

Coaching during a crisis: Organizational coaches' praxis adaptation during the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The chaotic initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic severely challenged organizations. Economies shut down and millions of people were confined to their homes. Human resource practitioners turned to organizational coaching, a trusted human resource development intervention for help, however, to remain relevant during the crisis coaches had to adapt their praxis. The working alliance describes the mutual bond, goal, and task alignment between coach and client and is an indication of coaching efficacy. This study investigates to what extent organizational coaches' praxis adaptation at the start of the pandemic maintained a working alliance that still served the human resource development (HRD) paradigms of learning, performance, and meaningful work. Interviews with 26 organizational coaches from USA, UK, Australia, and South Africa recorded during the first general lockdown (April 2020) were inductively analyzed using thematic analysis and deductively interpreted through the working alliance theory and desired HRD outcome paradigms. Findings reveal seven organizational coaching praxis adaptations judged to support all three working alliance components, with "task" and "goal" more prominent than "bond," suggesting a pragmatist preference reminiscent of crisis management. Praxis adaptation

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also seems to promote all three HRD paradigms of learning, performance, and meaningful work on individual and/or organizational levels. This study strengthens the already well-established link between HRD and coaching by positing that coaching is a dynamic, pragmatic, self-adaptive intervention that supports HRD during a crisis. Understanding coaches' praxis adaptation during the volatile initial stages of a crisis is important for HRD theory and practice given HRDs increasing reliance on coaching.

KEYWORDS

coaching, coaching praxis, Covid-19, executive coaching, human resource development, human resource management, organizational coaching, pandemic, working alliance

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic first gained prominence at the start of 2020 and quickly plunged the world into a crisis not seen for generations. Organizations struggled to remain operational as economies halted and the movement of people and goods was severely restricted. The impact on employees was immense. People suddenly had to work from home, some risked being infected with the virus because of their work and many were retrenchments (Butterick & Charlwood, 2021; Kramer & Kramer, 2020).

To navigate these challenges, organizations turned to the human resource (HR) practitioners and specifically the human resource development (HRD) function to support employees. Dealing with crisis situations is not new in HR; however, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation. During previous crises, HR strategies included adjustments in staff head-count (Chu & Siu, 2001); changes to remuneration schemes and incentives (Gunnigle et al., 2019); managing communication to staff (Lockwood, 2005); promoting employee wellness (Vardarlier, 2016); and promoting organizational agility (Nijssen & Paauwe, 2012). The magnitude of the Covid-19 pandemic however presented additional challenges. Employees grappled with remote working logistics (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Terblanche, 2021b); the removal of work and family boundaries (Giurge & Bohns, 2020); reskilling for remote working (Sheppard, 2020); mental health challenges (Singer-Velush et al., 2020); personal fear and uncertainty (Terblanche, 2021b) and unfair, unethical treatment of commoditized labor (Butterick & Charlwood, 2021).

One often-used HRD intervention is organizational coaching. Coaching in the organizational context in this research is defined by Bachkirova, Cox and Clutterbuck (2014, p. 1) as “a human development process that involves structured, focused interaction and the use of appropriate strategies, tools, and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the coachee and potentially for other stakeholders.” In the present study “organizational coaching” is used as an umbrella term that includes all forms of one-on-one coaching performed by professionally trained internal or external coaches in an organizational setting including executive, leadership, and managerial coaching. This type of coaching is an effective, individually tailored learning and support intervention (Bozer & Delegach, 2019; Ellinger & Kim, 2014; Jones et al., 2018). Recent meta-studies show coaching to be successful in developing individuals' personal, psychological, interpersonal, and career prospects through increased self-awareness and behavioral change (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Blackman et al., 2016; Theeboom et al., 2013). In fact, Theeboom et al. (2013, p.1) conclude that “coaching is, overall an effective intervention in organizations.”

From a theoretical perspective, coaching borrows from numerous fields, including management, education, social sciences, philosophy, psychology and adult learning (Cox et al., 2014). This eclectic foundation leads to numerous forms of coaching praxis (see Cox et al., 2014). There are many different forms, understandings, and applications of the term praxis. Classical definition of praxis hold that it is the relationships between theory and practice or a process of enacting or practicing a theory (Penney & Warelou, 1999). Praxis is also described as a recurring passage through a cyclical process of experiential learning (Kolb, 2014) and the action and reflection of people upon their practice world in order to transform it (Freire, 2018). Practically, this means that praxis may be described as a form of critical thinking that comprises the combination of reflection and action in a cyclical process consisting of taking an action, reflecting on the impacts of the action, revising future action plans, and implementing these plans in further actions (Lumby, 1991). Although the term praxis can become clouded by philosophical positions on the importance of theory, practically this paper concurs with Penney and Warelou (1999, p. 259) that in coaching “praxis can (and should) become a practical process that can be applied to one’s own practice with the intent of changing, reshaping and discovering new meanings or drawing out the meanings which were always there.” The eclectic origins of coaching naturally leads coaches to consciously and sub-consciously adapting their praxis based on what the situation and client requires. Terblanche et al. (2021), for example, found that coaches use simplistic coaching practices (goal-focused) for less complex coaching topics (career progression), but employed advanced coaching practices (cognitive behavioral) for more complex topics (diversity issues). A recent coaching praxis survey also found that most coaches adapt their praxis based on the situational requirements (Sherpa Coaching, 2020).

Coaching is a powerful, trusted HRD intervention and coaches can adapt their praxis to changing situations, however, is this also true in the case of a disaster the magnitude of Covid-19? Were coaches able to successfully adapt when the pandemic started and importantly, was their adaptation aligned with HRD needs? Merely adapting to a situation may not necessarily lead to desired outcomes for all parties involved. To answer these questions, we need to understand how to judge coaching praxis adaptation as well as how to interpret the relevance of these adaptations to HRD.

The working alliance is a useful lens through which to interpret coaching efficacy. An important predictor of coaching success is the strength of the coaching relationship and more generally the working alliance between coach and client (de Haan et al., 2020; Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015; Graßmann et al., 2020). The notion of a working alliance stems from psychotherapy and is defined as the level of agreement between client and therapist on the goals of the intervention, the tasks that the client needs to perform, and the bond between the two parties (Bordin, 1979). Investigating the way coaches modified their working alliance could therefore provide insights into their ability to successfully adapt their coaching praxis during the pandemic.

Praxis adaptation in itself does not necessarily lead to desired coaching outcomes. We should, therefore, also ask whether coaches’ praxis adaptation allowed the coaching to still achieve its aims. Bates (2002) and Bates and Chen (2004) provide a framework against which to interpret the relevance of HRD interventions. They propose three desired outcome paradigms for HRD practice: learning, performance, and meaningful work for individuals and their organizations. To understand the relevance of coaches’ praxis adaptation, we can, therefore, apply this framework to investigate to what extent coaches’ praxis adaptation was relevant to HRD.

Given the importance of organizational coaching as an HRD intervention, the turmoil created by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the context sensitive and adaptive nature of coaching, the question this research, therefore, asks is: *To what extent did organizational coaches adapt their praxis during the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic in a manner that supported a working alliance, aligned to desired HRD objectives?*

Answers to this question may inform HRD and coaching theory and practice regarding the relevance of organizational coaching during the initial stages of a crisis to continue to support the HRD objectives of learning, performance, and meaningful work on individual and organizational levels.

To situate the present study in existing research, we next provide a brief overview of the established, trusted relationship between HRD and organizational coaching, the main imperatives of HRD, the working alliance as an

indicator of successful coaching, and recent research showing the impact of the pandemic on employees and how coaching responded.

2 | COACHING AS AN HRD INTERVENTION

The evidence for coaching as a useful and effective organizational intervention is substantial as shown by several meta-studies. Theeboom et al. (2013) found that coaching significantly enhances performance and skills, well-being, coping, work attitudes, and goal-directed self-regulation. Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018) found positive outcomes of coaching in terms of work and career, personal development, behavioral change, and relationships of the coachee. Blackman et al.'s (2016) meta-study on coaching benefits found evidence of improvement in a number of areas including work-life balance; psychological and social competencies; career development; self-awareness and assertiveness; confidence; goal attainment; and role clarity.

Although there is on-going debate about the differences and similarities between coaching and HRD (see for example Hamlin et al., 2008; Maltbia et al., 2014), coaching is frequently used in HRD for the growth and development of individuals (Bozer & Delegach, 2019; Ellinger & Kim, 2014) and is considered one of the prominent activities used in HRD for learning and development (Cox et al., 2014). A closer look at the intersection between coaching and HRD may help us understand which aspects of coaching praxis (the focus of the present study) could contribute to positive coaching outcomes. Hamlin and Stewart (2011) derived four core purposes of HRD in their meta-study: (i) improving individual or group effectiveness and performance; improving organizational effectiveness and performance; developing knowledge, skills, and competencies; and enhancing human potential and personal growth. These four core purposes are compatible with the three major paradigms within HRD practice defined by Bates and Chen (Bates, 2002; Bates & Chen, 2004): learning, performance, and meaning of work. Cox et al. (2014) provide a detailed discussion on how the numerous types of coaching enable these three paradigms.

For the purpose of the present study, Bates and Chen's three HRD paradigms provide a theoretical lens through which to interpret coaching praxis adaptation both in terms of individual and organizational relevance. The first paradigm, learning, encapsulates the provision of individual learning, which may also lead to systems of learning within the wider organization (Bates & Chen, 2004). The second paradigm, performance, addresses the improvement of individual performance aiming to connect unique individual expertise to organizational strategic goals (Bates & Chen, 2004). On the organizational level, performance implies taking advantage of opportunities to enhance organizational goals. The third paradigm, meaning of work, aims on the individual level to promote humane, holistic development in the work context, while on an organizational level, the emphasis is on HRD as an agent of health and humanness beyond the boundaries of the organization (Bates & Chen, 2004).

Coaching is an enabler of HRD, a fact acknowledged by scholars in both HRD and coaching (Ellinger & Kim, 2014; Maltbia et al., 2014; Terblanche, 2021a). As an important and relied-on HRD intervention with the potential to assist employees during a crisis, it is important for HR practitioners to understand how coaches adapt their praxis in the face of a crisis. Specially, HR practitioners need to know to what extent coaches' praxis adaptation still produces results that are relevant to the core aim and purpose of HRD.

3 | WORKING ALLIANCE AS AN INDICATOR OF COACHING EFFICACY

The concept of a therapeutic alliance stems from psychoanalytic theory, with the earliest ideas being captured in Freud's writings (Horvath et al., 2011). In the psychoanalytic literature, two foundations of the therapeutic alliance can be found (Bordin, 1979). One originated from views regarding the alliance between the analyst and the rational ego of the client (Sterba, 1934) and the importance of a therapeutic contract (Menninger, 1958). The second drew, among other authors, on Greenson (1967) and Zetzel (1956), noting the importance of the relationship in psycho

analytic work. Bordin (1979) was responsible for naming the construct “the working alliance.” He argued that the working alliance is key in creating a collaborative environment in therapy and that its development was influenced by three processes: agreements on therapeutic goals; consensus on the tasks in therapy; and the bond between client and therapist. He also proposed that the role of the working alliance is not limited to psychotherapy and could be generalized to any relationship between a person seeking change and a change agent. O’Broin and Palmer (2006) agreed with Bordin (1979) and proposed that the working alliance construct is easily transferable into a coaching context and that it is most likely vital to promote successful coaching outcomes.

The working alliance theory is frequently used as predictor of coaching success. Working alliance measures three aspects of the coach-client interaction: the goals they want to achieve through the intervention, the tasks that need doing to achieve the goals and the bond (respect, trust and liking) between them (Bordin, 1979; Graßmann et al., 2020). Working alliance is a robust predictor of coaching success (Baron & Morin, 2009; O’Broin & Palmer, 2006) with a number of meta-studies indicating supporting this claim (see, for example, de Haan et al., 2016; de Haan et al., 2020; Graßmann et al., 2020). The study by de Haan et al. (2016) compared coach and coachee rating to determine whether the working alliance strength predicts coaching effectiveness. For both coach and coachee, a positive correlation was found between working alliance and coaching effectiveness. In another study by de Haan et al. (2020), two recent large-scale randomized controlled trials reviewed the coaching relationship as a predictor of coaching outcomes. They found that the working alliance strength correlated with coaching effectiveness at the beginning of the coaching contract. The meta-study by Graßmann et al. (2020) also found a positive correlation between the strength of the overall working alliance and successfully achieving coaching outcomes. They also found that the working alliance predicts coaching success regardless of the type of clients, coaches’ expertise, number of coaching sessions, and clients’ or coaches’ perspectives.

The working alliance is evaluated using different measures, the most frequently used being the Working Alliance Inventory (WAI), developed for psychotherapy research by Horvath and Greenberg (1989). The WAI measure is derived from Bordin’s (1979) original working alliance conceptualization and adapted to coaching (Baron et al., 2011; de Haan et al., 2016). The WAI as described above is quantitative measurement tool; however, in the present study, we apply this framework qualitatively to gain insight into the effect of coaches’ praxis adaptation on their coaching efficacy.

4 | HR AND COACHES' RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC

The Covid pandemic presented significant challenges to HR practitioners and coaches with potentially lasting implications. HR had to help employees adapt to drastically different remote working conditions. This required the creation and implementation of new workplace policies and procedures. These policies had to take into account new types of work-family conflicts and the role of different family structures (e.g., childless versus single parent) in the remote working setup (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Gigauri (2020) found that HR took a leadership role in managing the Covid-19 crisis by enabling people to cope with stress and working remotely. However, he also notes that HR had to deal with the unpleasant aspects of retrenchments. Butterick and Charlwood (2021, p. 847) add a warning that certain HR theories and practices during the pandemic actually made a “bad situation worse” by legitimizing labor market inequalities leading to commodified workers suffering disproportionately more. Going forward, HR and specifically HRD need to focus more on managing uncertainty, facilitating work and collaboration, redefining organizational performance, and promoting fair and ethical treatment of all workers (Butterick & Charlwood, 2021; Caligiuri et al., 2020).

Several coaching studies undertaken during the pandemic point to the positive contribution of coaching to employees and their organizations. Jarosz (2021) found that coaching may have been efficient in enhancing the well-being and performance of managers and their teams. van Nieuwerburgh et al. (2021) found that positive psychology coaching helped employees with safe reflection, increased awareness, alleviation of negative emotions, identifying a

way forward, and renewed confidence. Terblanche (2021b) found that coaching during the pandemic promoted crisis management skills and helped managers to better manage themselves, their bosses, and their staff. Coaching provided a space for reflection, support, and also challenged managers to take a holistic view and find future opportunities.

From the introduction and overview of the relevant literature, we conclude that organizational coaching is a valuable, frequently used, efficacious, and trusted HRD intervention. Coaching is context sensitive and coaches often change their praxis to match the situation. HRD faced several challenges during the pandemic and coaching appears to be able to assist employees and organizations during this crisis. What remains unanswered and, therefore, the research question addressed in the present study is to what extent coaches' praxis adaptation during the initial stages of the pandemic maintained a working alliance (indicator of coaching efficacy), able to support the HRD agenda.

5 | METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study consisted of one inductive and two deductive phases. This design was chosen to find specific answers to the research question (deductive) based on an initially rich, in-depth interpretation of the data (inductive). To gather first-hand in-depth insights from coaches, an inductive, emergent, interpretivist design was followed in phase one as is typical when investigating a novel social phenomenon such as the initial phases of the Covid-19 pandemic (Creswell, 2014; Elliott et al., 1999). This approach allowed for the description of the coaches' worlds and their praxis adaptation from an insider perspective (Babbie & Mouton, 2016), giving the researcher access to the inner worlds of the coaches (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Deductive analysis in qualitative research uses an organizing framework to guide the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To contextualize the findings from phase one, it was necessary to introduce two subsequent deductive analysis phases where the emergent insights of coaches' praxis adaptation could be interpreted through theoretical lenses relevant to the research question. The working alliance theory and desired HRD paradigms were used, respectively, as organizing frameworks in phases two and three.

5.1 | Research setting

Data were gathered during the first wave and initial stage of the Covid-19 pandemic (31 March 2020 to 19 April 2020) from organizational coaches in the USA, UK, Australia, and South Africa. "Initial stage" refers to the 30-day period immediately after the first nationwide lockdowns, which was declared at various times during the week of 23 to 27 March 2020 in these countries (Businessinsider, 2020). These four countries were selected as they represent prominent Englishspeaking coaching markets.

5.2 | Sampling

Table 1 details the 26 organizational coaches from the four countries who participated in this study. Participants were sourced from the researcher's professional network and the International Coaching Federation in the USA. To be included in the study coaches had to: have a professional coaching qualification; have more than five years and 500 hours of coaching organizational leaders; belong to a professional coaching body; and have conducted any number of coaching sessions with organizational leaders since the first Covid-19 lockdown. There were eight coaches from South Africa, seven from the USA, six from the UK and five from Australis. Eleven coaches identified as male and 15 as female. Coaches were highly experienced with an average of 14 years of practice. At the time of the interviews, coaches had conducted an average of 24 coaching session since the start of the pandemic.

TABLE 1 Participant demographics

Alias	Country	Date interviewed	Gender	Coaching years	Coaching hours	Pandemic hours	Coaching qualification	Coaching body
SA1	South Africa	31-Mar-20	M	17	2000	4	Master's degree	COMENSA
SA2	South Africa	31-Mar-20	F	22	10,000+	6	Doctorate	COMENSA
SA3	South Africa	1-Apr-20	M	12	1350	5	Master's degree	COMENSA
SA4	South Africa	6-Apr-20	F	17	4000	12	Doctorate	COMENSA
SA5	South Africa	6-Apr-20	M	15	18,000	50	Master Coach (COMENSA)	COMENSA
SA6	South Africa	7-Apr-20	F	5	1000	20	PCC (ICF)	ICF
SA7	South Africa	8-Apr-20	F	15	1000	25	Master's degree	EMCC
SA8	South Africa	9-Apr-20	F	18	20,000	10	Master's degree	COMENSA
USA1	USA	1-Apr-20	M	15	10,000	9	Doctorate	ICF
USA2	USA	14-Apr-20	F	17	10,000	80	PCC (ICF)	ICF
USA3	USA	15-Apr-20	F	11	3000	12	PCC (ICF)	ICF, AC
USA4	USA	16-Apr-20	F	9	600	12	PCC (ICF)	ICF
USA5	USA	16-Apr-20	F	25	20,000+	150	MCC (ICF)	ICF
USA6	USA	16-Apr-20	M	7	360	40	ACC(ICF)	ICF
USA7	USA	17-Apr-20	F	21	2500+	4	MCC(ICF)	ICF
UK1	UK	2-Apr-20	M	12	1800	14	Master's degree	EMCC
UK2	UK	9-Apr-20	F	10	1000+	10	Master's degree	EMCC
UK3	UK	9-Apr-20	F	12	2300	13	Master's degree	Association for coaching
UK4	UK	9-Apr-20	F	15	3000+	22	Master's degree	ICF
UK5	UK	14-Apr-20	M	24	5000+	56	Advanced Diploma in Coaching	Association for coaching
UK6	UK	14-Apr-20	M	17	3000	12	Master's degree in coaching	Association for coaching
Aus1	Australia	2-Apr-20	M	12	3000+	8	Master's degree in coaching	ICF
Aus2	Australia	3-Apr-20	M	7	1000+	6	Master's degree in coaching	ICF
Aus3	Australia	14-Apr-20	F	11	10,000+	15	Master's degree in coaching	ICF, Association of Coaching
Aus4	Australia	16-Apr-20	M	8	1000	25	Master's degree in coaching	ICF
Aus5	Australia	17-Apr-20	F	9	1200	10	PCC (ICF)	ICF

5.3 | Data collection

For phase one, open-ended interviews were conducted with participants via the Zoom digital platform. At the time of collecting this data, the use of Zoom to conduct research interviews was a relatively new approach. The obvious advantage of using Zoom was the ability to include participants who were physically far removed from the researcher (Oliffe et al., 2021). Zoom allowed the researcher to gain insights into the participants physical setting (home offices) and allowed participants to feel more at ease in their natural setting. Zoom also allowed for easy

recording of the interviews (Olliffe et al., 2021). The main challenges were technical in nature with some interviews that had to be rescheduled due to poor Internet connectivity (Gray et al., 2020). In general, the participants were comfortable using Zoom, probably as a result of being forced to do coaching via Zoom.

A basic interview guide was used to guide the interviews around what coaches noticed changed in their coaching praxis during the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. High level questions (in the context of the start of the pandemic) were followed by prompts for more in-depth understanding and included: What did you notice about the way you coach because of the pandemic? How did what your clients needed from you change the way you coach? How did the pandemic affect your relationship with your clients? What challenges did you face as a coach? How did you overcome these challenges?

Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviews were manually transcribed by the researcher and sent to two participants per country for member checking to help improve research quality (Creswell, 2014). No significant differences were found during the member checking.

5.4 | Data analysis

Data were analyzed in three stages. In the first phase, thematic analysis (TA) was used to inductively analyze the interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA was chosen as phenomenological method of analysis because it offers simplicity and flexibility to systematically identify, organize, and derive insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe, 2012). In the second, deductive phase, the TA themes were classified using the working alliance as theoretical lens. The aim of this step was to determine to what extent coaches' praxis adaptation influenced the success of the intervention. In the third phase, deductive analysis was used to map the themes to HRD outcome paradigms to examine the relevance of the praxis adaptation.

5.4.1 | Phase one–Inductive thematic analysis

Phase one data were analyzed using the five-step inductive TA process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interviews were transcribed and read several times by the researcher, and notes were made on possible trends in the data (step 1). Next, initial codes were generated by highlighting sections in the text and assigning succinct labels to each that captured their essence (step 2). The initial list of codes was reviewed and where appropriate, codes with similar meanings were merged (step 3). This reduced set of higher-order codes were grouped into seven initial themes (step 4) and refined through rephrasing into the final seven themes that captures the data as shown in Table 2 (step 5).

Data saturation, defined in this research as the phenomenon where new data did not lead to new codes being identified, was used to determine the sample size and guide the data collection and analysis process for phase one. After 24 interviews had been analyzed as described, two more interviews were conducted from different countries (Aus5 and USA7). Transcribing and analyzing these interviews added no new codes and, therefore, satisfied the data saturation criteria for this study.

5.4.2 | Phase two–Deductive analysis and inter-rater reliability

In the second phase, the working alliance theory (as indicator of coaching success) was used as a theoretical lens to perform deductive classification of the seven TA themes. The themes were classified into one or more of the three working alliance categories of goal, task, or bond using the WAI survey (Horvath, 2021) as qualitative guide. The WAI survey consists of 36 questions that measures the three working alliance categories. Each theme was assessed

TABLE 2 Coaches' praxis adaptation conceptual themes and working alliance categorization

Theme	Working alliance categories	Example verbatim quote from data
Staying current (T1)	Task	It was changing so fast, every day and I had to just keep up, I had to know what they [clients] are going through [USA3]
Using different models and frameworks (T2)	Task	Going back to some of my books and other resources to find the right approach for this, like systems thinking and existential approach [UK2]
Being flexible (T3)	Goal task	I could not just keep doing what I did before [Covid-19]. They needed a different approach. [AUS4]
Forming personal bonds (T4)	Bond	They'll just pick up the laptop or the iPad, and they'll show me the garden. It's actually good. Yeah. And in fact, there aren't many barriers. [SA5]
Embracing virtual coaching (T5)	Not applicable	I've coached online for years, but some other coaches I know are battling. [UK1]
Offering pro-bono coaching (T6)	Not applicable	Part of me wants to just be doing free coaching now. It's that wounded healer, but I may be shooting myself in the foot. [SA6]
Resisting being a therapist (T7)	Bond-potentially negative	It's been more of a blended coaching/counseling type sessions than pure coaching. [AUS4]

as a possible answer to the set of questions relating to each of the three WA categories and a judgment call made as to the most appropriate match.

This step was performed by the researcher in collaboration with an expert in coaching research familiar with the working alliance theory and HRD, who acted as co-analyst. To illustrate this process, the theme "Forming personal bonds" was judged to most closely aligned with the questions in the WAI survey that measure "bond" ("I am comfortable with my coach"; "My coach and I understand each other"; "I believe my coach likes me" etc.). In addition, pertinent verbatim quotes that illustrate each theme were selected from the transcripts to provide context to the decision (see Table 2). The researcher and co-analyst compared WAI categorization results and differences were resolved through a discussion using the WAI questions and verbatim quotes until consensus was reached.

The final analysis phase followed a similar process to phase two. The researcher and a co-researcher independently mapped the seven TA themes against Bates and Chen's (2004) three HRD paradigms of learning, performance, and meaningful work for both the individual and organization (Table 3). The theme "Forming personal bonds," for example, was judged to more pertinently influence individual (and not so much organizational) learning, performance, and meaningful work. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion between the researcher and co-researcher using the interview data as source.

5.4.3 | Research quality assurance

In qualitative social research, the researcher faces challenges around objectivity which, in turn, may influence the validity and reliability of the research (Babbie & Mouton, 2016). Aspects relating to the objectivity, validity, and reliability of the research are (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): (1) Transferability-to what extent can the findings be applied to other contexts and participants? (2) Dependability-to what extent will the findings of the research be similar for similar participants and a similar setting? (3) Credibility-how accurately are the participants' views captured and

TABLE 3 Predominant influence of coach praxis adaptation on HRD paradigms for individuals (I) and organizations (O) (Bates & Chen, 2004)

Themes from findings	HRD paradigms			Example verbatim quote from data
	Learning ^a	Performance ^b	Meaningful work ^c	
Staying current (T1)	I & O	I & O	I & O	I thought I could help them, help them more, to improve their situation if I knew what was going on. [SA7]
Using different models and frameworks (T2)	I & O	I & O	I & O	She [client] needed to see what she was doing now is important [for her staff]. I had to find a way to help her see that. [AUS1]
Being flexible (T3)	I & O	I & O	I & O	Sometime I had to coach after hours. They were more open to coaching [when] the time suited them. It really helped us all. [SA7]
Forming personal bonds (T4)	I	I	I	We actually got a lot closer than before [the pandemic] and I think it really helped the coaching. [UK3]
Embracing virtual coaching (T5)	I & O	I & O	I & O	Had we not done Zoom, the coaching over Zoom they would miss out [on coaching and learning]. [USA2]
Offering pro-bono coaching (T6)	O	O	O	Maybe some companies benefitted from my free coaching, who knows... [SA2]
Resisting being a therapist (T7)	I	I	I	We had to address this elephant in the room, the anxiety, the stress as it was affecting him showing up at work. But how? [USA5]

Abbreviations: I, Individual; O, Organizational.

^aLearning (*I*ndividual: Personal learning; (*O*)rganizational: creating organizational wide learning systems.

^bPerformance (*I*ndividual: connect the unique value of individual employee expertise with strategic goals of the organization. (*O*)rganizational: how to solve problems or take advantage of opportunities for enhancing the performance of organizational systems.

^cMeaningful work (*I*ndividual: humane, holistic development of individuals in work contexts. (*O*)rganizational: HRD, has a pre-eminent responsibility that goes beyond organizational boundaries.

conveyed? (4) Confirmability-to what extent are the findings a result of the research as opposed to the researcher's opinion, and can this be confirmed by other studies and literature?

Transferability and dependability were addressed by following a multi-stage (inductive and deductive), well-documented data analysis process (thematic analysis). The use of existing theoretical lenses (working alliance and HRD outcome paradigms) during the deductive phases assisted in objectifying the analysis from the first phase. Credibility was addressed through member checks by asking participants to review the transcribed interviews. Confirmability was addressed by using a research collaborator and following a consensus approach to decide on the final themes.

5.4.4 | ETHICS

The ethics committee of the researcher's academic institution approved this research (approval number USB-2020-14,889). All participants signed an informed consent form.

6 | FINDINGS

The TA analysis of the 26 interviews generated seven conceptual themes that capture the extent of coaches' praxis adaptation: Staying current; Using different models and frameworks; Being flexible; Forming personal bonds; Embracing virtual coaching; Offering pro-bono coaching; and Resisting being a therapist. The themes, examples of verbatim quotes that illustrate each theme and their working alliance categorizations (see Discussion section) are shown in Table 2 and elaborated on next.

6.1 | Staying current (T1)

The first theme describes how coaches realized they had to stay up to date with developments in the news relating to the pandemic to understand their clients' worlds and to offer relevant support. Coaches had to keep themselves informed:

They [my clients] work in healthcare in New York City and it was chaos. Watching the news helped me to get an idea of their struggles and I could talk to them about it. [USA4]

Coaches also had to make sense of the often conflicting information provided by the media. USA2 stated how there was "just so much going on it was hard to know who to believe." Not only was there a deluge of information, but coaches were also not sure about the veracity of the information. UK2 had to "check facts with people I trust" while SA7 "had to rely on my own common sense to separate fact from fiction." It seems that coaches had to not only stay abreast with the fast-changing news events, but also selectively filter the information and remain as neutral as possible to help their clients make sense of the situation.

6.2 | Using different models and frameworks (T2)

Given the unusual nature and scale of the pandemic and the unprecedented situation organizations and employees found themselves in, coaches could not rely solely on their usual coaching approaches. Some coaches adapted their method:

I've always liked complex situations and systems thinking and now it was really helpful to use them. They were able to lift some of the fog. [SA1]

Coaches also adapted their praxis to obtain faster results due to the pressing nature of the situation. UK6 found that companies and clients wanted to see quicker results due to constrained resources and they had to "be more pragmatic, to find solutions to the things burning them now."

More than before, coaches needed to anticipate what the world of tomorrow requires of leaders and coach them for this, now.

I have some knowledge on futurist thinking and this came in very handy. It's okay to solve the problem for the now, but what about the future. I had to take that approach with some of them [clients]. [SA7]

The pandemic caused leaders to stop and reflect more. Coaches had to accommodate this need for reflection and sense making:

They [leaders] are getting to know themselves a little better, they've slowed down a little bit. They have become a lot more discerning in how they want coaching delivered. [AUS2]

Coaches also had to challenge their clients more than usual to help them see perspectives and possibilities beyond the crisis. AUS4 went beyond “what is comfortable to me” and even risked being “rejected by my clients” in the way he challenged his clients.

While it is not unusual for coaches to adapt their coaching approach based on the presenting situation, it appears that coaches had to include critical, holistic, and complexity-based approaches in their praxis to support their clients during the initial stages of the pandemic.

6.3 | Being flexible (T3)

Coaches had to be flexible and adapt to their clients' immediate needs. This translated into two types of praxis changes: logistics, and session focus and content.

Logistically, some clients asked for session to be postponed or shortened. Most clients were in senior roles in their organizations and although they still needed and valued the coaching, they simply did not have as much time, prompting AUS4, for example, to change the logistics of sessions to be “shorter, more targeted.”

Shorter and fewer coaching sessions were not only because of client requests. Some coaches felt they had to scale down due to the pressure they themselves were experiencing:

[I had to] schedule fewer session with more gaps between them because some of my clients take a lot out of me at the moment. [USA2]

Session focus and content also changed. Coaching contracts and goals that were set before the abrupt changes caused by the pandemic needed to be renegotiated and adjusted:

So I think that's, I think it's reasonable to stick to the sort of goal orientation, but to modify the goals specifically to suit what's needed now. [UK6]

The initial stages of the pandemic seemingly forced coaches to be even more flexible than before to meet their clients in their new strange and unfamiliar spaces.

6.4 | Forming personal bonds (T4)

Coaches shared how this pandemic created a much more personal and intimate bond between them and their clients. SA3 attributed this to the “extreme nature” of the situation causing her to feel “closer” to her clients. USA3 experienced this close bond even with her “more formal” clients to the point where one of her clients shared personal information with her:

It's deepening the relationships especially with those [clients] who were more formal, they are now more personal. Someone I had a call with last week shared with me his wife may have breast cancer. That never would have come up from that guy. [USA3]

Key to this closer bond is that coaching session started off on a more personal note than usual. USA1 relayed how it was “more heart than head” when starting a coaching session. This more personal initial contact led to other personal sharing, caused by the fact that people were working from home:

So two of my clients, the children have come into the space while we were coaching. His a little boy came in and stood next to him while he was talking and I just say to him, hello, who are you? [SA4]

It seems that the pandemic forced coach and client to embrace their human side even more than usual in a typical coaching scenario by sharing personal vulnerabilities, fears, and hopes leading to deeper more personal bonds.

6.5 | Embracing virtual coaching (T5)

The lockdown that accompanied the initial stages of the pandemic left coaches and client with no choice but to conduct coaching sessions virtually. This change in interaction modality affected coaches differently as observed by AUS2:

I've seen it on a number of webinars that I've attended over the last week. Some coaches are fine with virtual, but some are fumbling around with Zoom and don't know how to use it. Not aware of what's in your background, noise, not muting. [AUS2]

Some coaches were proficient using virtual means as they have been coaching this way “for a long time” [UK6], but others struggled to feel authentic:

I ask myself how can I be more genuinely myself as a coach, but I'm working through a medium that doesn't feel comfortable. [UK4]

USA6 found a compromise by using only audio and not video:

If I'm just on the phone with somebody, and there's no visuals in some ways that feels nearer to face to face and I think there's a less distraction. [USA6]

Switch to a virtual modality was not comfortable and preferable for all coaches.

6.6 | Offering pro-bono coaching (T6)

Coaches by their very nature are people who help others. In times of crisis when people need help more than usual, some coaches felt they should “go the extra mile” [Aus2] by offering some of their services for free. However, not all coaches agreed:

So I was part of this group discussion where someone said we should do pro-bono coaching and others said no way these companies can afford it! [USA4]

UK6 supported the idea of free coaching because “being able to do something voluntary, is really powerful.” Other coaches, however, disagreed:

When you give your services away for free, even if there is some reason that seems incredibly important, it devalues what you do. And I think over time that would chip away at somebody's self esteem, self worth. [USA2]

USA1 found a compromise by providing some resources for free though including links and other references in his email signature. The reality for many coaches was that while they wanted to help, they also had to survive financially, especially in the uncertainty of the pandemic.

6.7 | Resisting being a therapist (T7)

The Covid-19 pandemic caused emotional and psychological stress for many people. It is often stated in research and practice that coaching is not mentoring, counseling, or therapy; however, it seems that the pandemic blurred these lines even more than before. USA1 saw an increase in mental issues among his clients:

You might be encountering clients who are more stressed out and so the question then becomes one of the skills. It becomes more important for a coach is to be clear around when they need to refer [to a psychologist]. [USA1]

Some coaches felt more comfortable moving outside of the coaching boundaries since “there's a lot of overlap between counselling and coaching anyway” [UK2]. SA6 agreed since “we almost do counselling by default sometimes that's because we're good at listening.” AUS2, however, felt strongly that coaches should be careful not to overstep their skills boundary if they are not qualified to do so:

Even if you are trained as a psychologist, is what you're doing now therapy? Is that what you agreed in your contract [with the client] [AUS2]

SA7 found a compromise by employing a coaching model that supports clients' counseling needs:

I do find what works is the SCARF model of David Rock, sometimes to explain to people what they are experiencing now. [SA7]

It seems that some coaches were comfortable to take on the role of a mentor or counselor, while others tried to remain more purely aligned to coaching. Either way, it placed an extra burden on coaches and forced them to re-evaluate the boundaries of their coaching praxis.

7 | DISCUSSION

This research set out to answer the question: *To what extent did organizational coaches adapt their praxis during the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic in a manner that supported a working alliance, aligned to desired HRD objectives?* Seven conceptual coach praxis adaptation themes emerged from interviews with coaches: Staying current; Using different models and framework; Being flexible; Forming personal bonds; Embracing virtual coaching; Offering pro-bono coaching; and Resisting being a therapist. To investigate whether these praxis adaptations were in line with positive coaching outcomes, the findings are now interpreted through the working alliance theory (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989) consisting of the strengths and mutual clarity between coach and client regarding the tasks to be performed, goals to achieve, and the bond between them. Furthermore, to understand how these praxis adaptations

were still relevant to HRD, the seven themes are classified using the HRD paradigms of Bates and Chen (2004) consisting of learning, performance, and meaningful work on individual and organizational levels.

This research contributes to the already well-established link between coaching and HRD practice by suggesting that coaching, as a trusted HRD intervention is able to adapt during times of crisis. These adaptations support continued coaching efficacy (as interpreted through the working alliance) and is aligned with the HRD agenda of learning, performance, and meaningful work.

7.1 | Working alliance perspective

Of the seven themes identified (see Table 2), three were judged to relate to the *task* aspect of the working alliance (Staying current; Using different models and frameworks; Being flexible); two relate to the *bond* aspect (Forming personal bonds; Resisting being a therapist); and one to the *goal* aspect (Being flexible). Two themes (Embracing virtual coaching; Offering pro-bono coaching) were judged to not translate directly to the working alliance construct.

All three aspects of the working alliance were affected by coaches' praxis adaptation; however, not all equally. Task and goal aspects are more prevalent than bonding. While a strong coaching relationship (bond) is important for coaching success, it seems that during this crisis, coaches changed their praxis in favor of pragmatism. Coaches stayed up to date with the news, revisited their coaching knowledge-base to select and use coaching models, frameworks, and tools more appropriate for a crisis, they took a flexible approach to meet their clients' immediate needs and even adapted their coaching modality (virtual coaching) and commercial stance (offering free coaching). This shift toward pragmatism is reminiscent of a crisis management stance where actions such as decisiveness, problem solving, planning, and decision-making—all known crisis management skills (Demiroz & Kapucu, 2012; Terblanche, 2021b)—were enacted. It seems that coaches instinctively knew they had to become crisis managers within their coaching interventions, temporarily focusing more on tasks and goals.

Another interpretation of this finding is that in coaching even outside of a crisis, the task and goal aspects are more important than bonding. Support for this argument stems from the fact that coaching differs from other helping professions such as therapy or counseling in that coaching focuses on helping healthy, functioning clients achieve their personal and professional goals (Grant et al., 2010). Although a bond between coach and client is important in coaching, clients are more interested in achieving an outcome and, therefore, less reliant on a bond than in therapy. This point is made by Gessnitzer and Kauffeld (2015) who found that task and goal agreement were positively related to coaching success, but that bonding was not.

The bond aspect was not completely neglected as illustrated by the themes “Forming personal bonds” and “Resisting being a therapist.” “Forming personal bonds” captures the fact that the very nature of the pandemic allowed coach and client to move closer. They shared personal feelings of fear and uncertainty and entered each other's homes virtually. This level of shared vulnerability and intimacy may have increased mutual trust by allowing coaches to demonstrate their trustworthiness. It has been shown that perceived trustworthiness of a coach leads to increased trust behavior by the coachee (Terblanche & Heyns, 2020) and is an important contributor to a strong coach-coachee relationship.

In terms of bonding, the theme “Resisting being a therapist” is potentially more problematic. It is notoriously difficult to distinguish between coaching and counseling/therapy (Bachkirova & Baker, 2019). Some scholars state that coaching is distinct from therapy and counseling because it is focused on the present and future and mostly work related (Ellinger & Kim, 2014), while others believe that a coaching intervention is situated on a continuum between coaching and counseling and fluctuate depending on the situation (Griffiths & Campbell, 2008). The pandemic clearly pushed many of the coaching relationships in the present study toward the counseling/therapy end of the continuum. Some coaches may have been more prepared and willing to take up the role of counselor/therapist; however, there is a real danger that coaches could end up out of their depth (Maxwell, 2009). This could adversely affect the bond and ultimately the well-being of the client and the coaching outcome. This finding, therefore, serves as a

warning to coaches and HR practitioners. Coaches sometimes overestimate their ability to deal with counseling/therapy situations in non-crisis times (Bachkirova & Baker, 2019) and it seems that during a crisis, this may be exasperated. Overstepping this delicate boundary may, therefore, have a negative effect on the working alliance through a weakening of the bond between coach and client when the client discovers their coach does not have requisite skillset to help them (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989).

7.2 | Hrd paradigms perspective

The findings indicate that coaches' praxis adaptation touched on all aspects of the working alliance, but were these adaptations aligned to HRD goals? To investigate the potential of the coaches' praxis adaptation to support the HRD agenda, the findings are interpreted in terms of the three HRD paradigms of learning, performance, and meaning of work on an individual and organizational levels (Bates & Chen, 2004) as summarized in Table 3. Learning refers to individual learning that may also facilitate systemic learning within the larger organization. Performance refers to improvement in individual work performance through connecting individual expertise to organizational goals, while meaning of work encapsulates the notion of humane work environment for the individual and humanness beyond the boundaries of the organization (Bates & Chen, 2004).

Four of the themes (Staying current; Using different models and frameworks; Being flexible; and Embracing virtual coaching) were judged to have the potential to benefit the individual with the possibility of a spill-over effect to the rest of the organization. By staying up to date with news, using appropriate coaching approaches and remaining flexible to the needs of the client during the pandemic, coaches may be able to provide relevant, context appropriate interventions that could positively promote individual learning, improved performance, and meaningful of work. If individuals have positive experience in this regard, the effects could also spill over to the rest of the organizations and beyond. Such an effect would be in line with Hamlin and Stewart's (2011) notion of the core functions of HRD being to improve effectiveness, performance, knowledge, and skills of the individual and organization. Similarly, the theme of embracing virtual coaching suggests that this praxis adaptation by coaches could foster individual learning, performance enhancement, and meaningful work at a time when, should coaches opted not to coach virtually, may have been lost. The same potential spill-over effect to the rest of the organization may be possible.

Two of the themes, "Forming personal bonds" and "Resisting being a therapist" could also promote the three HRD paradigms of leaning, performance, and meaningful work, but relates more closely to the individual than the organization. As discussed previously, forming a close personal bond could be beneficial to the individual paradigms, while there is a danger of taking on the role of a therapist (Bachkirova & Baker, 2019).

Offering pro-bono coaching was judged to support the three HRD paradigms on an organizational level. The pandemic created a situation where employees needed support more than ever; however, HRD is often the first function that suffers from reduced spending (Zavyalova et al., 2018) with companies typically reduce spending on training and development during a crisis (Sheehan, 2014) potentially also impacting coaching. The praxis adaptation by coaches of offering pro-bono coaching mitigated this problematic HRD strategy to some point allowing employees to continue benefitting from the support coaching offers. It was highlighted, however, that the pro-bono approach by coaches may not be sustainable in the long run. HR practitioners should take heed of this fact that human capital theory emphasizes the importance of continued investment in training and development (Garavan, 2007) even and especially during a crisis.

From this discussion, it is concluded that organizational coaches were largely able to adapt their praxis in a manner that is aligned with continued coaching success as observed through the working alliance. The praxis adaptations were also judged to be aligned in several ways to the HRD agenda of learning, performance, and meaningful work on the individual and organizational levels.

8 | CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Understanding how coaches adapt their praxis especially during the initial stages of a crisis when chaos and volatility are high is important to HRD and coaching theory and practice given the extensive use of coaching in HRD. To this end, the present study contributes to HRD theory in two ways. Firstly, the manner in which coaches adapted their praxis is supportive of the working alliance, suggesting that the adaptations are not random, but implicitly aligned with positive coaching outcomes. This should be welcomed by HR practitioners as it implies that coaching continues to strive for positive outcomes even during the initial stages of a crisis. Secondly, these adapted coaching practices appear to still serve the important HRD imperatives of learning, performance, and meaningful work for individuals and the organization. This suggests that not only does coaching praxis adaptation promote positive outcomes, but the outcomes also specifically seem to support the HRD agenda during crisis times. These insights further strengthen the already well-established link between HRD and coaching by suggesting that coaching is context aware, adaptable, and relevant when HRD is needed most during crisis situations.

Practically, the seven themes identified in this study provide guidance to coaches on how to adapt their praxis during the initial stages of a crisis. The focus on the task and goal aspects of the working alliance suggests that coaching should take a pragmatist approach to meet the client in their space. Furthermore, it is suggested that coaches need to be flexible in their praxis and well trained in a variety of coaching approaches to respond appropriately to changing client needs. HR professionals need to take heed of the continued value offered by coaching during a crisis and strive to use coaching when employees need it most.

9 | LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTED FUTURE RESEARCH

Only the opinions of organizational coaches were used in this study. The voices of coachees and HR professionals would add additional insights and a level of objectivity into the perceived praxis adaptation of coaches. This study looked only at coaches' initial responses to the pandemic. It would be insightful to explore whether and in which ways coaches continued to adapt their praxis as the pandemic unfolded. The study did not distinguish between different types and levels of coaching in organizations. It may be that coaches' praxis adaptation differed between junior and senior coaching engagements and between skills and developmental coaching.

Despite these limitations, this study and its unique dataset collected from an international sample during an extreme and rare event offer insights into the inner worlds and praxis decision of organizational coaches during the start of crisis.

10 | CONCLUSION

Organizational coaching is an often used, relied-on HRD intervention. During the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, it seems that coaches were able to adapt their praxis in response to the unprecedented context change in a manner that promoted a strong working alliance, suggesting continued effective coaching. Specifically, coaches seem to have favored the pragmatist aspects of the working alliance (task and goal). During times of crisis, a pragmatic approach has been shown to be effective in managing the situation. Coaches' intuitive shift to pragmatic crisis management mode suggests that coaches are well placed to adapt their praxis to future crisis situations. Coaches' praxis adaptation also appears to have continued serving the HRD agenda of learning, performance, and meaningful work for the individual and organization. It seems that organizational coaching remained a relevant HRD intervention at a time when people and organizations needed it most.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Dr. Nicky Terblanche—Author and researcher.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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