

Academic Paper

# Coaching in the Sales Profession: What part can coaching through literature play in dealing with a contemporary “Bartleby”?

Christine A Eastman [✉](mailto:christine.eastman@middlesex.ac.uk) (Middlesex University, London, UK)

Peter Critten (Consalia Ltd, Middlesex, UK)

Carl Day (Apogee Corporation, Maidstone, UK)

## Abstract

This article makes a case for using Herman Melville’s 1853 short story, “Bartleby the Scrivener, A Tale of Wall-Street,” to support new sales staff. Rock and Schwartz’s (2006) ideas on brain-based coaching have been reinforced by an exploration of a literary approach to coaching in order to demonstrate how to support sales people. The study used feedback from salespeople in mainly the recruitment and publishing industries. Data collected suggest that new sales recruits are frustrated at not knowing what standards they are expected to meet. Findings also suggest that there was merit in using literature as part of a coaching development exercise and that literature, including short stories, could be a source of help in navigating work situations.

## Keywords

Bartleby, the Scrivener, literature, brain-based coaching, sales, on-boarding,

## Article history

Accepted for publication: 17 July 2020

Published online: 03 August 2020



© the Author(s)

Published by Oxford Brookes University

## Introduction

The sales profession presents specific challenges when recruiting and on-boarding new staff. Jordan and Vezzana (2012) argue that sales is like no other profession in that it has not been considered a professional discipline and may lack the management rigour that is associated with professions in general. It also suffers from not having a recognised chartered professional body, a code of standards and ethics, and there is often an over expectation from management to achieve a volume of sales that may be unrealistic. Munoz and Mallin (2017) have recently conducted research into unethical selling practices and found that sales was “increasingly plagued” (p.62) by unethical behaviour. They point out that sales performance literature attributes selling behaviour to how sales people perceive their roles and identities. This paper offers an innovative way of addressing the challenges of on-boarding new staff by examining sales people’s roles and

identities through a literary coaching strategy using Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener, a Tale of Wall-Street" (1853).

This study draws on semi-structured interviews with newly on-boarded sales staff in order to demonstrate the value of using literature for coaching new sales recruits. Re-visiting Melville's story, we realised that the difficulties and costs related to on-boarding were not a modern challenge for business but a deeply entrenched problem that has been around as long as organised work has been. Using a literary model as a touchstone for a coaching conversation acknowledges coaching as a process. Shoukry and Cox (2018) have put forward the case for coaching to be viewed in its social context as a process, profoundly affected by "historical, cultural and social processes such as political structures and power dynamics" (p.414). A literary coaching model facilitates that very process, making the cultural and political realities explicit and far more open to examination. Such a literary response could reinforce a brain-based approach to coaching as advocated by Rock and Schwarz (2006).

Rock (2006) has written widely on what he calls a brain-based approach to coaching, describing how dissatisfied he was at being coached in general. He admits that it was a positive step for a coach to focus on his feelings but it did not help to address his problems: he realised the goal of coaching was to create insight in the coachee's mind which could then promote the necessary change. The crux of the matter that Rock illuminates lies in one sentence: the focus of change takes place in the *coachee's* mind, not the coach's. He is convinced that coaches must activate these natural processes in a focused way.

With Schwarz, his collaborator, Rock has been able to create some breakthrough coaching observations: "I have noticed for years that we have a choice when faced with an issue to either drill down to the problem or focus on the solution. A brain-based approach explains how focusing on the solutions actually creates solutions, while focusing on the problems can deepen those problems in our thinking" (Rock and Schwartz 2006, p. 38). Schwartz points out that "it sounds like the role of the coach is to help leaders focus their attention on the right activities" (p. 39) adding, "Where you focus your attention, you make connections. Focus on something new and you make new connections." He further points out: "Stimulating environments, especially when coupled with structured activity, lead to more nervous system connections being formed and generally higher levels of function" (p. 37). Rock and Schwarz's brain-based coaching sounds similar to solution focused coaching (O'Donnell, Palmer & Williams, 2012) in its emphasis on focusing on practical solutions - a focus on which is also the aim of literary coaching.

## **Background: A literary coaching strategy**

For those unfamiliar with Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener", the story chronicles an increasingly difficult relationship between the narrator, a nameless Wall Street lawyer, and Bartleby, the newly hired scrivener, or copyist, with a psychological disorder that eventually leads to the disruption of the narrator's work and life. At first Bartleby seems to be hard-working, but with no apparent trigger, reacts with the refrain "I would prefer not to" to any request to perform a task. Thus, he would sooner "prefer not to" copy a document, liaise with a colleague, eat, drink, or go home. Eventually he is carted off to New York City's Tombs, the local asylum. We follow the lawyer's repeated efforts to address a deteriorating situation which affects his own equilibrium and the disruptive effect Bartleby's (non) actions have on his colleagues.

While "Bartleby" does offer many topics for debate, the purpose of this paper is not to argue the inner meaning of Melville's narrative, but to explore the following:

- Can literature play a part in the development of staff and employees? Rock and Schwarz's (2006) theories are built on in our examination of how coaches can use "Bartleby" to illuminate coachees' experiences;

- Is there a connection between coaching as a social process and literature used to highlight and define power dynamics and professional ideology? The usefulness of a literary text to support people to question, not to conform to organisational imperatives is demonstrated.

In her work exploring how using diverse cinema can vary a management curriculum, Bumpus advocates getting “out of one’s comfort zone” (2005, p. 793). Although she uses film to demonstrate how diversity should be integrated into the mainstream of organisational behavioural courses, the use of a literary coaching approach can address diversity as well by moving the management style beyond a “one size fits all” type of model. The distinct advantage of a literary approach is to “take situations a step away from the constraints of reified professional discourses and expectations” (Jarvis, 2019, p. 14). When we coach we draw on actual lived experience. A literary approach to coaching allows both coaches and coachees to embrace an imaginative encounter, and to go beyond the normal range of experience and expectations.

It is widely acknowledged that high performing organisations achieve their performance through high performing staff (Maxwell, 2018; Jordan & Vezzana, 2012). These organisations often employ effective and unique recruitment, development and support processes. However, not all organisations have financial means that Google, Apple and Salesforce have in order to recruit the best people. For the large majority of organisations, recruiting and developing new sales staff to become successful (success in this case is measured as generating a profit for the organisation over and above its net cost) are their greatest challenges (Brock, 2016).

Working with predominantly small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), we regularly witness the cost and damage caused by recruiting and promoting staff without the support and development required to be successful in their new roles. Sales coaching is “mission critical” according to Dickie (2014, p. 4) because of the number of challenges faced by today’s sales people particularly in terms of increased competition, organisational complexity, and customer expectations. Just over 12 percent of the firms Dickie surveyed claimed to have implemented a sales coaching programme. Ineffective and outdated carrot and stick management styles are commonplace in the profession of sales, often resulting in failure for the following reasons:

- Without the required skills and or opportunity, no amount of pressure or reward will result in increased sales performance;
- Pressure can often lead to desperate measures and in some cases illegal and fraudulent behaviour;
- If a salesperson is underperforming there will be an underlying reason and it is unlikely that reason will be a lack of incentive (outside of remuneration);
- A carrot and stick approach is regularly viewed as a short term method over more modern methods such as coaching, mentoring and development, all of which have been shown to keep staff engaged over longer periods of time (Smilansky, 2015).

The carrot and stick approach could be supplanted by a literary coaching approach that recognises that how people develop their skills is predicated on privileging the coachees’ concerns over the coach’s and supporting the coachees in becoming conscious of their own thought processes.

Bradford, Rutherford and Friend (2017) make the point that on the job coaching is a rewarding process for business to business sales people and suggest that there is a need for sales people to continually update their skills. Many trainee salespeople struggle in their early days and many leave the profession prematurely, creating a situation in which the organization is forced to pick up the cost of failed recruitment. Research conducted for *Topgrading for Sales* (Smart and Alexander, 2008) indicates that the cost of a failed salesperson is six times his or her base salary. Most research on sales performance has been focused on improving the efficacy of selling. A major limitation has been a concentration on the sales person rather than on the company culture. Recent research on the buyer’s perspective has suggested that failure is more likely caused by a breakdown in the processes between buyer and seller. In other words, the culture of an

organisation may have more influence than a salesperson's specific performance: sales organisations need to bear in mind that "their sales people need to be trained and motivated in ways that are different from the metrics driving performance." The culture of the organisation should consider customer relationships, and in particular, trust and ethical issues (Friend *et al.*, 2014, p 1133).

The organisation's problems do not end once the salesperson has started to perform. Research by Sunder, Kumar, Goreczny and Maurer (2017) indicates that the sales function suffers from a higher rate of attrition when compared with other functions and professions: in most professions the annual turnover is less than two years, but the annual turnover among U.S. salespeople is estimated as running as high as 27%.

Clearly these systemic cultural issues need to be addressed by sales organisations. The symptoms can be intensified when the organisation is operating in a competitive or low margin industry. For example, the office print industry has seen a decline in street price in the last five years of up to 40% (Gartner Magic Quadrant, 2016). As a result of this decline and without a change in strategy, organisations are required to sell considerably more products in order to stand still financially. The cost of implementing a 30% growth in sales is not met with the profit it generates, which often results in a fall in client service / satisfaction. This predicament leaves many organisations forced to put pressure on the sales function to deliver more without offering any professional development or support to those sales people. With the cost of recruitment increasing and more pressure for sales to succeed, unsurprisingly many organisations struggle at this point to get out of the downward spiral (Munoz and Mallin, 2017). Oren Smilansky (2015, p. 11) points out that companies that resist formal coaching processes are at risk: "Companies with formal processes had win rates of 53.6 percent, while those with less structured processes closed sales slightly less than 43 percent of the time."

With the kind of pressure a sales organisation endures and exerts, it would be unrealistic to expect a coach in that environment to remain neutral. In such a pressurised environment a coach may likely deny the social complexity contained within the organisation in order to uphold the established strategies to improve competitiveness in performance. As a character, Bartleby is labouring in an oppressive environment and is himself socially excluded, the ideal candidate in need of coaching if we can define coaching as a process that has been developed "through a need for individual support to achieve personal goals" and one which relies on "an understanding of psychological and learning processes that can help coachees to think about the situations and problems and so come to their own solutions" (Shoukry and Cox, 2018, p.415).

One of the most powerful and enlightening ways of fathoming the gulf that separates what people say and what they do is through the means of fiction. The largest part of human behaviour is the unconscious which we can experience vividly in literary works. This gargantuan iceberg or the unconscious can be mined by an engagement with literary fiction. Attridge (2004, p. 59) demonstrates a number of beneficial effects literary fiction has on its readers: "humanizing them, broadening their minds, alerting them to linguistic niceties, enlarging their sympathies, undermining their covert, ideological assumptions [...]." Such covert, ideological assumptions, in particular, can be challenged by a literary engagement. Placing "Bartleby" in its socio-literary context can provide the communication tools to question one's position in the workplace and facilitate a dialogue between management and those managed on themes such as tolerance, isolation, success, failure and individuality.

"Bartleby" was chosen to introduce to the sales recruits because it had been a set text in our sales education programme and had been favourably received by our students, many of whom believed Melville gave a voice to the silenced workers, those who had neither power nor autonomy in their day to day professional lives. These students agreed that the story enriched the imagination, and that the complexities of roles and identities were explored in the story, complexities that also resonated with the new sales recruits interviewed.

## **Background: A brain-based coaching strategy**

It is often said that if someone has the gift of the gab, he or she will make a good sales person, whereas the very opposite is true. It is the ability to listen, really listen to what another person is trying to convey to us – that enables us to gain that person's trust so that they are then likely to reveal what it is they *really* want and need. And *listening*, not advising, is at the heart of coaching. Brain-based coaching is a necessity if a business is looking to keep its new sales person on board as well as helping that person realise his or her potential as quickly as possible. Burt (2019) suggests that only through effective listening can those in a coaching dialogue articulate their thoughts and challenge their assumptions.

According to cognitive neuroscientists Banissy and Ward (2007), our brain's capability is adversely affected by three factors: stress, dehydration and lack of sleep. Selling is a high-pressured role and is highly susceptible to such factors listed (Smilansky, 2015; Dickie, 2014). The likelihood of losing the job if one does not meet targets builds up stress levels from the day a person starts in sales. This situation is usually compounded by a culture which also encourages a great deal of socializing and camaraderie leading to dehydration and loss of sleep. There is a unique link between the way the brain works and what makes for effective selling (Rock and Schwarz, 2006).

## **Bartleby, the Scrivener – diversity considered**

Bartleby suffered from a suffocating environment coupled with repetitive and mindless activity that led to what appeared to be a breakdown or nervous collapse. If we take the personality of Bartleby at face value, some might classify him as "autistic". We would argue that Bartleby's condition may instead have been exacerbated by being deprived of a stimulating environment and being required to act as an automaton. Diversity in terms of autism can be not only accommodated in the workplace but welcomed. Regarding Bartleby, one would assume that he was recruited for what Melville described as his "excellent copying skills". As we now know, people on the autistic spectrum often have exceptional skills that demand such intense attention to detail. In today's selection process, Bartleby's condition would almost certainly be recognised as well as his exceptional copying skills. People with autism and other related conditions would now be described as "neuro-diverse", and as Silberman states "[Businesses are] moving on from the notion of employing people with cognitive disability as a form of charity to realizing that it can be good business". He goes on to observe the following: "They're realising that they can think in ways neuro-typical people can't, can identify problems invisible to neuro-typical employees and suggest solutions outside of the box." (Silberman, 2015). "Innovation" is one of five qualities SMEs need for the well-being of their staff. The others are "company culture", "employee centric", "environment" and "altruism" (Rucker and Galinsky, 2008).

To the reader, it is obvious that Bartleby does not "fit" within the company culture of the office Melville details. We suggest that it is the issue of "fitting" within a given company's culture that should be at the heart of on-boarding. We also suggest it can take years for an employee to get used to "the way we do things round here." A maverick in the mix undoubtedly could prove valuable to an organisation, but during the on-boarding process, recognising and conforming to the dynamics of an office are essential for most people. The culture of a company is rarely made transparent in company documents and unlikely to be raised in the selection process. Turning to Shoukry and Cox's (2018) point about maintaining a sense of self hood and identity during the coaching process by challenging rather than accepting prevailing structures and forces, we would argue that it is a questioning fit for the new employee rather than an acquiescent one. The lesson we take forward from "Bartleby", reinforced by findings from our brief interviews carried out with people new to sales, is the need to help new-starts "fit in". Companies must be clear right from the outset about what they are asking their new recruits to fit into at the same time as recognising the unique skills each person brings to the company and how those very skills may indeed change or challenge the culture they are being asked to fit into.

## Methodology

Convinced by the solution-focused aspects of brain-based coaching, we decided to build on brain-based coaching by introducing our six interviewees to a literary approach so they could focus on solutions to their work-based challenges. Our research question became: can literary coaching play a role in supporting new recruits in selling?

## Participants and data collection

Our interviewees came from different industries, mainly from recruitment and publishing, and all were regarded as sales people. One hundred percent income based and in sales less than eighteen months, they were selling business to business. Semi-structured interviews were held with four new starters, two males and two females. A male manager and male coach were also interviewed. This was a straightforward approach in which the respondents were simply asked for a summarised account of their experiences in sales. Confidentiality was assured and interviewees were told that their identities would be anonymised. The accounts of their experiences in sales were solicited by one of the authors in his capacity as manager of new recruits. The interviewees were asked to read "Bartleby", in particular to provide feedback on an extract from the story provided further on in this paper. Again, semi-structured interviews were held with them as well as an explanation that their reactions to the story would provide valuable data for our research.

## Findings

Common to all of the comments of the sales recruits were feelings of fear of being fired if they did not reach their targets:

*Even though I have hit my sales target I feel anxious about not achieving it in the future. I don't want to tell my boss about it as he will think I am a weak sales person. I felt unsure as to whether I was doing a good job, or whether I had been lucky. Though I was in a busy office I had hardly any contact with anyone in the senior team which made me feel very isolated. I felt trapped and just wanted to walk away. I soon became very disillusioned with sales and the corporate world. (recruit)*

They experienced anxiety and isolation at not being able to share their concern with anyone senior:

*We don't have any leadership here, just people with authority – how can I perform well under a poor leader/manager? I really respond to one-to-one development. However, in my current sales role the one-to-one is purely to look at my sales-pipeline and number of calls; the time is never spent looking at how I can be more effective. (recruit)*

Above all, they felt frustrated at not knowing what standards they were expected to meet and how they could improve. Common to all the new recruits was a general feeling of malaise, dissatisfaction, and anxiety in the field of sales:

*Leadership is a hole in this organisation. We are expected to simply "get on with it." I also feel that there is little communication here. If it's not about my sales pipe-line, my manager doesn't want to know. My current sales manager is also volatile which doesn't help the situation. (recruit)*

The additional interviewees, one with of the sales managers and the other with a coach, amplified the lack of support within the organisation, a lack long unidentified because clear, frank and fearless communication with each other had not been a priority.

*I have an older sales team that doesn't respond to anything they see as "gimmicky." Job dissatisfaction is the elephant in the room – we need something to pull us together (manager)*

*As a coach and trainer, I see what the sales profession needs. People here are no more anxious and worried than in other sales organisations. I am afraid this low-level anxiety is born out of competition and success at all costs within organisations that value little else. (coach)*

During these interviews, the author was able to reassure the new recruits that they would not lose their jobs as long as they made the calls and worked on the input activities the company should have set for them. Trust lay at the core of the relationship between the author in his role as manager of the new recruits. Because they trusted him, they wanted to participate in a study that could be beneficial to the sales industry as a whole. The interviewees were not interested in short term thinking but in long term solutions for the company. In his wide-ranging discussions with leaders and CEOs, Bennis (1989) recognised that trust was led "through voice" which could "change the climate enough to give people elbow room to do the right things" (p. 167). These new recruits wanted the company to provide a space for an open, frank and trusting dialogue.

Coaching is an ideal way to counteract the culture these young people have experienced in which they had received no support in their early days of selling and were constantly being reminded of what they seemingly could not achieve, or the target that seemed to elude them. What better way for a company to instruct their new recruits – start in how not to succeed? And for good measure they overwhelm them with data, dense detail about the product, service they were not selling which at this point in their selling career, remained just that, data, of which they could make no sense. These practices, as we now know, are counter-productive to helping the brain realise its full potential. These companies are doing what Rock describes as "drill[ing] down to the problem" rather than on "focusing on the solutions [which] actually creates solutions" (Rock and Schwartz 2006 p. 38).

Coaching that not only emphasises life goals but encourages both coach and coachee to reflect on how we interpret and understand the world can be reinforced by a literary engagement. Reading a story such as "Bartleby" helps us to engage with a multiplicity of voices and points of view. In exploring movies featuring movies featuring more diverse actors, Bumpus (2005) highlights how valuable it is for students to experience the multi-dimensional aspects of a character's life and multiple viewpoints embedded in a narrative: the very nature of valuing difference gets us to move beyond a self-centred orientation.

The interviewees considered the lawyer, the story's narrator, and his feelings of helpless bewilderment as Bartleby retreats more and more into silent resistance and refusal to conform to the culture of the Wall Street offices. They considered Bartleby's colleagues who are angered at Bartleby's inability to conform to expectations. Finally, they considered Bartleby's defiant stance:

*I called to him, rapidly stating what it was I wanted him to do—namely, to examine a small paper with me. Imagine my surprise, nay, my consternation, when without moving from his privacy, Bartleby in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, "I would prefer not to." (...)*

*"Bartleby! quick, I am waiting."*

*I heard a slow scrape of his chair legs on the uncarpeted floor, and soon he appeared standing at the entrance of his hermitage.*

*"What is wanted?" said he mildly.*

*"The copies, the copies," said I hurriedly. "We are going to examine them.*

*There"—and I held towards him the fourth quadruplicate.*

*"I would prefer not to," he said, and gently disappeared behind the screen.*

*For a few moments I was turned into a pillar of salt, standing at the head of my seated column of clerks. Recovering myself, I advanced towards the screen, and demanded the reason for such extraordinary conduct.*

*"Why do you refuse?"*

*"I would prefer not to." [.....]*

*"You are decided, then, not to comply with my request—a request made according to common usage and common sense?"*

*He briefly gave me to understand that on that point my judgment was sound.*

*Yes: his decision was irreversible.*

*It is not seldom the case that when a man is browbeaten in some unprecedented and violently unreasonable way, he begins to stagger in his own plainest faith. He begins, as it were, vaguely to surmise that, wonderful as it may be, all the justice and all the reason is on the other side. Accordingly, if any disinterested persons are present, he turns to them for some reinforcement for his own faltering mind.*

*"Turkey," said I, "what do you think of this? Am I not right?"*

*"With submission, sir," said Turkey, with his blandest tone, "I think that you are."*

*"Nippers," said I, "what do you think of it?"*

*"I think I should kick him out of the office." (Melville, 2001, pp 48 – 9).*

Guided by the research question – can literary coaching play a role in supporting new starts in selling? – we asked our interviewees to provide feedback on the extract above. They had already read the story, but we wanted to focus on this extract which demonstrates the effect Bartleby's withdrawal from office duties has on his colleagues and on his boss. We recognise that this is an extremely small sample, but we also recognise, that the interviewees found merit in using literature as part of a coaching development exercise and, on balance, found reading "Bartleby" helpful in getting them to reflect on their own situations:

*The story was an interesting and sad journey which allowed me to draw some parallels to my own situation. I found I was able to connect to the characters' understanding how situations we face in modern life are issues that have been facing for centuries. I used the main character (Bartleby) to ask how I would behave if I were him and how reflecting deeper on the situation could have helped me. Clearly coaching and support in his situation would have proved beneficial.*

*I found the exercise of using the literature to help me reflect on my behaviour and thinking an interesting exercise, but I think I would struggle to get people in my organisation to adopt the approach as culturally it wouldn't fit with our command and control environment. (recruit)*

It seemed they were convinced that literature, or at least reflecting on and discussing the story, could be a source of help in navigating through their work situations:

*My initial thoughts were, this is a waste of time; however, I found myself reading the story and matching the characters in the book to people in my office. I also found myself suggesting ways*



*to deal with the individuals in Bartleby's office. I think the exercise would work as part of a coaching session, and it would give me the chance to discuss my feelings and suggested solutions to a coach.*

*I found the process gave me the ability to detach from the emotion of my own workplace and situation which in turn gave me a wider lens through which to view and approach my situation. I think it would be a good exercise for managers to undertake as part of their training and personal development. It was also a great short story. (recruit)*

A poor working environment can be perceived in a range of different ways. Bartleby's colleagues had been perfectly content in the Wall Street offices. Bartleby clearly had not been. His powerful and psychologically layered story stimulated the imagination of our respondents, some conceiving it as "sad", others interpreting it as a rich mode of challenging power, exploring roles and identities, and representing a disruptive work environment, in this case in a sales company:

*I run coaching programmes from introduction to coaching through to coaching senior executives and as part of the programme we often use a "fishbowl" exercise. The role play requires the coachee to create an issue for the coach to assist them with. I can see very real benefit in introducing literature in the way we have explored. The Bartleby story is a fictional piece I could really immerse myself into the characters and then be able to offer my clients support and guidance in a manner that felt real.*

*I would also consider adapting the programme I conduct to include different characters to the coach that I am – possibly do some role play from a story like this. A really novel and engaging approach to my work. (coach)*

It was clear that the new recruits as well as an experienced yet frustrated manager and a coach new to this organisation were receptive to this innovative coaching intervention. In terms of the manager's and the coach's reactions (as well as the new recruits'), their embracing the creativity inherent in such an exercise reminded us of Bennis's (1989, p. 84) exhortation to business leaders to draw on "a liberal arts education", one that heightens insight, critical inquiry and imagination. One of the main planks of such an education is literature, reading about what great minds have theorised about the human spirit: "One of the marvellous things about life is that any gaps in your education can be filled, whatever your age or situation, by reading and thinking about what you read." (p. 84):

*I have used this technique in reverse when writing, but never thought about using it as a platform for sales coaching in my part time role. From the point of view of a coachee, I feel it would be an effective way to identify shortcomings in managerial behaviour; for example, my current sales manager is quite volatile towards the sales team. This characteristic makes it difficult to approach him to explain how it makes me and others feel. If we used a literary scenario /story as a starting point for discussion to highlight the behaviour and may prove an effective way to also highlight how the fictional manager made the protagonist feel and offer discussion points around how the situation could be proved.*

*I also think that a writer's work is influenced by their own experience and the characters from people they have met or even observed in their own life. It therefore seems logical that we can use literature for the development of interpersonal relationships. (manager)*

One recruit was not convinced by the efficacy of literary coaching:

*I think I am a little too black and white for this type of exercise. I read the story and struggled to make the connections to my work situation.*

*Clearly the protagonist would have benefited from some intervention and I can see the potential benefit of using this approach as part of a coaching development exercise. We need to do something about the command and control structure here. (recruit).*

This interviewee may not have seen value in literary coaching, but recognised the power dynamics in place. Watts (2014) undertook research in a medium-sized food manufacturer with several sites across the UK. He concluded that command and control demoralized workers and that privileging the leaders and not the people working in the system drives business away from the original intention of doing what the customers actually want: command and control can become a prison in which targets drive the system and both employees and customers suffer from an inflexible structure. In this organisation and in so many others “experimentation with better methods for doing the work was precluded by the need to hit the daily performance figures” (p. 86). The answer of course lies in changing the thinking in the organisation.

Overall, the reactions could be summarised by the manager interviewed:

*My biggest concern with the literature method is getting my sales team to read! I have an older sales team and have often tried to introduce professional reading with limited results.*

*I tried using the short as a group read / analysis which had a better result. Overwhelmingly positive comments and observations were:*

- *it allowed team members to listen to how their colleagues handled certain situations and also that*
- *it took any emotion out of their advice*
- *it was a very enjoyable way of learning*

*Less positive comments were:*

- *it felt like a book club.*
- *the choice of story could be more closely linked to the sales environment.*

We asked our interviewees how they would coach Bartleby or the lawyer. The question recognises the emotionally charged relationships in the office and asks respondents to put themselves either in the lawyer’s or in Bartleby’s place:

*“Bartleby needed to feel as though he was part of the team.” (recruit)*

*“Both have to feel listened to in such a tense situation.” (recruit)*

We are certainly not suggesting that organisational life is populated by Bartlebys in need of extensive and intensive therapy, but we believe that Bartleby’s struggle exemplifies the struggle many of us have with office dynamics. Returning to the ever-present dynamic of pressurized selling in a sales organisation, we are convinced that taking the time to examine emotions rather than trying to manipulate, control or quash them will enhance organizational and personal learning and promote higher levels of self-awareness, interpersonal sensitivity and more effective teamwork. Since workplaces are well known as sites of stress, burn-out and toxicity, perhaps a coaching strategy that emphasises emotional exploration in a distanced way so that no one needs to feel exposed or vulnerable could be a way of alleviating that stress, burn-out and toxicity. By opening up dialogues that explore the complexity of human emotions, we are listening to each other and creating a healthier workplace.

Bradford, Rutherford and Friend (2017) have demonstrated the crucial role coaching plays in improving salesperson learning, arguing that in the contemporary sales environment people need to develop their skills through continuous learning by “interacting with others, active listening, and

solving problems in social contexts” (p.135). If the relationship between salespeople and their managers remains untapped potential for social learning, a scenario represented by our interviewed new recruits, we need to explore how to support sales people especially during the onboarding process. The authors remind us that sales coaching continues to be an “under-researched area” (p.143).

*Drawing on emotional responses in the healthiest way to open coaching conversations in the workplace. We need to create space for insights. This means recognizing that change won't happen until the new recruits find their own strategy for effecting change. We also need to provide freedom for action: This means stepping back and allowing new recruits to put their strategy into practice, regardless of the outcome. We should be encouraging them to reflect on their practice and evaluate the outcome. (coach)*

The coach appears to confirm our ideas on putting strategy into practice. This strategy of reading and discussing a literary text such as “Bartleby, the Scrivener” with its rich themes of isolation and alienation help us to make sense of our own (working) lives by reflecting on other lives. Below are further questions a thorough coaching conversation about the story could explore:

- Description: What happens in the story?
- Feelings: What did you think when Bartleby started to refuse to work?
- Evaluation: What was good and bad about his colleagues' reactions to his refusal?
- Analysis: What sense can you make of the situation?
- Conclusion: What else could the characters have done?
- Action: If a situation such as this arose in your office, what would you do?

“Bartleby” typifies the range of dysfunctional personalities a coach may encounter in the workplace, and Melville’s characters demonstrate the immense complexity of people (Eastman 2016). If coaches operate within their own competence, working with people with psychological blocks is not necessarily problematic (Maxwell, 2009). Bartleby withdraws from others by retreating into a catatonic state (which is of course extreme), but taken simply as a character who has been treated as an automaton, his experience can trigger our imagination, helping us to explore another’s interiority and supporting our reflection on the power dynamics in the workplace.

Using “Bartleby the Scrivener” as a coaching strategy can serve as an important resource in discussing its themes such as leadership, uncertainty, change, job fit and office dynamics – the emotions that will emerge from such rich discussions can act as a catalyst for change. Before Bartleby shuts down and states that he “would prefer not to” in response to any office request, here he is portrayed in his first week:

*As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sunlight and by candlelight. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically (Melville, 2001, p. 72).*

Yet the lawyer does not try to engage with him in any way. His recruitment process consists of asking him about his qualifications. Even reading this brief passage will yield a range of emotional responses to the lawyer’s narration. Such emotional responses can separate the type of recruits who are open to an environment that privileges critical thinking and open dialogue and who want to engage with people from a place of mutuality, empathy and respect from those who “would prefer not to.”

Carroll (2011) makes the point that a good writer can create a bond in their fiction between the reader and the writer’s characters so that “the features the creators select for emphasis are those that are critically apposite to the emotional states intended to be excited by the work.”(106). In other words, an author’s skill helps us to identify with characters emotionally. The emotions that

Melville reveals to us – Bartleby’s intransigent sullenness, the lawyer’s puzzled frustration, even hatred, Bartleby’s colleagues’ envy that he is allowed to be excused from work responsibilities – help us coach better, and by extension, help us to develop staff potential, thereby minimising recruitment and subsequent development failure. Using fiction, especially a story about the workplace such as “Bartleby”, encourages both coach and coachee to respond to a situation with emotional intelligence: there is undeniable value in reflecting on and being cognizant of one’s emotions. It has been found that emotion shapes cognitive processing, for example, and the brain uses emotion to direct action (Fischer & Biddell, 2005). Using literature, coaches and coachees can discuss characters’ emotions – even unpleasant emotions such as hatred, envy and rage – all present in the Wall Street office in our story – openly, allowing them to explore uncomfortable emotions by using the distance of literature. As an example, the study of literature can have a civilizing effect on us. If people are taught to analyse literature carefully in a coaching scenario, they can learn to think more critically and to argue from cause to effect as well as from effect to cause, the kind of thinking that command and control resists.

Joseph (2018) suggests, a person who cannot fulfil their workplace role either due to illness, bullying or organisational change can become derailed, manifesting “difficulties with emotional regulation, inflexibility, dissatisfaction with work, depersonalisation and physical ailments” (p. 3). Such psychological trauma can severely affect a person’s self-image. Seeing how fictional characters respond to challenges in the workplace – even to a situation as catastrophic as Bartleby’s – can help people to explore issues of identity in order to “rebuild their understanding, role and connection with the organisation, covertly and creatively resisting being overpowered by organisational dynamics” (Shoukry & Cox, 2018, p. 418).

Rock and Schwarz’s brain-based approach focusing on creating solutions rather than deepening the problems in our thinking can be strengthened by a literary engagement which hones our emotional learning. If we can begin the coaching process at the very start of the recruitment process, we can influence the formation of the working relationship between recruiter and new recruit. If the lawyer had been emotionally attuned to Bartleby right at the outset of the employment contract, perhaps all the subsequent office upheaval, costs, frustrations and ultimate tragedy could have been avoided.

We can see the lawyer as representative of the values upheld in Western democracy, those that maintain a specific regime and structure. The lawyer clearly has internalised beliefs that prevent him from seeing Bartleby and Bartleby’s colleagues as having any independent agency: they are not at his offices to think – they are there to copy and to do his bidding. Reflecting on the story of Bartleby can be seen as a vital part of coaching. Instead of focusing on the sequential steps of a goal focused coaching model such as GROW (“Goals, Realities, Options and Will”) promoted by Whitmore (2009) among others, the “aim of thinking critically as to observe values and beliefs as they arise and examining the assumptions they embrace” (Shoukry and Cox, 2018, p. 424) can be enhanced by the critical reflection needed to engage with literature.

## Conclusion

We are convinced that there is a type of specific coaching that plays a crucial role in supporting new-starts in selling (Burt, 2019; Munoz and Mallin, 2017; Smilansky, 2015; Dickie 2014), and have concluded that organisations reap benefits from the implementation of a focused, preferably innovative approach such as our literary one. The profession of sales presents specific work challenges to people, in particular recruiting staff without the appropriate support and development required to be successful in their new roles. A targeted coaching programme may be the answer to these challenges, and we have drawn on the work of Rock and Schwarz to highlight what coaches need to focus on in order to have more success with coachees. We have provided data from interviews with both new and seasoned salespeople that have confirmed our initial observations

that companies tend to focus on problems rather than on the solutions to such problems. It is important to recognise that we have used “Bartleby, the Scrivener” for coaching and not therapeutic purposes. Bartleby could be perceived to be a person with some level of dysfunction or disorder, yet we wish to emphasise how we used the story as a touchstone for a coaching conversation, not as an exploration of how blurred the boundaries can be between coaching and therapy.

The paper commenced with the image of Bartleby and his office dysfunction. The interview feedback suggested that Melville’s lawyer could have used these approaches to help Bartleby:

- Create space for insights: The lawyer tries to reason with his scrivener but of course, Bartleby’s brain isn’t wired up for reason. The lawyer should try to enter his scrivener’s world, creating a discourse between them which would allow Bartleby to come up with his own conclusions. The lawyer needs to find a common language in which they can communicate.
- Provide freedom for action: Bartleby becomes ever more anxious as he feels he is being put into a position from which he cannot escape. If he had been freed up to develop his own unique approach to offer ideas and suggestions for improving not only his practice but that of office as a whole, he might not have become closed down and unresponsive.
- Reflect on practice. Reflection on practice would most likely prove a bridge too far, because those on the autistic scale may have difficulty with such a task. But this is where Bartleby’s colleagues could be brought in to help. The more they recognise his unique abilities and feed that back to him, the more new mental maps are likely to be created which in their turn become acknowledged by all.

We recognise that to pursue such a strategy, especially taking these suggested steps, would demand time and patience, a major limitation of our approach. A busy sales manager may prefer not to engage in this literary strategy. Our point is that given someone has been recruited for their skills (as Bartleby had been) investing time in nurturing those skills and ensuring they grow and connect with the company culture is not only a wise investment, it is the only investment possible.

## References

- Attridge, D. (2004) *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge.
- Banissy, M. and Ward, J. (2007) 'Mirror – touch synesthesia is linked with empathy', *Nature Neuroscience*, 10(7). DOI: [10.1038/nn1926](https://doi.org/10.1038/nn1926).
- Bennis, W. (1998) *On Becoming a Leader*. New York: Addison- Wesley.
- Bradford, S., Rutherford, B. and Friend, S. (2017) 'The Impact of Training, Mentoring and Coaching on Personal Learning in the Sales Environment', *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 15(1), pp.133-151. Available at: <https://radar.brookes.ac.uk/radar/items/6045d90b-30bc-49be-9b01-91c5d925f6ad/1/>.
- Brock, D.A. (2016) *Sales Manager Survival Guide: Lessons from Sales Front Lines*. KCP Partners in Excellence.
- Bumpus, M. (2005) 'Using Motion Pictures to Teach Management: Refocusing the Camera Lens Through the Infusion Approach to Diversity', *Journal of Management Education*, 29(6), pp.792-815. DOI: [10.1177/1052562905277183](https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562905277183).
- Burt, S. (2019) *The Art of Listening in Coaching and Mentoring* (1st edn.). London: Routledge.
- Carroll, N. (2011) 'On Some Affective Relations between Audiences and the Characters in Popular Fictions', in Coplan, A. and Goldie, P. (eds.) *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.162-185.
- Dickie, J. (2014) 'A Case for Sales Coaching', *CRM Magazine*, 18(6). Available at: <https://www.destinationcrm.com/Articles/Columns-Departments/Reality-Check/A-Case-for-Sales-Coaching-96851.aspx>.
- Eastman, C.A. (2016) 'Coaching in Organisations: how fictional characters can develop coaching practice', *The International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, 5(4), pp.318-333. DOI: [10.1108/IJMCE-06-2016-0048](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-06-2016-0048).
- Fischer, K.W. and Bidell, T.R. (2005) 'Dynamic Development of Psychological Structures in Action and Thought', in Damon, W. and Lerner, R.M. (eds.) *Handbook of Child Psychology Vol 1*. Wiley, pp.113-199.

- Friend, S.B., Curasi, C.F., Boles, J.S. and Bellenger, D.N. (2014) 'Why are you really losing sales opportunities? A buyer's perspective on the determinants of key account sales failures', *Industrial Marketing Management*, 43, pp.1124-1135. DOI: [10.1016/j.indmarman.2014.06.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2014.06.002).
- Gartner Magic Quadrant (2016) *Ricoh Positioned as 'Leader' for Managed Print and Content Sources, Worldwide*. PR Newswire.
- Gibbs, G. (1998) *Learning by Doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic. Available at: <https://shop.brookes.ac.uk/product-catalogue/oxford-centre-for-staff-learning-development/books-publications/ebooks/learning-by-doing-a-guide-to-teaching-and-learning-methods-by-graham-gibbs-ebook>.
- Jarvis, C. (2019) 'The Educational Power of Fiction: An Interdisciplinary Exploration', in Jarvis, C. and Gouthro, P. (eds.) *Professional Education with Fiction Media, Imagination for Engagement and Empathy Learning*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jordan, J. and Vezzana, M. (2012) *Cracking the Sales Management Code: the secrets to measuring and managing sales performance*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Joseph, S. (2018) 'Executive derailment, coaching and post-traumatic growth: reflections on practice guided by theory', *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 11(2), pp.155-164. DOI: [10.1080/17521882.2018.1478438](https://doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2018.1478438).
- Maxwell, A. (2009) 'How do business coaches experience the boundary between coaching and therapy/counselling?', *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 2(2), pp.149-162. DOI: [10.1080/17521880902930311](https://doi.org/10.1080/17521880902930311).
- Maxwell, J.C. (2008) *Developing the Leader Within You 2.0*. Nashville, Tennessee.: Harper Collins Leadership.
- Melville, H. (2001) *Tales, Poems and Other Writings*. New York: The Modern Library.
- Munoz, L. and Mallin, M. (2017) 'Unethical sales behavior neutralization: the impact of salesperson role variables and moderating effects of role relationship orientation', *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, 34(1), pp.62-79. DOI: [10.1108/JBIM-10-2017-0243](https://doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-10-2017-0243).
- O'Donnell, B., Palmer, S. and Williams, H. (2012) *Solution Focused Coaching in Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Rock, D. (2006) *Quiet Leadership: 6 steps to transforming performance at work*. New York: Collins.
- Rock, D. and Schwartz, J.M. (2006) 'A Brain-Based Approach to Coaching', *International Journal of Coaching in Organisations*, 42(2), pp.32-43.
- Rucker, D. and Galinsky, A. (2008) 'Desire to Acquire: Powerlessness & Compensatory Consumption', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 35(2). DOI: [10.1086/588569](https://doi.org/10.1086/588569).
- Shoukry, H. and Cox, E. (2018) 'Coaching as Social Process', *Management Learning*, 49(4), pp.413-428. DOI: [10.1177/1350507618762600](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507618762600).
- Silberman, S. (2015) *Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and How To Think Smarter about People who Think Differently*. London: Allen Unwin.
- Smart, B. and Alexander, G. (2008) *Topgrading for Sales: World-Class Methods to Interview, Hire, and Coach Top Sales Representatives*. New York: Penguin.
- Smilansky, O. (2015) 'Embrace formal sales coaching: for sales leaders, guidelines are not always the preferred method but they can have a big impact on the bottom line', *CRM Magazine*, 12(11).
- Sunder, S., Kumar, V., Goreczny, A. and Maurer, T. (2017) 'Why Do Salespeople Quit? An Empirical Examination of Own and Peer Effects on Salesperson Turnover Behaviour', *Harvard Business Review*, pp.22-24.
- Watts, J. (2014) 'The Perils of Command and Control', *Systems Practice Action Research*, 27, pp.75-89. DOI: [10.1007/s11213-012-9246-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11213-012-9246-8).
- Whitmore, J. (2009) *Coaching for Performance: GROWing human potential and purpose – the principles and practice of coaching and leadership* (4th edn.). Boston: Nicholas Brearley.

## About the authors

**Dr Christine Eastman** is programme leader for the MSc Professional Practice in Leading Sales Transformation at Middlesex University. She has published *Coaching for Professional Development: using literature to support success* (Routledge, 2019) and *Improving Workplace Learning by Teaching Literature* (Springer, 2016). She is currently working on a new book exploring how engaging with 19<sup>th</sup> century characters can help us to make better sense of our work situations. *The Seven Deadly Sins: the Uncanny Similarities between Twenty-first Century Office Life and*

*Nineteenth Century American Literature* will draw on both fictional and real voices in constructing a model for leadership and professional development.

**Dr Peter Critten** has 50 years' experience of facilitating learning and development at individual, group and organisational level in both the private and public sectors as well as in academia. For 20 years he taught in the Business School of Middlesex University where action research was a key part of the modules he ran on Human Resource Development. He has published three books and numerous articles and conference papers on work based learning, continuing professional development and the application of complexity theory to organization development. Now retired, he is writing about how learning in the workplace can be connected in such a way as to impact the organization as a whole.

**Carl Day** is currently Sales and Marketing Director for the Apogee Corporation, a £300M subsidiary of HP Inc. He has a Masters degree in leading sales transformation from Middlesex University and has experience in leading both B to B and B to C sales divisions., His previous roles include board positions at Toshiba TEC, Director of Client Development Europe & Asia for ACA Group a US based consultancy firm offering governance, risk and compliance. Other roles include marketing, IT development and senior sales management roles at Ricoh UK, IOS and SMG where he has built up extensive experience in the profession of sales.