonance," a harmonic phenomenon generated when a passive string or body vibrates in response to the external vibrations of another body or string, to which it has a harmonic likeness.

It reminds me of a story told to me by a friend who plays the cello. She was taking a music exam and took the opportunity to warm up in a practice room, feeling nervous about the test ahead. There were lots of other instruments in that room, including another cello standing up in the corner of the room. She began her piece, a long C from her bottom string. She was surprised to find that the other cello began to play its own C string, in response to hers. The friendliness helped settle her nerves. A

lovely example of Jaworski's field (1996) – invisible structures that connect and although inaccessible through our senses, they can be detected by their effects.

"I found it difficult not being able to see the reaction of the person when I was talking."

"I found it actually quite cathartic not to see the person, it made me respond to the questions more honestly than I would have otherwise."

An important reflection point of this exercise is to notice how much we look for validation of our responses. Subtle cues from our listener instruct us to proceed or pull back, rather than simply speak our mind. What are we censoring and why? What is it that we are feeling, thinking but not saying? It seemed that the process, positions and potency of the questions were what encouraged a step over the polite boundary, into more real and honest dialogue.

"I found it so hard to listen and not interrupt. I don't think I've ever just listened for 2 minutes."

Perhaps a lucky coincidence but the word "listen" is an anagram of the word "silent," although I have long thought that this should be seen more as an instruction manual than coincidence. I am convinced that the ability to temporarily suspend our need to clarify, give a suggestion, or just interrupt because we know what the person is going to say, is one of the most underrated skills in organisations today.

The term "active listening" doesn't help us here. I deliberately never mention it because it is so ubiquitous, everyone thinks they have mastered it, and for me listening is not about being "active." Quite the opposite. It is about working hard on being "inactive" – cultivating a quiet stillness, noting what I am receiving at the same time as what I am thinking.

Summary and bridge to next section

What would it be like if I could help team members bring this same quality of attention, intention, and listening to their team conversations? Rather than say

things like, “Can I just build on that?” (but continue to say something completely unrelated), what if this was a team meeting? It may not look like a traditional sit-round-the-table-with-slides meeting, but it seemed everyone in this room got a valuable and different perspective on something that is important to them.

How could I help teams reimagine their time together? Could it help change the organisation, one meeting at a time? (Weisbord, 2012).

This led me to my next significant engagement with theory – the literature surrounding the processes of dialogue.

3.3 Dialogue

To begin to understand the essence of dialogue, it is helpful to understand the roots of the word. It is derived from *dia* meaning “through” and *logos* meaning “the word” and can be thought of as a flow of meaning.

Bohm (2004) was a key contributor to the concept of dialogue and proposed that the reality we see about us (the explicate order) is no more than the surface appearance of something far deeper (the implicate order). He suggested that there is a wider crisis in the fragmented nature of how human beings perceive the world. As we develop meaning, we learn to split the world into categories and, instead of reasoning together, we seek to defend our perceptions and win across our point of view. When in dialogue, the process of thinking is slowed down to help us observe our thinking as it occurs, through noticing, holding, and suspending judgement.

Isaacs (1999), building on Bohm's work, argues that dialogue is a very old idea. It is something that we already know how to do and at the same time, something about which there is much to learn. He describes dialogue as a conversation with a centre but not sides; a way of taking the energy of our differences and channelling it towards something that has never been created before.

He argues that the problems we face today are too complex to be managed by one person and we require a collective capacity to solve them. Dialogue seeks to harness the collective intelligence of the people around you. Together we are more aware and smarter than we are on our own.

Dialogue then is a shared inquiry – a way of thinking and reflecting together. It is not something you do to another person. It is something you do with people. Learning to shift your attitudes about relationships with others, so we gradually give up the effort to make them understand us and come to a greater understanding of ourselves and each other. It is a living inquiry within and between people. (Isaacs, 1999, p.9)

The question for my inquiry was: how do we actually *do* dialogue in a team where debate and discussion are the behavioural norms? It starts by recognising that what we do today is not dialogue. The word “conversation” (*con verser*), literally means to “turn together.” You take a turn speaking. Then I take a turn. I might listen, but I’m probably just waiting for you to stop talking so I can speak. The word “discussion” has similar roots to the words “concussion” and “percussion” and means “to shake apart.” If we argue for long enough and shake this idea apart we’re bound to get the right answer. When we debate, one person argues and tries to beat down the other. Issues of power and politics are rife (more on this in Chapter 6). All of these processes attempt to get people to converge on one of two alternatives and make a decision on the “right one.” The word “decide” literally means to “cut-off.” Rather than closure, a dialogue helps to create and multiply alternatives and lay them side by side. It seeks to open new possibilities and see new options.

From theory to practice

I made several attempts to help the executive teams I worked with practise dialogue. I introduced the key skills: listening, respecting, suspending, and speaking their voice, and used business topics to situate the conversation. Despite intellectually understanding the skills, most teams quickly reverted to type, actually with *more* bad listening behaviours. Most of my attempts at dialogue failed, some rather spectacularly. In one session, one executive abruptly stood up and walked out of the room, announcing before they went that this was “the worst meeting ever.” They saw talking together without a fixed agenda as a waste of time.

“These sessions are just not working. It feels too mechanical, I need to find a more comfortable way to explore this – for them and for me” (Journal, Nov 2016).

I was missing something.

In the process of slowing the group down to listen and notice, I think I was unintentionally creating more uncertainty and fear than the team could handle in that moment (see Chapter 7 for a broader commentary on uncertainty). The process of slowing down to listen and notice is important for dialogue. “Light moves at a far

more rapid pace than sound. 186,000 miles per second as opposed to 1,100 feet per second. To listen, you must slow down” (Isaacs, 2008, p.86).

In searching for a less mechanical, more relaxed way to explore dialogue, I began to reflect on the team dinners that would typically happen over the course of the workshop. I wondered if I could use these essentially fringe, “off-the-main-stage” dinners to experience dialogue. They are often quite a formal affair and, if truth be told, usually fairly dull for most executives (and me).

I knew from the Attention and Intention exercise about the power of creating challenging questions that a group would not necessarily ask themselves. So, I began to experiment with different questions to help the team practise dialogue and experience again the field that connects.

On the first attempt, I was working with the global executive team of a very large organisation. Outwardly, there was lots of “banter” in the team. On the surface, everything seemed friendly, but privately many team members had shared how they felt let down by their colleagues’ lack of accountability. It felt like an important area for dialogue, but one that might fail if I used the previous methods.

I devised three simple questions. As preparation for the workshop, I asked the team members to consider each of their colleagues in turn and reflect on their answers. I explained that they would have the opportunity to spend some time individually with each of their colleagues.

1. What do I think they rely on me for?
2. What do I rely on them for?
3. What are the opportunities to better leverage our experience together?

I chose the word “rely” as I felt it spoke explicitly to the quality of trust and accountability in the relationships that some felt needed attention.

I knew something was different on the morning of the workshop.

Scribbled in my journal (Jan 17).

“At least three people have just come up to tell me they have done their 1:1 prep. Weird.”

Generally speaking, executives who lead sixty-billion-dollar companies do not look for a recognition of effort sticker for completing pre-work. There was something about the comment which suggested *anticipation* of what was to come.

I set up a more relaxed, buffet style dinner and suggested 20 min per pair to allow them to speak to everyone over the course of the dinner. It turned out everyone had done their preparation and brought with them their sheets of paper. I was taken aback at how *seriously* they were taking it. It was as if I had legitimised and liberated a conversation, but one right now that could only take place in smaller groups. After the first round, I had to literally wrench them away from their conversations. On the second round, I gave them half an hour. By the third round, it was clear to me that both I and the timings were getting in the way, so I just left them to it and watched as listening, respecting, suspending, and speaking their voice unfolded in front of me. The downside to this was that I felt more of a conductor than a part of the experience (this feeling eventually grew and became an inquiry in itself, coming up).

The following morning the CEO (who had initially resisted the idea) suggested we cancel his topics that were planned and the team complete their conversations instead. A number of people noted the quality of conversation led to the solving of significant business challenges and “we should do this all the time.”

At subsequent workshops I iterated the process further. The questions, whilst helpful for teams with inquiries into accountability, seemed to miss the opportunity for a broader conversation about how each person was actually doing. I knew from the intention and attention exercise that having the space to talk honestly about how you *really* are, was an important factor in resonance.

I created a second exercise called “After Eight,” named in honour of the venerable wafer thin, chocolate after-dinner mint. My idea was that after eight questions, people would be able to connect with their colleagues in a deeper way. As before, team members rotated during the evening to spend time with several people.

After Eight – for one person to ask another

Building bigger relationships

1. Why did you initially choose to join the company? How does this job fit with your ambition for your career?
2. How is your current role working out – do you feel largely energised, neutral, or let down about your work?
3. How do you feel about your health?
4. What would you still like to learn in life? How might you do it?
5. What do you appreciate most about me and why?
6. Where do you think I sometimes hold myself back in the team? Why do you think I do that?
7. Are there any areas between us where ownership and decision-making could be a bit clearer for us/our teams?
8. Where could we help each other more/leverage each other's experience?

Whereas the previous set of questions generated focussed and serious conversation, these conversations added energy and liveliness, perhaps as a result of the more appreciative inquiring position and vulnerability needed to answer questions 6 and 7.

Once again, I observed some of the key skills of dialogue – great listening and respecting.

On the occasions I would work with the team again, there was often a request to do another exercise over dinner, “did I have any others?”

I created another set of After Eight questions that I hoped would enable more informal conversation and connection. I cut the questions below into small cards that I slipped into empty After Eight wrappers (see Fig. 11).

A fundamental difference with this version was that *I joined in*. Whereas the previous questions had a deliberate work focus, this was about enabling deeper connection between team members. It allowed me to access the living field in a way that was not possible with the other exercises. Rather than conduct from the outside, I began to feel a part of their whole.

Summary and bridge to next section

At this point in the inquiry, I had lost sight of my starting positivist worldview and was moving further into a constructivist epistemology. I was co-constructing inquiry in real-time, frequently changing my approach as I sought to make sense of the environment alongside the teams I worked with. I began to note that whilst I felt the prior practices (Attention and Intention, After Eight) were successful in charging the field and encouraging dialogue, they were still happening in the parts of the team, rather than the whole.

This led me to my next integration of theory, that of parts and wholes.

FIGURE 11: After Eight Questions

 If you could go back and change one decision in your life, what would it be?	 If you could relive one 10-minute block of your life again, what would you choose?	 What do you want to be remembered for?
 What are you really good at but kind of embarrassed that you are so good at it?	 What profession would you choose if everyone was paid the same and why?	 What's the one thing that people misunderstand about you?
 What's the biggest change/decision you've ever made, which made you the proudest of yourself?	 What is your most cherished childhood memory?	 Tell me a really, really stupid joke that made you laugh.
 If I really knew you, what would I know about you?	 What do you appreciate most about me and why?	 What's the longest you've gone without sleep (and why)?
 If your family had a motto, what would it be?	 If you had a warning label, what would yours say?	 If you could resolve one problem in your life, what would it be?
 What's the weirdest thing you did as a child?	 What single piece of advice would you give to your younger self?	 Think about someone you wish you hadn't lost contact with and why.

3.4 From parts to wholes: systemic team coaching

Perspectives on groups as a whole can be traced back to Le Bon (1896), who studied groups as social systems and the relatedness of an individual to that system. According to Le Bon, an individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amongst other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will. This interrelatedness between parts and wholes is a core theme of Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers in their book *Presence*.

Our normal way of thinking cheats us. It leads us to think of wholes as made up of many parts, the way a car is made up of wheels, a chassis and a drive train. In this way of thinking, the whole is assembled from the parts and depends upon them to work effectively. If a part is broken, it must be repaired or replaced. This is a very logical way of thinking about machines. But living systems are different. (2004, p.22)

Morgan (1996) invites us to think about an organisation as a number of different images, one of which is as an organism, a living system existing in a wider environment on which they depend for the satisfaction of various needs. He invites us to consider organisations as open systems that are best understood as ongoing processes rather than as a collection of the parts.

Considering the whole as something much more than a collection of the parts was a very important shift for me. Recognising that there is something about the whole that is not visible in the parts encouraged me to place my inquiry focus more centrally on the whole team system, rather than the interconnecting parts. In contrast, much of the organisational literature has a mechanistic view of teams, where the way to improve is to optimise each part. How might I begin to imagine teams as “living systems capable of extraordinary results” (Ancona & Isaacs, 2007, p.226). I love how Kets de Vries (2011, p.135) describes a team as having a “cloud hanging over it that contains partially metabolized material from its members.” Especially if I am joining a team in the afternoon, when they have been working together in the morning, I can *feel* the density of the cloud.

Returning briefly to Bohm (1994), he offers a helpful metaphor of a hologram to explain this interrelationship. All the information contained on a holographic plate is enfolded into every part of the plate. Each part encodes the whole. In a similar way with music, each note contains information about the whole piece – reverberations of the note that came before and the anticipation of those that will follow. Bortoft (1996) also encourages us not to think of the whole as if it were a thing. He suggests we experience it within its parts and that we cannot experience the whole in the same way as we experience the parts. Bateson (cited in Charlton, 2008, p.143) goes further and suggests “we can never know the whole in any detail, one part of the process or entity always discloses information or meaning about the wider relational context.”

Wheatley (1992), along with other systems theorists (Stacey, 1992) highlights the importance of these relationships in the organisation; indeed, she argues that there is no sense of an individual that exists independent of these relationships.

Prompted by this literature to work more systemically with teams, I noticed my goal to script was still to go and get the qualifying badge and during this time I attended a number of workshops on the application of Gestalt psychology with groups, systemic team coaching, and systemic coaching constellations. I don't have the opportunity here to go into great detail on each but I will highlight some useful themes.

Systemic team coaching

There is a considerable amount of literature (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Katzenbach, 1998; Hackman & Wageman, 2005; Clutterbuck, 2007; Hawkins, 2014) in the space of coaching teams in organisations. The majority of literature on team coaching might be described as more “Diagnostic Organisational Development” (Bushe & Marshak, 2015) with an emphasis on the role of the team coach in early diagnostic and expert design of interventions. It usually takes a “part optimisation” approach to seeing the team as a living system.

In line with Wheatley's (1992) view of relational dependence, systemic team coaching starts with the premise that any problems lie not within the individual, but within the connections between individuals. According to Hawkins (2014), systemic team coaching emerged as the best of the last 30 years of coaching practice, merging the best of organisational development practice with the best of team development.

He invites us to see a team as a network of relationships, rather than just the individual parts. I find this to be a useful reminder when working with team leaders. If you ask a team leader to "Tell me about your team," at some point, usually very early on, they will give you their individual assessment of each person. As a team coach, it is very easy to get sucked into this and come to some early diagnosis on who and what the issue is, especially as the client in the early stages is looking for signs that you understand what the issues are and are able to do something about it.

Practically, this means helping leaders to start noticing the connections, not just the parts, and helping them as the leader to represent the whole, rather than their own function/part of the business.

Summary and bridge to next section

At this point in the inquiry, I was becoming much more comfortable in running sessions that aimed to work on the connections between the team. I had run exercises like Attention and Intention many times and knew their potency to develop relationships between people. But ... I didn't feel I was working systemically. It still felt a bit too instructive, too facilitator-with-their-own-agenda. I was getting in my own way of being able to work with the living system. I needed to experiment with a different way of *being* with groups and here once again I turned to theory to inspire new practice.

3.5 Don't just do something, stand there!

Marvin Weisbord is a writer I enjoy for his straight-shooting and accurate commentary on organisations. He notes the following about consultants like me:

“We always arrive in the middle of someone else's movie and leave before the end” (Weisbord, 2012, p.265).

Weisbord's style is in contrast to much of the mainstream management literature on organisational change (Kotter, 1995; Senge, 1990) which I have decided not to include in this thesis. They speak largely from a positivist paradigm that I acknowledge but, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, feel less affinity for. At this stage of the inquiry, I acknowledged the highly relational, socially constructed and interdependent process of changing organisations. For me, the mainstream literature reads somewhat like a handout you might receive at your first salsa lesson. Follow these steps, in this order, and you too can master the dance of change, my friend.

Ah, but what happens if your partner does the right steps, but in the wrong order?¹⁵

Encouragingly, in line with my own practice shift, more recent editions of Senge's (2014) and Schein's (2016) work move away from what Bushe and Marshak (2015) describe as “diagnostic organisational development,” towards “dialogic organisational development.” They highlight that the interrelated, complex nature of today's problems are not technical ones that can be solved with specific tools. They reinforce the need for more joint sensemaking within consulting. The best we can do is find “the spirit of inquiry” (Schein & Bennis, 1965) and accept that we don't always know where the process will take us.

Weisbord's most significant contribution to the early part of my inquiry is concisely summed up in the title of his book with Sandra Janoff, *Don't just do something, stand there!* (Weisbord & Janoff, 2007). Whilst I didn't quite stand there and do nothing

¹⁵ I take this opportunity to apologise to all the people in my life who were unlucky enough to get paired with me during dance lessons. Arlene, I do hope your foot (and face) have fully recovered. Sorry again for that unfortunate incident with the table. I honestly didn't see it. Best wishes.

(remembering I am being paid to be there), I did begin to notice myself more in team meetings.

Journal, July 2017

“Working hard. Could I do even less here and be more available?”

This was my call to adventure, to stay on the edge of not knowing (Bateson, 1973) and, perhaps, go even further to become an expert in not-knowing, as Raab (1997) might describe it. To “presence” the outcome (Senge et al., 2005) rather than give a good diagnosis of the organisation and prescribe a series of interventions.

Echoing the work of Heifetz (2009), Schein suggests replacing the concept of a series of interventions by working out what is a next “adaptive move” that the client can make in order to begin to deal with what is worrying them.

The sophistication of *Getting in* is important here. Suggesting to your client that you don't have a “road map” for the team, but rather that you're going to do some stuff, see how it goes, and then do some more stuff, I can say with some certainty, is unlikely to win you Executive Level work.

But that is *exactly* what I wanted to experiment with.

A comment from my supervisor, Nov 2017

“Notice your assumption that without preparation it cannot work. Could you hold that more lightly?”

Working live

I felt I had too much power in the teams I worked with and sometimes ended up fulfilling roles that the team could be doing. As described earlier, in the last afternoon of the workshop, it would be me who was driving the team towards an action plan. This made me uncomfortable.

I wanted to explore how I could work more in the moment, more systemically and how I might hold my own authority without taking power from the group. I noticed an opportunity to explore these questions in parallel to my team coaching practice, using music and inner and outer arcs of attention.

One of the instruments I had always wanted to play was the drums. I learnt to play the flute as a child; rock & roll it is not and don't even get me started on jazz flute. In my mid-thirties, we lived in the United States and were fortunate to live in a house with a huge basement. I came home from work and sitting there was a brand-new drum kit, complete with glistening birch surfaces and polished chrome (see Image 6). My wife had bought it for me as a surprise with her redundancy payment from work.

I remember my first reaction ... oh no, what have you done?

We can't afford this, what if I'm rubbish at it? (my inner critic is always on hand for a motivational speech).

It took quite a lot for me to embrace the vulnerability of potentially having no aptitude for an instrument that I'd always dreamed of playing and make that first rebound on the drumhead.

Image 6: Our first drum kits (2009)



Back to Huyens once again: drumming is a deep form of entrainment. It goes beyond setting the rhythm and tempo, there is a sense of pre-knowing. As the guitarist reaches overhead into the space above to announce the arrival of a chord, so my right arm hovers like a hummingbird over my crash cymbal – knowing exactly when to strike the bronze (see Image 7). In doing so we exhale and inhale together from the same connected field.

Image 7: Drumming as entrainment (2013)



When I drum, there is a sense of unity that I never quite found when doing anything else. There is a sense of intimacy I have with my fellow musicians, even though I have known many of them for 30 years. Just like the participants in the Attention and Intention exercise, I too am connected in a new way.

Just as I learnt about entrainment and connection as I drummed, I hoped I might understand more about working live with systems through a new musical endeavour – learning to DJ, something I had always been curious about trying.

So, it turns out that DJ'ing is much more difficult than it looks.

Like any instrument there are some rudiments to learn. How to use the array of equalisers, filter effects, beat effects, tempo adjustments, and scratching techniques to seamlessly mix one song into another. Nobody will notice a good mix (unless they

are another DJ) but everyone will notice a bad mix when you crash two songs into each other.

In order to mix one song into another, you need to be able to manage many things, quickly. Firstly, will the key signatures of your next song clash or be harmonic? Where will you start mixing in and how will you mix it in? When you hit play, you need to match the beats manually by adjusting the platters, which means being able to “feel” if the new song needs speeding up or slowing down (there is a parallel here with the world of team coaching; there is no single speed that works for all). These technical skills are important – they allow you to get the crowd dancing to an unfamiliar song that, if you were to play first, they might not necessarily dance to. Because you have started with something familiar and extended that into the next, new song, they continue to dance, a parallel process to the *Getting in* and *Getting on* practice. Pace with what they know, skilfully lead to the experimental, don't mess up the mix.

Perhaps even more important than your technical mixing skills are your song selection skills. That hot track you love and makes you go crazy? Sorry, no one is dancing to that. It is a deeply vulnerable experience to clear a dance floor as a result of playing the wrong song (just as it was to have someone get up and walk out of a workshop).

As a DJ, you are constantly scanning the crowd, your living system. As I play different genres of music, I am looking for subtle cues from the crowd: a little pump of the head, finger tapping, swaying from side to side in time to the music, looking over to the DJ booth taking interest.

There is a final aspect which is perhaps the most difficult to master. It involves selecting the right song and mixing well but doing so whilst being fully with your crowd, not staring intently at your DJ equipment. It means dancing with your crowd, being a part of the party, being with your music, and fully in the moment, whilst not forgetting to cue up the next big moment.

My first gig was in Sept 2015 for a friend's birthday. He had hired out a bar to have a party and I had offered to provide the music with my fledgling DJ skills. The first thing I did was a sort of diagnostic – I asked him to create a playlist of his favourite songs that he would like me to play at some point in the evening. I felt that it was important to play music he liked given it was his birthday. I had many of them already but had to buy several that I really disliked – but felt I should play them for him.

I spent hours and hours preparing my DJ set during the summer of 2015.

Using my DJ software, I would analyse the key and beats per minute of each song and create “cue points” of where I was planning to mix in or do an effect. These songs were transferred to a long playlist that I would practise mixing over and over again to help build my confidence in the technical aspects of transitioning between songs.

Image 8: Hours and hours (2015)



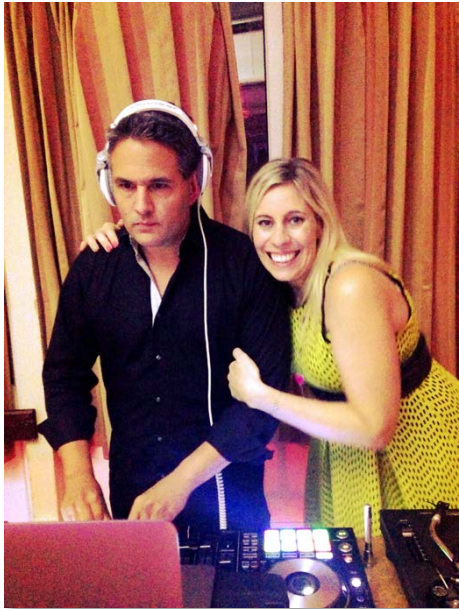
Over summer, I set up a mini DJ booth (see Image 8) where I would try out my mixes with friends. I remember that my focus would always be on my equipment. I was too shy to look up to see if they actually liked the mix.

The evening of the gig came around and I arrived very early to set up all my equipment. I started playing the songs in my set list with the transitions that I had practised over and over again.

The music was going down well and my friend was in good spirits, dancing with abandonment to his favourite songs.

I, on the other hand, was working really, really hard, as captured in Image 9 of my wife coming up to try and talk to me.

Image 9: Missing the party (2015)



In fact, whenever anyone came up to talk to me, I found it impossible to interact with them as I was so focussed on the next cue point to mix in the next song in my playlist.

A few people would come up and ask for requests, some of which were very random. I had no idea how to handle these. They were, after all, not in my setlist.

By the end of the evening, everyone was in good spirits but I was so exhausted. I managed a wave to the crowd at the end to acknowledge them, probably for the first time.

Image 10: Pay no attention to the man in front of the curtain (2015)



As I reflected on the gig, I noticed how the exact same patterns of my work had shown up in how I had approached DJ'ing. Over-preparing my script, asking the leader what they wanted as opposed to noticing what the group were responding to, and working really hard but not really being “in” it.

Whilst this approach had some success (most people liked the music and danced), I was not working live and was largely absent from the experience. I also noticed my physical exhaustion over the next few days, a theme I was also beginning to notice in my work.

In the same way as I found new business at work, word got out amongst my friends that I could DJ and very soon I found myself booked for some black-tie-dinner-dance-type-things in swanky golf clubs and hotels.

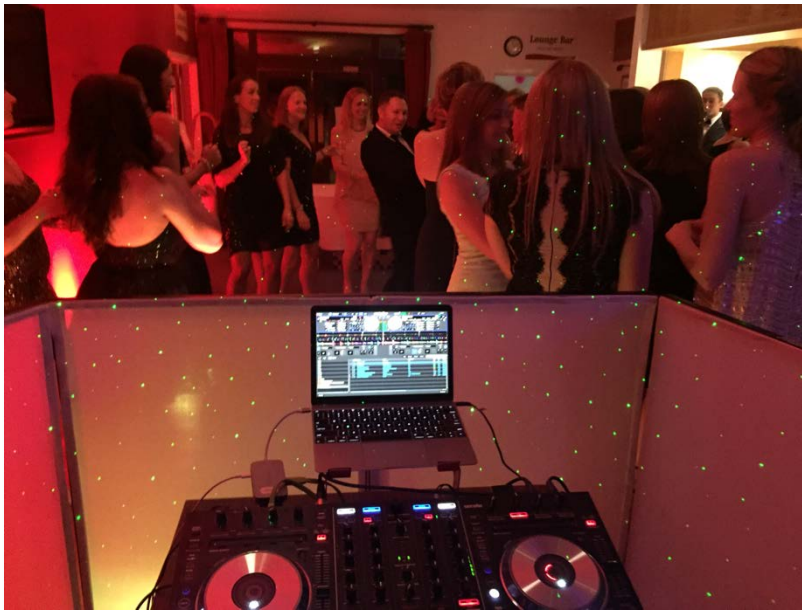
I refused to take any fee from my friends for doing the event and instead asked them to donate to our Pancreatic Cancer charity. A noble gesture, but deep down, my inner critic told me I wasn't worthy of charging money and perhaps if I did it for free they might be more forgiving.

I wondered how this might show up at work and whether it was part of the work I needed to do in order to be able to work more in the moment.

As the events approached, I felt an urge to upgrade my gear, as if that might make me look the part and give me some more confidence of fitting in. It was my script at work too.

One of the things that most DJs seemed to have was a “booth,” a screen that folds around your equipment. It simultaneously hides the nest of wires, as well as protects your equipment from tipsy dancers. It also places a barrier between you and your audience.

Image 11: Would the booth help? (2016)



I noticed in some gigs that there would be one guy who would get on the dance floor early and bop around with complete abandonment. Generally, the individual wasn't a particularly skilled dancer, but he didn't care a hoot. He was free, in the moment and just loving the music.

How I longed to be this man.

I would still do the odd train crash mix or poor song selection – quickly burying my head in my equipment – but overall I was getting better. I was finding a newfound love for songs that I didn't particularly like but could see that the crowd would go wild to (think 1980s power ballads).

I joined their collective energy and began to move around a little. I was relying slightly less on pre-prepared set lists and incorporating some requests into my sets. This took some work. A common DJ frustration is people who come up to the booth and say, "I'm leaving in a minute, are you going to play my song or not?" At first (just like work), I would try to please everyone and play all of the requests; this often meant a completely random song, in a different genre being played. Occasionally, this worked to interrupt the pattern, but more often than not it failed dismally and cleared the floor. I tried to mime a gesture saying, "Hey it was this person's request, blame them!" but the damage had been done. I realised that working live was not necessarily about fulfilling everyone's requests.

There had to be something of me in it to *know* what would or wouldn't work. I started to long just to play my music one day, without the predictable requests.

At some point I decided to upgrade my equipment to the standard found in nightclubs all over the world. Whilst I could argue why it was important to have this kit (I hope to play these clubs one day!), it really wasn't essential. It was probably a safety behaviour designed to legitimise my skills. It was designed to say to the world, this guy belongs here. It did, however, have the advantage of not needing a laptop which meant I could focus more on the dance floor, not the screen.

Image 12: All the gear... (2016)



But it still wasn't right.

Sure, I had become proficient enough in technical mixing. Appropriate song selection I realised largely relied on rapid pattern recognition, reading a group and inferring their music choices based on age and other cues. But I was still not in the moment. I simply felt too vulnerable to dance and move with the crowd.

I knew vulnerability was important in my practice as a way for me to let go of content, but also for participants to connect with each other in new transformational ways.

Checking in with theory briefly, the concept of vulnerability as being less about weakness and more transformational is now more accepted thanks to the research of Brené Brown whose TED talk on The Power of Vulnerability¹⁶ has attracted over forty-seven million viewings. I find much personal resonance in her work.

Vulnerability, from the Latin *vulnero*, means to wound or injure. Brown challenges what she believes to be some of the myths surrounding it – that vulnerability is weakness, an excuse for poor standards and that somehow, we don't need to be vulnerable and can manage by ourselves. Her view is that there simply is no courage without vulnerability. For her, courage is not an absence of fear; to feel vulnerable is to feel risk, uncertainty and emotional exposure. Vulnerability for Brown then, is neither good, nor bad – but simply necessary.

“Do not think you can be brave with your life and your work and never disappoint anyone. It doesn't work that way” (Brown, 2012, p.6).

The stakes at work felt high at the time, both for my fledgling reputation and resulting commercial security, but in my DJ'ing, they felt much lower. Yes, it came with considerable performance pressure and the risk of gaining a local reputation for not being very good, but there was no lasting commercial risk to my family.

It provided a great opportunity to experiment with vulnerability, so I did two things:

¹⁶ Brown, B. (2010, June). *The power of vulnerability* [video]. Retrieved from <http://www.ted.com>

Firstly, I removed the booth.

I felt it cut me off from the living system and literally created a barrier to connect our energy. DJ'ing with the booth meant that people could see me now. I tried to allow myself to dance a little whilst I was mixing. I noticed others would follow.

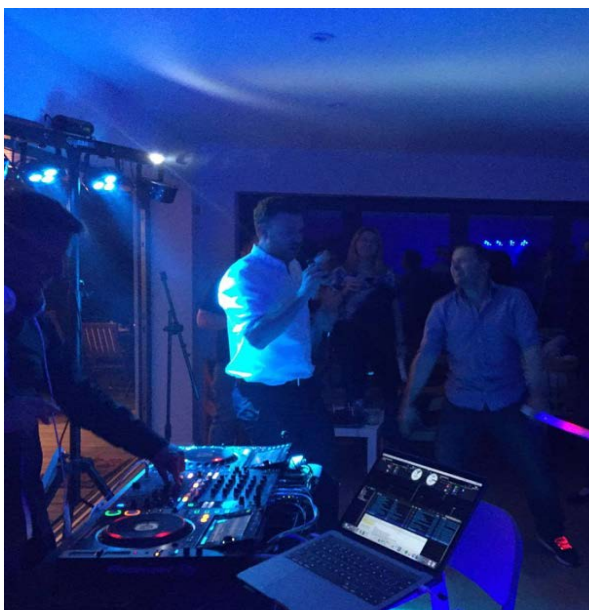
Dancing is something I have always felt a bit awkward about, despite actually being relatively well coordinated and able to follow a routine well. Teach me a routine and I will master it. Ask me to freestyle and I experience excruciating vulnerability as I feel the whole world is watching.

With the removal of the booth came an immediate feeling of being watched and that perhaps afforded my biggest learning. I realised that I was occupying this somewhat paradoxical state of being fully externally focussed and aware of every move of the crowd, whilst at the same time being shut away in my own head, focussed on the technical aspects of DJ'ing.

What I needed to do was care less about the crowd.

I needed to just enjoy playing my own music.

Image 13: No, the booth did not help (2016)



The second thing I did was bring in other musicians to my DJ gigs. I invited one of my band members, who was an excellent saxophonist, to improvise over the top of some of the songs. A talented rapper friend would come and freestyle. Together we would build upon each other's energy and that gave me more confidence to worry less.

Image 14: Collaborations (2016)



I also started doing some back-to-back sessions with another local DJ, who played vinyl records. Vinyl records are different in that you cannot “read” it using DJ software, so you have no exact way to work out the speed and key of the track. You can only use your ear to work out if it sounds right and whether you need to speed up or slow down. You also have no idea what the other DJ is going to play, so preparation and pre-thought is impossible, you simply need to work live and respond to the gesture.

As enjoyable as my DJ'ing was, I was still not quite there. I felt there was an element of my playing out that wanted to *please* the crowd, to give them a good time, sometimes at the expense of my own enjoyment. I recognised the same pattern in my work practice. Who will play my music if I don't do it myself?

Could I play my music and please the crowd? How would I deal with the vulnerability if everyone hated my music and cleared the dance floor as had happened in some previous experiences?

Brown argues that a common response to our own vulnerability is to numb it and turn to something that makes us forget to disconnect us from the feeling. She suggests we cannot “selectively numb,” that is to choose what we do and do not want to feel. If you numb fear and shame, you numb joy and happiness. Denying your pain ensures you pass it on but finding the courage to own the pain allows you to spot hurt in the world in a very unique way. It sounded like an invitation.

The opportunity to throw a party came about and my wife once again provided a field for me to explore my vulnerability. I had told her how sick I was getting with dealing with requests all the time and I just wanted to play my music.

“We're having a party for your birthday and it's going to be a 'no requests' party. You can DJ, but no one is allowed to request any song. You just play what you want to play, OK?”

Image 15: No requests (2017)



I had a T-shirt made up with #norequests on it. A bold statement of practice indeed. I invited my sax and rapper friends to collaborate on a few tracks. I didn't prepare

any set lists. I simply took all my music with me, played what I felt like playing at the time, danced, laughed, chatted, and *finally* felt part of the party, the living system.

The learning for me was unexpected. I am quite sure I wouldn't have got there through exclusively evolving my practice at work and am grateful to have chosen a Pragmatic Action Research Methodology with emergent methods. So was my learning that in order to become a part of the living system, I had to ... care less? From chapter 1, you may recall that a sense of care is fundamental to my identity.

My clients need to know I genuinely care and can empathise with the weight of their issues. Some may even want me to co-own it with them and need to feel like I have “skin in the game.” I know of some clients who insist on payment by results, where your fees are contingent on the team achieving certain metrics. But was perhaps my sense of care causing me to get in my own way?

I was inadvertently creating a helplessness in my clients through my own helpfulness and, in doing so, losing my ability to be part of the living system.

My learning was not to care less, but to reflect on how I might be useful, rather than helpful. Intent matters and I give this further consideration in Chapter 7.

Reflecting on contribution

Before the next track comes on, let me take the opportunity to pause and reflect on the contribution of this musical inquiry.

The object of inquiry for a bricoleur is ontologically complex (as described in Section 2.5). There is a double ontology of objects of inquiry and their being-in-the-world, with the nature of the social construction of human subjectivity. It is a moving part of many contexts and systems and “too mercurial to be viewed by a single way of seeing.”

(Kincheloe, 2005, p.334).

Rather than seeing the DJ as someone behind a booth pressing buttons to play records (seriously, how hard can it be?), I invite you to consider DJing as a context to explore complexity science and field theory.

Complexity science is rooted in dynamical systems theory, chaos theory, systems theory, and fractal geometry. It is concerned with the study of emergent phenomena that occur at multiple levels of complex systems, where messiness and variation are central to change through nonlinear interactions that oscillate between equilibrium and randomness. The social and natural world is an open system with energy, materials, and ideas travelling in and out (Boulton, Allen and Bowman, 2015). There are many independent agents interacting with each other in many ways, producing an ontological uncertainty in that the future cannot be known. The patterns that emerge cannot be predicted in their entirety, but at the same time, they are not random. Complexity theory is interested in how these patterns get disturbed or invaded, because it is at this edge of chaos that living systems are most dynamic and naturally change (Gallos, 2006).

My experience as a DJ taught me to get *really* good at noticing small patterns and how they can shift the big pattern (in this case whether the whole room is dancing). Boulton et al. (2015) suggest that patterns start locally and are co-created real-time by relationships. The mechanism for these patterns is often in the small details. For example, I began to notice emergent phenomena in response to a track I was playing,

such as tapping feet and nodding heads. These local, co-created patterns moved the system away from its equilibrium.

Brown and Eisenhardt (1998) advocate that improvisation, time pacing, and co-adapting are key competencies to steer through the edge of chaos. As I reflected on my intuitive practice, I noticed the gesture and response of these improvised moments – in this case, which genres of music created a response and which did not.

Chilean biologists Maturana and Varela (1980) identified a dynamic called autopoiesis, where small changes feedback on themselves and reverberate through the larger system, thereby setting the path by which a system can evolve. In addition to this autopoietic dynamic, I was able to visualise the complex interactive process of relating between people, similar to Stacey's (1992) view of organisations and Wheatley's (1992) concept of webs of interconnected, interdependent relationships. When someone did respond to the music, the effect fed back to the individual and those nearest to them, encouraging them to move too.

I learnt that you cannot direct a living system, only disturb it. The elements in a complex system cannot know what is happening in the system as a whole. If they were able to, then all the complexity would have to be present in that element. But that is unlikely as complexity is created by the relationships between elements. This suggests that no element in the system could hope to control the system...but that didn't stop me trying. There were times I tried everything I knew to get the crowd to get up and dance, but they just wouldn't, preferring to sit and talk at tables with their friends. At a certain point in the evening, I gave up trying to direct them to the dance floor and just played quieter genres where I noticed small changes in the crowd. Thinking I had failed by not filling the dance floor, it was much to my surprise that many people came up to compliment me on the music as they left.

One of the principles of chaos theory is that in any system, when we are trying to serve, all we can do is contribute a little twitch to be a disturbance. Where that disturbance goes depends on many things that you cannot control and probably don't even know about. This offers some comfort as I think about the large scale changes required in the organisations I work within and how I might consider my

practice as a form of activism. But, even with this, I must accept the nature of emergent change is predictably unpredictable and sometimes, despite my best efforts, change will not happen. This conversely also means that sometimes when I don't expect it to, I am pleasantly surprised.

Is an organisation a complex system? Morgan (1996) offers complexity as one of his metaphors of organisations. It could be argued that complexity is not just a metaphor, but an accurate description of organisations. Indeed, many of the descriptions of complex systems match my own experience of organisations: the inability to predict and control, the ability to self-organise, the potential for patterns to emerge as a result of relationships, and the autopoietic nature of small changes. It reminds me to pay attention to small differences in the room and corridor conversations outside the room. Instead of trying to control the outcome, all I can do is hold my intention. To fully adopt complexity as a descriptive term would be to adopt a theoretical stance and for me, this would potentially limit insight to only those that fit with complexity theorists. Employees in organisations, as agents in a complex system, are significantly more complex than those usually considered by the theory. My pragmatist position is to continue to explore the utility of its description, whilst being open to other approaches which may challenge or supplement.

In addition to complexity theory, we can use this musical inquiry to develop the previous section on field theory (see Section 3.2) and reflect further on the space created by both the DJ and the team coach. As discussed previously, field theory has its roots in physics and was adopted by Lewin (1947) and Bourdieu (1993) as a way of "accounting for causality in a relational, spatial view of the social world" (Friedman et al, 2016, p.116).

A field is a space in which some force exists and exerts influence on the behaviour of entities within that space and provides a concept for understanding the seemingly invisible influence of social structures on individuals and each other (Martin, 2003).

Bohm (2004) suggests that when people simultaneously self-scan and inquire within a group, they create a connective field between observer and observed, a

concept I find helpful to reinforce the dual importance of reflexivity and inquiry within a group.

By holding this field, a group can

contain both energy and matter and investigate more fully what it is producing. And in uncovering this tacit infrastructure, create new collective dynamics. (Mirvis, 2004, p.17)

In physics, field phenomena such as gravity, magnetism, and electromagnetism all exert influence on the constituent elements of the field. But what is holding the social field together?

For Friedman et al. (2016) it is meaning.

Social spaces are invested with meaning through people's thinking and action and these meanings act back upon perception and people's experience of the social world. Meaning is a truly human force that differentiates social fields from fields as experienced in the world of nature (Cassirer, 1961).

I would fully agree that shared meaning is central to the creation of the social field. As a DJ, you see and feel this shared meaning when you play at a birthday party or special event. As a team coach, you feel this most when there is *not* shared meaning, when the team members do not really know why they are there, or in some cases, even why they are in a team together. In such cases, it's helpful to create a "transitional space" (Friedman et al, 2016, p.121) which allow team members to

temporarily step out of a field, change disadvantageous mindsets, and then re-enter the field with a new mindset that enables them to change their position, challenge the field, and open pathways for self-actualization and growth. They constitute a protected space that enables learning and development that would be difficult, if not impossible, within the larger field.

Overlaying complexity theory and field theory to this musical inquiry provides both a metaphor and description of the social and transitional spaces that a team coach may find themselves working within. Key to forming and navigating these spaces is the ability to self-scan whilst inquiring with the group.

3.6 Summary and introduction to next chapter

In this chapter, I have shown:

- how new practice was inspired through being in dialogue with theory, which was iterated using cycles of action and reflection
- specifically how I have worked with the literature on field theory, dialogue, wholeness, systemic team coaching, organisational change, and vulnerability
- how emergent methods outside of my practice facilitated deep learning within my practice on the living system and working live.

And now we come to the most difficult parts to write. They are difficult because, as I write them, I reexperience them, with all of the emotions I felt at that time.

If I could have my time again, these are the moments I would go back in time and have a serious word with my younger self about, sharing with him the conclusions of this thesis (Chapter 7).

But, stay, let me take you back with me. At this point in the inquiry, work became very intense.

Through some of the practices described in this chapter, I developed a (mostly positive) reputation within the organisations I was working with for pragmatic and effective team coaching. This led to an explosion of new assignments. You may also recall from Chapter 1 that I made the decision to work school term time only, to allow me to spend more time with my family. So, it was not just the volume, but the concentration of this work into a smaller window of time.

By virtue of working with more teams, the corresponding proportion of assignments of “teams in trouble” (see Chapter 1) also increased. I resist drawing too empirical a conclusion on the distribution, but needless to say, as a team coach you will always

come across some. I found myself working with difficult systemic issues such as bullying, silencing, and team favourites. As I was now more skilled at accessing and becoming a part of the living system, this caused me to feel increasingly vulnerable during the run-up to workshops – perhaps experiencing the same vulnerability that the team felt.

It marked a very difficult period in the inquiry and the emergence of a previously unknown phenomenon – the inability to recover and *just be ok* when workshops did not seem to shift the system in the way previous workshops had.

I called this stage *Getting over it*.

The following chapter documents two vignettes of the most difficult practice experiences, weaved with relevant theory and data from my inquiry methods.

I worked with theory in a different way during this stage of the inquiry. Rather than work with theory to inspire practice, I worked from practice to theory in order to make sense of my difficult experiences. Theory and reading became part of my recovery process, as I recognised that others had experienced similar phenomena.

If you're reading this thesis now, for the same reason, know that you have already started the process to help this moment pass.

Chapter 4: Experiencing a new phenomenon

4.1 Introduction

"It strikes me that you might be experiencing some form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder."

(External Supervision Session, April 18)

For me, the word "trauma" brought to mind incurring or witnessing serious physical injury, surely not an inability to *Get over* difficult corporate experiences. Not so, according to Peter Frost (2003), whose research was pivotal to help *redescribe* my understanding of organisational trauma. He highlights seven causes of toxicity and trauma in organisations: intention, incompetence, infidelity, insensitivity, intrusion, institutional forces, and inevitability¹⁷.

Each one of these has at its core an unwritten "psychological contract." Schein (1980, p.22) describes the psychological contract as an "unwritten sets of expectations operating at all times between every member of an organisation and the various managers and others in that organisation." He argues that although the psychological contract is unwritten, it is a powerful tool for determining behaviour within organisations. When this contract is broken, it can create trauma, emotional pain, and toxicity.

Echoing one of Morgan's (1986) images of organisations as a living organism, Frost (2003) believes that dealing with emotional pain and toxicity is an integral and normal part of a healthy functioning organisation, just like the liver and kidneys in our bodies. His underlying premise is that it is *our* human response to this emotional pain that determines whether it becomes toxic or generative. What turns emotional pain into toxicity is when others respond to that pain in a harmful way, rather than transforming it as a force for good.

¹⁷ This was clearly a man that understood the rules of the game in the corporate world. Rule 1: whenever introducing a model or framework, ensure all parts begin with the same letter, even better, use a catchy mnemonic.

There is, of course, a route available as a team coach to largely ignore this organisational trauma and emotional pain. Just stick with your own agenda, team assessments, and exercises and “push on through.” Drink enough coffee and the end of the day will come soon enough. But as I described in the previous chapter, I had worked hard to shift my practice to work with people, rather than on them. I was as much a part of the living system as they were, which at this stage of the inquiry, resulted in a deep sense of responsibility to help shift it.

The following two practice vignettes describe how I encountered Frost's different sources of toxicity (intention, incompetence, infidelity, insensitivity, intrusion, institutional forces, and inevitability).

Sometimes all at the same time.

4.2 Polonium case vignette

Polonium 210 is a highly radioactive substance.

It emits enough gamma radiation to causes a blue glow in the air around it.

It is an extremely toxic substance and must be handled with great care.

Background:

Polonium is a multi-national, FTSE 100 organisation, employing several thousand people. Like most global organisations, senior leadership teams preside over the various geographies, functions, and categories, broadly modelled on Morgan's (1986) image of an organisation as a “machine.” This particular vignette considers a team coaching engagement to support a new, first time CEO and his leadership team. Speaking perhaps to one of Frost's sources of toxicity: “institutional,” it's worth noting that before I started working with the organisation, Polonium had hit the headlines due to a serious scandal where certain groups within the company were deemed to have colluded to prevent sensitive information about business practices becoming public knowledge. They were severely fined by the regulating body and their reputation suffered considerably.

Getting in

I had been working with Polonium for the three years following their business scandal, on a series of team coaching assignments with various members of the Group Executive and their leadership teams. Typically, these assignments were initiated by a new leader joining or after a restructure resulting in significant membership changes.

I was approached by the HR business partner of one of the teams I had been supporting to ask if I would like to be considered for a new team coaching assignment for a newly appointed, first time CEO of one of the important geographies. In addition to individual support, James the CEO was also looking for team coaching support.

It felt like an opportunity to do some genuine systemic team coaching and I proposed a coaching plan that I felt might support the key parts of the system (the CEO, his leadership team, the extended leadership, and the key stakeholders of the team).

See Appendix C for detail on the coaching objectives and proposal.

As described in Chapter 1, large corporations often set up a procurement-driven process to select their vendors, which in my experience is largely a test of stamina and spreadsheet skills, rather than anything to do with transformative capability and cultural contribution. However, in this instance, I was fortunate in that James simply wanted to have a call with me, where he was most interested in the work I had done with other teams at Polonium (on reflection perhaps testing the security on my vault to see if I would spill any secrets and to see if I agreed with his judgement of the senior leadership team).

He liked the coaching plan, especially the coaching for the extended leadership team. This was an area he had not considered focussing on. An additional bonus to this assignment was that it did not involve a considerable amount of international travel, which most of my assignments did. I shared this travelling lifestyle with most of my clients and I relished the opportunity to get home in the evening and sing my children a song to sleep. It would also mean I could have more informal time with James, rather than scheduled set pieces in another faceless business hotel. I was awarded the assignment and was really looking forward to getting started.

Getting on

I made contact with the leadership team to connect and explore what work we might want to do together. During the first three or four team calls, something seemingly insignificant happened that later turned out to be important. I would call the team member at the designated time and each time they would say a version of “can you give me a minute to find somewhere I can talk?” Having spent many years of working in an open plan office, I didn't think much of this as I assumed they were simply getting up from their desk to find a meeting room – until I visited their offices and saw that each team member had their own office, which seemed relatively well

sound proofed. Many were *leaving* the office and going outside to take the call. I missed that and it was significant. There was something about their physical office space that had a silencing effect.

I used the five-column analysis method (see Chapter 2) to capture my conversations with the team. The example below is the original version, before I later revised it to include *redescription* of the experience.

FIGURE 12: Polonium team calls (1), five-column analysis

Speaker	Transcript	First-person reflections and memos	Theme	Final theme
A	James replaced a huge personality in the business. He was a real energiser and highly competitive. He was incredibly detailed and incredibly directional. He wanted to know what was going on, everywhere.	Huge contrast in style with previous leader, emphasising his more affiliative, inclusive style. I must speak to his boss to see why he chose him for this.	Suffering from contrast principle – aggressive/directive style. Power, silencing, just do it culture.	Controlling culture
	He's a very different leader, which is a good thing but the challenge is he is so different, the leadership team are used to receiving their orders and executing. I can tell you after the recent business results a few of us are thinking "When is James going to give us a kicking?" People at the moment still can't quite work it out. A pointed email from him wouldn't go a miss.	"Orders" very military, authoritative. Wow, poor team. Sounds very controlled. You need a telling off to do something! Is there a leadership moment here for James to set out his stall differently? "Kicking" Powerful language I don't experience James as someone who would be comfortable with that.	Controlling power	Punishment Coercion

Speaker	Transcript	First-person reflections and memos	Theme	Final theme
B	His predecessor's leadership was a bit dictatorial. It created a childish sort of culture; you wouldn't disagree with him. James is a far more adult sort of leader, refined, thoughtful and considered. People are wondering why isn't James killing us? Maybe he doesn't care. Maybe the more people get to see him they will see that he is a leader of substance. It takes longer.	I wonder what a "childish sort of culture" is like and how this seemingly adult guy went along with that. Killing, violent language again. "leader of substance" comment seems out of place in contrast to other comments, does he actually think that or is he repeating someone else's words?	Psychological safety Punishment	Bullying with enforcers behind the scenes James doesn't know how to respond

It was clear that people liked James and appreciated his fresh style, but at the same time they couldn't quite figure him out. He was so different in style from the previous leader (who had returned to head office to take on a larger role). When the quarterly results were published and they missed the guidance they had given the City, no one could understand why he wasn't screaming and shouting like the previous leader would have done. They were waiting for (and maybe wanting) him to berate them. As I reflect on the five-column analysis I notice now that I perhaps believed a little too much in James and his more affiliative, consensus-driven style. He represented a way of being in organisations that I felt was missing from many teams I worked with. I really wanted him to do well, to the extent that I perhaps did not consider and discuss with James the possibility that his inaction was less due to an inclusive style and more because he was a first-time CEO and didn't actually know what he should be doing.

About half-way into most conversations, once there was some connection between us, I would ask "is there anything else you think is important for me to know?" and then I would wait.

At this point, I could sense a great deal of hesitancy in responding. My experience from the Attention and Intention work suggested that there was something significant being unsaid. I remained still, resisting the urge to make the pause less awkward and get in the way of their thinking. Eventually, in nearly all of the calls, one individual in the leadership team was spontaneously brought up as being the biggest block to becoming a more effective team.

FIGURE 13: Polonium team calls (2), five-column analysis

Speaker	Transcript	First-person reflections and memos	Initial themes	Final theme
A	Over the last 12 months I can no longer hold my tongue ... he is a dangerous, dangerous individual, the antithesis of what someone in his role should be.	I don't hear the word dangerous repeated twice, I make the (fatal) assumption I can help them.	Alertness Rescuing	Safety
B	There is a single source of all problems in the team ... he is a white-collar psychopath	Again, very harsh language to use. It's like it has been stored up for this call.	Toxicity	Toxicity
C	I've found this a difficult topic to bring up, but the biggest blocker to our culture is one of the team. It's a conversation that a few of us will have, it's mentally draining.	Visions of whispers in offices and secret meetings about this individual ... much wasted energy. Do they realise they are complicit to this?	Psychological safety	Complicity
D	This individual is the biggest risk for James. He will undermine all change efforts and James will be judged if he doesn't get rid of him.	Does James realise this?	Subversion Subtle undermining	Risk

Speaker	Transcript	First-person reflections and memos	Initial themes	Final theme
E	It's just the way he speaks to people. I don't know if it's fear. I worked with him in my last role and when the team was told he was moving – it was the best news ever – they had a massive party. If he ever came back, I know for a fact that a lot of people would leave.	I'm imagining a secret party to celebrate someone leaving. It makes me very sad.	Toxic culture	Toxic culture
F	One of the things that annoyed me was that the previous CEO ignored it.	What did he have on him to ignore such poor behaviour? How did it benefit him to keep him?	Collusion Power	Power

This presented a challenge.

I had frequently come across the situation where it was the leader of the team who was deemed by the group as being one of the biggest blockers to change, but not one of the team members. I had a mandate to work with James on his feedback, but not necessarily with the individual (Mike), whom the vast majority of team members felt would undermine any meaningful change efforts and was “untouchable” due to his relationship with the previous CEO.

I ended up speaking with Mike last in the team, as he cancelled the original call. In the days leading up to the call, I began to feel vulnerable and anxious. I slept fitfully and found my attention frequently drifting to role-playing the upcoming telephone conversation.

As I imagined the conversation, I would do a slightly odd behaviour of actually mouthing the words, occasionally unconsciously saying them as if rehearsing a script. “Did you say something?” my wife would shout from the other room. I stopped exercising. I made poor food decisions, frequently relying on late night

takeaway food. I felt vulnerable about being able to raise and inquire into some of the concerns raised by his colleagues.

The picture painted by Mike's colleagues was that of a corporate bully, who was largely hated, not just disliked, by all. Someone who had enforced exactly the wishes of the previous CEO, by managing some of his most difficult situations. It sounded a lot like what Lewis (2017) noticed about Japanese political scandals. He describes the Japanese word, *sontaku*, meaning to “anticipate one's boss's next wish and to take action accordingly.”¹⁸

Frost (2003) might even refer to this as a “toxic tandem,” a partnership between a toxic boss and their handler. Sometimes I have seen the handler actually helping to translate and even *dilute* some of the difficult characteristics of their boss. These relationships can last for years. In one particular financial services organisation, I knew of a leader who brought his deputy with him from one job to the next over the course of a 20-year partnership. The deputy routinely buffered the team from the boss's anger and prevented chaos.

The morning of the call with Mike approached. I woke up exhausted, having not been able to find sleep until the early hours of the morning.

Journal entry (Jan 18)

“I'm dreading this 11 am today. Does he have any idea whatsoever that his colleagues absolutely hate him? Am I going to have to be the one to tell him? Yet again I'm holding all of their hopes and expectations. This is killing me.”

Appendix D lists a sample of the five-column analysis from the call. Apart from a glimpse of self-impact at the end “I'm not afraid of bringing bad news to the table,” there was absolutely no willingness to recognise that he was anything but corporately awesome. He had gone to some great lengths to list his responsibilities and achievements to firmly cement this narrative. I can't think of a time that this has ever happened on a call before.

¹⁸ Lewis, L. (2018, March 22). Abe scandal tests Japanese tolerance of nod-and-wink power. *Financial Times* Retrieved from <http://www.ft.com>

I sensed a very well-defended image and a high degree of guardedness. I decided in that moment not to mention any of the feedback from his colleagues. It was always going to be a tricky one over the phone anyway: “Hey Mike, did you know that your leadership team colleagues and basically everyone I spoke to hates you?” I had some face-to-face time planned with him in a few weeks so decided to reflect on it.

I wrote up a summary of all of the conversations and key themes for James. You might wonder why I created a classic piece of diagnostic OD, given I was trying to work more dialogically. The answer is pace and acknowledging the client as you find them. Whilst I was technically in my *Getting on stage*, it was still early days and in some respects I was still *Getting in*. I knew James was likely to judge the quality of my “insights” and accuracy of organisational assessment as a gauge of whether he wanted to proceed. The joint reflection on the themes were a chance to re-commit and review. To review whether this was the right time for a team journey and also for me to review if I wanted to do this work.

Twice I have stopped assignments at this point. Once, this was because I felt that the leader needed to listen to the feedback and act upon it before proceeding to a team workshop – he didn't need to bring the team together, he just needed to modify some of his behaviours that no one had told him were deeply disrespectful. I stopped a second assignment because it was clear through the interviews that everyone was paying lip service to the team development initiative proposed by the Chief People Officer. The CEO was disinterested and nodding through the work. I told him that he was not ready to do this work yet and both his money and my time would be better spent elsewhere. He was quite shocked by this. Clients expect consultants to sell. We ended up working together a year later.

Returning to the conversation with James to review the themes, the feedback on James was pretty straight-forward stuff – a good start, very different but likeable, need to be more visible, spend more time in a certain part of the business, work out what you want to be famous for here, fix your team.

However, the feedback about the team and particularly Mike was very sensitive. I was concerned how Mike might react if it were to find its way into the wider

organisation. I asked James if I could send the feedback to his private email address. I felt such discretion was an act of care towards Mike's reputation, should we ever end up working together.

I spent an entire day poring over the feedback and reflecting on the ethical and power challenges in sensemaking to create the narrative (e.g. could/should I actually put the phrase "Corporate Psychopath" in?) Such challenges come up so frequently in my practice, I have dedicated an entire Chapter (6) to discuss how to work with these.

I made the decision not to mention Mike by name in the feedback, nor mention his function. I wanted to balance fairness for Mike, with a need to honour the voices that had decided, courageously, to speak out.

The only time James and I could speak was late in the evening. It's common to have such client calls late into the evening – it can sometimes work well as a welcome break from the typical formality. I was sitting in my home office overlooking a dark street, floodlit with a single lamppost. He was in his hotel room, with a (one would assume very large) glass of wine. We discussed his feedback. He listened, clarified, and attended well to the messages from the leadership group – exactly as I might have expected him to.

When it came to the feedback about the team and in particular Mike, he was shocked at the ferocity of the feedback, but "deep down not altogether surprised." His main concern was that Mike had been identified as "Top Talent" by the previous CEO and the narrative back at the head office was that Mike was a high-flyer. How could James pop that bubble without drawing into question the judgement of many others, including his predecessor and the Chief People Officer? How could it be that such consistently toxic behaviours had been tolerated and not reported, especially after the recent launch of a glossy new set of values and leadership behaviours?

I suggested to James that we cancel the upcoming team workshop. My concern was that there would be "Pack Attack" against Mike, where the leadership team galvanise against one individual, rather than towards a clear collective purpose. Given what I

knew about Mike's need for respect and to feel part of the team, I felt this would do irreversible damage. Taking a systemic team coaching approach, I tried to recast the issue more as a breakdown in the network of relationships between the parts of the team, as opposed to individual personalities. The solution lay within the team but our collective sense was that, at this moment, the team lacked the capacity to hold the tension in those conversations.

I asked James to speak with Mike individually and give him the headlines of the feedback. Once he had done that, I offered to meet separately with Mike to help process some of the themes that came out and, in confidence, understand how I might better represent him through the team coaching.

James took two weeks to speak with Mike. At the time, this lengthy delay felt significant, but I put it down to organisational busyness. Looking back now, I think James was perhaps experiencing some of the fear I felt in speaking to Mike. He didn't want to have the difficult conversation and to navigate the minefield of informal power networks. As discussed, I wanted to believe in James and what he stood for and overlooked this.

Finally, James had the conversation with Mike.

It did not go well.

Mike challenged the process, the feedback, my credibility, and refused to meet with me. This made me feel vulnerable but didn't completely centre me as I might have expected it to. Perhaps I had enough confidence in the team interview process, having run it at Polonium at least five times before with other senior teams. Perhaps it was more to do with feeling a moral responsibility towards representing Mike's colleagues who had made themselves vulnerable by sharing this information.

A week or so passed and James once again got in touch. He had received two formal grievances against Mike and now was forced to investigate. He asked if I would be interviewed as part of that process. I agreed to be interviewed under the strict understanding that I would not release the data from the team interviews and he

agreed. The process had “opened the floodgates” and suddenly lots of people were complaining about Mike's behaviour. Perhaps the mighty beast was wounded and the other animals smelt blood.

The group CEO (quite legitimately) questioned how this individual could go from a high performer, to needing to be managed out in the space of 12 months? Did James have a personal problem with him? This was one of the leading narratives laid out by the investigator in the interview, which disgusted me. It felt like a blatant tactic to hide the fact that senior leaders had chosen to ignore Mike's behaviour. Morgan's (1986) organisations as an organism had well and truly activated its immune system and antibodies were being pumped into the bloodstream.

The outcome of the investigation?

Mike was allocated a personal coach from a well-known boutique consulting firm. Perhaps politically it was the right move and may serve James well in the future, but I felt deeply disappointed in the organisation.

It felt like a leadership moment that had been squandered. James had the opportunity to move Mike into a different role or even remove him.

I hadn't expected to hear from James again, but about six weeks later he got in touch to say he was still keen to start the team coaching process and felt that now Mike had received some personal coaching, it might be possible.

Even as I said yes, I knew it was the wrong decision.

Perhaps it was because it provided a real systemic team coaching opportunity, perhaps I was overinvested in James, perhaps there was some morbid curiosity of how bad it might be, or perhaps I just needed the money. Whatever the reason, I agreed to run a first team workshop.

Of course, this meant checking in with the team again and this meant another call with Mike (the person for whom I had just initiated a complete tsunami of reputational damage).

The same patterns of vulnerability and anxiety found me: reexperiencing previous conversations, mouthing aloud future conversations and finding it difficult to get to and stay asleep.

On the call with Mike, there was no façade or claims about how good he was this time. There was a different tone, quieter, seething, hurt. He seemed less concerned about my feedback and more about a wider conspiracy to remove him, which he laid out in some detail. I realised that whilst he might be angry at me, he was also angry at James and the rest of the organisation. I was glad to get the call finished.

Turning to theory to help make sense of the experience so far.

Frost (2003) highlights the work of toxic handlers within organisations and suggests they respond in a compassionate manner to pain, in order to either minimize, prevent, identify, contain, remove, or find ways for people to live with it constructively.

He claims that cultures of toxicity are created in organisations by the way leaders reach the top, suggesting that in order to climb the ranks, they must turn a blind eye to any toxicity created along the way.

Over time, these leaders become desensitised to the painful and emotional elements of their work and as they rise higher, they find themselves with fewer “friends willing to act as enemies” (Torbert, 1976, p. 169) who will tell them candidly how their behaviour is affecting others. In particularly toxic organisations, such behaviour isn't even considered undesirable. It is often directly and indirectly rewarded.

The toxic handler

Working with emotional pain and toxicity is complex, subtle, and demanding work.

There are a range of skills deployed by toxic handlers – listening, buffering and transforming pain, holding space for difficult conversations, healing, and extricating people from difficult situations. Their compassion takes the form of noticing and feeling the pain of someone else and then acting in a way that is intended to help the other person.

For some organisations, toxic handling may be part of the unofficial job description, as is the case for many HR managers, or perhaps *was* the case for many HR managers. This important relational work is often not acknowledged on a job description, making space for whatever is in fashion at that time e.g. “agile, digital, analytics.” Whilst I sense some organisational acknowledgement about the power of relational “networks,” it tends to be more in the context of influence and power, rather than the broader relational nature of work.

For all toxic handlers, there is a real risk that they get caught up in a “Drama Triangle” (Karpman, 2011) playing the role of the “rescuer.” In playing this role, they come to the support of a “victim” who believes they are being unfairly treated by a “persecutor” and feels powerless. In this way, the toxic handler may be perpetuating the very thing they are trying to change. Karpman suggests that the rescuer is not altogether without criticism here. They may be compensating for low self-esteem and rescue as a way to experience approval.

When I originally read about the role of the rescuer, it was one of those moments that a piece of literature was able to speak to my deeper sense of knowing that I could not find the words to articulate. It was like that sentence was written for me. You may recall from Chapter 1 how I met my own needs for belonging by being helpful and facilitating others to find their place to belong.

Weinhold and Weinhold (2017, p.54) offer some advice on how to recognise a rescuer. They suggest that the most common ways people enter the Drama Triangle as a rescuer include:

- doing something for someone that you really don't want to
- trying to meet other people's needs without being asked
- consistently doing more than your fair share of the work in a helping situation
- feeling very uncomfortable with receiving help
- having relationships with others in which you can only give and not receive
- trying to fix other people's feelings or talk them out of their feelings
- speaking up for other people instead of letting them speak for themselves
- refusing to ask for what you need and attending only to the needs of others
- feeling rejected when your help is graciously refused
- trying to help others without an explicit contract. This does not include acts of kindness and compassion where help is legitimately needed.

I remember reading this list and thinking I could not be more perfectly cast in this role of the rescuer. Frost also believes that the toxic handlers may bring some of the suffering on themselves by:

- focussing on everyone else's wellbeing except their own
- becoming consumed with worry about whether what they are doing is the right thing
- becoming addicted to the fix that helping people can deliver.

When the toxic handler becomes toxic to themselves

Frost (2003) warns that toxic handling creates a restlessness and inability to focus. It disturbs sleep. It ends up seeping into body and mind. The biggest risks to the toxic handler are becoming so immersed in the work of handling other people's toxicity that they end up becoming toxic to themselves in the process. Here I weave back in the concept of post-traumatic stress referred to at the beginning of this chapter.

The condition is typically defined by several clusters of symptoms including: reexperience (e.g. replaying upsetting memories and conversations), avoidance (e.g. avoiding thoughts, feelings and physical sensations), and arousal (irritability, problems sleeping).

I was certainly experiencing these symptoms in working with Polonium, but this was a sensation that had been *constantly building* ever since I began to work more with the concepts of field theory, wholeness, and systemic team coaching (see Chapter 3).

I was finding my previous method of regular weekly journaling and reviewing each Friday was failing me. To journal meant to reexperience a conversation or emotion and I did not feel strong enough to do this. I wanted to avoid thinking about them. By the time Friday came, instead of my usual practice of spending the afternoon on doctoral reading and writing, I would sleep to try to shift the exhaustion. Noticing this lack of utility, I moved from journaling to autoethnography (see Chapter 2) to “embrace vulnerability with purpose” (Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2013, p.22). My writing flowed much faster and to acknowledge what was happening, without needing to process immediately, felt helpful.

I have included an example of my use of this autoethnographic method in Appendix E – and as I look again, I can see the themes of reexperience, avoidance, and arousal had been with me for some time.

Returning to the vignette

The day of the workshop came. I had decided to bring a colleague with me at the last moment. She asked me which sections I wanted her to run and I noticed I really struggled to articulate what specific help I needed from her.

“Are you sure you need me?” she asked. It was after all only a small team of seven people.

“Yes. I’m absolutely sure.”

I was sure I needed her, but I didn’t know why in the moment of invitation. I now realise I was scared. Properly frightened. I was worried that Mike might forcefully challenge me or another team member and that I would not be strong enough to respond to it.

The morning of the workshop arrived. I used my audio journal to capture my reflections as I finally managed to get dressed. I used the word “dread” 12 times.

I stopped to take the following photo as I was walking from my bedroom to the meeting room.

Image 16: It could go either way (2018)



Just another typical grey winter's day ... but the photo had an inner significance.

I had a strong feeling that it could go either way today. That there would be no middle ground. It would either explode or be forever ignored.

To re-tell the workshop would not add much to this vignette. Instead I choose to share two things I felt were significant.

I began with the Attention and Intention exercise. It was safe ground for me and I thought it was my best chance of signalling a different quality of conversation.

In my peripheral vision, I notice Mike with his partner. He has a pad and a pen and is writing a lot when his partner is talking to him. I must have seen hundreds of people do this exercise and I have never, ever, seen anyone choose to write responses down. In his check-in he talked about wanting to be more reflective and listen to the group in this session, yet he is constantly writing in his book. The cynic in me says he is building his constructive dismissal case, or that this is some sort of safety behaviour from having to engage. But the writing is *weird* and it puts me on further alert towards him.

I spend most of the following day in this state of alertness towards Mike and doing my best to hold the group. I realise as we approach the end of the first day that the picture I took of the sign was correct. It is going to take the left path of polite exchanges with no real conversations. They are just not ready.

By the morning of the second day, I'm noticing some tension between two of the other team members, Jeremy and Tom, starting to flare up. I notice it – but am not unduly concerned as I am still focussing on Mike and his incessant writing. My colleague is also noticing Mike, and together we feel confident we are holding the room.

In the morning check-in conversation, Jeremy makes a comment that seems disconnected to everything else being said, "I don't know what people think of me."

Mike writes it down. My peripheral focus on Mike is temporarily interrupted as I am confused by Jeremy's comment; I find it a very odd thing to say.

"Have you tried asking?" I offer "And when you say 'people,' might you be referring to some people in this team?"

Jeremy shrugs his shoulders.

"Would it be helpful to spend a bit of time on feedback then?"

"I think so," says Jeremy.

The rest of the group look decidedly unimpressed.

Rather than do a group feedback session in the same room, I suggest they might want to start off in smaller groups. I had previously discussed this with James and suggested if feedback were to come up, this might be a better option for Mike in particular.

They have their conversations. Something is bubbling. But I miss it. I am still focussed on Mike and whether anyone will engage in a real feedback conversation.

We get to the last couple of hours of the workshop. I am in just-push-on-through mode. They took the left path and that's fine with me. I am relieved to have held the room just enough for people to start to voice some of the things that are important to them. No one has attacked Mike. We haven't got to the bottom of everything but that's ok. I have more time with them over the next nine months.

In the last few hours, everyone is getting the chance to receive some feedback from the group in an offers and request session: "here is what I really need from this team, here is what I am offering to the team." Mike's turn comes and goes without any drama. He writes a lot. Some people offer a few thoughts but everything bounces off the sides. He is well-defended.

Tom is last to go. I like Tom very much. He is new to the role and a thoughtful, likeable, hardworking man. He has also been suffering with a chronic illness recently but has done so with a way of being that I find humbling. In the feedback, most of the team pay testament to Tom's deep humility and leadership skills.

Except Jeremy.

Jeremy begins to tell stories about how he has heard things from people in his team about Tom.

I stop Jeremy in his tracks and ask him to follow our agreed process and be specific on examples and effect. As if he is holding court, Jeremy theatrically recounts a story and builds up to an explosive punchline about somebody being terrified of Tom.

Everyone seems slightly bemused but no one else says anything.

As I have asked everyone before Tom to clarify, but not justify, so I ask Tom to do the same. He does so, slightly irritated by Jeremy's comments, and then we finish. At the time, I remember thinking that although he probably didn't like it, helping Tom notice his triggers and stay in a listening mode could be something we work together on during the coaching assignment.

We do a check-out and I'm relieved to be done. I just want to go home now. I debrief with James on the way back to the airport. He seems happy enough that it was a good start and is keen to share his views on each participant and talk about the next steps. I create the closing entry to my audio journal as I walk from the taxi to the check-in counter. I emphasise my sense of *relief* at having finished the workshop.

That evening, at 1:43am, I receive an email from Tom. I'm asleep and open it when I wake up.

The note was so painful for me, I had to delete all email traces of it, so forgive me – in the re-presenting I will no doubt focus on some things and not others.

Tom is furious at me.

He trusted me and my process.

Jeremy's feedback was wholly untrue but he was not allowed to counter it.

I have tarnished his reputation in the team.

He does not want to work with me ever again.

He is angry.

As I type this now, I feel the cold darkness that instantly washed through me as I read it. I am reexperiencing the very moment I looked at my phone in bed and felt thoroughly ashamed and embarrassed.

I quickly write a response.

Tom.

I'm so sorry, it was never my intent.

I missed it.

I didn't even consider someone would say something that wasn't true.

Please let's talk today.

I'm going on holiday this afternoon but want to speak with you.

Please.

That afternoon I am travelling up to the Lake District for an annual reunion with some longstanding friends. This ritual gathering of friends is a highlight in my year. Yet I can think of nothing but Tom and his email.

Tom eventually replies at 9pm that evening.

He doesn't want to speak now.

He needs some time to reflect.

I reply back that I'm available all weekend.

I am sorry once again.

I have some thoughts on what might be going on.

I'd really like to talk to him.

That was the last I ever heard from Tom.

James was very kind when I spoke to him after Tom's messages. He encouraged me not to take it personally and reassured me that there were other things going on. The following week Tom raised an official grievance against Jeremy. I have never known so many grievances be raised in a senior leadership team, a bit like a "Toxic Pass-the-Parcel," never dealt with, just displaced and passed around until the music stops.

I journaled furiously that weekend trying to make sense of what had happened:

(Journal, May 18)

- In debriefing the situation with my colleague who came to the workshop, I can see how we were both focussed on containing Mike. We did not take in, enough, what was happening in the wider room. In trying to hold one thing, we dropped another. An important learning that two team coaches should never both be focussed on the same thing at the same time.
- Drama Triangle 101 – Jeremy had throughout the workshop displayed several victim-like behaviours, talking about how unfair he thought the organisation was behaving to his function. He was desperate to hook in a persecutor and he found one in Tom.
- Systemic to Relational – Jeremy was enacting the systemic toxicity in the organisation, through the relational with Tom.
- Why didn't anyone else in the team speak out to say, "Hey Jeremy, that's just not true" They would have known the individuals. Why hang out Tom to dry? Was there something about how I facilitated that prevented that? Or were they too scared/bored/other?
- Why didn't Tom stand up for himself and say "Nick, I'm sorry, I'm going to break process here. Jeremy that is simply untrue." These are big leaders. Why be so compliant? Ah, but they have been conditioned to be!

- Where was James in all of this? He was silent. Should the leader of the team step in here?
- Do I really need to tell board-level adults “When you give feedback, it needs to be true?” I never have before, but you can bet that every time after this session I will.

But, here was (and for me still is) an important characteristic of trauma.

One does not *Get over it* through intellectually-sound group dynamic arguments alone. The propositional does not heal the soul.

“I know logically I am not a failure but I still feel a failure. I know logically I am not to blame for the abuse but I feel blameworthy and bad” (Gilbert, 2012, p. 140).

(Journal, May 18, message from my wife)

“I’m not sure how much you’re absorbing of what D (my colleague), James, or I am saying. Nor how much you are really taking your own counsel. It’s being muted by the negative voice of this one person.”

Try as I might, I could not *Get over* this.

With each week that passed, I withdrew further within – whilst still needing to fly to a different time zone and somehow show up for the teams I was working with. I would return home exhausted, wanting only to sleep. I declined most social invitations. On one very memorable workshop in Italy, I awoke on the morning of the workshop with excruciating back pain. I could not move and it was terrifying. I had to miss the first afternoon of the workshop, something I had never done in twenty years of facilitating.

Getting over it

I really don't want to give the impression that I did a set of activities, in a certain order and managed to *Get over* it stronger and wiser. As I said in my introduction,

this isn't a hero story and it didn't happen like that. I still enter into my *Getting over it* loop, although not as frequently nor intensely. I was deeply grateful for the support of my wife and the ADOC programme during this time, particularly my supervisor Professor Gill Coleman and my supervision group, Michele and Malcolm, who gently encouraged me to attend to these experiences – suggesting that I might be holding on to something from my upbringing that was significant here.

What follows are the results of some of my emergent methods to stay inquiring in this time.

I turned once again to autoethnography, but this time experimented with more “freefall writing” to get closer to the actual, rather than edited, thought processes. The rules of freefall are pretty straightforward: keep the hand moving, don't worry about typos or grammar – no editing, don't tell – show, give sensuous detail, go “fear-ward,” which may be where the energy is (Goldberg, 1986). I also set a time limit to encourage me to write more regularly.

One of the stories I had not really gone fear-ward towards was that of my family of origin, despite often hearing feedback from doctoral colleagues that they sensed important themes of belonging in my work. It was messy, confusing, and given both of my parents had died, limited in its opportunity to verify any facts. Part of me felt I had explored to the level I was comfortable with already and yet there felt as if there was more to say.

This piece of writing is included in Appendix F. It helped reveal two important things.

Firstly, I sensed that I looked to my work to create a sense of belonging that I did not feel as a child. My aunt's comment about being a “sad baby” hurt me because I *knew* it was true, the sort of “knowing of the third kind” (Shotter, 1993). It connected with what I had learnt about the role of the Toxic Handler and Karpman's Rescuer role. I was putting myself in these situations by playing an out-of-date script.

Secondly, the number of times I had to *redescribe* my past was quite astonishing. I hadn't considered that my ability to be comfortable with redescription could actually be an advantage. Later in the inquiry as I moved towards a more pragmatist worldview, I would read the work of Richard Rorty, for whom redescription is also an important construct (Rorty, 1989, p. 9).

I wondered if I might look again at the five-column analysis I used with Polonium and redescribe the themes based on what I saw *now*, that I didn't see *then*.

I found this to be a very helpful exercise. I took a more inquiring stance and this helped me feel some breathing room between my experience with Tom and Mike. It felt like I was helping out my future self, for the next time I would come across such an experience.

Figure 14: Polonium adapted five-column analysis

Speaker	Transcript	First-person reflections and memos	Initial themes	Redescription
A	Over the last 12 months I can no longer hold my tongue ... he is a dangerous, dangerous individual, the antithesis of what someone in his role should be.	I don't hear the word dangerous repeated twice, I make the (fatal) assumption I can help them.	Alertness Rescuing	The previous leader kept the lid on the toxicity, be very careful when you lift off the lid.
B	There is a single source of all problems in the team ... he is a white-collar psychopath	Again, very harsh language to use. It's like it has been stored up for this call.	Toxicity	Problems are held in the system, there is never a single source.
C	I've found this a difficult topic to bring up, but the biggest blocker to our culture is one of the team. It's a conversation that a few of us will have, it's mentally draining.	Visions of whispers in offices and secret meetings about this individual ... much wasted energy. Do they realise they are complicit to this?	Psychological safety	"Pack attack" the group have galvanised against this individual.

Speaker	Transcript	First-person reflections and memos	Initial themes	Redescription
D	This individual is the biggest risk for James. He will undermine all change efforts and James will be judged if he doesn't get rid of him.	Does James realise this?	Subversion Subtle undermining	It's not just James, they were saying I will be judged as well!
E	It's just the way he speaks to people. I don't know if it's fear. I worked with him in my last role and when the team was told he was moving – it was the best news ever – they had a massive party. If he ever came back, I know for a fact that a lot of people would leave.	I'm imagining a secret party to celebrate someone leaving, it makes me very sad.	Toxic culture	Toxic culture extends beyond the team
F	One of the things that annoyed me was that the previous CEO ignored it.	What did he have on him to ignore such poor behaviour? How did it benefit him to keep him?	Collusion Power	Collusion, power, toxic tandems

My revised five-column analysis, in combination with my pre and post audio journal recordings became a helpful way to capture learning and inquire further. I learnt that even a short use of these methods could be helpful to *Get over* challenging experiences.

Reflecting on the contribution of revised five-column analysis

The use of this revised five-column approach allowed me to loosen my grip on firmly held ways of making meaning and learn new methods of seeing and inquiring. As encouraged by Denzin & Lincoln (1999), the bricoleur must seek multiple methods to provide richness and depth to their research. Rudolph, Taylor and Foldy (2000) highlight the value of “offline” reflection to enhance inquiry “online” (in person with the client). Revised five-column analysis can be considered as a form of offline reflection.

The goal of the offline reflection process is to inquire into the mismatch between intended and actual results, which completing the fifth column after the event helps reveal. The first four columns offer an opportunity to reflect on the source of the mismatch, what assumptions I had used to frame my understanding, how I made sense of language, and how meaning became socially constructed. Key to the fifth column is increasing my confidence and range to be able to prevent similar mismatches real-time with clients, thereby avoiding a potential need to *get over* another difficult situation.

Rudolph et al. (2000, p.405) claim that offline reflection helps build action inquiry skills in at least three ways:

First, off-line reflection gives one distance in time and space to analyse and re-experience feelings and thoughts, actions and results that may have been imperceptible or confusing in real time. Secondly, it provides a practice arena in which to build skill with action science/inquiry tools where mistakes have little or no adverse impact. Thirdly, it allows one to experiment with different ways to phrase interventions, a crucial step in my personal practice to help adopt new behaviours that feel authentic.

The impact of five-column analysis goes beyond this definition of offline reflection. The necessity to take detailed, often verbatim, notes during telephone calls allows for an accuracy and specificity that can facilitate multiple new reinterpretations.

It allows us to constantly reinterpret the past from the standpoint of the present (Mead, 1932) and create new possibilities. This would not be possible by simply reflecting or remembering the experience, as it is likely I would privilege the same information and patterns which created the difficulty. By actively redescribing the same information, the potential for a different reality is created. Wittgenstein (1953) suggests that language is a tool we use to play many different games. Many problems do not emanate from the real world, but from our language itself. He encourages us to pay more attention to the meaning of ordinary words and understand that language does not represent our world, it makes our world. Given that I am co-constructing in real time, it is important to take time to seriously reflect on the world my language has created, as a way of looking after myself.

It is my assertion that this reassembling of the past from the lens of the present has the capacity to heal. The practice of five-column analysis worked to help me *get over* my toxic experiences at Polonium and other organisations by developing my ability to identify my consistent patterns of construction and inferences that turned out to be unfounded. Its utility as a tool worked in ways that other tools (reframing, journaling) did not, perhaps because there was a much greater sense of having learned something new and useful.

The learning distilled from the past experience not only heals the present but can be stored and carried into the future to enhance the ability and courage to transform difficult live situations with teams.

In the next section, I consider another Practice Vignette that triggered a period of *Getting over it* and two additional methods to work with the on: creative inner critic inquiry and work that reconnects body and mind.

4.3 Radium case vignette

“In the 1920s, young women worked in an Ottawa, Illinois, factory painting radioactive glow-in-the-dark numbers onto watches. They were told to lick their brushes to a fine point. They were told that the glowing radium in the paint was safe.

Radium is extremely dangerous. The element gets absorbed into the bones like calcium, and these women would go on to lose their teeth, jaws and limbs to the radium poisoning. Many died.”¹⁹

Introduction to the Radium practice vignette

The purpose of documenting this practice vignette is to show how I further developed the concept of *redescription* from the previous vignette and began inquiry into how the *Getting over* process was showing up in my body, introducing a new section of theory on recovery from trauma. This vignette in particular is infused with complex themes of power and ethics. I felt I could not adequately cover these alongside the vignette so have chosen to take a wider perspective on these themes in the context of the whole thesis (Chapter 6).

Radium is a multi-national, FTSE 100 organisation, employing over 100,000 people in a fast growing sector. This particular case study looks at two team coaching engagements:

1. with the Group CEO and leadership team
2. a follow-up team coaching workshop with one of the leadership team.

Getting in

I came to be working with Radium by stumbling across a simple, secret, back-door that missed out the procurement process. The power of referral from a friend in a similar seat of power. The CEO of Radium was friends with a former client (a CEO of a similar sized company to Radium) who had recommended me.

¹⁹ Zhang, S. (2017, March 15). A Century Later, the Factory That Poisoned the 'Radium Girls' Is Still a Superfund Site. *The Atlantic*, Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com>

What's particularly interesting about this *Getting in* is that the Radium CEO had access to a very significant Organisational Effectiveness and Talent department. He could have instructed them to shortlist the very brightest minds and biggest thinkers, all of whom would be salivating at the chance to get Radium on their client list. Instead, he turned to his friend, who held a similar position to him, and asked whom he trusted with his own team.

To me, this highlights further norms of corporations.

Firstly, I think there is a definite fear about choosing the wrong person. Imagine flying in all of your execs and convening a two-day workshop, only for the coffee break conversation to be about the “lightweight facilitator” trying to get them to do mindfulness with a raisin in their hand (a story I was told on my first meeting with Radium and forever referred to as “Raisin Gate” by the team). The blame would (unofficially) fall on the leader for making a bad call, who in turn would blame the Chief HR Officer, who would blame someone in their team and so on.

Secondly, it speaks to a contradiction where the relationship between trusted friends can have primacy over a procurement shortlist. Yet, when a team coach suggests work that might be in service of creating such trusted relationships within the leader's team, the leader dismisses it as “fluffy stuff.” It highlights to me the very narrow space within which I first *Get in* and then try to widen.

Getting on

1:1 team conversations were organised and, in parallel, the Radium organisational effectiveness team unleashed a barrage of surveys on the team. Reports, especially with graphs and numbers, seemed important at Radium to legitimise and perhaps reduce the uncertainty of doing relational work (another rule of corporations – speaking to their machine-like origins).

It is 5.30pm on the day before the long bank holiday weekend (significant as it speaks to the intensity at Radium – whilst I and many others are trying to ease into the luxury of a long weekend, Radium keeps a different time and is always on).

Christine, the Head of HR at Radium, has requested we “check-in” to discuss the feedback from the team interviews I have been conducting in advance of the workshop.

I find “check-ins” with people outside of the team (and who won't actually be in the workshop) can be very helpful if jointly approached from a constructivist stance of co-creating shared meaning and collective understanding of the situation together. Given that Christine had not personally selected me, my instinct was that this would not be one of those conversations – rather, it was more likely to literally be a “check” of my work. I was cross at the time but, as I reflect, I think it was a perfectly reasonable request from someone in that role trying to assure quality. My irritation was perhaps reflecting a common theme of being told by the leader I am coaching that there isn't the internal expertise to do executive team coaching, only to then find myself being told *exactly* what I have to do by one of the internal “experts.” I suspect there is the expertise, but not the relationship.

I'm using my adapted five-column analysis with redescription to record the conversation.

Figure 15: Radium adapted five-column analysis

Speaker	Transcript	First-person reflection and notes	Initial themes	Redescription
Christine	I'd like to see the write up of the report you're going to share with Eric before your feedback session with him.	I am really uncomfortable with this. I'm worried that she will try and censor it, steer it to her point of view. I'm worried for Eric that this info gets beyond him and me. This is different to the contract I set with Eric's team. She might think it's not “good enough” and as such “I am not good enough”	Power over Censorship Confidentiality Contracting Confidentiality Self-judgement Anxiety	Instantly we are both caught up in Foucault's machine of power (Foucault, 1980, p.156). Inner critic

Speaker	Transcript	First-person reflection and notes	Initial themes	Redescription
Nick	I'm not sure that's such a good idea. It would break the contract I set with the team members and I don't think it would be helpful for Eric.	Why didn't I just say "No" rather than I'm not sure that's such a good idea? The fact that I'm saying it shouldn't be documented alludes to what's in the feedback. I'm feeling stupid for not being explicit about this up front. I can sense her frustration building with me. I am wielding a form of power over her now, I have knowledge.	Courage Power Confidentiality Contracting Vulnerability Power over	Ethics Power as a relational concept
Christine	Silence, then OK, well can you take me through some of the high-level themes?	It feels like a concession but is actually the same question – she wants to know.	Power Assumptions Intent – Could I be reading it wrongly and she wants to help?	A wonderful example of a micro-ethical dilemma (see Chapter 6)
Nick	I guess the central question is what does Eric really want from this? From the interviews it's clear that the team are frustrated with their lack of autonomy. Changing this is going to require a sizeable shift from the team and from Eric. I want to talk about whether he is really up for that. In some ways you might be better off just having him	I wonder if I'm coming across as challenging her? There's a parallel process here in that I am frustrated with my own lack of autonomy to do the work. Why don't I say this to her? I genuinely think the best thing might be to not get	Parallel process Organisational "busyness"	Noticing systemic patterns Ethically, what is my stance about potential collusion or "going through the motions?" The busyness and uncertainty

Speaker	Transcript	First-person reflection and notes	Initial themes	Redescription
	hear the feedback and actually not getting the team together as doing so raises expectations of change – making it more difficult for the next leader (that I know is not too far away).	the team together, but sense how difficult that becomes when 2 weeks out venues and diaries are booked. How ridiculous that this is a driving force in the decision.	and breaking norms	loop (Chapter 7)
Christine	Long pause, then, Look, everyone knows that Eric is the real reason we haven't progressed on culture. But of course you wouldn't say that to him because that would be really upsetting.	If everyone knows that why are you not doing anything about it? You're the bloody head of HR. Disbelief in what I just heard. Time stands stills.	Psychological safety Courage Collective knowing Silencing Censorship	Entrainment, synchronising to the loudest “beat,” despite research to the contrary on the impact of the team (Finkelstein & Hambrick 1996) Collusion, power over

It seemed that the function responsible for supporting organisational culture change had not been telling the leader about the impact they are having because it might upset them. It sounds kind, but I suspect it was either a sense of futility to do so or more to do with a fear of the professional and personal consequences and in this way perhaps closer to Foucault's concept of “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1979, p.135).

I began to ask myself who *really* served to benefit from the current culture? There certainly seemed to be a lot of requirement for HR support within Radium. By deliberately not choosing to intervene, did it create and sustain a whole industry to deal with the by-products of inaction?

As I redescribe this experience some years after, I find myself having my own odd sympathy with Christine. I didn't know her. I didn't know the difficult choices she may have been forced to make to survive in that organisation. I was being judgemental, even moralistic, about the role of HR to help “liberate” organisations – once again highlighting to me this delicate ethical balance between colluding with the system vs. wanting to change the system.

The workshop, when it arrived, was largely uneventful. No one spoke out about the themes they had shared in private with me. Those that did venture into this space were quickly silenced by others. The colourful personality reports, with their multiple numbers and bright bar charts provided a familiar, safe haven. I sensed a futility in the room to even try and shift the conversation. Maybe this workshop was just a necessary rite of passage to get permission to go where a real difference could be made. I grappled with whether it was an acute example of a tempered radical (Meyerson, 2001) strategy or an act of collusion by me.

At the end of the workshop, Paul, one of the senior executives, approached me to offer his congratulations for running the session. He told me that it went a lot better than he thought it would and that I had “handled” Eric well.

“Of course, if you want to see a really high performing team, you should come and work with my team. You will never come across a more high-performance team. I'd love you to push us, really push us. Do the stuff you've always wanted to do with a team but have never been able to because most of them are, frankly, even worse than this team.”

In this short conversation he had managed to convince me that the tempered radical strategy was worth it. He had blinded me with praise and settled my insecurities, as well as dangled the possibility of experimenting with new team practices.

It was a pure seduction.

And I totally missed it.

For the workshop with Paul's team, the ever-present Christine was keen to still have some involvement, perhaps as a way to demonstrate she was still in charge of all things HR. She asked me to co-facilitate the session with one of her team, Jerry.

Jerry was a very likeable character. He felt trapped in his role, disliked the culture but at the same time had developed a loyalty to the organisation. As it was a large team, Jerry suggested that we split up the pre-workshop team conversations and take half each. On reflection, this was a dreadful mistake given the weight I ascribe to building relationships in the calls before the workshop. It prevented the opportunity to experience the whole.

Jerry and I wrote up the themes from our conversations and discussed them with Paul. The report that I sent to Paul can be found in Appendix G with some layered reflective writing.

As I look again at the team comments, I am struck by how distinctly *normal* and *expected* the comments are. This is a team that would like the chance to connect with each other beyond the role and to do so through the lens of collective purpose. How and where might they come together to create something much bigger than the sum of the parts?

And yet, I fell into the trap of needing to provide something “cleverer” than this. I imagined Paul's response. Trust and Purpose, YAWN! Next you'll be telling me you want to run an MBTI survey Nick. This is, after all, one of the highest performing teams you will ever get the chance to work with and I asked you to really push us.

When Jerry and I spoke with Paul before the workshop, he was very clear that he wanted the group to dig into some very complex and controversial issues, where accountabilities were unclear. He did not want to “waste time” on any relationship building or questions of purpose; they got on well and had a vision statement. Move on. He asked us to come up with a process for holding difficult conversations.

Reflecting on his comments, each part probably did get on well – with him, not each other. He set himself up as the docking point for all teams, carefully controlling each

part. To suggest something as regular as relationship building would not have been congruent with his narrative as a high performing leader.

The day of the workshop came.

Jerry and I facilitated a group check-in, which is really hard with a group of 17 as you can see people starting to get bored in your peripheral vision. You are balancing a need for the team to arrive mentally, settle, and put their voice into the room – alongside a need to maintain energy, in order to pace and manage the inevitable discomfort that comes for execs in slowing down (more commentary on this in Chapter 7).

During the Radium group check in, similar themes emerged to those I had experienced on the phone. By far the most prominent theme was “getting to know each other.” Certainly no one put their hand up to beg for dialogue sessions on the controversial new operating framework and to give feedback to, and receive it from, each other. Unfortunately, this is what Jerry and I had planned.

Very early on in the workshop, I noticed myself working really hard to try to find a smart, expert sounding thing to say. It felt significant to me as I felt I had largely relaxed my need to do that, knowing it can often get in the way of connection. I mentioned it to Paul in the break and he made a joke about this being a smart group and he had told me so. But it was more than that. I felt there was a pattern where it was important for this team *to be seen* as being smart which created a façade of excellence that everyone had bought into.

I began to realise that this whole team had been carefully scripted by Paul to project a high level of success. He managed each part directly to control the narrative. Even by selecting me he was able to demonstrate that this was an important team because they got the coach that the CEO was using.

The workshop did not go well.

The nature of the topics (“elephants in the room”) proved too hard for the group to work with due to blurred accountability, implications for their own jobs, and sensitive questions about each other's competence. I did my best to hold the space and push the group to reflect on how they were working with each other, but I could see a polarity between many people checking out of the conversation and a few vocal members largely directing the conversation.

I made it through to the end of the workshop and debriefed with Paul and Jerry. I open with an apology “I'm sorry, I'm not sure we achieved what you had wanted to Paul.”

“Look,” Paul says. “It was fine.”

I can tell from the way he avoids my eye contact that it really isn't.

“I think they just wanted to get to know each other a bit better,” said Jerry nonchalantly.

No response.

We move onto safer ground as Paul shares observations about various individuals in the team.

Nobody seems to want to offer much more, so we agree to leave it there. I am embarrassed and feel utterly useless.

In the days following the workshop I experienced similar sensations to that in the Polonium vignette. I would reexperience the moment I felt that the team gave up with the workshop. I imagined them talking about how rubbish the workshop was, possibly even more so than “Raisin Gate.” If I received any emails from Radium, it would take me hours to summon the courage to open them; I avoided contact with anything to do with the organisation. Once again, as if on cue, I started to suffer from lower back pain and found myself exhausted when I woke up each morning.

In the weeks that followed the workshop, I waited for the sharp email and summons to meet Christine (Jerry's boss) to discuss the workshop.

But it never came.

When I eventually did hear from her, she had heard that it had gone well and that was that. She wanted to discuss working with another team. Perhaps to acknowledge that the workshop had not been particularly well received would have meant opening up the conversation as to why not, which in turn may have led to either Paul's colleagues questioning his narrative about having a High Performing Team (he had made several enemies on the team who would like nothing more than to see him fall from grace) or questioning my competence as a facilitator, which may have reflected on Eric. It seemed that there were other narratives that did not fit the facts very well, but nonetheless were held in place by senior people.

Once again, a cognitive understanding of the factors that led to this situation was not sufficient to produce an improved emotional state (Haidt, 2001; Stott, 2007). As Gilbert (2012) might comment, it wasn't my fault, but it may be my problem.

Through the encouragement of my supervision group, I worked with different methods to explore these sensations. Although they might be written sequentially here for presentation, in reality they were much more entangled and interdependent.

Working with redescription – switch the labels

My relationship with Paul felt significant. I felt I had missed, or chosen not to see, the characteristics I would later notice in the team workshop. In order to open the possibility for redescription, a colleague suggested I switch the labels on my assessment of him.

Paul

Strengths

Charismatic

Polished communicator
Politically astute
Decisive

Development Areas

Hard to get to know beyond the surface,
shows no vulnerability

Manages individual parts, not the team
Micro-manages, cannot let go
Overtly career-focussed

I notice that some of the feedback on Paul's strengths were things I would also associate with my own strengths. In some ways I saw Paul as similar to me and this led to incorrect assumptions.

Development Areas

Charismatic

Polished communicator
Politically astute
Decisive

Strengths

Hard to get to know beyond the surface,
shows no vulnerability

Manages individual parts, not the team
Micro-manages, cannot let go
Overtly career-focussed

If I had held the possibility of Paul being too charismatic, too polished a communicator as a development area, I would surely have paused and asked myself whether what I was experiencing was real for me, or whether it was what Paul wanted me to experience.

Working with autoethnography

One of the phenomenon I experienced in this workshop and several others was a deeply critical *inner* voice that would criticise my work with a team, particularly the relational work. The voice would taunt me that my work simply wasn't good enough and I didn't belong in this team. This voice would peak on the morning of most workshops. I would record what this voice would be saying to me immediately after I managed to get out of bed.

I made several attempts to try to get in dialogue with this voice, rather than just hear a one-way conversation. The most successful attempt "Coffee with the Demons" is included in Appendix H.

I was struck by how my inner critic characters were all real people I had come across in the course of my career. With each, there was some unresolved trauma that I was carrying into the next engagement.

Fundamentally, I think the demons show up because the relational change I am trying to effect in the team sounds so simple: allowing each other to be truly seen and met. But in practice the space to do this work is virtually non-existent in many organisations and at best narrow in others. Doing this work comes with real risk – professionally, personally, and commercially. My inner critic is alive and well today, perhaps you have heard him in this thesis. I like to think he has a protective intention to him but, even today, he can be overwhelming. I need to know when to stay inquiring and in dialogue and when to leave things unprocessed (more of this in the concluding chapter).

Working to reconnect body and mind

The literature on the concept of the toxic handler (Frost, 2003) led me to the theory of workplace trauma (Tehrani, 2004) which in turn helped me find the broader literature on trauma treatment, specifically the work of psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, an innovator in treating the effects of overwhelming experiences. Once again I notice my different relationship with theory in this part of the inquiry, acting as a part of the treatment.

Van der Kolk (2014) suggests that during trauma, people feel like some body or no body. He argues that the body is the bridge to overcome trauma and to do so you need help to get back in touch with your own body.

In my autoethnographic writing during the most difficult post-workshop experiences (see Appendix E), I wrote that “I don't feel in myself.” I felt detached and separated from my own body. I did not believe that the episodic back pain I was suffering from was coincidental. It peaked around the times of my most intense *Getting over it*. It was as if I literally couldn't carry the systemic weight any longer. I had recently taken up Ashtanga Yoga as a practical way to strengthen my back. I liked the teacher, April. She didn't make me feel inadequate as I huffed and puffed

away trying to reach my toes. Instead she would simply put her hands on my back and ask, “Could you do even less Nick?” Like Weisbord, but in yogic form.

April ran a monthly evening Yin Yoga session called “Radical Rest.” My favourite part of the Ashtanga Yoga practice was the last section, the *Shivasana*, where I would sense a progressive relaxation of all of my muscles and a gentle feeling of momentarily reuniting my mind and body. Radical Rest was a whole two-hour session of this and I signed up immediately.

The most powerful aspects of this work for me involved finding a new bridge between my mind and body, one of the first connections to break in times of trauma according to Van de Kolk (2014). I found my way into this space through paying attention to Rosen and Brenner’s (2003) concept of “Lid Muscles.” They argue that muscles like the jaw and neck help us “keep a lid on things” that make us feel vulnerable or might hurt others.

I learnt that my jaw held lots of tension. “What are you holding in?” April would often ask me, “Could you do even less?” Slowly, but progressively, my jaw would relax and as it did so, I felt it sink back “into me,” having been held in place for so long outside of me.

April did a lot of work to physically “ground” me back into myself. This involved gently placing weighted sandbags over me. My body would initially resist the weight, tensing the muscle to greet it. It was as if my own living system was rejecting itself. Covered in these weighted bags, she invited me to notice the qualities of my sensations. Where felt tight? What were the qualities of that tightness? Where was heavy? Was there symmetry?

This process of grounding and noticing was a fundamental part of recovering from the trauma of being pushed outside of my body – my autoethnographic piece captured it perfectly, I didn’t feel “in” myself.

It felt as if through this work, I was invited to notice the qualities of my *own* living field in order to find my way back into it.

Image 17: Finding a way back (2018)



4.4 Chapter summary

In the previous two chapters, I have laid out how by attempting to coach more effectively at the level of the whole system, I inadvertently ended up embodying difficulties contained within the system, in a way that I would not have done previously.

"The part can never be well unless the whole is well."

Plato

I described different ways in which I attempted to be in dialogue with theory and how an inquiring stance and emergent methodology were pivotal to helping recovery through some of the most difficult embodied experiences. I have tried to convey the painful, messy, and emergent nature of inquiring into these phenomena, despite needing to organise it a little to help comprehension.

At this stage of the inquiry, I had realised that many of the *Getting over it* experiences were created by me, through too readily rescuing or being willing to play the role of toxic handler in order to meet my own needs for belonging and recognition.

I began to ask myself more questions about my own ethics and morals as a team coach and developed a set of questions to more readily guide me when faced with ethical dilemmas (see Chapter 6). As well as keeping my clients safe, I also started to ask how I might keep myself safe.

I saw connections between the potential of these first-person inquiry methods and the challenges that individual and team coaching clients faced. I wondered if I could widen the narrow space within corporations to be able to bring some of these insight-rich practices in.

The next chapter considers my attempts to do this.

Chapter 5: Inquiry to practice

5.1 Introduction

This chapter describes a period of “looping back” into practice, in order to introduce my inquiry methods detailed in the previous two chapters to individual clients and teams.

In doing so, my intent was not necessarily to generate more research data but to respond to some of my validity criteria for this research described in Section 2.8: utility and resonance (a broader consideration of all validity criteria is discussed in Chapter 7).

I was interested to find out if these methods might be as useful to others as they had been for me. I also wanted to take the opportunity to further refine these methods through cycles of action and reflection. It was a chance to learn about my learning. In this respect, rather than second person inquiry, I considered these inquiries more as a form of triple-loop learning: "continual reflection on the learning process, the contexts within which learning occurs, and the assumptions and values motivating the learning and influencing its outcomes" (Yuthas et al., 2004, p. 239).

The vignettes detail coaching assignments, typically individual or pair coaching as part of a wider team engagement. They are deliberately shorter and lighter than Polonium and Radium and specifically consider autoethnographic writing and embodied forms of knowing.

5.2 Marianne and “The General”

Marianne had been identified as a potential successor to the CEO of a large, US-based technology corporation. She had recently joined the leadership team which I was coaching. The CEO asked me to work with her to “smooth out some relationship issues” she was having with her new leadership team colleagues. Apparently, some of her colleagues did not trust the numbers that Marianne was submitting and were concerned that she was not in control of her numbers.

Marianne was very much in control of her numbers (in fact she was in control of most things). She was just not willing to fold as easily as her new leadership team colleagues when put under pressure by the Chief Financial Officer (CFO). According to the CEO, she had not learned “the rules of the engagement.” I hoped she never would. She stood up for what she believed in and did so unapologetically. Basically, she was my hero. What did bother Marianne, though, was that nothing seemed to be quite good enough for her. She was restless for success and would drive herself much harder than the task required. She was not the kind of leader who would pass down stress to her team either, so much of the extra work she took upon herself. In earlier years, she had suffered from an anxiety disorder that she felt was related to this restlessness.

I notice that the space to work differently with individual coaching clients is less narrow than executive teams. Whilst they are a part of a wider system which needs consideration, I find the living field between coach and coachee is more readily available. I enjoy the recess of being able to give my full attention to one person, rather than a group. Marianne recognised reoccurring themes of control and perfection and as we had built up a trusting relationship, seemed receptive to experimenting with something different. I described my *Coffee with the Demons* screenplay (see Appendix H) and invited her to gently experiment with some writing techniques to explore her own inner critics and feelings of driving herself harder than the task required.

I asked her to bring it to our next session.

Marianne also created a screenplay. There were three characters. One was called “The General”; he did much of the talking; another was called Peter; and a third she couldn't find a name for, so simply referred to her as “Little Girl.” She performed her screenplay as we walked through a forest close to her office. She would stop from time to time as if making silent stage directions from behind the scenes.

Dress sense is very subjective and culturally sensitive (and I claim no expertise in this area) however, I had always noticed that Marianne would dress a little differently from most of her colleagues in the office. She would often wear slightly military-looking jackets, like the ones on the album cover of The Beatles Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart Club. Given the subjectivity and sensitivity of the subject, it wasn't something I felt appropriate to bring up in our conversations.

However, when she started to describe The General and his quiet disappointment at her, it felt like the best chance I would get. I silently gestured to her jacket, which that day looked like formal military dress. Her facial expression suggested that something significant about the nature and origin of her inner critic had just been revealed to her. It was a moment I felt very privileged to witness. Our work together continued to get to know The General: his origins, intent, and how she might allow the other characters in her screenplay to claim more of their authority.

The last time I checked in with Marianne, she had been promoted above her peers, to run the most strategically important part of the business. She still had a taste for military jackets.

5.3 Jenny and “the leaving speech she could never give”

Jenny worked in the group HR function at large multi-national corporation where I had run several team coaching workshops. She was a strong advocate of team-based development and we would often meet up to swap notes and discuss assignments together. I appreciated her warmth and insight.

After a year of working together, a new head of function was appointed and Jenny was made redundant during a particularly savage restructure. One would think that a restructure involving HR, done by HR, would be managed with care and a mutual understanding but sadly in my experience it is so often the opposite. Jenny found it a particularly difficult experience, feeling that she had suffered considerably more than others as she left the organisation.

Jenny found another job quickly as Chief People Officer of a smaller company, but she felt fragile. She shared with me how she would get into her car at the end of her working day, lock the doors, and burst into tears. On Sunday evening before work, she was beginning to experience some of the phenomena I experienced at Polonium and Radium: reexperiencing her restructure conversation, avoiding work, and feeling intense exhaustion.

I had written an autoethnographic piece for my supervision group called “Leaving.” It was a piece of layered writing describing some of the things that were emerging for me as I left one company to start another. Whilst I was considered a “good leaver,” there were a number of things I felt I could not say as I left, largely because I felt it would fall on deaf ears and I wasn't sure it would be kind to those that remained. So, I had swallowed the thoughts and silenced myself. Writing the piece felt good to acknowledge what I had been carrying.

Jenny asked for some coaching support to integrate into her new organisation, of which I felt a significant part was *Getting over* her last organisation. Freefall writing had been a powerful way for me to go fear-ward (Turner-Vesselago, 2013, p.34) and I invited Jenny to write “the leaving speech I could never give” in this style.

Once written, I asked her to leave it for a week to simmer, then come back to it and, in a different colour font, layer her reflections over what she had written. I had found this particularly useful to help *redescribe* the single story.

I offered to perform her speech for her, worried it could be too painful for her to reexperience the emotion, but to my surprise it turned out that Jenny had already performed the speech several times around her house, becoming more confident with each delivery.

She commented that this process helped her acknowledge the trauma she went through and name the behaviour, bullying, that created it. I imagine she still has to lock her doors and have a cry from time-to-time. But in my experience, in these moments when we are trying to *Get over* difficult experiences, even the smallest amount of self-compassionate inquiry practice can offer support to make the pain less intense or frequent.

5.4 Sarah & Toby – going beyond writing

During one of my team assignments, I was asked to do some paired coaching work with two leaders who were in open conflict with each other. The leader of their team was an inspirational, likeable man who had not found a way in which he could honestly confront them about the impact of their behaviour. He asked for some help to have the conversation.

The two leaders had very different outward styles. Toby was outspoken, spontaneous, and energetic. His raw creativity had won the organisation many awards. Sarah was much quieter, deeply thoughtful, and a big strategic thinker. She had a gravity around her, which seemed to make sense as I learned about her family and home life. She was dealing with some very difficult issues. Whilst outwardly their styles seemed very different, I felt their interior world was more resonant than they realised. They both had a deep sense of responsibility and similar upbringings that drove an ethic of working hard.

I facilitated some conversations between them but they didn't seem to be making any headway. In fact, I was worried that they were entrenching even more deeply into their perceptual positions. I decided to pause the joint conversations and work individually with them instead. I liked them both very much and felt this would be of more service.

I invited Sarah and Toby on different adventures with me. Talking about the issues only seemed to reinforce them and I felt I needed to find a way for them to connect with a more experiential way of knowing.

Toby

Consistent in Toby's feedback was a theme about talking about his achievements too much. When I first met him, he listed quite a few of his awards to me "Who are you talking to right now?" I asked "Me, or you?" Toby was a very successful and well-known executive. He did not need to brag about his achievements as everyone knew them – so why did he?

I felt the metaphor of wearing a mask would be useful for Toby to explore this and around that time, I was planning to attend a mask workshop to explore my own inner critic.

This was nearer the end of my inquiry and I felt a much greater confidence in my own practice as a result of the inquiries I had already undertaken. In a shift of practice, rather than attend as Toby's coach to work on him, I suggested I work with him and he attend the workshop too. Together we might be able to help each other make sense of our experiences. This vulnerability to be willing to sit alongside a client with my own mess felt new and important.

IMAGE 18:²⁰



I found working with masks to be a very interesting mechanism to find a way into new emotional territory. Our selection and responses to other masks can be deeply revealing. On my first experience working with masks, I had an experience of the sad child my Aunt had referred to (see Appendix F), yet I would only come to hear about him some years later.

Toby enjoyed the creativity of the session and identified significant themes in his family of origin, which he did subsequent and transformative work on.

²⁰ Chapman, S. Retrieved from <https://canscorpionssmoke.com/masks/>

Sarah

I was interested to explore with Sarah the idea of lightness and not carrying the world on her shoulders. It was not something she recognised about herself, or if she did momentarily, it often came with justification and normalisation.

I arranged for Sarah to attend a workshop on equine-assisted coaching with me, along with some other clients I had invited. I had not experienced it before and I was increasingly becoming interested in hosting different ways of knowing and being for clients, to explore in a space they trusted and knew was safe.

The principle is that these specific horses will mirror whatever you bring to them and, as such, it is a good opportunity to inquire how you show up (or so the theory goes). I had little experience with horses and I was interested to see how I might react next to a big creature that I was wary of (essentially most CEOs). Once again, I approached this session as a co-inquirer with Sarah rather than her coach. I hoped the equalisation and vulnerability from me might encourage more from her.

On receiving the invitation, Sarah's first response was to tell me that she was afraid of horses. Excellent, good start, I thought. I took care to explain upfront what the session might entail and ensured she realised it was completely up to her. She decided to join the session.

Her learning from the session was less about her inner critic and how she showed up, but more that she *actually* showed up. She repeatedly asked me to take pictures of her with the horse so she could send them to one of her friends who had been trying to get her to ride for years. "She won't believe it," she kept on saying.

IMAGE 19: She won't believe it! (2018)



She later reflected that the session had contributed towards finding the strength simply to be able to go into the office and share the same space as Toby, something she was previously finding increasingly difficult.

I continued to coach them both and a year later, Sarah and Toby managed to reconcile their differences, largely through working on their own reaction to each other, rather than the relationship directly.

5.5 Helping a team do even less

During my sessions working with Yin Yoga and embodied knowing, April would often ask me to notice where I was holding tightness, sometimes placing her palms on my back to show me. She would ask if I could breathe into that area to make space and do even less. It struck me these instructions were equally relevant to the skills for dialogue discussed in Chapter 3.

I had a workshop coming up with a group of corporate lawyers, a group that are generally more known for their cynicism (occupational hazard) than their willingness to throw themselves into slightly alternative activities.

It was my third engagement with the team. The prior two workshops had gone well and I felt I had earned enough credibility to take a risk with the team by bringing in April to run a Yin session with them. If it bombed, it would be a blip, but not a disaster.

I was worried, though, about the team leader, Jeroen. He was a very smart, intense individual with an enormous drive for action that sometimes meant the team gave in and just did whatever he wanted, rather than what might be needed.

I decided (rather riskily) not to tell Jeroen about the Yin session I had planned. I was concerned he might veto the activity in favour of getting into the meeting content straight away. I felt strongly it would be helpful for this team to prepare them for the dialogue session.

On a cold, January winter morning, the expected boardroom table, projector, and screen in a windowless room was replaced with the following:

Image 20: Can you do even less?



The first person walked in the room, said hello, then walked straight out.
I panicked.

The second person came in and rather awkwardly looked around the room.
“Is this for us?” she said quizzically.

The third person came in, put her bag down and immediately got onto the mat and found child's pose. “This is great,” she said.

The room filled up with people largely in one of those three camps:

I love this.

I hate this.

This is weird.

I was concerned that Jeroen might be cross with me for not asking permission to do this, but I needn't have worried. He came in, gave a quizzical look, and just joined in. An important learning that challenged my assumptions about him.

April did a wonderful session of scanning, grounding, and creating space. I took part in the session rather than watch the group, wanting again to sit alongside the team, rather than work “on them.”

The session drew to a close.

“We should do that at *every* offsite,” announces Jeroen.

I learned in subsequent workshops to transition into some individual reflection and thinking pairs first, before bringing the main group together to “work.” The transition was too abrupt otherwise.

I also learnt that rather than it be an “activity” for the beginning of the day, I would instead ask April to blend sessions throughout the day. It worked particularly well when the group would get stuck on a difficult topic.

This work feels largely denied in corporations and the space to introduce it directly is too narrow. Today, wherever possible, I include some form of embodied knowing in my team coaching work. I don't lead with it or even really mention it in a proposal, but I know that at some point, it will happen.

Summary

This chapter has offered vignettes to speak to the utility and resonance of the methods and learning that emerged from my own inquiry into *Getting over it*. The next chapter begins to draw towards a conclusion by consider the meta-themes of Ethics and Power that are central to several of the practice vignettes.

CHAPTER 6: Ethics and Power

6.1 Doing the right thing ... but for whom?

Integral to the practice vignettes shared in Chapter 4 are themes of ethics and power.

They are tangled together like the white headphone wires in my desk drawer. Note: I put them in there separately, but somehow, they always seem to knot themselves together. In this chapter, I take some time to unravel them, knowing they will always find a way to entangle themselves once back *in situ*.

Action research, by its nature, is full of choices (Reason, 2006) and ethical questions are central to the research process. Attentiveness to these “multiple choices and their consequences and being transparent about them are significant for considering the quality of action research” (Holian & Coghlan, 2013, p.413).

But it goes well beyond questions on the quality of the research. The choices you make as an executive team coach in these “micro-ethical dilemmas” (Traeger and Warwick, 2018, p.105) can have a real impact on other people, whom you will never get to meet. You will never get the chance to look them in the eyes and apologise for what you did, or didn't do, in the moment that changed their life.

To illustrate this point, I recall sitting in a meeting where an executive team were deciding whether or not to relocate their Head Office, which was currently situated in a prime, thriving city centre district and employed over 3,000 people. The CEO was keen to move the office to an industrial location, at least two hours away, and with very limited public transport options.

Privately, all but one of the board members had told me they thought this was a terrible idea. They felt for a number of reasons that the location was completely unsuitable and feared they would lose over 90% of people, including all of their top talent. A few people tried to raise this discussion in the meeting but were quickly shut down and sharply reprimanded by the CEO. He saw the industrial location as an important way to take cost out and, as he was coming to the end of his tenure, he

felt this would help secure the next chapter for the business. Moreover, he felt the team's objections were rooted in them wanting to personally avoid an excessively long commute. He didn't believe that they were thinking for the greater good of the company and regularly told them so.

I had an important choice that morning that would have consequences far beyond my immediate line of sight.

In these moments, unfortunately there isn't the opportunity to get out your journal, do some reflective writing, and let it simmer for a while. There are literally seconds available.

Retreat from the moment and the moment is gone. Retreat and reflect in the moment, and you may stand a chance.

Picture the scene:

The CEO is once again re-stating why he thinks this is the right decision. He is a big man, an ex-volleyball player with a dominant physical presence. He uses emphatic hand gestures to magnify the point as if scoring the winning goal.

You notice in your peripheral vision, team members catching each other's eye with an exasperated look, wanting to say something but concerned they will once again get a firm scolding.

You hear him say, "Ok, so decision made. That's what we are going to do. Let's move on."

Some of the team are staring at you with a look that says, "Aren't you going to do *anything* here mate?"

Their eyes are upon you, as if to implore you to somehow step in and do *something*.

Do you:

- a) find a way to slow the decision-making down and help the team reconsider this decision?
- b) challenge the CEO in front of his team and also risk being sharply reprimanded? Would such an overt move negatively impact your relationship with the CEO such that it would jeopardise any future business possibilities with this team? Often missed out in the literature is an inconvenient but necessary commercial reality to consider – just how much money are you willing to lose in the name of your ethics? This is your business, it's not like the money gets distributed to faceless shareholders – it pays for your kids to go to Scout camp, have music lessons, and sleep in a warm bedroom. How much equity do you have in this relationship and is it enough to publicly call him out?
- c) step in, forcibly pause proceedings and share publicly what most of the team told you privately? Sure, you would succeed in ventilating the issue but you would fail in honouring your confidentiality contract when the CEO asks you: “OK fine. Tell me who said that to you?”
- d) keep your nose out of their business and wait for the storm to pass, as it invariably would, for you at least. For those that would be affected by this issue, the storm is just collecting on the horizon.
- e) Do something else that occurs to you whilst you read this? The chances are you have found yourself in many similar situations to this and have had to find your own way through.

In such moments, Coghlan (2008) encourages action researchers to demonstrate authenticity by being explicit about their process of sensemaking and decision-making. Before explaining my process, I take a moment to consider more fully the question of ethics as a team coach. Just like those “Choose Your Own Adventure” books of my youth, read ahead if you need to know first how the story ended.

The term ethics has its roots in the Greek word *Ethos*, meaning custom, or character. It refers to our decisions and actions, as shaped by our beliefs and values. What we do, rather than what we just think about doing. De Jong (2010) offers a more direct approach, suggesting that ethics is the process that determines what is good or bad, right or wrong. It goes beyond “our general notions of what is important, but to actual rules, codes, and principles of conduct” (Beckett & Maynard, 2013, p.20). In this respect, we can consider ethics as “the practical application of values” (Iordanou, Hawley & Iordanou, 2017, p.17).

In the western world, two separate models have contributed to the framing of ethics in organisations: deontological ethics and utilitarian ethics. Central to deontological ethics, which emanated from the enlightenment and doctrines of Immanuel Kant, is a sense of individual moral duty and obligation. Indeed, for Kant, one's actions only possess moral worth when they are done out of a deep sense of duty. He goes further and suggests that the value of an action depends not on the consequences it creates, but on whether it honours a moral rule that can be translated into a universal law.

As a team coach who identifies as a pragmatist, I would find it difficult to remain a strict deontologist in practice. Firstly, as I have laid out in the opening example, context and consequence matter greatly. You impact beyond your line of sight. Secondly, I have yet to come across any “universal laws” in organisations, with the exception of Barry Oshry's excellent commentary on organisational life (Oshry, 2007, p.34):

1. Stuff happens.
2. When stuff happens, we take it personally.

Utilitarian ethics are rooted in the works of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. They are concerned with maximising utility for the benefit of society, often defined in terms of wellbeing and happiness. The value of an action is judged not by a moral rule or sense of duty, but rather by its positive and negative consequences.

Whilst I like the utilitarian approach of considering the impact beyond the individual into their relational system, it still does not fully account for my lived experience as a team coach. It may *feel* as if I am having a positive impact – the mood music is positive after each workshop and I am invited back – but unless I consider my own sense of duty as well, could I actually just be colluding with the system?

Noffke and Stevenson's (1995, p.4) description of action research feels more like a blend of both deontological and utilitarian perspectives that I could work with: "a moral and ethical stance that recognizes the improvement of human life as a goal." In addition to a moral sense of duty and consequences, it makes explicit a third important element – intent, a topic we will return to in the final chapter. Connecting back to pragmatism for a moment, Noffke's early research focussed on the work of Johann Herbert, whose views on education influenced the pragmatist John Dewey. Like Dewey, I wonder if, she too, was more interested in dissolving all "artificial dichotomies" (Hursh, 2014) than creating universal laws.

Moving to how to actually work with these central questions of ethics, Coghlan (2008) offers some useful ideas on how to do this work authentically.

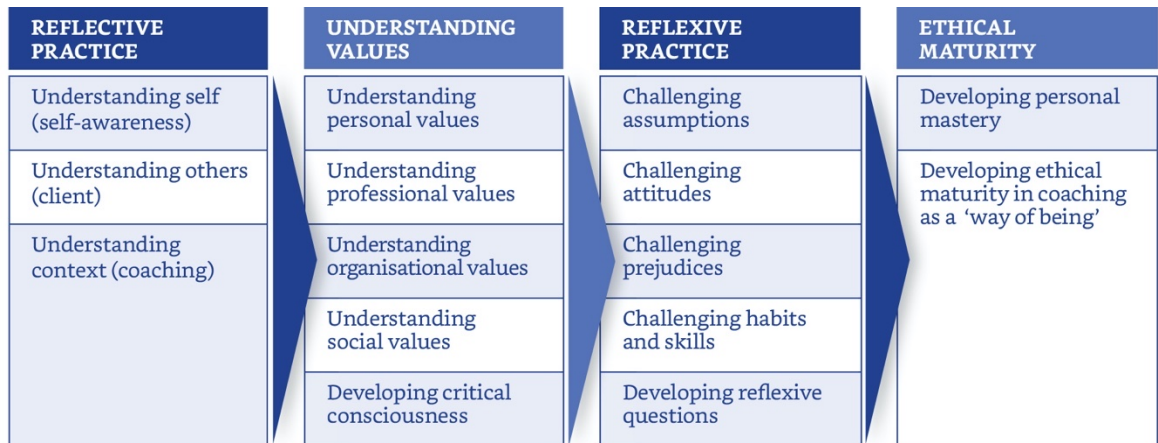
For him, there are four process imperatives:

- being attentive (paying attention to ethical challenges)
- being intelligent (noticing how you come to know)
- being reasonable (making judgements about how to act)
- being responsible (taking accountability for decisions and actions).

Iordanou, Hawley and Iordanou (2017, p.97) add to this thinking and introduce a helpful continuum for ethical coaching (see Fig. 16) which acknowledges the importance of reflective and reflexive practices between each of these stages to help "bend back" and "shift our thinking about thinking" to move towards an "ethical maturity."

FIGURE 16: “Reflexivity Chain” – towards an ethical maturity

(Iordanou et al., 2017, p.97)



This “reflexivity chain” seems well aligned to the principle of action research as being a cyclical process of consciously and deliberately planning, taking action, and evaluating the action. So, in this respect, ethical questions can be considered as integral to the process of action research. The way to answer these questions is found in the action research process itself, not outside of it.

Ethical maturity can be seen as a product of reflective practice developed through a deeper understanding of values and challenging assumptions, attitudes, and habits. There is a link here to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of *habitus*.

For Bourdieu, *habitus* was an embodied type of natural feel for something that has become “embodied history, internalised as a second nature and so forgotten to history” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.56).

Often, as a team coach, I will sense this natural feel for people and coaching situations. Without reflexive practice to help de-layer these culturally developed histories and patterns, it is easy to universally frame these reactions as instinctive, even intuitive. I see a connection here to Kahneman's (2011) dual process theory of human cognition with “System I” being responsible for fast, automatic, and effortless thinking.

Returning to the CEO and team at the beginning of this story, following Coghlan's four process imperatives, I had paid attention to the ethical importance of this moment (many people would be impacted) and satisfied myself that I had been intelligent in how I had come to this realisation (I was aware of the views of the whole team and had challenged assumptions).

We come to the “being reasonable” part and making judgements about how to act, which is where the pragmatist within me finds both the four process imperatives and the reflexivity chain somewhat lacking in immediate utility. Turning to Hawkins and Shohet's (2006, p.146) checklist for making ethical decisions in the field of coaching supervision (a different, but related field), they suggest: “Consider possible and probable sources of action. Enumerate the consequences of the various options. Decide on the best course of action.”

Perhaps the lack of specific guidance here is the very point.

No model can fully account for individual values, moral duty, context, or consequences. Perhaps it is only through the process of “bending back” that one can stay honest. But how, then, in the moment, to notice Bourdieu's *habitus* and our inner echo chambers that reinforce, rather than *redescribe* our experiences?

6.2 Developing ethical questions

Throughout this inquiry, I have developed the following questions that have been useful to make judgements about how to act in these micro-ethical dilemmas.

- a) What do I stand for as a team coach?
- b) If I were to fully step into that purpose right *now*, what would it compel me to do in this situation?
- c) Who is the client here?
- d) What action could I take that would be in greatest service to the team (rather than the individuals)?
- e) At this moment, does the team have the capacity and inner resources for this discussion? If not, how could I use this moment to work towards it?
- f) What am I no longer willing to tolerate about this situation?
- g) What am I not fully acknowledging or pretending not to know about this situation?

It was questions (a) and (b) that determined my course of action with the CEO and his team.

- a) What do I stand for as a team coach?
 - I stand for helping everyone to have a voice.
 - I stand for creating spaces for people to belong, not just fit in.
 - I stand for having the courage to make difficult decisions that don't come with any guarantees, except the knowledge that you've honoured what was required.
 - I stand for a gentler, caring, kinder world.
 - I stand for creative practice and trying your bloody best.

- b) If I were to fully step into that purpose right *now*, what would it compel me to do in this situation?

As I fully stepped into that purpose, it *compelled* me to act.

By staying silent, I was not helping people to have a voice. They were not being courageous, but neither was I. This was not a coincidence. Questions about the future implications of me intervening became secondary to honouring the questions of the present moment.

Before the CEO could move on to the next agenda item, I suggested a quick comfort break, which everyone was amenable to as they had been going for a long time. It was a hot day and I felt the stale air languish in the room. Before the CEO could reach for his phone to check his messages, I quickly walked/did a weird half-run thing up to him and asked to have a conversation outside of the room.

I explained that I was worried. There were unsaid things that needed to come out if he wanted them to co-lead this massive change effort with him. I explained my sense was that they were not protecting self-interest but had genuine concerns about the location that they felt he was not listening to. I inquired whether he would be up for a different process that might get to a higher level of collective accountability for the decision.

It was me that was worried, for him. This was my issue, not his. I had not set up a very public conflict of team vs. leader. I was not enacting a power over him (covered in the next section). As a brief aside, Wittgenstein's concept of Language Game is important here (see Chapter 2). In my practice, I deliberately ask "*Are you up for trying something different?*" as opposed to insisting we use a different process or directly asking permission. "Are you up for a bit of feedback?" I might ask rather than "Can I give you some feedback?" (which has the same effect as bellowing "BRACE FOR IMPACT!" at someone with a megaphone). It seems a bit silly now I see it written down. Surely it doesn't make much difference to the meaning by changing the odd word, but, in my experience, it really does. It goes beyond semantics; the

words take on a different quality. Even our questions are sometimes a form of telling and this lighter way seems to encourage more listening and ownership.

From a language perspective, the other important words here are “collective accountability.” The word “accountability” has a Pavlovian quality to a CEO. Add “collective” to it and you’ll find it is irresistibly seductive.

The reason for this is that being a CEO is a lonely job.

It's popular these days to criticise them for remuneration and well, let's face it, pretty much everything else ... but don't lose sight that these are jobs where you have few (or no) friends at work and certainly no one to share the collective load with. They don't have nearly as much authority as they'd anticipated having before they took the role and most are surprised and frustrated at the speed of decision-making in the organisation. And yes, in the UK²¹ they are paid 117 times more than the average full-time worker so perhaps this just comes with the territory.

During the coffee break I also approached two of the team members who had privately expressed concerns about this decision. I explained that there would be an opportunity after the break to share what was on their mind. I deliberately spoke to two people together because this “Power of Two” can be one of the most effective ways to help a group to pause.

Rather than sit quietly as individuals and silently disagree with the decision being made, I suggested that one team member turns to the other and says, “I think this is wrong, shall WE say something?” When they collectively speak (“We think this is wrong,”) I find more often than not, that a group will listen – in a way they would not to an individual team member – *“the nail that sticks up, gets hammered down”* (Japanese proverb). This liberating, “mutually-transforming” power (Erfan & Torbert, 2020) used in conjunction with Noffke's moral and ethical stance is a potent combination.

²¹ Walsh, A. (2019, Aug 21) Executive pay in the FTSE 100, is everyone getting a fair slice of the cake? CIPD, Retrieved from <http://www.cipd.co.uk>

The ethical decision point for me as a team coach was deciding whether or not to speak out and if so, how. I won't detail at length the conversation after the break as I think that takes us away from the subject of ethics, which is elusive at the best of times – so perhaps just a few highlights.

- a) I tried to bring the voices of the system into the room. I set up an empty chair to represent the employees who would be affected by the decision and another to represent stakeholders within the company who might be impacted.
- b) I changed the frame of the question to a “Pre-Morten” (Klein, 2007) which instructs a team to move mentally into the future and imagine they have made the decision they are about to make. That decision turned out to be a disaster. I then asked them to reflect on what they missed at this stage or regretted not paying enough attention to. In shifting the process to one that rewarded dissent, suddenly more people spoke up.
- c) I had them spend some time individually, then with two other people, then in a group of six. This 1-3-6 process helped to build more divergent views and consensus quickly.

It's in these practice moments where perhaps *habitus* confers some advantage as a team coach. I had no time during the break to design a new session. I had to keep the left hand going whilst improvising on the melody (Weisboard, 2004).

Two and a half hours later the team eventually came to a consensus. They decided to move the head office as the CEO had first suggested. Whilst the decision was the same, the process to reach it was different. Everyone had contributed. Some still did not agree, but at least there was a sense that the CEO had listened more attentively to their concerns. “If people don't weigh in, they can't buy in,” (Lencioni, 2012, p.48) and the real value of this intervention would be beyond my sight line, in the shared ownership of the compassionate approach in which the change was led.

6.3 Beyond the moments when everyone is watching

The previous vignette focusses on an example when I literally only had a few moments to decide on a course of action. But there are other less time critical situations as a team coach that require ethical maturity to navigate the choppy waters.

Consider the following examples of ethical challenges. Note: I've deliberately not included the full stories of what I actually did. I think staying with my personal struggles with the situation is a better illustration of the ethical challenge than the outcome itself. I will offer a perspective at the end of these vignettes.

a) When the client's reputation precedes them

CEOs of publicly-listed companies are public figures and, as such, there is a lot of information about them freely available on the internet e.g. past speeches on YouTube, biographical interviews, rants and raves by former employees on various employer ranking sites. As a part of *Getting in*, I always do an internet search to help get a sense of this potential new client and what is important to them. You might argue that it is better to meet with no preconceived ideas about the individual, but in my experience, by the time you pass the organisational gatekeepers, the CEO *expects* you to have been briefed and know something of their background. To not do so would risk being perceived as sloppy and time-wasting.

In this vignette, a new CEO was appointed to an organisation that I had already been working with for a year. I had coached the previous CEO and executive team and was invited to meet the new one. In researching the new leader online, the first few hits of the search did not return the usual Bloomberg business report or Wikipedia entry, but allegations of child molestation. The case had been dismissed but there were further legal proceedings underway. I could not believe what I was reading. I felt appalled and empathetic. Also, at that time, the child in question was the same age as my daughter, which accentuated the potency of the story.

If we consider Iordanou, Hawley and Iordanou's (2017) definition of ethics as the practical application of values, then a straightforward application of my value of fairness encouraged me to bracket this information, which at some level I felt able to do. These were allegations only and he would have a fair chance to disprove them. I also felt a level of care and commitment to the team because of the work we had already done together.

When I met the CEO in person, I took a near instant dislike. He had a tendency to hold court, lecture me about the business, rubbish his predecessor, and not acknowledge the smiling waiting staff when they brought us coffee. I've learnt that in the first meeting, I need to feel a sense of care towards the client. Otherwise, when these ethical micro-dilemmas present, I will let them float on by because I don't care enough to potentially put myself in harm's way. This stage is about chemistry and it's perfectly reasonable to suggest that someone else might fit better, which is what I wanted to do. Liking is a two-way street. I would imagine he also found me insufferable. But was my reaction *really* because we didn't find the right chemistry, or was I carrying a conscious bias into the situation because of what I had read about him – which would surely be unethical ...?

b) The ethics of censoring difficult messages

In the *Getting on* stage, it's typical for me to seek some feedback from the team to help the leader become more aware of the impact of their leadership. I do this through conversation, often using five-column analysis (see Chapter 2) to record the output.

During this process, some leaders I have worked with have received some absolutely brutal comments about their leadership e.g.

“They are a white-collar psychopath.”

“An evil piece of work.”

“Doesn't have a people bone in their body.”

“Without doubt the worst leader I have ever worked for.”

“They are a tense, anxious individual who only lives for work. No life and no friends.”

In collating this feedback and deciding how to frame it, I recognise a potential “power over” the leader I’m working with (discussed in the next section), but there is also an inextricably linked ethical question, for me at least, of what I choose to include and exclude from the feedback I give to the leader. Is it ethical to exclude the comments of one or two “outliers” whose feedback might not be in tune with sentiment of the whole?

... Whoaaa, wait there a moment ... you said earlier you stand for “helping everyone to have a voice.” The whole is contained in the parts, so surely you need to include everyone’s comments when you give feedback? Or are you saying that some people’s voices are more valuable than others? That sounds like collusion to me. You’re on very shaky ground here mate

.... {sigh}, I know I should include everyone’s comments but honestly, can you imagine being told that some people think of you as a white-collar psychopath? ... that would really hurt. Well, probably not if you are actually a fully paid up psychopath but you get the point. I want to represent the whole (applying the value of fairness), but what about the potential lasting consequences of doing so on that individual (applying the value of care)?

c) Information requests from senior leaders

At some point during a team assignment, if I get a call from the Chair of the Board or a more senior leader from the organisation I’m supporting, I have learnt they will want one of two things: they either want to engage me on a new assignment (10% of the time) or they want insider info on the leader/team I’m coaching (90% of the time).

On one occasion early in my team coaching career, I received a call from a Regional President asking for an opinion about a participant who had been in a recent workshop. He was very complimentary on my reputation and relaxed in his style. He shared his view that this particular team member was ineffective and should be fired. He wanted my view. I explained how I had set a contract with the team so could not share very much, but he continued to push, reminding me politely that it was

ultimately his budget that was paying for these workshops. I pictured the team member in front of me and figured out what I would be willing to say to their face that seemed balanced and fair, and that's what I shared with the Regional President. I put the call from my mind until a few weeks later when I received a call from the team member. They had just been asked to leave. A number of reasons were cited, but within the feedback they had been told that "Nick Pope said ..."

I will never forget that call; it taught me a priceless lesson. I hold a much stronger line on confidentiality as a result of this experience, encouraging the participant to own the data and have the conversation instead.

Summary – the team becomes the client

One of the questions that arises for me in these final vignettes is: who is the client?

Opinions vary on this. Peltier (2010) and Scoular (2011) claim that the paying organisation is the client, because the contact is between the organisation and the coach. A systemic coaching approach supports this and suggests that the coach's priority is not the client, but the system to which they belong.

Others maintain that the client is the coachee and that it is essential to maintain boundaries between the client and their organisation (Thomson, 2014; Van Nieuwerburgh, 2015).

In team coaching, the concept of client is more complicated because you have multiple coachees. It is quite feasible that you will end up doing some form of coaching with all team members during the course of the assignment, so which of these is your client? For me the answer is – all of them. The *team* is your client.

The ethically mature question becomes “What action could I take that would be in greatest service to the team (rather than the individuals)?” The moment I privilege one of these individuals over another, even if they are the leader, I fail the team.

Systemic awareness and moving towards an ethical maturity are considered in my overall inquiry reflections in the final chapter.

Turning towards power

In the next section, I turn my attention to the “ethics of power and structure” (Beckett & Maynard, 2013, p.23) and in particular, the relationship between power and knowledge. I will consider different perspectives of power in organisations and how a team coach might want to equip themselves to respond. I ask who stands to benefit and who stands to suffer as a result of my actions.

6.4 Power and the nature of knowledge

The complex relationship between power and knowledge is a long held notion within action research (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). It is not my intent here to do a full review of the literature in this space, but rather to lay out some of the practice challenges relating to power and knowledge and to locate these in the literature for inspiration on how to respond.

As with our discussion on ethics, let me first situate the challenge of working with power and knowledge in a practice context.

We have come to the end of a two-day executive team workshop. It has been a particularly challenging workshop, largely because of the nature of the CEO. He is a very intense, demanding, and not overly personable man. He has very few facial expressions and always gives full and direct eye contact when he speaks. He has the propensity to “go off on one” (as one team member once described his long rants) and part of my role over the two days involved balancing this intensity with more active participation from the team. I am packing up my kit, shaking hands, and saying my goodbyes. As my attention turns inwards, I suddenly notice that I am feeling very tired having kept my focus on the room for the whole day.

I sense him before I see him.

The CEO is striding up to me. I am six foot tall and he seems much taller than me. He looks me in the eye, puts his arm around my shoulder, and with an uncharacteristic smile says:

“Well done, that went well.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that,” I reply. “I thought so too.”

[He pauses, leans in and looks me in the eye.]

“You are now a confidante of the ELT (Executive Leadership Team).”

I shudder.

Perhaps it's the unexpected physical touch and smile.

Perhaps it's the feeling of being told I was now a “confidante.”

Wait, am I overthinking this?

Perhaps it's just a completely justified reminder to keep the sensitive information discussed in the meeting confidential. But he knows I've signed a very comprehensive non-disclosure agreement and have been named on a list this morning to prevent insider trading before City results.

No, there is something more to the gesture. It feels more like an instruction than an invitation.

You will collude with some of the behaviour you have just witnessed.

You will never speak of this again.

You are an insider now.

It is both enticing and terrifying. It is a moment of choice and of no return.

Through the knowledge of what is going to happen in the organisation i.e. who's in/who's out, I could have new power to help maximise my own benefit. I know whom to associate myself with and whom not to bother with. I have some snippets of information that could be very useful to the careers of some important leaders. I also now have a hotline to the top man so don't even think about messing with me, OK? I have been offered a key to what Morgan (1986) might call a “Psychic Prison,” where conscious and unconscious processes create a culture of repression and regression.

Becoming a “confidante” would definitely have its benefits to my business, but at what cost? Would I end up replicating the very system I was trying to bring about change in?

In turning to the literature to make sense of this interaction, let's start with the **traditional view** (Dahl, 1969) where power is considered to be the ability of the CEO (the powerful person) to get me (the powerless person) to do what I would not do otherwise. Typically, in this approach, power is understood as a result of a conflict on a clearly identified issue, within a relatively open system with established decision-making processes. Should I choose not to participate, the assumption is that I am apathetic on the issue or ineffective at making an argument, rather than having been deliberately excluded. Those with better knowledge (more objective, credible) will exert greater influence on the decision. However, this view does not account for the knowledge of those who were *not* included in the decision-making process, nor how power was used to actually frame the problem itself.

The traditional view, then, does not fully account for this experience as no visible conflict or objective arguments are being put forward. It is subtle, beneath the surface stuff between the two of us.

Let us turn then to the **pluralist view** of power, where power is used to create informed debate amongst competing interests. I tend to agree with the assessment of others who have challenged this view (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970), when they highlight that it is not only about who wins or loses the battle on key issues, but how certain issues and individuals are prevented from actually getting to the battle in the first place. Some issues get organised in, but some also get “organised out” (Schattschneider, 1960, p.71). Who is missing from the conversation and why they have been left out is an important area for reflection as a team coach. How do I include more people and mobilise them to participate in the knowledge production process?

But simply having more participation in the knowledge process is not without its dangers either. It risks “disguising or minimising other axes of differences,” (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001, p.76) which decreases the possibility for a broader solution and simply replicates the dominant discourse in the system.

Consider the following example from Google.

In the team effectiveness space, they have become well known for Project Aristotle²², which used their data processing powers to come up with a positivist situated model on why some teams stumble and others soar.

They have long highlighted the importance of psychological safety within teams and the weekly, all-hands TGIF (Thank God It's Friday) meeting, where anyone could ask the two founders anything that was on their mind, was an important part of the culture. According to a recent newspaper article²³ this freedom has “turned into a liability as tension between management and staff has grown. The tools used to generate cross-company collaboration have become instruments of unrest in the hands of workers opposed to some of the company's more controversial projects.”

Tricky work indeed then, not to just replace one set of dominant voices with another set waiting in the wings.

Perhaps the closest approximation for power in this Confidante example is that of **Foucault's**, which differs significantly from the traditional view of individual interests and ideologies.

For Foucault (1976), power has no distinct form that can be localised or tied down. It cannot be measured. It is possessed rather than wielded. It exists only in relational terms or through the forms and techniques in which they are expressed in action. He describes it as a “machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom power is exercised” (Foucault, 1980, p.156). It is only when we reveal these micro-physics of power that we can begin to talk about power in a meaningful way, recognising that any concept of truth to Foucault was always a social construction.

²² Duhigg, C. (2016, Feb 25) What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team. *New York Times*, Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>

²³ Waters, R. (2020, Jan 27) How Staff Came To Question Google Culture. *Financial Times*, Retrieved from <http://ft.com>

In this sense, issues of power may feel more like a struggle than outright war.²⁴ This struggle was certainly how I felt when being invited to be a confidante.

Whilst I find Foucault's invitation to get really interested in power helpful (because it lurks everywhere), I struggle to fully align with the Foucauldian perspective. I feel, in his world, that the scope for change and human agency is very limited. I am a pragmatic action researcher. I am interested in improving the world. Whilst he acknowledges power as a necessary, productive, and positive force in society (Gaventa, 2003), I feel he would take a somewhat sceptical, suspicious, even pessimistic view of any new forms of knowledge I might seek to create. He might consider any attempt to privilege one view over another as a question of power and normalisation, versus considering what might be more useful in this context.

Like many other academics, I also think he runs into the paradox of stating there are no truths independent of power, then gives his own truth ... like the Harvard professor who offered me a five-point framework to be more spontaneous (true story).

Alvesson (1996, p.10) refers to some of Foucault's critics who have pointed out that

“His work is based mainly on sources such as written projects and proposals for arrangements, plans for architectural sites, handbooks for rules and regulations, but rarely on actual accounts of practices and experiences.”

As someone who spends most of their time in practice, it is perhaps for this reason that I am somewhat more hopeful than Foucault perhaps would be. Yes, I do see some “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1975, p.135) but I also see others choosing not to settle for this. When I do see the docile bodies, I see exhausted people, trying to do their best with the energy they have available at any given moment. I return to this important question of energy and the role of the team coach in Chapter 7.

In the final consideration of “You are now a confidante,” I consider the contribution of Habermas, who emphasises the possibilities of common sense and reason, over

²⁴ He also wrote that “power is war continued by other means” (Foucault, 1980, p.80).

concepts such as power. He believes deeply in our capacity to deliberate well and pursue rational interests together.

For Habermas (1979), through good will, rationality, and dialogue, consensus can be reached. His theory of communicative action suggests exploring every statement in terms of its comprehensibility, sincerity, truthfulness, and legitimacy.

Looking through this lens, was the invitation to become a confidante perhaps simply a straightforward invitation to join the team in further dialogue?

Critics of Habermas would argue that the theory of communicative action is unrealistic and overestimates our dialogue abilities. Having worked with many teams, I would tend to agree. Few teams *really* listen.

Additionally, the theory does not take into account the ambiguities and limitations inherent in language as discussed in Chapter 2. I also wonder what value dissent and conflict has to Habermas, which as in the example of the head office move, if done well, can lead to decisions that are more fully owned by a group.

Summary – complementing frameworks

In this section, I have set out to explore a potentially simple practice vignette, where I was invited (or instructed) to become “a confidante of the Executive Leadership Team.”

I have found that a number of different theoretical lenses can complement each other, particularly Foucault and Habermas, when considering how to explore multiple perspectives.

From Foucault, I heed the warning that power lurks everywhere. I must stay alert to the micro-physics of its use in organisations and my own (ab)use as a coach. Given that he sees power not as a commodity, but as relational, I must find and claim my own personal power as a coach. I must use this power to honour my own ethical

code, which asks me to step fully into what I stand for, in the service of the team above all others.

From Habermas I take the potential for free, rational dialogue to liberate and lift above power games. I must continue to work on my ability to create and hold communicative spaces where dissent, exploring ambiguities, and personal positions comes easily and free from power relations.

In the next and final chapter of this thesis, as I lay out my conclusions and contributions, I return to the idea of developing an ethical maturity as a team coach and comment further on how to work with power structures in a more personally sustainable way.

CHAPTER 7: Conclusions and claims

Over the course of the previous chapters, I have sought to lay out my inquiry, beginning with finding its roots in my own stories of seeking belonging, to shifting worldviews and emergent methods, through to experiencing a new phenomenon of *Getting over it* as a result of trying to work more systemically with teams.

In this chapter, I reflect on the significant themes within my inquiry and bring these parts together to move towards my claim for this whole thesis. In doing so, I am reminded of Gregory Bateson, who suggested we can never know the whole in any detail, but rather “the wholeness of the system provides each part with meaning” (cited in Charlton, 2008, p.143). As you read this chapter reflecting on the whole of my thesis, I hope it may provide each previous chapter with a new meaning.

7.1 Narrow spaces

As I reflect on the whole of this thesis, I am struck by the volume of inner work involved to *actually get to do* the outer work. At the executive leadership level of a corporation, the normative rules of behaviour seem so very narrowly defined. The space to step outside of these rules simply does not exist. One must create the space.

The first challenge for the executive team coach then, is to get into this narrow space. Many never even reach this point. Once you are in, you must never veer too far from the space, but at the same time you need to be constantly trying to widen it and point to other available paths, finding a way to get people to trust you to follow them. Some of these paths will be dead ends and people will get cross at you. You must create calm, whilst deliberately inducing conflict. You must do all of this without letting these powerful norms of behaviour invisibly seep into your being and define you, which will result in you becoming complicit in the very system you are trying to help change.

It is a very tricky space.

Furthermore, in some corporations it's made even trickier. Consider the practice vignettes shared in this thesis. These norms of behaviour aren't just narrow; they can be damaging to anyone who enters this space. They leave a set of toxic footprints somewhere in the system for the next person to follow, eventually creating a radioactively lit path for everyone. Choosing not to follow this path requires tremendous ethical maturity, deep roots in your own story, and profound courage in the moment. But even with this, I'm afraid you're still likely to take a bit of a bashing and you need to have your own practices in place to help you notice your own trauma and recover.

As I have discussed, it is popular, even sometimes expected, to demonise executives of large organisations. Some of these criticisms seem very well justified to me, given the enormous impact such individuals have over the planetary and financial wellbeing of others. However, I do hope this thesis has brought a different perspective and you have got to know behind the curtain of other fundamentally

decent people, who would genuinely like to liberate themselves and their organisations – but somehow deny themselves (or are denied) the chance to do the inner work required to resource themselves to work differently.

Why this work gets denied

DeLong (2011) describes “busyness” as a key part of corporate culture. I’d go further and suggest that for many it is a badge of honour. In many corporations you’ll find it is the automatic response to the question, “How are you?”

“Yeh, busy, busy. You?”

Executives are experts in the business of busyness. In order to reach the top, they have conditioned their muscles to be constantly busy. Running towards the next meeting at a ferocious velocity, whilst simultaneously running away from themselves. They do not know what to do when they’re not busy. Even taking a break from their routine does not disperse the manic energy that might allow for a more reflective moment, as they find themselves “always on.”

Alongside this busyness, I also notice that they push their interests and hopes forward in time, in the (deluded) hope that when they get there, everything will be better than it is now.

“Once we get through this stage of restructuring, we can get back to normality.”

“Once I finish this job, we will be able to take some time as a family.”

There is no felt connection to the present moment, only an idealised future which they never really get to enjoy as they continue to shift their interests to the next moment.

Keynes (1963, p.370) observed that man “does not love his cat, but his cat’s kittens; nor, in truth, the kittens, but only the kittens’ kittens, and so on forward forever to the end of cat-dom.”

This allows executives to feel more in control of their lives, but the reality is that they were *never really in it* in the first place. Connecting with this inner world requires reconnecting to ourselves in the present moment and that, for many, creates uncertainty and fear.

Uncertainty and fear

“The special trouble with uncertainty,” writes Burkeman (2020)²⁵, “is that it's a doorway to infinity.” Infinite uncertainty creates fear, which according to Notter and Grant (2012, p.219) is arguably “the most important source of dysfunction in organizations today.”

Fear can take many forms. Some leaders become obsessed with power to defend themselves against the feeling of helplessness. Employees quickly learn it is not safe to challenge bad behaviour and these behaviours replicate throughout the organisation. Change initiatives with the allure of certainty spring up from every corner of the business, causing duplication, complexity, and confusion. The system now nourishes, rather than admonishes, this reactive loop of busyness as a key defence against anxiety (Menzies, 1960).

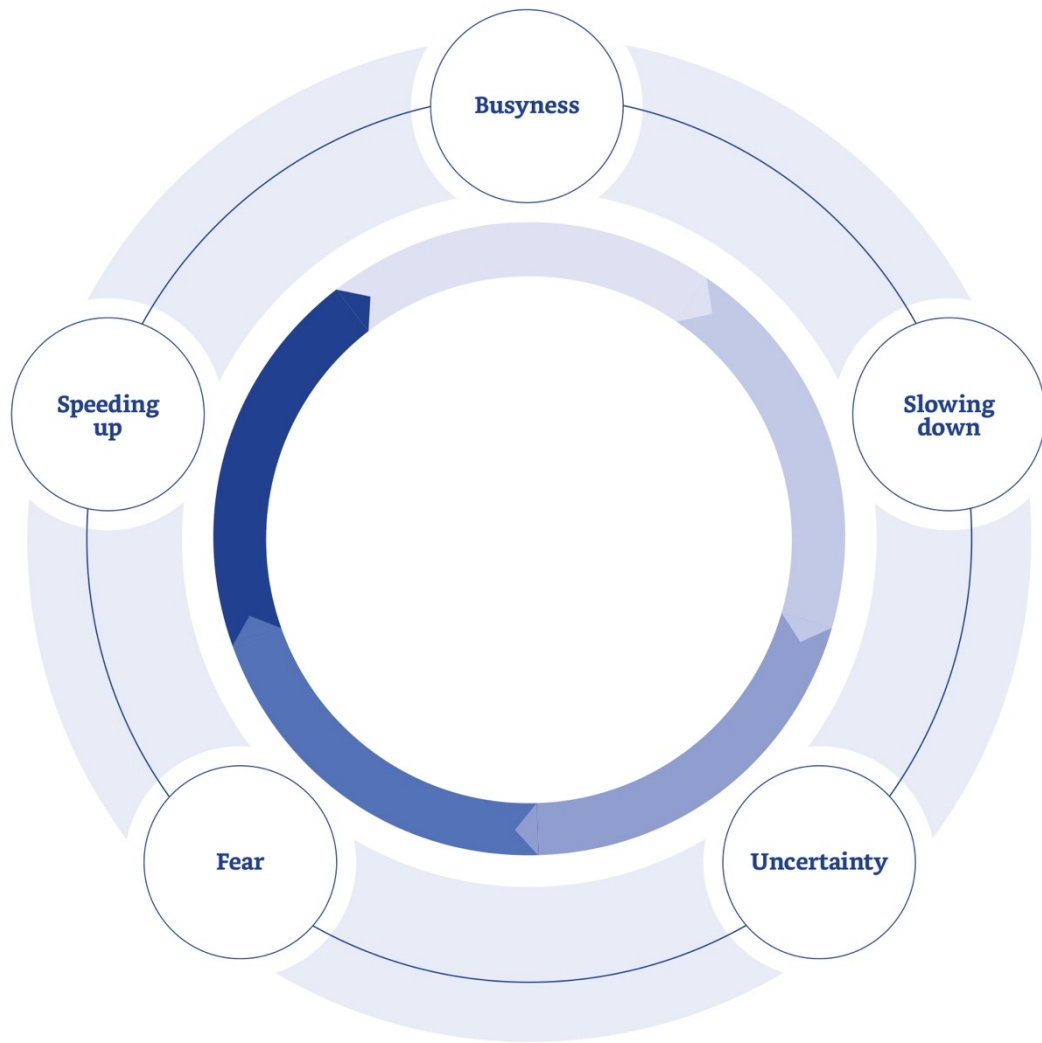
Breaking the loop

How then to interrupt this loop of busyness-uncertainty-fear-busyness? (see Fig. 17)

This is an area where I perhaps depart from those influential thinkers I described in Chapter 3 and claim a different practice.

²⁵ Burkeman, O. (2020, March 28). Focus on the things you can control: how to cope with radical uncertainty. *The Guardian*, Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/28/things-you-can-control-cope-with-radical-uncertainty-oliver-burkeman>

FIGURE 17: Busyness loop



Weisbord (2007), in the title of his book, suggests we “Don’t just do something, stand there!” His advice is well noted. How easy it is to do the work of the team and end up holding too much power, such that we fulfil roles that the team should be doing.

However, in just “standing there,” we may inadvertently end up creating more uncertainty and nourishing the reactive loop we are trying to interrupt. In Chapter 1, I noted how several very skilled facilitators never got the chance to put their skills to use because they inadvertently triggered this uncertainty-fear loop.

I have come to understand that part of my outer practice is to match and pace this busyness through the shorthand way I speak – business-like “unfluffy” language with the promise of certainty; the clothes I wear – suit for some, trendy trainers for others; my company branding – red and sharp; our central London office. These are all very deliberate inner choices on my part. Rather than create more uncertainty

and fear by doing nothing, I acknowledge and meet the client where they are at and indeed bring even more energy to create hope and optimism that a shift is possible.

But in doing so, I find myself in a position that perhaps approximates to Rorty's concept of the Ironist, whom he describes as someone who “has radical doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses” and is “always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change” (Rorty, 1989, pp. 73–74).

I have my own “radical doubts” that my promised action in itself will bring about the change the client is looking for. I also know that if we were to immediately move directly to what I wanted to do, e.g. more radical reflection, slowing down, noticing, and co-development, it would trigger the busyness loop. For example, if I were to tell a client that six months from now, at least half of their executive agenda will be dedicated to emergent co-creation, oh and by the way, you might be doing some yoga too, it's my belief they would never return my call. Or perhaps more accurately, I would never get invited into those clients that (in my opinion) would benefit most from doing this work.

If I were to critique what I have just written, I might politely say, “you're a bloody fraud mate. Why don't you just set your stall out clearly with the work you want to do, with none of this *Getting in* rubbish? Those that want to do that work with you will do it; those that don't will find someone else.”

I really wrestle with this.

What does it mean to do this work authentically? As discussed in Chapter 6, get the ethics wrong and it can become unbearable, requiring serious tempering of the soul (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Because I believe I can genuinely help a team reach a healthier more productive place, does it justify the acknowledgement – no perhaps I'll go further – does it justify temporary *collusion*? Do the ends justify the means?

To answer this, we need to go deeper towards intent.

7.2 Deep intent and belonging

“Good work, done well for the right reasons and with an end in mind, has always been a sign, in most human traditions, of an inner and outer maturity” David Whyte (2002).

Throughout this thesis, literature, particularly poetry, has been a bridge to a felt sense of my inner world that I cannot quite put language to. In the above quote, *for the right reasons and with an end in mind* calls out to me. It reminds me of the importance of intent in my work.

Intent and my ability to notice it, scrutinise it, and hold it centrally in my practice really is the “difference that makes the difference” (Bateson, 1972, p.459) in my work.

I have developed my own set of ethical questions (Chapter 6) to help interrogate and scrutinise my intent. In this conclusion, I go one step further and submit that in order to truly understand your *deep* intent as a team coach working with a system, you must first understand your relationship with your own system, that of your family of origin.

We all originate from a system, that of our family of origin. Like corporations, this a system built upon complex relationships within which we learn our own set of implicit rules and rituals to get our needs met. It is the first place we learn about belonging, perhaps one of our most fundamental needs as social creatures.

“There is no house like the house of belonging” David Whyte (2011).

Whilst we may not be able to write them all down, we *know* the rules that protect our membership and sense of belonging to our family system. This family system is part of a wider social system, into which we take our own implicit patterns and rules of belonging. As we enter each new system, we unconsciously tune in to the rules that safeguard our belonging, comparing them with the previous system in which we belonged.

As I reflect on the whole of this inquiry, particularly the first-person inquiries into my own system of origin, I realise I have never quite belonged anywhere.

This yearning for belonging flowed through my childhood years, into my choice of career, and became the template for my working life today. It hasn't necessarily been a limitation, in fact I actually owe much of my career success to not quite belonging – it allowed me to get really good at noticing when others didn't belong and help them find their place, which in turn gave me a way to get my own needs met.

As I described in Chapter 3, I became skilled at systemic team coaching and working at the level of the invisible field, developing a strong inner sense of the organising forces of the system (Whittington, 2012). However, at a certain point, my own system of origin became entangled with the systems I was working within. I found myself repeating and re-enacting my own belonging scripts from my family system, in organisational systems where I could only ever be a temporary guest.

I now wonder if I set myself up to be too emotionally available, too willing to take on the needs of my clients in the hope that I might be helpful and solve their issues. It made sense – this was my script for finding a sense of belonging. In some cases, I succeeded in removing the immediate pain for my client, but as the dynamic was typically a part of the wider system, more often than not, the system found a way to self-right itself. This meant that the pain would re-emerge elsewhere, locate me, and take me down. I took the full force of the trauma and became exhausted. Despite these signals, I continued to make myself available and give to my clients.

Perhaps (and this is hard and new to write) the nurturing I needed in my own family system just wasn't there and I have been making up for it ever since.

It seems paradoxical that I had to get closer to my past in order to let it go, which seems in keeping with the Jungian doctrine of ensuring your shadows are in front of you, not behind.

It was only through exploring these issues using the first-person methods described in Chapter 2, that I was able to build a “heightened awareness of my own systemic entanglements and loyalties” (Whittington, 2012, p.81).

Listen to my audio journal before a workshop today and you'll still hear a nervousness in my voice about whether I will be able to create the conditions for the group to talk about a difficult subject; I still care deeply about the work and what I have been entrusted to do. The reality is that transformative work always comes with some level of risk, but the difference is you will hear me more confidently bracketing my various negative thoughts from my own system: “ah that is definitely my stuff,” which I greet like a familiar friend, rather than a frightening foe.

Resourcing from within

Recognising my original shallow roots of belonging and carefully transferring and nurturing them in my strong family system today has allowed me to ground myself better. Outwardly, clients might experience the same energy and optimism for transformation, but inwardly I am resourced by a much calmer energy. I am still very interested in using my inner resources to help others find their place in a team and have their voice heard so they can arrive (Kline, 2009), but I am far less attached to the external outcome as an indirect way to get my own needs met. I am resourced more fully from within.

I am also more focussed on being useful than being helpful. I have realised that helping too much can create a helplessness on behalf of the team and I end up fulfilling roles that they should be taking. The psychotherapist Bert Hellinger, one of the pioneers of Family and Systems Constellations, encourages us to “Have no intention. Especially to help” (in Whittington, 2012, p.230). Taken in context, to me it doesn't imply less care, rather the ability to remain focussed on the system instead of getting caught up in meeting individual needs.

7.3 Research claims

By virtue of this being a doctoral thesis, I am expected to condense my thinking and move towards a specific “claim.” As you read this section, please call to mind some of the grit and messiness of the practice vignettes shared throughout this thesis. I don't want to give an impression of things being too neat. Despite what I will share in this section, there isn't a set process to this inner work. Each team coach must find what works for them. But find it they must or risk serious consequences to their sense of self and wellbeing. In this chapter, I review my research question and aims and offer my own contribution to the field of executive team coaching.

As a reminder, this was the research question and aims I presented in Chapter 1.

Research question:

How can I improve my practice of executive team coaching through paying greater attention to the inner work required to *Get in*, *Get on*, and *Get out* of large corporations, as well as *Get over* difficult assignments?

Research aims:

- to research into my own professional practice and use myself as an instrument to help understand what works in improving the quality and range of interventions as an executive team coach
- to be of service to others, particularly those in coaching professions who might be struggling to *Get over* difficult assignments, by documenting my own struggles
- to offer an original contribution to the field of team coaching by detailing practice from senior teams in large, multi-national corporations.

I will consider each in turn.

Research question

How can I improve my practice of executive team coaching through paying greater attention to the inner work required to Get in, Get on, and Get out of large corporations, as well as Get over difficult assignments?

My claim

I have set out a team coaching meta-process of *Getting in, Getting on, Getting out, and Getting over it* that requires a serious investment of inner work by an executive team coach in order to resource themselves *from within*.

This is because at every stage of the team coaching process, the team coach is likely to encounter ethical dilemmas and dominant, often invisible power structures that will push them constantly to choose between collusion or exclusion.

They will need to summon the courage to strike a different path, a path that has no guarantees of success but is the best available path at that moment. They must be masters of improvisation. They must create trusting relationships with the leaders they work with (who do not value or are so often denied this inner work) to “Go Fearward” (Turner-Vesselago, 2013, p.34) alongside them.

I have reached this understanding as a result of a seven-year first-person inquiry, by paying close attention to my own embodied knowing during difficult assignments and noticing what works in my own team coaching practice over the last eighteen years.

On this basis, my advice to team coaches is as follows.

Before attempting to coach your clients' systems, locate your own system of origin first.

Failure to fully explore the roots of one's own family system will quickly result in you becoming entangled in the system you are trying to support. This will lead to you struggling to *Get over* difficult assignments. As you try to free yourself from the

systemic knots you have created, you will become exhausted. Continue and you will almost certainly burn out. Central to this inner work is an understanding of why and how you find belonging in any system and what you are willing to do/not willing to do in order to maintain it?

Further resource yourself from within by constantly working towards an ethical maturity.

Ethical maturity can be seen as a product of reflective and reflexive practices developed through a deeper understanding of our values, challenging our assumptions and habits, and allowing the possibility to *redescribe* our experiences to make new meaning. Practical ways to build ethical maturity:

- Create a list of your own ethical questions you can turn to when in the midst of a micro-ethical dilemma (see Chapter 6 for my own). To write this list you must first understand your own values and how these were forged in your story of origin.
- As well as reflecting on what happened in your team coaching assignments, find a form of reflexive practice that works for you and build this into your schedule to make it a habit. Reflexive practice is more than reflection – it asks us to question that which we may not notice in order to locate ourselves within the complexity of our systemic relationships. For me, comparative audio journaling pre- and post-workshops, autoethnography, and somatic work such as Yin Yoga have become part of my practice. Find what works for you.

I now consider my wider research aims, taking each one in turn.

Research aims

- **To research into my own professional practice and use myself as an instrument to help understand what works in improving the quality and range of interventions as an executive team coach**

Typically, the first thing one does before playing an instrument is to tune it. If a piano is nearby, a single note is played. A guitarist might use an external tuner attached to their guitar. But for a team coach the question becomes: if you are using yourself as an instrument, what are you tuning your instrument against?

One must develop a clear *inner note* that, whenever the music feels out of tune, can be used to pitch your way back to harmony.

Much of this inquiry has been about finding my own *inner note* to tune my practice to and learning to listen when this falls out of tune. I have done this by engaging in a variety of first-person inquiry practices, evolving them throughout the course of the inquiry in search of what works.

I have used this process of self-attunement to learn how to attune better to individuals and wholes.

- **To be of service to others, particularly those in coaching professions who might be struggling to *Get over* difficult assignments, by documenting my own struggles**

Meyer and Land (2005) introduce the idea of “threshold concepts” which are places where we “get stuck” and how, once grasped, they allow for new understanding. However, there are scant resources for a team coach to help move beyond getting stuck and do what Hawkins and Edwards (2015) describe as “tackling the monsters of doubt.” It is not a topic which receives much coverage in management literature, despite many team coaches expressing to me significant moments of self-doubt and team coaching assignments that they still ruminate on several years, even decades, after the event.

I believe there is a significant amount of self-censorship occurring in this space, perhaps out of fear of causing reputational damage to the coach, or perhaps to the client that feeds you. But if no one is sharing their struggles and difficulties, how might we honour the ancient proverb “Good judgement is the result of experience and experience the result of bad judgement?”

There are plenty of victory stories and glossy best practices available to the team coach (just take a scroll through your LinkedIn feed), but I hope by inviting you to stand alongside me in some of the messier situations I have managed to get myself entangled in, it might, in some small way, be of more use to tackle your own monsters of doubt than the glossy stuff.

In particular, I hope methods such as my edited version of five-column analysis incorporating Rorty's (1989, p.7) idea of redescription might help you *see now what you did not see then*.

- **To offer an original contribution to the field of team coaching by detailing coaching practice from senior teams in large, multi-national corporations**

This inquiry has been situated within the beating heart of the corporate beast, at the very top of large, multi-national corporations. Whilst tone at the top has and will always be important to organisational change initiatives, much of the advice for team coaches focusses on what to do, not how to do it.

This thesis offers:

- a framework to consider the meta-process of executive team coaching: *Getting in, Getting on, Getting out, Getting over it* and what the ethical challenges might be at each stage, particularly in working with power.
- an acknowledgement of the very tight behavioural norms within corporations and how a loop of busyness-uncertainty-fear-busyness sustains this. I have suggested that the work needed to authentically pace and interrupt this looping begins with an interrogation of one's deep intent.

- a re-humanising look behind the curtain at the executives in corporations, to understand why inner work is so often denied and how a team coach might bring some of this practice into the workplace.
- an encouragement (I hope) to other team coaches that experimental methods which advocate different ways of knowing (artful knowing, somatic knowing) are indeed possible at the very top of the organisation – through careful pacing, positioning, and inner work. You will (and perhaps should) always be slightly terrified when you offer them to an executive team, wondering if the CEO will walk out of the room, but build the confidence and inner resources to stand tall and turn to your edge, and the team might just follow you. Or you might get fired.

7.4 Critiquing my claims

I hope in reading this thesis, you get the impression of someone who has been significantly changed by this inquiry, for the better. I deeply value the insights gained over the last seven years. Nonetheless, it is also necessary to reflect and consider the validity and limitations of my claims by fairly critiquing those approaches that led to them.

A reminder of the research validity criteria presented in Chapter 2:

1. Utility

Is this research in the service of creating useful and practical knowledge to other team coaching and OD professionals who do similar work?

2. Resonance

Do the practice vignettes and first person inquiries resonate with others' experience of organisations?

3. Research not just reflection

Have I worked with my data in a way that shows I have been actively researching, not just reflecting? Are my methodological choices congruent with my ontological and epistemological positions?

1. Utility

The personal and emergent nature of this inner work focussed primarily on my own first-person inquiry into my professional practice. In terms of Action Research practice, I am conscious that whilst I took several of my inquiry practices successfully out to executive clients, (inner critic, somatic work, artful knowing) there were fewer opportunities to convene groups of my team coaching peers and engage with them in true second-person inquiry (rather than first-person inquiry with others). This was mainly due to the ability to get everyone together, made more difficult by the commercial reality for many of prioritising personal inquiry over paid work.

During 2018-2019, I convened some very enjoyable inner critic workshops with my peers. They were filled with raucous laughter and potty-mouth language, releasing something that just could not emerge in their practice. It was a sort of dark humour to cope with the trauma and dilemmas we faced in our day-to-day work. I remember how my sides ached from laughing and learnt that it's important to know when to pause inquiry for a moment and just allow these moments of shared connection (I chose not to include them here). Furthermore, a shift in my own practice was about *not* seeking affirmation from others and learning to trust in my own inner sense, so in this respect I am comfortable with the level of peer participation.

Going forward, I hope to convene more spaces for genuine second-person inquiry with peers that could provide further insights into this important inner work. To support this work, I have created a separate part of my business called Academy X. This is my vehicle for experimental practice with teams and team coaches and an opportunity to do second-person inquiry with a wider audience. It's designed for external and internal team coaches, looking to experiment with different ways to resource their inner selves – in a safe, non-judgemental, slightly weird way.

2. Resonance

I know, through the feedback I receive from participants on our team coaching training, as well as from other facilitators I work alongside, that the practice vignettes of my difficult experiences resonated with their own stories and feelings of failure. Before I could even finish the vignette, they were accessing their own story – not in an annoying let-me-make-this-about-me way, but in a supportive, empathetic way. I am struck by how near to the surface these stories are, despite some happening several years ago. These wounds can so often be a source of great insight and clarity – “the wound is where the light enters” (Rumi).

An expert on pain, Remen (1994) suggests that living well is not about eradicating our wounds and weaknesses but understanding how they can complete our identity and equip us to help others. The way we deal with losses, large and small, shapes our capacity to be present to all our experiences.

“Often, we connect through our wounds, through the wisdom created by them. It's because we have been wounded that allows us to help other people.”²⁶

I hope through the sharing of some of my wounds, both personal and professional, that you have felt a resonance to your own stories.

An aspect I was interested in but felt I simply did not have the capacity to adequately honour the complexities of within this thesis, is the impact of gender on the experience and inner work of a team coach. Do my experiences as a male team coach resonate with female team coaches? In what way does the inner work differ? I'm led to believe by my female business partner (who worked alongside me in the Polonium practice vignette) and the groups I convened to inquire into our inner critics, that there are many similarities. My instinct suggests that the hegemonic masculinity typical within some executive teams makes this inner work vital.

3. Research not just reflection

I believe the choice of my methodology has been appropriate, given the relationship between my shifting ontology and epistemology and the emergent nature of this inquiry. In this respect, I am less concerned about typically positivist situated criticism on the lack of empirical methods.

In the methods outlined in Chapter 2, I have set out to present evidence of my “first-person inquiry competence for their own and others' scrutiny” (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p.20) but one potential criticism might be the extent to which I fully drew on my experiential knowing and allowed that to fully ground the inquiry at all stages.

I would understand and accept this criticism. I'd also suggest that when inquiring into difficult experiences, it's important to keep yourself safe (I consider this further in my closing remarks). There were many times in this inquiry that I would have liked to stay more within a space of experiential knowing, but to do so (and at the risk of sounding a bit dramatic) would have really harmed me. Particularly in those

²⁶ Tippet, K. (Producer). (2018, November 22). *On Being with Krista Tippet: Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, The Difference Between Curing and Healing* [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <http://www.onbeing.org>

moments where I was trying to *Get over* really difficult experiences, I feel that constantly reexperiencing the conversations and emotions may have tipped me over the edge into a place from which it would have been difficult to find my way back.

I remember well a conversation about this with my wife. We were sitting on the sofa one evening after the kids had gone to bed. It was during one of the most difficult periods of the Polonium practice vignette and in response to her question of what was wrong, all I could find were the words “I’m losing myself” and I quickly found myself moved to tears.

Nearer the end of the inquiry, she would tell me how terrified she was to hear me casually ask her, as I would put on my pyjamas and come to bed: “Hey, do you ever feel like you’re right on the edge of a nervous breakdown?”

I hope a certain competence on drawing on my experiential knowing is evident throughout this thesis, but perhaps what I have not been able to show are the moments I decided not to draw upon this.

Here I am reminded of the words of Judi Marshall (1999, p.157). “I do need to know when not to adopt a thoroughly inquiring approach and to leave life ‘unprocessed’ but deciding when and how to do this is also part of living inquiringly.”

8. Coda

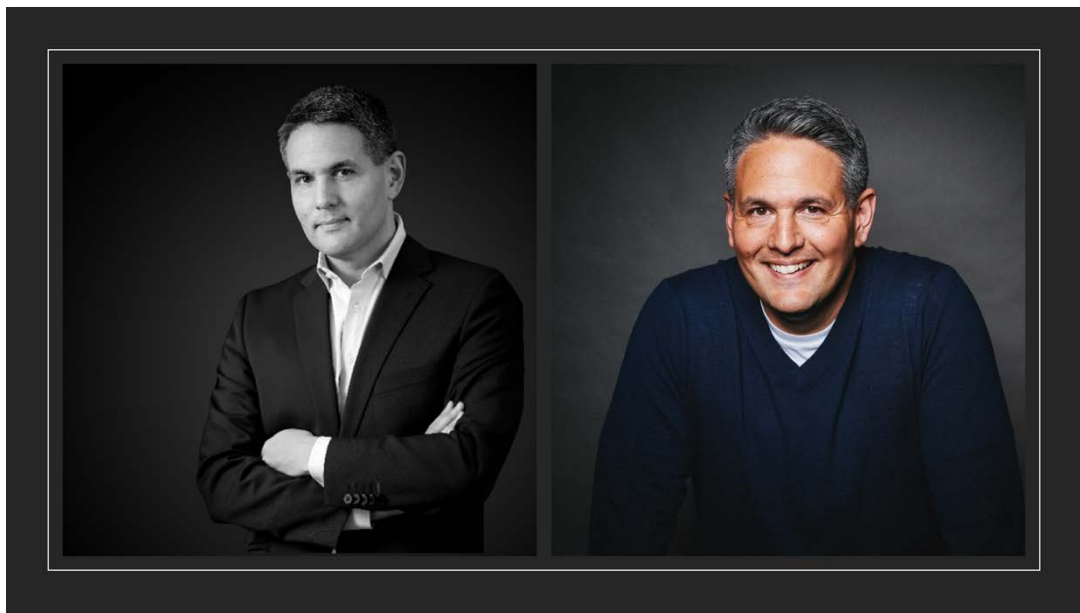
8.1 Bringing the inquiry to a close

A Coda is a musical segment that typically brings a piece to an end.

In this final segment, I offer a reflection on the inquiry as a whole and a word on the future.

I am struck by the phenomenal amount of time that has passed since beginning this inquiry, some seven years ago. I realised that this was the same amount of time I spent at secondary school. I was prompted to dig out my “old school photo” (i.e. my LinkedIn profile picture) from when I began the process.

Image 21: Then and now: 2013 and 2020



When the photo on the right was taken, I remember the photographer commenting that my jumper was a little scruffy and asking if I had a jacket that I wanted to put over it.

I said it was just fine. Not to worry. Go ahead.

Perhaps this is my most significant shift. A willingness to be seen, in colour, without the jacket of protection. A bit scruffy and firmly rooted as a result of being better

resourced from within. I'm reminded of the poem *These Days* by Charles Olson (1987), which I have always liked, but now the last line speaks to me in a way it didn't before:

"Whatever you have to say, leave
The roots on, let them
Dangle
And the dirt
Just to make clear
Where they come from."

I have always thought of this poem as an invitation towards vulnerability and a willingness to shun the projection of perfection. Now as I *redescribe*, I feel the gravity of the last line. It speaks to roots growing from a system of origin and, for me, I found out in this inquiry that those roots were shallow.

I am left with a sense of unease regarding the length of time I get to work with a team/client. Given this inquiry took me seven years, how on earth could I be useful to others in this space when I might only have a few days or at best weeks with them? I don't have an answer for this. Perhaps I need to release myself from any pressure here. But that's difficult because I'm asking myself: what would it mean to take inner work *seriously*? I am about to hand over the studying baton to my wife, who begins a Masters in Integrative Psychotherapy in the Autumn. I have a feeling a whole new practice might emerge for us to help those who need some help to dig up those roots, safely.

Safety is important in conducting inner work and I neglected it. My ethics statement focussed on keeping others safe and I failed to adequately consider how to keep myself safe during the process. Marshall (1999) speaks to the importance of boundaries when opening up challenging territory that threatens safety. Decentring feels like an important part of the process, but what happens when decentring becomes so intense that it overpowers? When should one stay inquiring and when should one move to safety (although in making this choice we are still acting inquiringly)? I would be interested to see further research in this space.

Finally, it feels important to say something about the current context in which I am writing this thesis. The world is experiencing a global pandemic of Covid-19; thousands die each day as the virus transmission increases. Words such as self-isolation, social distancing, and furloughing seem to have found their way into everyday discourse. Our children are home-schooled and we gather on our little doorstep every Thursday at 8pm to clap for our National Health Service. If Bauman (2005) were alive today, he certainly would have much to say about living in conditions of endemic uncertainty.

I wonder about all of this in the context of the future of team coaching. All of my face-to-face workshops have been postponed or cancelled this year. Much of this thesis has been concerned with how to create social intimacy between teams (Chapter 3). How might any of this be possible in the context of social distancing?

What might the impact of long-term social distancing be on the willingness of a team to move *closer* to their teammates? Today we are becoming rapidly conditioned to stay *away* from each other.

Given that most team coaches will have far less work this year, what might that mean for ethical maturity and how much they are willing to disrupt one of the few systems that feeds them? Will a new virtual team coaching practice emerge that we don't have to pretend isn't awful?

These are the questions that wait for me as I submit my thesis to you. Not the questions I expected, but at least I feel better resourced, from within, to greet them with a smile and wearing my scruffy jumper.

Encore

All good bands come back on stage for an encore and this final section is in response to my examiners' questions in the viva on how I might sustain myself going forward.

Surfacing, naming, and owning my inner note has enabled me to work systemically with wholes, rather than just the parts, inside very narrow and normative organisational spaces. I know when I encounter a part of the organisation, it brings with it a representation of the whole. This is particularly true of the top management team in an organisation which feels like the nearest representation of the whole. I have learned to hold a tempered radical (Meyerson, 2001) position within the organisations I support – never quite in the box, always working in the margins. It is a very edgy, risky place where one can quickly lose credibility and be shamed out of the organisation. But, if you can slightly disturb the system, move the boundaries just a little, then that difference can make a difference. The inner note allows me to create transitional and social spaces, and helps me to stay in these fields, holding a sense of what matters (which is often different from what is handed down). It has enabled me to have the courage to work artfully with contested and complex concepts of vulnerability, trust, and dialogue and to feel some pride and sense of accomplishment when I do.

I've experienced the interplay between my first-person inquiry and my practice and learnt first-hand how one can nourish the other. Much of my first person work has been to learn to work with my past so it does not disturb my present. I've learnt that the past must be found in the present world. With a little help from Rorty and Mead, I am able to constantly reinterpret the past from the standpoint of the present to create new interpretations, and, even heal.

How might I sustain this inner note going forward? Pain, anxiety, and uncertainty are features of organisational life that are likely to increase further in a world recovering from a global pandemic. I'm noticing a significant reduction in the levels of psychological safety within teams as more leaders think twice about speaking out in a climate where mass redundancies are a real risk and job security is prized.

When singers need to hold a long note, they take turns to breathe, signalling and synchronising their breath between each other. I am keen to work more regularly as part of a pair of team coaches. As I learnt from the Polonium vignette, four eyes are better than two.

I am reflecting on how I might continue to work with my own vulnerability, which I have learnt has the power to transform, but to do so responsibly and know when to “titrate my vulnerability” (M. Gearty, personal communication, July 2020) in relation to what I feel resourced to address at that given moment. Gearty suggests there are important choices to be made about the extent to which we disclose and actively work with our first person narratives. Maybe this means sometimes dusting off the booth and being ok with making a deliberate, restrained choice based on the level of toxicity present in the culture I find myself in.

Finally, I am reminded of Shepard’s (1975, p.1) first rule of thumb for change agents:

RULE 1: Stay alive.

Staying alive means staying in touch with your purpose. It means using your skills, your emotions, your labels and positions, rather than being used by them. It means not being trapped in other people's games. It means turning yourself on and off, rather than being dependent on the situation. It means choosing with a view to the consequences as well as the impulse. It means going with the flow even while swimming against it. It means living in several worlds without being swallowed up in any. It means seeing dilemmas as opportunities for creativity. It means greeting absurdity with laughter while trying to unscramble it. It means capturing the moment in the light of the future. It means seeing the environment through the eyes of your purpose.

Perhaps the greatest sustenance for my inner note will come from a greater agency to act upon the first hearing of an organisational note that harmonically clashes with my own, and to trust my myself when it says, “run a mile.”

When I do invariably have to *get over it*, perhaps I will now understand (and believe) it says as much about the organisation I’m working with as it does me, which is a very special and significant concept to have discovered.

Thesis wordcount: 70,498

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