Coaching: How are the dynamics of 'support' between coach and client defined, and reflexively maintained throughout a workplace coaching intervention?

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Abstract

Support is often described as central to coaching, but it remains loosely defined and rarely taught. While it is widely expected that coaches will provide support throughout the process, how that support is created and managed in practice is often left to the coaches' best intention rather than an explicit agreement and collaboration with the client. This research challenges the notion that support is an assumed skill. Instead, it explores what support really means in workplace coaching, how it is enacted, and how it is managed reflexively throughout the coaching intervention.

Adopting a pragmatist stance and drawing on symbolic interactionism and discourse analysis, the research followed an exploratory sequential mixed methods design. A national survey (108 responses) was used to gather broad insight into how coaches describe support, its role in their practice, and how it is (or is not) addressed in training. The findings indicated a strong consensus around the value of support, but limited clarity on how it is developed or taught. This informed a second qualitative phase involving twenty in-depth interviews with experienced workplace coaches. These interviews explored how support is actually applied in practice, and how coaches navigate the ethical, emotional, and relational complexities that surround it.

Five themes are presented, showing that support is not a fixed behaviour or a set of standardised actions. Instead, it is deeply reflexive, shifting in response to context, client need, emotional tone, and the moment-to-moment flow of the coaching relationship. Participants described moving between care, containment, challenge, and perspective shifting, often drawing on embodied judgement rather than structured models. Support was described as something co-created, not imposed, and something that requires presence, awareness, and relational skill.

This thesis contributes to theory by reframing support as an active, relational skill rather than a passive or backgrounded quality. It positions support as something that is negotiated through interaction, shaped by both coach and client, and embedded in the dynamics of the working alliance. The research also contributes to the coaching practice by providing a new conceptual lens for naming, teaching, and developing support in more explicit and practical ways. A new framework, The Four Dimensions of the Coaching Support Lens, is proposed to help coaches integrate support more

explicitly into their practice, offering a practical contribution to coach education and supervision. It argues that support should be recognised as a core skill, not simply something coaches are expected and assumed to “hold” without guidance. These findings carry implications for coach education, supervision, and professional standards, particularly in how relational skills are developed and assessed.

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In compliance with the University of Sunderland's approach to academic integrity and guidance on the ethical use of AI tools, I transparently acknowledge the limited and responsible use of digital assistance tools: Napkin AI was used for creating graphic diagrams; Perplexity AI assisted with checking the accuracy of Harvard referencing; and Co-Pilot was employed for formatting and technical editing support. These tools were strictly used to enhance presentation and consistency and did not contribute to the research content or analysis. All research design, data collection, interpretation, findings, writing, and conclusions are entirely my own work.

Finally, my deepest thanks go to the participants who generously shared their experiences; their openness is the foundation of this research.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background and context of the research

Workplace coaching has grown rapidly over the years; however, some core aspects have remained the same and have not been re-examined. One of these is the idea of support within workplace coaching. Sir John Whitmore, a pioneer in this field, once said, *"Coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them"* (Whitmore, 1992). This quote is a positive starting point. However, it may have helped to create the assumption that support happens naturally, without the need to be taught. This research challenges this notion as it often gets overlooked in training programmes.

In 2023, Canon, Bowers et al confirmed that *"coaching is an effective workplace intervention"*, an opinion that has not raised a contradiction in the literature reviewed for this research. Interestingly, the International Coaching Federation (ICF) confirmed within the *Coaching Statistics: The Return on Investment of Coaching in 2024* report that: *"A report from management consulting and investment banking firm FMI found that 87% of survey respondents agreed that executive coaching has a high return on investment"* (ICF, 2025). The same report demonstrates: *"A global survey by Price Waterhouse Coopers and the Association Resource Centre report an average return on investment of seven times the cost of employing a coach."* This compelling financial case gives gravitas to the shift from coaching being seen purely as problem solving to becoming a strategic income generating opportunity. It also highlights the need to fully understand the skills and qualities that underpin effective coaching delivery, especially areas often taken for granted, such as support.

In coaching, support is often assumed to be inherent. However, skills such as building rapport, listening, questioning, understanding linguistics, and interpreting body language are emphasised through the training process for coaches, support tends to be assumed as a natural trait, rather than recognised as something that requires deliberate practice. Support is a complex and vital element that significantly impacts the success of coaching interventions. This complexity calls for a deeper examination

through research and analysis. In organisational contexts, where coaching is increasingly used to support leadership, performance, and wellbeing, the absence of clear guidance on support may limit impact, or even risk unintended harm.

for the analogy of this to a road trip whereby you plan your route, pack your essentials, ensure car safety, and taking all necessary actions, without anyone checking that you know how to drive demonstrates the gap in coaching development when it comes to support. All of the essentials are trained as a way to support a client, (listening, rapport building, questioning techniques, etc) but the skill of support itself, and the ability to manage how it changes throughout an intervention is assumed to be within the coach to apply naturally. This assumption overlooks the value and the specific need for support to be explicitly taught.

The foundation of workplace coaching, and thus the training to deliver coaching, has remained relatively static since Whitmore's influential work (Whitmore, 1992) . His definition of coaching as unlocking potential rather than imparting knowledge has shaped the industry. However, this foundational view has also led to certain assumptions, particularly regarding the role of support in coaching. The belief that support is an inherent skill neglects the need for its intentional inclusion in coaching training and development. Considering the financial implications now acknowledged in the return on investment of coaching this can be a costly oversight and an opportunity to provide a business case to develop more coaching opportunities within the workplace. It also raises critical questions about what is prioritised in coach education, and what is left unsaid.

This chapter begins by exploring the professional and organisational context that gave rise to the research. It then introduces the research key questions, explains how they were developed, and outlines the intended structure of the thesis as a whole. These research questions aim to address a specific gap which is how the concept of support is understood, applied, and developed in coaching practice, and what this means for coach training, supervision, and standards.

Portfolio Link: My professional journey, detailed in the portfolio, shaped the focus of this research, particularly the way HR leadership and coaching practice have intersected throughout my career.

1.2 Problem statement and research questions

The main challenge this research confronts is the dearth of literature regarding the specifics of what support actually is and how it is applied, and managed, reflexively throughout the coaching intervention, as well as neglect of support as a distinct and essential skill in coaching development. While coaching theory often assumes that support is part of the coaching relationship, it rarely explores how it is defined, negotiated, or developed in practice. These oversights raise several important questions:

1. To what extent is support an implicit part of the coach and client relationship, and why is it not addressed as a specific skill in the literature?
2. How do coaches with distinct levels of experience perceive and practise support?
3. How is the dynamic of reflexive coaching practice managed in relation to support?
4. What specific components of support contribute to successful coaching?
5. How can support be effectively integrated into coaching training programmes?

These questions aim to uncover the complexity and nuance of support in coaching. Support is often seen as a principle of coaching, something that naturally occurs. This research challenges that assumption. By examining how support is defined, adapted, and experienced across different coaching relationships, this research aims to clarify what support demonstrates in practice. It also explores how support might be better taught, reflexively managed, and embedded within professional training and standards.

1.2.1 Research Aim

This research aims to explore the concept of support within workplace coaching, identifying its components, analysing how it is managed reflexively, and evaluating its presence in coaching education and professional development.

1.2.3 Research Objectives

The specific objectives are:

1. To explore how support is defined, understood, and valued in workplace coaching.
2. To examine the key elements and practices that make support effective.
3. To analyse how support is reflexively managed and adapted across coaching interventions.
4. To evaluate how support is represented in coaching training, education, and professional standards.
5. To provide evidence-based recommendations for embedding support as a core coaching skill.

By achieving these objectives, the research seeks to enhance the understanding and application of support in coaching, ultimately improving coaching outcomes.

The first objective involves a thorough analysis of the current state of support in coaching practices. This includes examining how support is perceived and practised by coaches, as well as identifying any gaps or areas for improvement. By understanding the current landscape, the research can provide a solid foundation for further exploration.

The second objective focuses on identifying the key elements of support that contribute to effective coaching. This involves breaking down the concept of support into its constituent parts and examining how each element impacts the coaching process. By doing so, the research aims to provide a detailed understanding of what makes support effective in a coaching context.

The third objective examines how coaches reflexively manage support during interventions. This includes how they adapt their approach in response to context, client need, and emotional cues, and how this reflexive practice is shaped by experience and judgement.

The fourth objective assesses the extent to which support is included in coaching training programmes. This involves reviewing existing training curricula and standards so to identify whether, and how, support is explicitly addressed, and what assumptions underpin its inclusion or omission.

The final objective is to develop practical recommendations for integrating support as a core skill in coaching development. This involves not only identifying the key elements of support but also providing actionable steps for incorporating these elements into training programmes. This may include a proposed training module that can be tested, refined, and potentially adopted by bodies such as CIPD and EMCC. By doing so, the research aims to enhance the overall effectiveness of coaching by ensuring that support is recognised and developed as a core skill.

Together, these objectives position support not just as a taken-for-granted coaching principle, but as a teachable, definable, and critical skill, that deserves more attention in both research and practice.

The research questions and objectives outlined above are closely aligned, with each question matched to a specific objective that shapes the design and focus of the research. Table 1.1 presents these side by side to provide a clear visual link between what the research is asking and what it aims to achieve.

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

Table 1.1 presents the research questions alongside the objectives of the research, providing a clear visual link between the guiding questions and the intended outcomes.

Table 1.1 Research Questions and Objectives

Research Question (RQ)	Objective
RQ1: How is 'support' understood and defined in the context of workplace coaching?	To explore how support is defined, understood, and valued in workplace coaching.
RQ2: How is support enacted and adapted by coaches in practice?	To examine the key elements and practices that make support effective, and to analyse how support is reflexively managed and adapted across coaching interventions.
RQ3: In what ways can support be conceptualised and developed as a distinct coaching skill?	To develop an evidence-based framework for support as a reflexively managed skill.
RQ4: What implications do these findings have for coaching education, training, and professional standards?	To evaluate how support is represented in coaching training, education, and professional standards, and to provide evidence-based recommendations for embedding support as a core coaching skill.

1.4 Significance of the research

This research is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it addresses a critical gap in the literature and coaching development by highlighting the importance of support as a distinct skill. Secondly, it provides empirical evidence on the role of support in coaching, contributing to the broader body of knowledge in the field. Thirdly, the findings have practical implications for coaching training programmes, offering insights into how support can be effectively integrated and taught.

The anticipated outcome is the identification of support as a key skill for aspiring coaches, emphasising its simplicity and profound impact on coaching success. This recognition can lead to more comprehensive and effective coaching training programmes, ultimately benefiting both coaches and their clients.

The significance of this research extends beyond the immediate context of coaching development. By highlighting the importance of support as a distinct skill, the research challenges existing assumptions and encourages a more nuanced understanding of the coaching process. This has the potential to influence not only coaching training programmes but also broader discussions about the nature of coaching and its role in personal and professional development.

Furthermore, the empirical evidence provided by this research will contribute to the broader body of knowledge in the field of coaching. By offering insights into the role of support in coaching, the research can inform future studies and help to shape the direction of the coaching industry, thus potentially leading to new theories and models of coaching that better account for the complexity and importance of support.

Finally, the practical implications of this research are significant. By providing actionable recommendations for integrating the definition and management of support into coaching training programmes, the research can impact on the coaching content for training to improve the overall effectiveness of coaching. This has the potential to benefit not only coaches and their clients but also the coaching community, organisations and industries that rely on coaching as a tool for development and performance improvement.

Portfolio Link: This research is underpinned by my professional experiences as outlined in the portfolio, where themes of fairness, challenge, and enabling growth are recurring in my HR and coaching roles.

1.5 Brief overview of methodology

To achieve the research objectives, a mixed methods approach was used. This methodology combines quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Surveys, and in-depth interviews were conducted with coaches of varying experience levels to gather diverse perspectives on support in coaching.

Quantitative data from surveys offered a broad overview of current practices and perceptions, while qualitative data from interviews provided deeper insights into the complexities of support. This combination of methods ensured a robust and nuanced analysis of the research questions.

The mixed methods approach is particularly well suited to this research as it allows for a comprehensive exploration of the research problem. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the research can provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of the role of support in coaching.

Surveys were used to gather quantitative data on current practices and perceptions of support in coaching. This provided a broad overview of the landscape and helped to identify any patterns or trends. The surveys were designed to capture a range of perspectives, including those of coaches with varying levels of experience.

In-depth interviews were used to gather qualitative data on the complexities of support in coaching. These allowed for a deeper exploration of the research questions and provided rich, detailed insights into the role of support. The interviews provided an opportunity for more in-depth exploration of individual perspectives. The assurance of confidentiality enabled honest input by practitioners. It was important that all participants were aware that there was no ‘wrong’ answer in their contribution. Either they were fully embracing the design of support explicitly, and the research demonstrated the literature is not capturing the current praxis, or they were in line with literature and therefore contributed to the change in the promotion of the good practice into formalising training programmes and adding to the literature.

Symbolic interactionism and discourse analysis informed the qualitative strand of this research. These lenses enabled a deeper exploration of how coaches construct meaning around support through language, interaction, and identity. Symbolic interactionism positioned the coaching relationship as a site where meanings are

socially negotiated and shaped by context, while discourse analysis highlighted the role of language in framing what support is, how it is offered, and whose voice defines it. Together, these approaches allowed the research to attend to not just what coaches do, but how they verbalise support, revealing the implicit beliefs, tensions, and assumptions that underpin coaching practice.

The combination of these methods ensures a robust and nuanced analysis of the research questions. By triangulating and synthesising the data from surveys and interviews, the research can provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of support in coaching.

1.6 Thesis structure outline

The thesis is structured as follows:

1. **Introduction**: This section provides the background, problem statement, research questions, aims and objectives, significance of the research, and an overview of the methodology.
2. **Literature Review**: provides a comprehensive review of existing literature on coaching, support, and related concepts. This includes a discussion of key theories and models, as well as an examination of previous research on the role of support in coaching. The literature review helps to situate the research within the broader context of the field and provide a foundation for the analysis and findings.
3. **Methodology**: This section details the mixed methods approach, including data collection and analysis procedures.
4. **Analysis and Findings**: The results of the data analysis are presented, highlighting key findings related to support in coaching.
5. **Discussion**: The findings are discussed in the context of existing literature, addressing the research questions and objectives.
6. **Conclusion and Recommendations**: The thesis concludes with a summary of key insights, implications for coaching practice, and recommendations for future research and training programmes.
7. **Conclusion**

Table 1.2 outlines the structure of the thesis, summarising the focus of each chapter and how they collectively address the research questions and links to the portfolio supporting the thesis.

Table 1.2 Thesis Structure Overview

Thesis Chapter	Focus	Details	Portfolio Link (Chapters / Appendices)
1. Introduction	Introduces the research context, aim, questions, and significance of the research.	Establishes the research gap around "support" and situates the researcher's positionality.	Portfolio Ch.1 (Introduction: Purpose & link to thesis); Ch.2 (Professional Identity & Context).
2. Literature Review	Reviews existing literature on coaching models, relational support, and gaps in understanding.	Identifies where support is absent or implicit in coaching discourse.	Portfolio Ch.4 (Research Contribution Summary, 4.2 "Thesis in brief").
3. Methodology	Describes methodology, philosophical stance, and ethical considerations.	Explains pragmatism, exploratory sequential design, insider research and reflexivity.	Portfolio Ch.3 (Reflective Practice Commentary, esp. reflexivity); Appendix 11 (Methodology for Tier 3 Paper).
4. Findings	Presents findings from survey and interviews, structured around five themes.	Shows support as reflexive, responsive, and co-constructed; introduces 5 themes.	Portfolio Ch.4 (Research Contribution Summary, 4.3 "From Research to Practice"); Appendix 7 (Commissioned Module incl. "Support").
5. Discussion	Discusses findings in relation to literature and practice.	Introduces Coaching Support Lens (framework) and practical implications.	Portfolio Ch.4 (Research Contribution Summary, esp. 4.4 Reflections); Ch.6 (Application & Evidence of Impact).
6. Conclusion	Concludes the thesis with key insights, recommendations, and future directions.	Draws research aim, RQs and objectives together; notes strengths, limitations, and future research.	Portfolio Ch.5 (Professional Development Plan); Ch.7 (Conclusion: Identity, Insight, and Influence).
7. [Final Chapter / Conclusion marker]	Thesis conclusion section.	Acts as final consolidation and legacy statement.	Portfolio Ch.7 (Conclusion, esp. 7.2 Integrating Identity, Insight, and Influence; 7.3 Closing Reflection).

1.7 Chapter Conclusion

In concluding this introduction, it is clear that this research addresses a crucial gap in the workplace coaching dynamic by focusing on the often overlooked element of support. The role of support in coaching has not been given the consideration it truly deserves. Recent studies on the return on investment (ROI) of coaching underscore its significant impact, making it essential to move beyond traditional problem-solving approaches and recognising coaching as a key driver, and cost saving opportunity for organisational success.

The questions this research aims to answer are designed to delve into the complexities of support within the coaching dynamic. By exploring how support is perceived and practised by coaches with various levels of experience and identifying the specific components that contribute to successful coaching interventions, this research seeks to provide a thorough understanding of support as a distinct and essential skill. Additionally, the research investigates how support can be effectively integrated into coaching training programmes, ensuring it is recognised and developed as a core competency.

The significance of this research goes beyond just coaching development. By challenging existing assumptions and promoting a more nuanced understanding of the coaching process, this research has the potential to influence the coaching community with broader discussions about the nature of coaching and its role in personal and professional growth. The empirical evidence gathered contributes to the wider body of knowledge in the field, guiding future studies and shaping the direction of the coaching industry.

Ultimately, the practical implications of this research are profound. By offering actionable recommendations for incorporating the definition and management of support into coaching training programmes, this research enhances the overall effectiveness of coaching. This has the potential to benefit not only coaches and their clients but also organisations and industries that rely on coaching as a tool for development and performance improvement.

The research investigates how support is understood and applied within workplace coaching interventions. The researcher posits that the word and principle of support is used regularly, however, the actual skill is not trained specifically to have the coach reflexively and proactively manage the support necessary throughout the coaching intervention. To understand this, an exploration into the theory and frameworks of how support is discussed in the literature.

The researcher is using literature from a wide timeline as they feel this has been significantly overlooked throughout the evolution of the coaching process and is often treated as implicit and absorbed into other areas of the coaching practice.

It is, therefore, important to establish how support is framed within the literature and identify if there is an acknowledgement of an accepted skill of support for coaches to be trained on.

This thesis should be read alongside the accompanying professional portfolio, which provides a reflective and practice-based context for the research. While the thesis explores the concept of support in coaching through a mixed methods lens, the portfolio traces the evolution of the researcher's professional identity and HR leadership practice, demonstrating how these experiences informed and were shaped by the research. Together, they offer a holistic narrative, the thesis presenting the academic and analytical contribution, and the portfolio capturing the lived experience, critical reflection, and professional growth that underpin this doctoral journey.

The following literature review seeks to evidence if support is being explicitly theorised and identify gaps that justify the research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored the context of workplace coaching and outlined the research questions. This chapter critically examines how support has been theorised, practised, and represented across the coaching landscape, from early canonical authors through to contemporary models and frameworks. The focus is to understand whether support is treated as a distinct, teachable skill, or simply assumed to be present in the coaching dynamic.

The objective of this review is to demonstrate that support, while often seen as a core part of coaching, is rarely addressed with the same intentionality as other coaching competencies. Support tends to be treated as a talent a good coach naturally offers, rather than a skill that is consciously developed, reflexively managed, and ethically defined.

The review explores the historical context of coaching, key theoretical foundations, organisational relevance, and existing empirical research. It aims to uncover how support is discussed, what assumptions are embedded in coaching literature, and where gaps remain. The literature is reviewed thematically and chronologically, drawing on both foundational authors and contemporary debates to build a wide-ranging view of how coaching support is constructed and communicated.

This argument is grounded in recent evidence from practice. For example, UK Coaching Week 2024, with its themes of understanding self, others, environment, and coaching practice, presented a holistic view of development, yet made no explicit reference to support as a defined or teachable competency. Similarly, the EMCC and other training providers offer detailed frameworks on contracting, ethics, and rapport, but give little attention to how support is defined, agreed upon, or reflexively managed within the coaching relationship.

Although it is difficult to evidence the absence of something, the literature consistently implies that support is assumed. It is rarely positioned as a distinct ethical skill, nor is it addressed in the same way as other core elements of coaching. This lack of

definition raises critical questions about what is prioritised in coach training, and what is being left implicit.

Throughout this review, a guiding question remains: is support in coaching explicitly theorised, implicitly assumed, or overlooked entirely? By tracing how support has been framed over time, and how reflexivity and intuition are described in its application, the review provides a foundation for the empirical phase of this research.

The next sections follow a structured path through the literature. First, reviewing the foundations of coaching theory, then examining the role of models and methodologies before turning to empirical evidence and the specific absence of support as a named skill.

2.2 Background to coaching

Coaching is widely recognised as a tool for development, but its conceptual foundations and strategic use have evolved significantly over time. This section explores the origins and growth of coaching, with a particular focus on how it has been framed as a vehicle for organisational performance, wellbeing, and adaptive leadership. It also introduces how definitions of coaching have developed and where tensions or gaps exist, particularly around the notion of support as a named skill.

In today's complex and dynamic world, coaching is positioned as a strategic intervention that supports both personal and professional development. It enables individuals and organisations to adapt, grow, and achieve sustainable success (Passmore and Lai, 2020). This shift has been shaped by increased organisational complexity, the demand for emotionally intelligent leadership, and a growing focus on employee wellbeing and resilience. Harvard Business Review (2025) argues that effective coaching enhances an individual's ability to recognise their strengths, improves morale, and helps achieve meaningful goals, underlining its role in today's wellbeing-oriented workplaces.

Although often seen as a modern practice, coaching has deep historical roots. Its origins can be traced to the mentoring traditions of ancient Greece, where experienced guides supported learners in life and philosophy. Modern coaching and mentoring began to diverge during the 20th century, with structured coaching programmes becoming increasingly common in business and education by the mid-1900s (Garvey, 2023).

What distinguishes coaching today is not just its structure, but its underlying purpose. Coaching is framed as a collaborative, goal directed relationship aimed at growth and learning. Stelter (2013) describes it as "*a catalyst for self-awareness and resilience*", while Gladding (2019) contrasts it with therapy, emphasising its future focus and practical outcomes.

However, many of these definitions tend to idealise coaching without addressing the more nuanced relational dynamics at play. For example, Stober and Grant (2009) define coaching as "*a process of helping people find their own way"*, but this downplays the complexity of how support is actually offered or negotiated in the process. Mocker (2024) and People Management (2024) reiterate coaching's link to wellbeing, decision making, and agility, but again without naming support as a skill in itself.

There is also no universally accepted definition of coaching. Yet, common themes emerge such as partnership, reflection, and purposeful interaction. The ICF (2024) frames coaching as *"partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential"*. Nash, MacPherson and Collins (2022) highlight reflective practice as being a "*core learning tool*," while Karlsen and Berg (2020) point to coaching as the ability to build confidence and actionable results. Bakhshandeh (2022) calls for confidentiality, trust, and interactivity, yet literature to date implies the dynamic of support rather than explicitly defining it.

This raises a critical tension. If support is always there, why is it not taught? Why is it not named as clearly as contracting, rapport, or questioning techniques? These definitions describe coaching as structured and intentional, yet they gloss over how coaches manage the emotional and ethical labour involved in supporting clients.

This section shows that coaching has evolved into a strategic and relational intervention. However, definitions often assume support is naturally embedded. This assumption leads to the next section, which explores how coaching models and methodologies reflect, or obscure, support as a deliberate and trainable practice.

This reflection is closely tied to the researcher's HR and coaching practice, described in the portfolio, where support was often expected but never clearly defined or explored in training. Rather, it was treated as 'something good coaches just do', a belief this research aims to challenge.

2.3 History of Coaching

This section traces the historical development of workplace coaching, identifying how foundational theories, professional standards, and evolving workplace needs have shaped coaching into a distinct, strategic practice. It also highlights the shifts in focus from performance to wellbeing and surfaces key questions about what has been codified and what may have been overlooked.

The evolution of workplace coaching began in the early 20th century, as management and leadership theories emerged to support industrial productivity and employee performance (Eliadis, 2023). Early supervisory training and peer-led performance coaching, first noted in factory contexts in the 1930s, laid a foundation for coaching's practical roots (Gorby, 1937, cited in Grant, 2011).

During the 1960s, the Human Potential Movement and humanistic psychology shifted attention toward personal growth and self-actualisation, crucial precursors to modern coaching focused on individual goal attainment (Spence, 2007; Atad and Grant, 2021). By the 1970s and 1980s, coaching began to formalise as a distinct discipline, moving away from counselling towards leadership and interpersonal development. Figures like Alan Fine, Graham Alexander, and Sir John Whitmore pioneered models such as GROW, which were introduced into the workplace to support performance, awareness, and development (Fine, Alexander and Whitmore, cited in OMT Global, 2021).

From the 1980s into the early 1990s, coaching further professionalised, transitioning from therapy and mentoring to a regulated practice. Life coaching expanded into fields such as education, career, and health, driven by organisational demand (Cavanagh and Grant, 2004; Atad and Grant, 2021). This prompted the emergence of formal standards and certification, notably from the International Coaching Federation (ICF) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) in the mid1990s, helping to define competencies and ethical frameworks.

Over recent decades, coaching has significantly adapted in response to the growing complexity of workplaces, greater diversity, and a wider emphasis on wellbeing. Online coaching platforms, digital tools, and flexible delivery models have expanded global access. The emphasis on mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing recently aligns with organisational priorities around resilience and holistic support. For example, the

2024 ICF Coaching Snapshot reports a marked shift toward wellbeing-focused coaching (ICF, 2024). Positive Health Coaching has emerged, integrating behavioural science, positive psychology, and wellness strategies (RCSI, 2025).

Today, coaching spans executive leadership, career transitions, and team development. Frameworks such as GROW, Situational Leadership, and Appreciative Inquiry remain influential (Whitmore, 1992; Hersey and Blanchard, 1993; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005), but experienced coaches increasingly adapt them to the individual. As Stober and Grant (2009) suggest, the real art of coaching lies not in rigid models, but in reflexively adapting to client context and need.

As the profession matures, critical issues such as power dynamics, ethics, and the impact of coaching have moved to the fore. Authors such as Carroll (2011), Vince (2011), Clutterbuck and Megginson (2017), and Ehnert (2016) raise questions about whether coaching risks becoming depoliticised or decontextualised in its push for professional status. Ethical reflection, supervision, and boundary setting have, thus, become central to professional discourse. This raises the issue of a research gap covered next.

2.4 Research gap

The purpose of this research is to examine whether support in workplace coaching is treated as a reflexively managed and deliberately developed skill or simply assumed. Although coaching training includes modules on contracting, rapport building, and client-centred communication, recent literature indicates that the question of who defines support, how it is shaped within the relationship, and how it is adjusted across contexts receives limited explicit attention (Cox et al., 2018; de Haan and Gannon, 2017). Professional competency frameworks also omit support as a named capability. The ICF Core Competency Model (ICF, 2021) and the EMCC Global Competence Framework position relational work within broad categories, such as presence or partnership, but do not identify support as a distinct skill. This absence, in both academic texts and professional standards, suggests that support is often acknowledged but not conceptualised or taught in a consistent way.

Recent data from the 2024 ICF Coaching Snapshot: Coaching and Mental Wellbeing show that 85 percent of coaches report clients requesting wellbeing related support, yet only a minority have received formal training or access to reflective supervision to

meet these needs (ICF, 2024). More than 70 percent of internal coaches also report that additional training is needed to respond effectively to client expectations. These findings highlight a pattern of coaches being asked to provide support without consistent preparation. Scholarship mirrors this concern. Grant (2017) notes the increasing emotional and relational demands placed on coaches within contemporary workplaces, and Western (2019) argues that coaching often expects relational capability without offering structured development of the underlying skills. When support is not taught or defined, practitioners may depend on personal intuition rather than shared standards. This reinforces the argument that support remains an under theorised and inconsistently developed element of coaching practice.

The ICF Core Competency Model (ICF, 2021) outlines essential coaching capabilities, including ethical practice, active listening, and facilitation of client growth, yet it does not define support as a specific competency that requires training or assessment. The EMCC Global Competence Framework presents a similar picture, where relational elements are included within broader categories, but support is not identified as an explicit skill. This pattern reflects a wider absence in the academic literature. Authors such as Cox et al. (2018), de Haan and Gannon (2017), and Passmore and Tee (2020) highlight the importance of relational capability in coaching, but they do not identify support as a defined or structured element. As a result, support may remain a tacit and under theorised construct that lacks consistent definition, shared language, or agreed developmental pathways within coaching practice.

Although many coaching models and frameworks reference support, this is often implied rather than clearly operationalised. The lack of definition risks inconsistency in coaching practice, where the quality of support depends strongly on the coach's personal style or instinct rather than evidence-based frameworks. In organisational settings, where coaching is increasingly adopted to support strategic goals, leadership development, and employee wellbeing (Harvard Business Review, 2025), this ambiguity can lead to variable outcomes. If support is not consciously examined or reflexively managed, coaches may default to habitual behaviours, risking ethical oversights and reinforcing existing power dynamics within the coaching relationship (Vince, 2011; Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2017).

A notable recent review by Jarosz (2025) presents the updated Coaching Effectiveness Framework, evaluating a range of coaching models in relation to relational dynamics and emotional intelligence. The paper identifies trust, rapport, and communication as core relationship factors and highlights how emotional intelligence, including emotional alignment and adaptability, drives positive coaching outcomes. However, Jarosz (2025) does not attempt to define what 'support' means within the coaching relationship. This lack of definition underlines a persistent conceptual gap in the literature, reflecting a wider pattern identified in recent literature, where relational capability is discussed but support is not theorised as a distinct concept (Cox et al., 2018; Passmore and Tee, 2020).

The absence of a clearly articulated framework for support also limits how coaches are trained, supervised, and assessed. Models, such as GROW or OSCAR, provide useful structural scaffolds, but they do not address the nuanced ways in which support is defined, enacted, or adapted to individual client needs. This issue is noted by contemporary critics, who argue that widely used coaching models often prioritise structure over the relational processes that underpin effective support (Western, 2019; Grant, 2017) leaving a critical blind spot in professional development pathways, where support is assumed to be appropriate rather than explicitly cultivated (ICF, 2024). Addressing this gap is essential for enhancing coaching effectiveness and advancing workplace coaching as a credible profession. This research aims to explore the reflexive and dynamic processes underpinning support, and in doing so, contribute to the design of practical frameworks for coach training, supervision, and ethical standards.

A further underexplored dimension is the role of power in shaping how support is enacted. While coaching is often framed as a partnership, the coach inevitably holds a degree of authority, both through their facilitative role and through the models and language they bring. Vince (2011 pp331-338) argues that *power and emotion* are always present in developmental relationships, and that without critical reflection, these dynamics may unconsciously shape the coaching process. In the context of support, this means a coach's assumptions about 'the notion of support' may override or silence the client's perspective if not reflexively negotiated. Similarly, Clutterbuck and Megginson (2017) observe that coaching ethics tend to focus on confidentiality

and contracting, but offer little guidance on the quality, nature, or management of relational support.

Contemporary critics highlight that this narrow focus can overlook systemic bias and power dynamics which is a key area increasingly addressed by newer ethical frameworks and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) aware thinking (Hawkins, 2023; Milner, 2022).

In summary, the lack of a defined and reflexively managed concept of support creates theoretical, practical, and ethical blind spots within workplace coaching. Despite the prominence of relational skills across coaching literature and competency frameworks, neither the ICF nor EMCC identify support as an explicit skill, whilst recent scholarship continues to note the absence of a shared definition (de Haan and Gannon, 2017; Cox et al., 2018; Passmore and Tee, 2020). This research seeks to illuminate that space by exploring how support is understood, enacted, and taught, and asking what is at stake when it is left unexamined.

2.5 Theoretical Foundations of Coaching

Understanding the theoretical foundations of coaching provides a necessary framework for professional practice. These foundations help coaches move beyond simple goal setting and towards creating reflective, ethical, and supportive relationships with clients. Coaching is not a single method or philosophy but an evolving discipline that draws from psychology, education, and leadership studies (Cushion, 2016).

Over the decades, numerous models have shaped contemporary coaching, each offering a distinct perspective on how best to guide, challenge, and support individuals. Among these, the GROW, FACTS, and OSKAR models have proven particularly influential, both in academic literature and practical coaching contexts.

GROW (Goal, Reality, Options, Will), developed by Whitmore (1992), is valued for its simplicity and adaptability. It enables clients to define outcomes and take ownership of solutions through structured reflection. FACTS (Feedback, Accountability, Courageous Goals, Tension, Systems Thinking), introduced by Blakey and Day (2012), brings attention to feedback and systems awareness, framing personal responsibility as an active element of support. In turn, OSKAR (Outcome, Scaling, Know-How, Affirm, Review), designed by Jackson and McKergow (2002), is rooted in

solution-focused practice, using affirming dialogue and client strengths as levers for progress. Together, these models reflect diverse, yet complementary, views on how coaching outcomes are structured and how support is offered in practice.

Other models, such as CLEAR (Hawkins, 2013) and STEPPA (McLeod, 2014), are also well established but place more emphasis on process and performance, rather than the subtle dynamics of relational support. For the purpose of this research, GROW, FACTS, and OSKAR were selected as they offer relational, adaptable frameworks that align with the central concern of this investigation: how support is constructed, reflexively managed, and experienced in workplace coaching.

Importantly, these models are well suited to the workplace coaching context because of their flexibility and scalability. They are routinely applied in one-to-one coaching, leadership development programmes, and broader organisational interventions. Each model frames the coaching relationship as a partnership, not a directive encounter which is a crucial distinction when exploring support not as incidental, but as an intentional and co-constructed element of practice.

Another reason these models are integral to this research is their reflection of coaching's ongoing shift towards more human-centred, emotionally intelligent practice. For example, FACTS explicitly recognises the tension between challenge and care (a central theme in this research) and provides practical tools for navigating that balance. GROW has endured due to its adaptable format, which accommodates both linear goal setting and more emergent forms of reflection. OSKAR, drawing from solution-focused approaches, affirms the client's role in constructing progress, offering an accessible but powerful model for strength-based coaching.

These models have also featured in the researcher's own coaching practice, particularly GROW and FACTS, which was adapted in different leadership contexts. This practical application is explored further in the portfolio, where the researcher reflected on how these frameworks have shaped their coaching style and informed an understanding of support as a dynamic, rather than fixed, process.

To explore how support is reflected in practical coaching frameworks, the following sections examine GROW, OSKAR, and FACTS in more detail. These models have been selected for their prominence in workplace coaching and their relevance to relational and reflexive dynamics. Each offers a different lens on the coaching process,

thus by analysing how they approach interaction, challenge, and reflection, it is possible to assess whether support is explicitly addressed or left as an assumed element of good practice.

2.5.1 GROW Model

Whitmore's (1992) GROW model which stands for Goal, Reality, Options, and Will, remains one of the most widely used frameworks in workplace coaching. Its appeal lies in its simplicity and adaptability across a range of coaching situations. However, this very simplicity can become a limitation when the coaching conversation involves deeper emotional complexity or behavioural change. For example, Panchal and Riddell (2020) argue that GROW can struggle to address the personal implications of change, particularly when clients are dealing with entrenched habits or identity-related challenges.

While the model encourages client ownership through structured self-awareness, critics note that this is not always adequate. As O'Connor (2023) suggests, GROW enables clients to "*shape the process to fit their needs"*, but some individuals may require more direct guidance or support, especially when self-discovery alone does not lead to actionable outcomes.

Bishop (2018) proposed extending the model to include additional stages such as *"engage"* and *"routinise",* recognising that follow through and habit formation are often the missing links in real world coaching scenarios. This is echoed by Panchal and Riddell (2020), who highlight that GROW offers a useful structure but omits some of the relational and behavioural components essential for sustained change. This critique reinforces the central argument of this research in that while models such as GROW may rely on supportive behaviours, they do not explicitly define, teach, or encourage the reflexive management of support as a distinct coaching skill.

2.5.2 FACTS Model

According to Blakey and Day (2012), the FACTS coaching model adopts a more challenging, performance-oriented approach. It draws upon constructivism, positive psychology, systemic thinking, and social learning theory, positioning the coach as both a supportive and accountable figure. Bond and Blevins (2020) and Stelter and Stelter (2014) reinforce this by identifying the central elements of the model as feedback, accountability, tension, courageous goals, and systems thinking.

The FACTS model has been associated with positive organisational outcomes. Jones (2019) found that organisations implementing FACTS-based coaching reported improved productivity, increased employee satisfaction, and enhanced organisational climate. Bozer and Jones (2018) also linked the model to benefits in leadership capability, job satisfaction, and employee engagement. Scott (2021) provided further evidence that coaching aligned with the FACTS principles led to efficiency improvements across both individual and group performance.

However, the model has drawn criticism. Filley, Travis and Lane (2020) argue that FACTS can reduce coaching to a set of prescribed procedures, oversimplifying what is, in reality, a personal and complex relational process. This raises concerns about whether the model allows space for adaptive, reflexive support. Furthermore, scholars such as Shoukry and Cox (2018) and Kapoutzis (2024) argue that traditional coaching models, including FACTS, often neglect the cultural, social, and political contexts in which coaching takes place. Without attention to these dynamics, the model may struggle to meet the needs of diverse clients or reflect the lived complexity of workplace coaching.

This critique reinforces the central argument of this thesis: while challenge and accountability are essential elements of coaching, they must be balanced with intentionally managed support which can change throughout a coaching intervention. FACTS provides tools for constructive feedback and systems awareness, but it still assumes the coach's interpretation of support is appropriate and effective, rather than treating support as a skill to be defined, negotiated, and reflexively delivered.

2.5.3 OSKAR Model

Developed by McKergow and Jackson in 2002, the OSKAR model offers a structured coaching framework centred around five stages: Outcome, Scaling, Know-how, Affirm, and Review (Adams, 2022). Its strength lies in its solution-focused approach, helping clients identify and apply their strengths to promote growth, goal achievement, and wellbeing (Van Zyl et al., 2020). As Passmore and Sinclair (2020) note, it deliberately avoids dwelling on problems, instead prompting forward movement through reflective dialogue. This model has also informed supervision practices by supporting collaborative, reflective conversations aimed at improving coaching quality (Banerjee, 2023).

However, some scholars argue that OSKAR may oversimplify complex coaching dynamics. O'Broin and Palmer (2018) suggest that its focus on individual agency may neglect broader systemic influences, such as organisational culture or structural barriers. Similarly, Kruger and Terblanche (2022) caution that by focusing predominantly on the coach's growth, client needs may be overshadowed. Passmore and Sinclair (2020) also highlight the risk that its simplicity may fall short when navigating emotionally charged or ethically complex situations.

OSKAR clearly relies on supportive behaviours such as affirming strengths, celebrating progress, and reflection, yet, like GROW, it does not pause to ask what support actually is. It assumes the coach knows how to offer it, rather than exploring how that support is negotiated, adapted, or consciously managed. This matters. When support is embedded but unexamined, coaches are left to rely on best intention or with risk, habit rather than skill.

When considered alongside GROW and FACTS, the three models share a foundational aim: to facilitate growth and behavioural change. However, their applications differ. GROW is widely adaptable across personal and professional contexts, offering a flexible blueprint for reflective planning. FACTS is more tightly aligned with organisational performance and accountability. OSKAR is positioned between the two, structured yet relational, focused on strength building but less able to navigate systemic dynamics. Across all three, the assumption of support is present, but the skill of support is rarely named, trained, or evaluated in its own right.

The three models explored, GROW, FACTS and OSKAR, all make important contributions to coaching theory and practice. Yet, none of them explicitly defines support as a reflexively managed skill. Each offers embedded opportunities for supportive practice, but often leaves the coach to interpret, adapt, or assume how support should be enacted. To summarise the comparative value of these models in relation to the research aim, Table 2.1 provides a high-level overview of their structure and relevance to the concept of support.

2.5.4 Coaching Models Overview

To provide a concise comparison of the coaching models referenced in this research, Table 2.1 below summarises their core features and evaluates their relevance to the concept of support:

Table 2.1 Coaching Models Overview

Model	Key Features	Relevance to Support
GROW	Goal setting, Reality check, Options, Will: a structured problem-solving approach.	Provides structure but can lack explicit focus on emotional support.
OSKAR	Outcome, Scaling, Know-How, Affirm, Review: a solution-focused framework.	Encourages positive reinforcement but lacks extend on managing deeper relational support.
FACTS	Feedback, Accountability, Courageous Goals, Tension, Systems Thinking: emphasises emotional exploration.	Addresses emotions directly, aligning with supportive dynamics.

2.6 International Coaching Organisations

Coaching practice is shaped by a number of international bodies that set standards, offer accreditation, and provide ethical frameworks to ensure professionalism. The most influential of these are the International Coaching Federation (ICF), the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). These organisations define core competencies, outline codes of conduct, and establish professional benchmarks for coaches at every stage of their development. Through their frameworks, they aim to create a shared understanding of what effective and ethical coaching should entail, helping to maintain quality and consistency across the industry.

The EMCC offers three principal forms of accreditation, covering individual practitioners, training programmes, and organisations. The ICF, on the other hand, provides three tiers of credentialing: Associate Certified Coach (ACC), Professional Certified Coach (PCC), and Master Certified Coach (MCC), all reflecting a coach's experience, training hours, and commitment to ongoing professional growth. In the UK context, the CIPD complements these international standards by embedding coaching within broader people development strategies, positioning it as a core component of effective HR and organisational practice.

For the purpose of this research, the EMCC framework has been chosen as the guiding reference point. This decision involves two main considerations. First, the EMCC is a Europe based organisation, making it particularly relevant to the area in which this research is situated. Second, the EMCC model spans both individual and organisational coaching, aligning with the research's focus on the dynamics of support across multiple contexts. The EMCC's emphasis on reflective practice, professional supervision, and ethical awareness makes it highly suited to examining how support is understood and delivered in workplace coaching.

Several studies highlight the value of the EMCC framework in advancing professional standards. Garvey and Stokes (2023) note that EMCC accredited coaches are often perceived by clients as both highly competent and ethically grounded. They argue that the combination of structured guidance and clearly defined competencies enhances the credibility of coaches, while also giving clients confidence in the coaching relationship. Similarly, Ojukwu (2019) observes that the framework encourages consistency and rigour, ensuring that coaches apply both reflective and evidence-based approaches to their work. These studies suggest that EMCC accreditation not only builds confidence among clients but also supports the development of professional identity among coaches.

However, the EMCC framework is not without its criticisms. Ojukwu (2019) highlights that the prescriptive nature of the accreditation process can sometimes limit creativity, particularly in complex coaching relationships where a one size fits all approach is not always effective. Cavanagh (2022) further argues that the model's European focus does not fully address the cultural or contextual variations present in Europe's own diverse coaching practices. While the EMCC is widely respected, its guidelines are not always easily applicable to coaching contexts outside of Europe, which may require more cultural flexibility and adaptation. Chen et al. (2020) also raise concerns about the administrative and financial challenges of adhering to EMCC principles in smaller coaching practices, where the costs of accreditation and compliance may outweigh perceived benefits.

Despite these critiques, the EMCC framework remains a benchmark for quality and professionalism. Smith et al. (2023) conclude that the EMCC's structured approach develops confidence and reliability in coaching relationships, both for practitioners and

their clients. This balance of strengths and limitations makes the EMCC framework particularly useful for this research, as it offers both a structured foundation for evaluating coaching practices and a platform for exploring how the concept of support is framed and delivered within accredited coaching.

While the EMCC framework promotes reflective practice and supervision, it treats the concept of support as an underlying principle rather than a distinct skill to be consciously developed. The focus is often on competencies such as goal setting, contracting, and ethical standards, with limited exploration of how support itself is defined or enacted in the coach and client relationship. This research builds on these observations by critically examining whether support is treated as a deliberate, reflexively managed skill within workplace coaching, or whether it remains an implicit, unexamined aspect of accredited coaching practice.

Professional bodies, such as the EMCC who offer structured standards and ethical guidance, tend to treat support as a background principle, embedded within competencies but rarely examined in its own right. This creates a gap between formal accreditation and the lived, relational dynamics of coaching. If support is not explicitly defined or reflexively managed, coaches may rely on assumptions or default behaviours that are inconsistent, or too consistent if habitual, across practice. This gap highlights the need to move beyond frameworks and explore how coaches themselves understand, enact, and develop support in their everyday work. The next section, therefore, examines how support is conceptualised from the perspectives of practising coaches, setting the stage for the empirical research that follows.

2.7 Understanding the Perspectives of Support in Coaching

2.7.1 Defining Support

In organisational settings, support is closely tied to how well employees feel valued, respected, and empowered. It involves creating environments where individuals can develop skills, make decisions, and feel psychologically safe to contribute meaningfully to organisational goals. As Hughes and Terrell (2011) emphasise, effective leaders, and by extension effective coaches, create conditions that develop trust, autonomy, and open communication. These conditions are critical for employees so to feel supported and engage in reflective, forward-looking development.

Within coaching, support can be understood as the process of enabling clients to explore their potential and take ownership of their growth. Grant (2014) highlights that coaching is not about providing answers but about asking the right questions and creating a structured yet collaborative space for self-discovery. This involves a balance between encouragement and constructive challenge, ensuring that the client is both supported and held accountable for progress. Ellinger et al. (2003) add that workplace coaching is most effective when coaches demonstrate active listening, provide clear and actionable feedback, and encourage clients to develop problem-solving skills that create long term independence.

Support in coaching is, therefore, not a passive or background concept. It is an active, deliberate, and reflexively managed part of the coaching process. It includes a set of conscious behaviours such as active listening, empathetic questioning, and the timely use of constructive feedback. Grant (2014) notes that these behaviours help to create a sense of psychological safety, allowing clients to experiment with new perspectives and take responsibility for meaningful change. In this context, support is as much about holding the space for reflective dialogue as it is about guiding the client towards defined outcomes.

A key example of where support is referenced but not examined in depth is found in the early work of Sir John Whitmore (1992). In one of coaching's most cited texts, Whitmore encourages the reader to *"play with the tools in the book"* and discover their own authentic leadership approach *"with the support given"*. However, this invitation rests on the assumption that a shared understanding of what support looks like already exists. No definition is provided, no range of support styles is offered, and no guidance is given on how to tailor support for different clients. Despite the fact the book is aimed at those new to coaching, support is positioned as something the reader is already expected to know how to do.

Whitmore also describes coaching dialogue as *"non-threatening and supportive"*, yet what constitutes *"threatening"* or *"supportive"* is not explored. These generalisations assume a level of reflexive competence that may not yet be developed, particularly in novice coaches. This highlights a pattern in contemporary literature whereby support is regularly referenced but seldom defined. No author has since undertaken a detailed

examination that defines support, how its effectiveness is judged, and how it is managed or adapted across a coaching intervention.

Modern workplace demands have further expanded expectations of support within coaching. With growing organisational focus on employee resilience, mental wellbeing, and trust building, coaches are increasingly expected to facilitate conversations that go beyond traditional performance outcomes. Research demonstrates that employees thrive in environments where they feel supported not only in achieving goals but also in developing personal resilience and self-awareness (Hughes and Terrell, 2011; Grant, 2014).

As workplaces navigate hybrid working, rapid change, and heightened expectations of emotional intelligence, the role of the coach in delivering skilled, structured, and intentional support becomes even more critical. This reinforces the need to treat support not as a natural byproduct of coaching, but as a conscious, teachable, and reflexively applied practice.

While the previous section explored how support is defined in coaching literature and organisational contexts, it remains clear that this definition is often implicit, assumed, or framed through adjacent concepts such as trust, rapport, or listening. What is less explored is how support is actually understood by coaches in practice, in how they recognise it, deliver it, and adjust it throughout the coaching relationship. The following section delves into these practitioner perspectives, drawing on both existing research and emerging commentary to assess how support is interpreted and enacted within real coaching environments.

2.7.2 Understanding Support in Coaching

Support in coaching is a multifaceted and dynamic concept that integrates emotional, informational, instrumental, and motivational elements. Emotional support involves creating a safe, non-judgemental space where clients can express themselves openly, reflect on their challenges, and explore new possibilities. De Haan and Nilsson (2023) highlight *“the quality of the coaching relationship as the single strongest predictor of coaching success”*, with emotional support playing a significant role in building trust and openness. Hughes and Terrell (2011) reinforce this by arguing that emotional intelligence is fundamental to coaching, enabling practitioners to respond with

empathy, recognise unspoken concerns, and adapt their approach to meet individual client needs.

Bluckert (2005) identifies support as one of the critical factors of coaching, noting that *"understanding how a client lets support in is also a critical skill"* (p. 338). While Bluckert (2005) acknowledges the importance of feedback, this research argues that leaving the evaluation of support entirely to the client is insufficient. Effective coaching requires a proactive and reflexive management of support, with reflexivity acting as a tool to gauge the client's needs in real time.

Informational support refers to providing clients with insights, resources, and constructive feedback that enhance their capacity to achieve meaningful outcomes. Grant (2014) emphasises that coaching is not about offering readymade answers but about equipping clients with the tools and confidence to develop their own solutions. Similarly, Ellinger et al. (2003) found that workplace coaching thrives when informational guidance is combined with reflective questioning, enabling clients to challenge assumptions and build new perspectives.

Instrumental support extends this principle by offering practical structures, strategies, and frameworks that facilitate learning and action. Peltier (2021) points out that instrumental support often bridges the gap between theoretical concepts and the tangible behaviours needed for sustainable change.

Motivational support is equally vital, involving recognition of progress, the celebration of achievements, and the reinforcement of self-belief. Bachkirova (2024) notes that motivation emerges most effectively when coaches balance encouragement with constructive challenge, allowing clients to feel supported without diminishing their autonomy or accountability.

A recurring theme in the literature is who defines the nature of support during the coaching process. Stober and Grant (2010) argue that support is most effective when co-created, emerging through collaborative conversations and negotiated expectations. While the coach may initially identify areas where support is needed, Grant (2014) suggests that the client's goals, preferences, and readiness should guide the process. This collaborative approach not only respects the client's autonomy but also reinforces trust and mutual responsibility within the relationship.

Coaches employ a range of strategies to ensure that support is personalised and meaningful. Active listening, powerful questioning, and reflective dialogue are critical tools for uncovering client needs (Hughes and Terrell, 2011; Stober and Grant, 2010). Observation of verbal and non-verbal cues also provides valuable insight into unspoken concerns, enabling coaches to respond sensitively and effectively. Clark (2010) adds that creating safe mechanisms for feedback, whether anonymous or openly shared, can help surface issues that clients may be hesitant to raise, particularly in organisational contexts where hierarchy or cultural norms may inhibit honesty.

In contemporary workplace settings, support in coaching has evolved to align with broader organisational priorities, such as psychological safety, resilience, and wellbeing. Grant (2014) and Bachkirova (2024) emphasise that coaches extend beyond traditional performance outcomes to address the holistic needs of their clients, enabling them to navigate uncertainty, build confidence, and strengthen their capacity for independent decision making. This approach positions support as a reflexive, intentional skill, not simply a background condition aligning directly with the research focus of this thesis. The alignment between theory and experience forms a central part of this doctoral inquiry, highlighting how support is shaped through reflexive judgement rather than static techniques.

As this discussion evidence, support in coaching is not a single behaviour but a dynamic exchange shaped by context, emotion, and interaction. It cannot be reduced to a checklist of actions. Instead, it unfolds through moment-to-moment judgement, often under conditions of uncertainty. To navigate this complexity, coaches need more than just frameworks or tools. They need the ability to reflect in action, question their assumptions, and remain responsive to what is emerging in the relationship. This is the work of reflexivity, and it is where the skill of support becomes visible as noted in the next section.

2.7.3 Reflexivity in Coaching

Based on the previous section highlighting the many dimensions of support, this section presents knowledge on how coaches manage this in practice. Reflexivity is often named as the mechanism for this, but it is not consistently defined, taught, or critically explored.

Reflexivity has become a widely used term in coaching literature, but it still lacks a clear, shared definition. The literature commonly notes that it involves deliberate self-awareness, critical thinking, and questioning one's own assumptions. Abraham (2015) describes it as "*structured self-examination*", a way for coaches to reflect on the decisions they make in sessions, and how those choices impact the coaching process and outcome. It does not solely regard consideration but notices what shapes the relationship from a dual perspective.

In practice, this means considering not just what the coach verbalises or practises, but how personal beliefs, reactions, or habits might be influencing the conversation. Stober and Grant (2010) argue that reflexivity is essential to coaching that is ethical, flexible, and truly client focused. Rather than adhering to rigid rules, coaches should remain open and aware to adapt and adjust as needed.

De Haan and Nilsson (2023) link reflexivity to "*trust and authenticity"*- two qualities most clients would say matter more than technique. They argue that a coach's ability to name their own values, recognise bias, and be transparent builds stronger relationships. Reflexivity, thus, is a way to consciously shape the support being offered, not just to 'be supportive', but to question the type of support needed, and why.

Reflexivity a continuous, live process. Grant (2014) poses reflexivity as a way for coaches to check whether their words and behaviours are helping or getting in the way. Well achieved, it helps coaches to challenge themselves, disrupt default patterns, and keep the work focused on the client, not the coach's preferences or habits.

Abraham (2015) and De Haan and Nilsson (2023) both argue that reflexivity helps coaches to notice their own emotional triggers, such as frustration, over identification, or blind spots, and manage them in ways that do not derail the session. This is of importance as without this awareness power dynamics could overwhelm the process. Reflexivity helps keep the coaching space safe, ethical, and grounded in the client's agenda.

It also strengthens empathy and rapport. Research indicates that coaches who regularly engage in reflection develop a deeper rapport with their clients. The ICCS, 2025) are clear on the impact: *"Through committed reflexive practice, coaches cultivate a heightened emotional intelligence and presence that fundamentally*

transforms the coaching relationship. This ongoing reflexivity empowers coaches to discern subtle, unspoken client signals, challenge their own assumptions in the moment, and respond with greater empathy and adaptability". In its definition of coaching the ICF (2018) highlights this as a partnership based on "*openness and respect"*, with reflexivity being an aspect that aids materialisation, rather than claim.

This is additionally demonstrative in literature on leadership. A 2025 article in Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning (2025) refers to leaders who develop leadership fitness cultivate essential capacities such as balance, strength, flexibility, and endurance, enabling them to act proactively in situations with more clarity and respond with greater resilience in complex, high-pressure environments. By disrupting their default thinking and challenging subconscious patterns, these leaders gain new possibilities for action, leading with enhanced emotional awareness and adaptability. Forbes (2025) links this directly to workplace wellbeing, psychological safety, and coaching that goes beyond tick-box goals. Reflexivity is presented as a vital skill for today's complexity, not a luxury or afterthought.

Finally, reflexivity supports ongoing growth. Whether through supervision, journaling, or peer feedback, coaches who reflect regularly tend to improve both their technical skills and their ethical grounding. Stober and Grant (2010) suggest that this reflective habit helps coaches stay aligned to best practice, respond to evolving contexts, and remain conscious of how support is offered, rather than assuming it will take care of itself.

The ideas explored in the previous sections, from emotional safety and challenge to reflexivity and relational dynamics, form the foundation for this research. To clarify how these concepts interconnect, the following table (Table x) provides a summary of the key components of support in coaching as they emerge from the literature. This visual helps consolidate the argument so far and show how the research develops from these core principles.

2.7.4 Key Concepts Related to Support

The themes of reflexivity, empathy, and co-created support discussed above are not isolated ideas but are positioned within a wider set of interrelated concepts that shape how support is recognised and delivered in coaching. To make these clearer, the

following table, Table 2.2, synthesises the most frequently cited constructs in the literature and highlights how each contributes to the overall understanding of support.

Table 2.2 Key Concepts Related to Support

Concept	Definition/Focus	Relevance to Support
Reflexivity	The ability of the coach to critically reflect on their own assumptions, behaviours, and decisions in real time.	Central to recognising and adapting supportive behaviours during coaching interventions.
Rapport	The establishment of trust, empathy, and connection between coach and client.	Provides the foundation for supportive coaching relationships but is not sufficient alone.
Presence	A state of mindful, non-judgemental awareness and attentiveness to the client.	Enhances the client's feeling of being seen and supported, especially in moments of challenge.
Challenge	The act of constructively questioning or pushing the client's thinking.	Considered a form of support when balanced with care and containment.
Containment	The coach's capacity to hold and manage emotional dynamics safely.	Creates a safe environment where clients feel supported even during difficult conversations.
Empowerment	Enabling clients to recognise their own agency and strengths.	A key outcome of supportive coaching that moves beyond 'fixing' clients towards collaborative growth.

This summary serves as a foundation for the next phase of analysis, where the intuitive and situational aspects of support will be explored further.

2.7.5 Leveraging intuition in the provision of support in coaching.

Intuition in coaching has been described as *"a kind of knowing that resides in the background and is often unspoken. It remains in the background because, for many people, it is not easy to trust"* (Whitworth, Kimsey-House and Sandahl, 2007, p. 11). This perspective highlights the subtle, yet powerful, role that intuition plays in shaping

the moment-by-moment decisions made during coaching. Intuition allows coaches to sense shifts in tone, energy, or focus, drawing on tacit knowledge and lived experience in a way that logical reasoning alone often cannot reach.

Grant (2014) argues that intuition complements evidence-based coaching techniques, enabling coaches to act in the moment with responsiveness and emotional intelligence. Rather than being seen as mysterious or irrational, intuition can be understood as the product of accumulated experience, reflective practice, and heightened self-awareness. Bachkirova (2024) reinforces this view by describing intuition as "*a fusion of insight, emotional alignment, and professional judgement*", all of which help the coach tune into what is not explicitly said but significantly influences the coaching dynamic.

However, Stober and Grant (2010) caution that intuition must be grounded in ethical awareness and critical reflection if it is to be used responsibly. Coaches who develop their intuitive skill through supervision, peer dialogue, and reflective practice are better able to balance instinct with accountability. When integrated with frameworks such as GROW, OSKAR or FACTS, intuition may become a conscious and dynamic skill, helping the coach to adapt support in real time while remaining client centred and ethically grounded.

Intuition as a reflexive tool, directly supports the central argument of this thesis in that support is not an automatic or invisible force, but a skilled practice that relies on situational awareness, judgement, and continual adaptation.

2.7.6 Intuition in the provision of support in coaching

Intuition is widely recognised as a core skill in providing emotional and relational support during coaching. It helps coaches recognise subtle cues, such as body language, hesitation, or shifts in tone, which may indicate underlying client concerns. Calabretta et al. (2017) highlight how intuition enables coaches to build trust and openness, deepening the client relationship. Similarly, Diller et al. (2021) note that intuition allows coaches to discern when to challenge, when to listen, and when to step back, helping to maintain an effective balance between support and autonomy.

However, intuition also has its limitations. Shoukry and Cox (2018) caution that intuition can be influenced by bias or assumptions if not critically examined. Diochon

and Lovelace (2015) emphasise the importance of ethical practice, suggesting that coaches must remain transparent and avoid imposing their interpretations on clients. Reflexivity and supervision are, therefore, essential thus providing mechanisms to validate intuitive insights and ensure they are aligned with the client's goals.

Grant (2014) and Bachkirova (2024) both argue that intuition develops with experience and deliberate reflection. It is not simply an innate ability but a competency that can be cultivated over time. As coaching practice evolves, there is increasing recognition that intuition, like support, should be treated as a learnable and deliberate skill, rather than something left to chance. This research aims to explore how reflexive support, when consciously developed, can enhance the coach's ability to manage and deliver support effectively.

Although intuition is recognised as an influential component of coaching, its role in defining and managing support remains largely unstructured and underexplored. Current coaching frameworks, including those from professional bodies such as the ICF, acknowledge the importance of presence, listening, and adaptability, yet they seldom provide explicit guidance on how intuition should be developed or applied as part of a coach's skillset. This absence reinforces the notion that intuition, like support, is assumed rather than deliberately cultivated. This research, therefore, seeks to address this gap by examining how intuition can be reflexively integrated into coaching practice to strengthen the quality and intentionality of support provided to clients.

Examples of intuition within the coaching context:

- **Sensing emotional shifts:** this can be through voice, tone, pitch as well as body language.
- **Navigating sensitive topics:** reacting to the responses and identifying when a topic or question raises emotions.
- **Intuitive questions:** delving deeper into a response and offering open questions and opportunities for the client to expand.
- **Patterns:** does the client seem more animated and open with one topic than another? This allows for the coach to focus on where the intervention is required most.

Shoukry and Cox (2018) also recommend seeking coach feedback to gain insights about potential truth and bias. Their argument reveals that the experience, and expertise play significant roles in determining the quality of intuition.

This is a paradox that surely requires research and a refresh of coaching training to incorporate such a necessary requirement. The researcher believes this will enable new coaches to proactively address support. The knowledge and skills will aid coaches to navigate the innumerable methods of support available to determine and tailor a solution to every client based on their needs, the outcome sought, and to reflexively manage that support throughout the intervention.

The crux of the research is the critical review of current praxis to develop and enhance the dynamic between coach and client through detailed explicit discussion and agreement on support. However, deferring feedback on the support provided by the coach, recognised as a key factor, until the client initiates it is not effective. The desire of this research is to have this training on defining and managing support transition from the intuitive to a more focussed notion on reflexive and as part of the essential learning required to be a coach.

As this section has demonstrated, support in coaching is deeply intertwined with reflexivity, and the quality of the coach and client relationship. Yet, to completely understand how support operates in practice, we must also consider the power dynamics at play. Coaching is often framed as a partnership, yet, the coach inevitably holds influence through their frameworks, their language, and how support is delivered. The next section explores this more critically, enquiring as to who shapes the coaching space, and whose version of ‘support’ takes priority?

2.8 Power Dynamics in Coaching

Power dynamics are an inherent feature of coaching relationships, shaped by the coach’s perceived expertise, authority, and the expectations of both clients and commissioning organisations. Diochon and Lovelace (2015) argue that the positional authority of a coach, particularly when contracted by an organisation, can unintentionally create a power imbalance, with clients perceiving the coach as the “expert” who dictates the process. This imbalance is especially evident among less experienced coaches, who may rely on a forceful or overly structured approach to

demonstrate credibility and control, which risks undermining the collaborative and ethical principles of coaching.

Shoukry and Cox (2018) highlight that power in coaching is often linked to organisational agendas, with coaches pressured to align client outcomes with corporate expectations rather than focusing solely on individual growth. This creates tension between organisational performance goals and the client's personal development needs, raising questions about autonomy, authenticity, and the ethical boundaries of coaching. Organisations often influence individuals to conform to established norms, and when coaching overlooks these power dynamics, it risks becoming a tool for maintaining compliance rather than enabling authentic leadership development and empowerment (Koroleva, 2024).

Coaching scholarship has long recognised that power and support must be consciously balanced. Bluckert (2005) stresses that the quality of the coaching relationship relies on the coach's ability to combine challenge with genuine, empowering support. Garvey et al. (2015) provide evidence that equitable and interactive coaching relationships, where clients are active participants in defining goals, lead to greater motivation, trust, and improved workplace performance. By contrast, when power dominance takes precedence, communication risks becoming one-directional, limiting the client's opportunity to explore their own needs and perspectives. Ianiro et al. (2015) warn that this dynamic can reduce client engagement and compromise the quality of outcomes.

Reflexivity is essential in helping coaches navigate these complexities. Stober and Grant (2010) suggest that reflective practice enables coaches to examine their positional power, biases, and underlying assumptions, allowing them to adjust their approach in favour of collaboration. This aligns with Gray (2006), who argues that self-awareness and reflective thinking are critical for ensuring that power is exercised ethically and constructively. Coaches who fail to engage in this level of self-reflection risk coercing clients, intentionally or not, into accepting predefined solutions that may not align with their personal goals.

As a practising coach, ethicality is of importance when discussing an intervention. The needs of the organisation are the reason for the coaching. However, in the

researcher's experience, the success of the organisation cannot be to the detriment of a coaching client, It is, therefore, paramount that the discussion on the impact of a coaching intervention may well create the change they require, but it will not always provide the desired outcome if that outcome is not fundamentally aligned with the wellbeing of the client.

Strategies to address power imbalances have been widely discussed in the literature. Harper (2012) and Lai and Palmer (2019) recommend that coaches involve clients in decision-making and co-designing objectives to create a sense of shared ownership. Similarly, scholars highlight the importance of creating non-judgmental and psychologically safe environments where clients can express their views openly without fear of judgment or organisational consequences, fostering the trust and openness essential for effective coaching (Advance HE, 2025). Okpala (2021) highlights that collaborative approaches, such as open dialogue and transparency, are vital for developing trust and ensuring that the client's voice is not overshadowed by organisational priorities.

Power imbalances can also negatively affect how support is perceived. Kruger and Terblanche (2022) note that when clients feel disempowered or unable to express challenges, they may not fully benefit from the support the coach offers. Fliegel (2016) adds that ethical coaching requires recognising the client's agency and avoiding the trap of exerting control under the guise of organisational performance metrics. This research, therefore, positions power dynamics as a central consideration, arguing that the ability to reflexively manage power and support together is critical for sustaining authentic, client-centred coaching relationships.

The presence of power dynamics highlights the importance of intentional and reflexive management of support in coaching. If power is left unexamined, the coaching relationship risks becoming unbalanced, with support either misdirected or diminished by organisational pressures. This research contends that coaches must develop both the awareness and the skills to navigate power consciously, ensuring that support remains authentic, collaborative, and tailored to the client's needs. By exploring how support is defined, negotiated, and sustained within these dynamics, this research seeks to address a critical gap in current coaching praxis and training.

The researcher opines that there is rarely a balance of power. Using a see-saw analogy, a positive coaching intervention should see movement on both sides, yet rarely is the outcome one of complete equity. Predominantly, the client is at some kind of disadvantage, and the coach is there to assist in working through that dynamic. If the client is overwhelmingly 'down' on the seesaw, then the coach is permanently 'up', which, in the researcher's view, is not a positive use of power. This gives further evidence of why defining and managing support is vital to ensure both sides benefit.

The discussion of power dynamics has revealed how easily support can be distorted, misdirected, or withheld, sometimes unintentionally, when structural or interpersonal imbalances are not consciously managed. This leads naturally to a deeper question: what prevents coaches from providing the kind of support clients truly need? The next section explores the internal and external barriers that hinder delivering effective, reflexive support in practice, from organisational agendas and performance pressure to the coach's own blind spots and emotional defences.

2.9 Barriers to the Provision of Client Support in the Coaching Process

Coaching relationships are rarely free from constraint. This section explores the barriers that coaches must navigate when trying to offer reflexive, tailored support in real-world settings. The COVID 19 pandemic fundamentally shifted coaching delivery. While many coaches initially feared that remote work would undermine their practice, it opened up opportunities to work with clients beyond geographical boundaries, including internationally. For some, this accelerated the adoption of virtual platforms and enhanced flexibility, but it also introduced new challenges around presence and connection in coaching conversations.

Barriers to the provision of support within coaching can be broadly categorised as organisational, personal, and interpersonal factors (Kudliskis, 2022). Organisational barriers often emerge when coaching is closely tied to corporate agendas, where coaches are expected to align interventions with organisational values or performance outcomes rather than the client's individual needs. Klasen and Clutterbuck (2012) highlight how organisations sometimes commission coaching programmes to reinforce their cultural norms, which can limit a coach's flexibility in providing personalised support. Hawkins (2012) adds that organisations exert structural

influence by controlling how coaching sessions are planned, scheduled, and evaluated, creating a tension between corporate expectations and client autonomy.

Welman and Bachkirova (2010) argue that reporting requirements, performance metrics, and organisational contracts can restrict a coach's ability to deliver genuine support, as coaches may fear losing future work if they diverge from expected protocols. These dynamics are particularly challenging when organisational authorities set rigid frameworks, leaving clients less able to request the support they truly need. Shoukry and Cox (2018) point out that power dynamics in organisational coaching can create a subtle pressure for compliance, with both the coach and the client constrained by institutional expectations. To maintain professional integrity, contemporary coaching ethics guidelines emphasise that coaches must exercise ongoing personal judgment, including the responsibility to withdraw from coaching engagements that compromise ethical standards or hinder authentic client support (ICF, 2025).

Personal barriers relate to client readiness, motivation, and self-perception. Clients may resist seeking support due to internalised beliefs or fear of change. Gray (2006) observes that behavioural change, an inherent part of most coaching interventions, can provoke discomfort, resistance, or even self-sabotage. Similarly, Kudliskis (2022) notes that negative peer feedback, unrealistic expectations, or a lack of awareness about available coaching support can discourage clients from fully engaging with the process. Coaches must work proactively to create safe, empowering environments where clients feel encouraged to articulate their needs and take ownership of their development.

It is vital to point out these risks. However, the researcher supports that many of these foundational skills, such as listening, questioning, and contracting, are second nature to experienced coaches. Highlighting them is important, but it is often the more subtle aspects of reflexivity and intuition that determine how support is effectively provided.

Interpersonal barriers often involve issues within the coach-client relationship. Misaligned communication styles, lack of trust, or insufficient rapport can hinder the quality of support. Ianiro et al. (2015) found that coaches' behaviour, especially when perceived as dominant rather than collaborative, can reduce client engagement. Poor listening skills or ambiguous feedback are also cited as factors that weaken the

coaching relationship (Slade, 2024). Additionally, cultural differences and personality clashes can create misunderstandings or limit psychological safety. As Passmore (2013) highlights, cultural sensitivity and adaptability are crucial for ensuring that support is not only delivered but also perceived as meaningful and relevant to the client.

The table below (Table 2.3) provides a summary of key organisational, personal, and interpersonal barriers to the provision of client support in coaching, alongside examples and supporting references.

Table 2.3 Summary of key barriers

Barrier Category	Description	Examples & References
Organisational	Structural or cultural constraints imposed by the organisation commissioning the coaching.	Rigid performance targets, reporting frameworks, or cultural norms (Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2012; Hawkins, 2012; Welman & Bachkirova, 2010).
Personal	Client-related factors that limit engagement or willingness to seek support.	Resistance to change, negative self-talk, peer pressure (Gray, 2006; Kudliskis, 2022).
Interpersonal	Relationship-based factors between the coach and client.	Communication breakdowns, lack of trust, cultural misalignment (Ianiro et al., 2015; Passmore, 2013; Slade, 2024).

These barriers highlight the complexity of delivering effective support in coaching, particularly when organisational pressures or relationship dynamics overshadow the client's needs. This reinforces the argument that support should be a consciously developed and reflexively managed skill, enabling coaches to adapt effectively while maintaining ethical integrity. This research aims to address how coaches can navigate these barriers and better define, negotiate, and sustain support throughout the coaching process.

Unclear coaching goals can hinder support because of misaligned expectations. This is where contracting provides a valuable opportunity to give and receive clarity. For example, an organisation stating ‘there are no issues, this is just a benefit we are offering’ is as unrealistic as a coach promising to transform operational delivery at every level. Communication, honesty, and clarity on what success looks and feels like paves the way for a contract that both parties can commit to.

2.10 Rapport as a Component of Supportive Coaching

Rapport has long been recognised as a foundational element of effective coaching, underpinning trust, collaboration, and openness in the coach-client relationship. Scholars broadly define rapport through qualities, such as mutual respect, trust, empathy, warmth, and understanding, all of which contribute to a safe and productive environment for learning and development. Gan and Chong (2015) emphasise that establishing rapport early in the coaching process creates the conditions for meaningful conversations and better alignment of goals. Similarly, Van Coller, Peter and Manzini (2020) describe rapport-building as a multi-dimensional process, shaped not only by verbal communication but also by tone, body language, and authentic presence.

Recent research consistently highlights that building rapport is primarily the coach's responsibility, requiring empathy, active listening, and cultural sensitivity to overcome barriers and foster client openness, trust, and engagement (Devereaux, 2025). These qualities form part of what Van Coller, Peter and Manzini (2020) call the “*supportive skills*” of coaching; skills such as patience, compassion, and understanding that enable coaches to create a climate of trust and mutual respect. Ianiro and Kauffeld (2014) further support this view, in that that coaches who intentionally cultivate rapport encourage self-directedness and greater engagement from clients, allow for a more collaborative and empowering process.

Rapport is often treated as an obvious but implicit skill, a concept assumed to be developed naturally rather than systematically. Van Nieuwerburgh (2017) argues that rapport is fundamental to effective coaching, as it provides the relational infrastructure upon which trust, recognition, and open dialogue are built. Abraham et al. (2015) highlight that prioritising trust not only strengthens rapport but also enhances

responsiveness and the client's willingness to share challenges honestly. Contemporary research underlines that building and maintaining rapport relies on the coach's empathy, active listening, and communication style, which foster trust and client openness crucial for effective coaching relationships (Lai, 2021).

However, while rapport is extensively discussed in coaching literature, the acquisition of rapport-building skills is rarely made explicit in formal training programmes. Atkinson et al. (2022) note that learners and clients are far more receptive to feedback when it comes from a trusted source with whom rapport has been established. This suggests that rapport is not simply a "soft" or secondary skill but an essential capability that coaches must develop intentionally, using reflective and adaptive strategies. Grant (2014) and Stober and Grant (2010) argue that effective coaches combine structured approaches with intuitive, relational skills like rapport to create a space where the client feels heard, respected, and empowered.

This research argues that support in coaching warrants the same level of recognition and intentional development as rapport. Just as rapport is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone of successful coaching relationships, support should be elevated to a visible and reflexively managed skill, rather than being assumed as a natural by-product of the coaching process. While rapport is actively taught through techniques such as active listening and questioning, support often remains undefined and unmeasured. By examining how support can be defined, taught, and embedded into the coaching dynamic, this research seeks to advance the argument that support, like rapport, must be consciously cultivated to create truly client-centred, ethical, and transformative coaching experiences.

2.11 Skills and behaviours of supportive coaching

The literature on coaching highlights two overarching dimensions that underpin effective practice: the skills that coaches apply and the behaviours they demonstrate. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing, with skills representing the technical abilities coaches bring to the interaction, and behaviours reflecting the values, attitudes, and relational qualities that create a supportive and trusting environment (Gilley and Kouider, 2010; Ellinger and Keller, 2003).

Empirical studies repeatedly identify a consistent skillset essential for supportive coaching. These include goal setting, providing constructive feedback, active listening, reflective questioning, and analysing client challenges (Ellinger et al., 2003). Gray (2006) emphasises that core skills, listening, questioning, challenge, and support, are integral to building an environment where growth can occur. Yet, despite the prominence of these skills in the literature, few studies explore how they are explicitly taught or measured in professional coaching programmes. This absence of structured instruction in "how" to deliver support leaves an important conceptual and practical gap. This research seeks to address that gap by exploring how support can be defined as a distinct and reflexively managed skill.

Goal setting, for instance, is often viewed as a mechanical exercise, but within supportive coaching it becomes a collaborative exploration. Coaches must balance setting measurable objectives with creating space for the client's values, aspirations, and uncertainties to emerge (Grant, 2014). Similarly, feedback must be delivered in a way that is not only constructive but also empathetic and timely, ensuring that clients feel motivated rather than judged (Atkinson et al., 2022). These nuances transform seemingly straightforward skills into complex relational practices that require both training and reflective awareness.

Beyond technical competencies, coaching literature underscores the importance of behaviours that reflect a coach's emotional and relational intelligence. Relationship, building is frequently cited as a fundamental behaviour, shaping the level of trust, safety, and openness within the coaching process (Morgan, Harkins and Goldsmith, 2011). A coach who actively invests in building authentic relationships creates a foundation where clients feel comfortable sharing vulnerabilities and engaging deeply in the process. Peltier (2021) warns that a lack of relational skill can create distance or mistrust, undermining the client's willingness to engage.

Trust, often described as the "invisible link" between the coach and the client, (Coaching Outside the Box, 2025) is an essential behavioural outcome of supportive coaching. Trust is cultivated through authenticity, reliability, and confidentiality. Aguilar (2020) stresses that coaches must demonstrate consistency in their words and actions to reassure clients that their input is respected and valued. Schieman, Schafer and

Gundy (2019) add that trust acts as the emotional anchor that sustains open dialogue and supports transformative learning.

Emotional intelligence (EI) plays a pivotal role in how supportive behaviours are expressed. EI enables coaches to read emotional cues, regulate their own responses, and tailor their interactions to meet the client's emotional needs (Chan and Mallett, 2011). Hughes and Terrell (2011) suggest that emotionally intelligent coaches can better manage the balance between challenge and support, ensuring that feedback is both impactful and compassionate.

Empathy, as an extension of EI, allows coaches to fully understand and connect with the client's experiences. Jarosz (2021) defines empathy as the process of "*stepping into the client's world*," which helps create a keen sense of partnership. This empathetic connection enables the coach to provide support in ways that resonate with the client's values and emotions. Conversely, the absence of empathy can lead to feelings of isolation or disengagement (Crawshaw, 2005).

Active listening is a foundational skill closely tied to supportive behaviours. According to Connor and Pokora (2017), active listening requires the coach not only to hear but to understand and validate what is being said, often by reflecting back or reframing the client's statements. Poor listening or miscommunication can leave clients feeling misunderstood or undervalued, weakening the relationship (Rosk and Wilson, 2013).

Complementing listening is the skill of clear and transparent communication, which involves the seamless exchange of information, clarity of expectations, and the ability to provide feedback that is actionable and respectful. Peltier (2021) highlights that simplicity in language, combined with openness and transparency, helps avoid confusion and ensures alignment between coach and client.

Despite the wealth of literature on coaching skills and behaviours, the mechanics of 'support' itself remain under-defined. Coaches are often trained to assume that the act of coaching inherently delivers support, but there is little guidance on the specific tools, techniques, and relational choices that constitute effective support. Parsloe and Wray (2000) define coaching as "*focusing, motivating, and supporting people in reaching their goals,*" yet they do not detail how this support is enacted.

Recent literature has begun to address this gap by emphasising linguistic sensitivity, reflective dialogue, and non-verbal behaviours as mechanisms of support. The USA Coach Academy (2025) highlights practices such as clean language questioning, tonal alignment, and strategic use of silence and humour as ways to deepen engagement and empower clients. These approaches suggest that support is not merely the background context of coaching, but an active construct requiring skill, intention, and adaptability.

Current literature reveals a paradox: although skills such as active listening and empathy are extensively discussed, support, the very foundation of the coaching relationship, is often assumed rather than explicitly defined or taught. This research seeks to challenge that assumption by examining how support can be conceptualised as both a skill and a behaviour that coaches consciously apply. By investigating the specific techniques, language choices, and relational strategies that “deliver” support, this research aims to elevate support to the same prominence as rapport or feedback in coaching pedagogy. This aligns directly with the research aim of exploring support as a reflexively managed skill, rather than an invisible by, product of coaching.

2.11.1 Skills and Behaviours Matrix for Supportive Coaching

To address the fragmented treatment of ‘support’ within coaching literature, this section introduces a Skills, Behaviours Matrix for Supportive Coaching. While skills are often discussed as technical competencies, behaviours reflect the relational dynamics and emotional intelligence that bring these skills to life. Combining these dimensions enables coaches to provide holistic, genuine support that is both structured and empathetic.

The matrix below in table 2.4 categorises examples of skills and behaviours drawn from contemporary coaching literature (e.g., Gilley et al., 2010; Ellinger et al., 2003; Peltier, 2021) and aligns them with the overarching themes of trust, psychological safety, and client empowerment. These examples illustrate how coaching support is enacted through both what a coach does (skills) and how they do it (behaviours).

2.11.2 Skills, Behaviours, Outcomes

To support future development in coaching research and practice, this research identified several gaps in the existing literature. These were drawn from the findings, the literature review, and the researcher's practitioner insight. Table 6.2 summarises each gap alongside suggested directions for future research that could build on this thesis.

Table 2.4 Skills, Behaviours, Outcomes

Skills	Behaviours	Outcomes/Impact
Goal setting and feedback	Demonstrating clarity, fairness, and constructive encouragement	Aligns client focus with achievable goals (Grant, 2014).
Active listening and questioning	Maintaining open body language, reflective pauses, and non-judgemental presence	Creates psychological safety and validates client experiences (Connor & Pokora, 2017).
Observation and analysis	Attuning to subtle cues (tone, emotion, body language)	Enables deeper insight into client challenges (Jarosz, 2021).
Communication and language framing	Using empathy, transparency, and clean language	Encourages trust and self, directed learning (USA Coach Academy, 2025).
Emotional regulation	Practising calmness, emotional mirroring, and situational sensitivity	Strengthens rapport and prevents reactive coaching behaviours (Hughes & Terrell, 2011).

Support is delivered not by skills or behaviours in isolation, but by the constructive interaction between the two. For instance, active listening becomes more impactful when paired with behaviours like reflective body language and empathetic tone, reinforcing the client's sense of being heard and understood. Similarly, goal setting is most effective when the coach demonstrates patience, warmth, and collaborative

framing rather than imposing targets (Peltier, 2021; Van Coller, Peter & Manzini, 2020).

By framing support through this matrix, coaches can move beyond seeing support as an abstract concept, instead recognising it as an integrated practice of applied skills and relational behaviours. This research aims to build on such insights by examining how coaches consciously adapt these elements throughout the coaching intervention, particularly when navigating complex dynamics such as organisational pressures or client resistance.

The Skills and Behaviours Matrix provides a practical synthesis of how support can be both enacted and observed in coaching. However, to fully understand how support is experienced in real coaching contexts, it is necessary to examine the available empirical research. The next section explores what studies to date have revealed about the role, impact, and treatment of support within coaching interventions, and where the gaps still remain.

2.12 Empirical Research on Support in Coaching

Empirical research consistently highlights the importance of support in coaching, though it rarely explores its operational delivery. Blakey and Day (2012) assert that meaningful development only occurs when coaches offer both support and challenge, yet few studies go beyond this premise to examine how support is enacted.

Recent literature positions coaching as a relational process built on reflection, adaptation, and trust (De Haan and Nilsson, 2023). In this context, support is often discussed as a contributor to outcomes such as confidence, motivation, and performance (Ali et al., 2018; Knight, 2021). However, these studies tend to focus on outcomes, offering little insight into the specific behaviours or skills required to create supportive conditions.

Several authors extend the discussion to organisational factors. Bozer and Jones (2018) demonstrate that support is reinforced when coaches operate within systems that offer clarity, resources, and sponsorship. Cannon, Bowers et al. (2023) confirm this through meta-analysis, showing that coaching impact increases where organisations create the right conditions. Bachkirova (2024) reframes support as an

evolving process, shaped by dialogue and mutual trust, rather than a static feature of the coaching relationship.

There is also growing recognition that support enhances not only client experience, but coach development. CoachHub (2024) finds that practitioners engaged in reflective support practices report greater adaptability, resilience, and professional insight. Hughes and Terrell (2011) argue that emotional and practical support improves a coach's ability to respond creatively to client needs, strengthening both practice and presence.

Alongside this, several studies examine core skillsets linked to supportive coaching. Gilley and Kouider (2010) and Ellinger (2003) identify goal setting, listening, feedback, and questioning as critical coaching behaviours, yet fall short of clarifying how these skills are used to deliver meaningful support. Hahn (2016) outlines broader dimensions such as valuing ambiguity and open communication, while Gray (2016) includes support as a named competency, alongside listening and challenge.

Yet, despite this naming, little guidance is given on how such skills are taught. The absence of structured instruction on support is a recurring issue. The literature refers to support but often treats it as implicit or assumed. Research by Peltier (2021) and Aguilar (2020) points to trust as central to effective support, describing it as the relational glue that enables openness. However, they offer minimal detail on how trust is actively built or how support is varied in response to client cues.

Emotional intelligence has been explored as a route to providing support, with Chan and Mallett (2011) highlighting its role in reading and managing emotional dynamics. Reflexivity is presented by Gray (2006) as a means for coaches to maintain self-awareness and thereby offer more attuned support. Terrell and Hughes (2008) similarly suggest that emotional agility helps coaches respond to challenges with empathy and presence.

Empathy emerges across the literature as a linchpin of support. Jarosz (2020) frames it as the coach's capacity to emotionally attune to the client's world, while Crawshaw (2005) warns that its absence may lead to client isolation. Connor and Pokora (2017) define active listening as a multi-layered skill involving attention, reflection, and response, yet caution that mishandled listening can leave clients feeling unseen or dismissed (Rost and Wilson, 2013).

The literature also reflects an emerging consensus that coaching models like GROW and OSKAR, while widely taught, prioritise structure over support. Stober and Grant (2010) argue that such models focus on problem solving and goal setting but offer limited insight into the micro-skills that enable supportive coaching. These include tone, emotional collaboration, or reflective silence, elements rarely detailed in mainstream coaching education.

The lack of clarity around support creates a blind spot in training and professional standards. Although Bachkirova (2024) recognises support as a negotiated, dynamic process, the field continues to fall short of treating it as a teachable skill. Coaches are often left to rely on intuition, risking inconsistency in client experience and ethical practice.

This research aims to develop the conversation. While Grant (2014) identifies encouragement and reflective questioning as key enablers of client growth, and Ali et al. (2018) link support to team connection, these insights are descriptive rather than instructional. The notion of support as a facilitative force (Lawley and Linder-Pelz, 2016; Cox, 2006) is compelling yet rarely unpacked in behavioural terms.

Finally, Fliegel's (2016) repeated use of the term "*genuine support*" suggests an intuitive recognition that not all support is equal. Yet, this rhetorical emphasis adds little to the operational clarity the field still lacks. The literature mentions support frequently but treats it as a backdrop. This research contends that support should be recognised, defined, and developed as a core coaching skill, one that is reflexively managed and intentionally practised.

While the literature consistently points to support as a key ingredient in effective coaching, it lacks the definition of how support is understood, taught, or applied in real practice. This gap is not just theoretical but has real implications for how coaches are trained and how clients experience coaching. With so much of the existing research focused on outcomes rather than process, there remains a lack of clarity around how support is reflexively managed within the coaching relationship.

This thesis aims to address that gap. The next section outlines how insights from the literature informed the design of a mixed methods survey, created to explore how coaches themselves understand and apply support in their everyday practice.

2.13 Design of Survey Questions based on the Literature Review

A survey was developed as the initial phase of this mixed methods study, directly addressing the conceptual and practical gaps identified in the literature. The literature review revealed that while support is frequently cited as central to effective coaching, it is rarely defined, operationalised, or reflexively explored. This informed the decision to begin with a broad, anonymous survey to establish how coaches describe and apply support in their own practice.

The survey was structured in two parts. The first section used Likert scale questions to capture quantitative patterns in how coaches perceive, value, and use support across different coaching contexts. From a pragmatist perspective, the Likert scale questions served a practical function: they helped the researcher quickly identify patterns across a wide group of coaches. The researcher was not looking for statistical proof, but for indicative trends, where agreement clustered, where it diverged, and what that might suggest about how support is understood in practice.

Because this was the first phase in an exploratory sequential design, the researcher needed a method that could give a broad, accessible overview. Likert items allowed the gathering of consistent, comparable data from all respondents, which was a useful starting point for identifying areas to probe further in interviews.

The use of scaled responses also allowed for triangulation. The researcher could compare what coaches said they do (quantitatively) with how they talked about it (qualitatively), helping to highlight disconnects, contradictions, or underexplored assumptions. This links back to the aim of investigating support as a reflexively managed skill.

The second section invited open text responses to explore, in the coaches' own words, how they define and deliver support. This combination allowed the researcher to gather both measurable trends and richer, qualitative insights, laying the foundation for deeper exploration in the interview phase.

By grounding the survey questions in the specific gaps highlighted in the literature, particularly the lack of clarity around how support is managed and taught, the design ensured alignment between the research aim and method. This approach also

supports the researcher's pragmatist stance, prioritising useful knowledge grounded in real world coaching practice.

2.13.1 Survey questions with links to Literature

To ensure the survey was grounded in the literature and addressed the specific conceptual gaps identified in this review, each question was mapped directly to relevant research themes. Table 2.5 outlines the survey design in full, presenting each item alongside its corresponding literature source. This approach provides transparency about how theoretical insights shaped the practical tool and illustrates a cohesive link between research aim, survey content, and the broader academic conversation. The structure also reflects the researcher's pragmatist stance by connecting conceptual inquiry with usable, real world data collection methods.

Table 2.5 Survey questions with links to Literature

Quantitative Survey Questions
1 To what extent is the provision of support explicitly discussed with the client at the start of the coaching intervention? **(Grant, 2014; De Haan and Nilsson, 2023)**
1 Not at all
2 To a small extent
3 To a moderate extent
4 To a large extent
5 To a very large extent
2. How frequently is the client's need for support assessed throughout the coaching intervention? **(Bachkirova, 2024)**
1 Never
2 Rarely
3 Sometimes
4 Often
5 Always
3. To what degree does the coach actively encourage the client to reflect on the support they require during the coaching sessions? **(Stober and Grant, 2010; Hughes and Terrell, 2011)**
1 Not at all
2 To a small degree
3 To a moderate degree

4 To a large degree
5 To a very large degree
4. How often does the coach and client collaboratively review the level of support needed as the coaching intervention progresses? **(Hughes and Terrell, 2011; Grant, 2014)**
1 Never
2 Rarely
3 Sometimes
4 Often
5 Always
5. To what extent does the coach adapt their approach to providing support based on the client's changing needs throughout the coaching intervention? **(Bachkirova, 2024)**
1 Not at all
2 To a small extent
3 To a moderate extent
4 To a large extent
5 To a very large extent
6. How frequently does the coach seek feedback from the client on the effectiveness of the support provided during the coaching sessions? **(Grant, 2014; Stober and Grant, 2010)**
1 Never
2 Rarely
3 Sometimes
4 Often
5 Always
7. To what degree does the coach consider the client's personal and professional context when determining the appropriate level of support to offer? **(Hughes and Terrell, 2011; De Haan and Nilsson, 2023)**
1 Not at all
2 To a small degree
3 To a moderate degree
4 To a large degree
5 To a very large degree
8. How often does the coach and client engage in open discussions about the coach's role in providing support throughout the coaching intervention? **(Hughes and Terrell, 2011; Grant, 2014)**
1 Never
2 Rarely

3 Sometimes
4 Often
5 Always
9. To what extent does the coach draw on their own experiences and reflections to inform the support they provide to the client? **(Bachkirova, 2024; Grant, 2014)**
1 Not at all
2 To a small extent
3 To a moderate extent
4 To a large extent
5 To a very large extent
10. How frequently does the coach seek external supervision or guidance to ensure the appropriate level of support is being provided to the client? **(Grant, 2014; De Haan and Nilsson, 2023)**
1 Never
2 Rarely
3 Sometimes
4 Often
5 Always

In addition to the structured Likert scale items, the survey included a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed, reflective responses. These qualitative items were developed to explore how coaches describe, interpret, and apply support within their own practice, in their own words.

2.13.2 Qualitative questions for survey

While the previous table (Table 2.5) outlines the rationale for each quantitative question, Table 2.6 below presents the corresponding qualitative questions, which were grounded in the themes identified throughout the literature review. These questions were designed to prompt narrative responses that could be thematically analysed, allowing the researcher to examine not just what coaches say they do, but how they articulate and make sense of their actions in context.

This phase of data collection reflects the researcher's pragmatist stance and exploratory sequential design, using practitioner language to surface lived meanings of support and lay the foundation for the second phase of in-depth interviews.

Table 2.6 Qualitative questions for survey

Questions for narrative response
1. In establishing a supportive environment for your clients, how do you tailor your coaching approach to meet their unique needs and preferences? (De Haan and Nilsson, 2023; Hughes and Terrell, 2011)
2. Can you share examples of specific strategies you employ to develop trust and openness within the coaching relationship, creating an environment where clients feel comfortable expressing their concerns and aspirations? (Gan and Chong, 2015; Van Coller, Peter, and Manzini, 2020; Grant, 2014)
3. How do you assess and address potential barriers or challenges that may impact the client's ability to fully engage in the coaching process, ensuring an accommodating atmosphere? (Klasen and Clutterbuck, 2012; Kudliskis, 2022; Passmore, 2013)
4. In your coaching practice, how do you encourage clients to reflect on their experiences and insights, contributing to a self-reflective learning environment? (Nash, MacPherson and Collins, 2022; Stober and Grant, 2010; Abraham, 2015)
5. Could you elaborate on the role of ongoing support beyond formal coaching sessions? How do you provide resources or assistance to help clients navigate challenges and sustain their growth independently? (Bachkirova, 2024; Hughes and Terrell, 2011)

Together, the qualitative survey questions offered an opportunity for coaches to articulate their understanding and application of support in a way that moved beyond tick-box responses. These narrative insights served two purposes: they provided depth to complement the quantitative data, and they helped surface practitioner language and interpretations that would shape the next phase of the research. This aligns with the researcher's pragmatist stance, allowing real world experiences to inform the ongoing inquiry into support as a reflexively managed coaching skill.

2.13.3 The Gap in the Literature

These questions were designed to develop the conversation and to invite coaches to describe support in their own terms, rather than fit it into predefined boxes. What they shared offered valuable insight into how support is understood, experienced, and enacted in real practice. These narratives also laid the groundwork for identifying

patterns, gaps, and contradictions, many of which directly reflect what is missing in the literature.

This pattern mirrors what current literature has already highlighted, which is that support is discussed but not defined as a coachable skill (Cox et al., 2018; Passmore and Tee, 2020). Recent reviews of coaching competencies also note that widely used professional frameworks do not name support explicitly, leaving a gap between what practitioners describe and what is formally recognised in training (ICF, 2021; EMCC, 2020). The next table, Table 2.7, draws a line between what the literature currently tells us about support in coaching, what remains underexplored or unclear, and how this research aims to address those gaps. This is where the purpose of the research becomes sharply focused, not just describing support, but questioning why it has remained so undefined for so long, and what needs to change.

Table 2.7 The Gap in the Literature

What is Known	What is Under-Theorised	How This Research Responds
Coaching models such as GROW, OSKAR, and CLEAR provide structured frameworks (Whitmore, 1992; Adams, 2022; Hawkins, 2013).	Support is rarely defined as a distinct, reflexively managed skill (Grant, 2014; Stober and Grant, 2010).	Explores support as a skill, challenging its assumed 'invisibility' in models.
Rapport, presence, and trust are recognised as essential relational elements (Gan and Chong, 2015; Van Coller-Peter and Manzini, 2020).	The balance between challenge, care, and containment is poorly articulated (Blakey and Day, 2012; Hughes and Terrell, 2011).	Investigates support as a balance of these relational dynamics.
Reflexivity is acknowledged as important for advanced coaching practice (Abraham, 2015; Nash, MacPherson, and Collins, 2022).	How reflexivity underpins support in real-time decision, making is unclear (De Haan and Nilsson, 2023).	Examines reflexive management of support across diverse coaching scenarios.
Coach education often emphasises models over adaptive practice (Bishop, 2018; Grant, 2022).	Limited focus on real world adaptation and intuitive support beyond models (Whitworth, Kimsey, House and Sandahl, 2007; Diller et al., 2021).	Provides evidence of practitioners moving beyond rigid models to responsive support.
Coaching ethics and boundaries are widely discussed (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2017; Passmore, 2013).	How boundaries are used as a form of support remains under, explored (Vince, 2011; Cox, 2006).	Positions boundary work as an integral element of supportive practice.

This table makes clarity in that while the coaching literature offers a strong foundation, it leaves critical questions about support unresolved. The assumptions embedded in models, training, and practice reveal a tendency to treat support as self-evident, something coaches either 'have' or develop instinctively. By positioning support as a skill that is both learnable and reflexively managed, the research responds directly to the gaps identified here and lays the groundwork for the empirical exploration that follows.

2.14 Chapter Conclusion

This literature review has explored the foundations, dynamics, and lived realities of support in workplace coaching. Drawing on historical context, theoretical perspectives, and empirical studies, it has shown that while support is consistently referenced as a key factor in coaching success, it remains under-defined, under-taught, and largely taken for granted within the profession.

Several themes emerged. First, support is inherently subjective. Its effectiveness relies not on rigid adherence to models, but on the coach's ability to adapt responsively to the client's needs, often through intuition and reflexivity. Yet the professionalisation of coaching, via global standards and ethical codes, can constrain this responsiveness, creating tensions between practice and policy.

Second, there is wide variation in how support is framed across coaching models like GROW, OSKAR, and FACTS. While each provides a structured process, few offer guidance on how to navigate the emotional, relational, or ethical complexity of offering support in real time. This lack of uniformity is not just a theoretical concern, it affects how support is taught, enacted, and experienced.

Third, the literature's focus on client outcomes often eclipses the reality that coaches also require support, for reflection, supervision, and professional development. This oversight risks limiting the sustainability and integrity of the coaching relationship. Addressing the support needs of coaches may be as vital as examining how they offer it.

Perhaps most concerning is the absence of a shared definition of support. Without it, coaches may unconsciously project their own assumptions about what support means, reinforcing power imbalances or unintentionally undermining the client's autonomy. This points to a significant ethical gap in current coaching frameworks.

This research responds to that gap. It positions support not as a background feature of good coaching, but as a reflexively managed skill, one that can and should be defined, taught, and explored. The inconsistencies across literature, theory and training create both a challenge and an opportunity which is to move beyond assumptions, and towards actionable insights grounded in real world coaching practice.

This research adopts a pragmatist stance, and mixed methods design to do just that. The next chapter outlines the methodology and explains how each phase of the research has been shaped by the gaps surfaced in this review.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The research stems from an industry apparently omitting a vital part of what we fundamentally do as coaches, which is to support and enable a client to make a change. The immense and variable methods of supporting a client can be overwhelming to begin with, let alone considering the combinations of support such as how, when, how often, a client can and should be supported. This is what has sparked the researcher's curiosity. As coaches we are taught on contracting with clients, setting boundaries, questioning techniques, upholding ethics, safeguarding and considering financial arrangements. Yet, coaches are not taught on the explicit way to offer support. Indeed, it may be proven through the analysis of data that the client unequivocally accepts the support offered by the coach as an assumption of the coach knowing best.

The above is an interesting dynamic, which may be treated as an assumption or as an implicit skill. What requires more explicit discussion between a coach and a client is how support is to be provided. At times, this may take the form of a hand on the shoulder and words of reassurance. At other times, it may mean being told firmly what has been committed to and what is expected to be delivered. Between and beyond these points lies a wide spectrum of supportive methods. How does a coach know how to give the best support if the coach and client do not discuss it and agree how the client best welcomes the support the coach offers?

Further, there are anticipated recommendations for the coaching community. To create a significant impact on the coaching community there is an opportunity to enhance the training of coaches and the relationship-building dynamic with clients.

This research is developing a focus on support similar to how building rapport is seen as a basis of coaching success, which is not to disrupt and overturn the decades of coaching development and implementation, rather it is to broaden the ability for relationships and dynamics to be transparent and, without any irony being overlooked, to support the coaching community further.

The research defines support as a dynamic process requiring clear management from the coach and engaging the client, placing emphasis on the need for clarity, reflexivity and fluidity in responding to change and challenge throughout a coaching intervention.

3.2 Philosophical and Ontological Stance

This research adopted a pragmatist stance, focusing on what is most useful and actionable in understanding and developing support as a coaching competence. Pragmatism, as an epistemological position, prioritises outcomes and real world application over adherence to any single philosophical paradigm. This approach is appropriate to the aims of the research, which sought to generate findings that are both theoretically insightful and practically relevant for workplace coaching.

Ontologically, pragmatism assumes that reality is not fixed but shaped by interactions, experiences, and context. This view aligns with the findings of this research, which suggest that support in coaching is a dynamic and co-created process rather than a static entity. By drawing on symbolic interactionism, which emphasises how meaning is constructed through social interaction, the research explored how both coaches and clients shape the meaning of support in real time. Narrative discourse analysis complemented this lens by examining how coaches use language, metaphors, and storytelling to express and construct their approach to support.

This combination of perspectives allowed the research to remain flexible, focusing on methods and interpretations that provided the most insight into how support is understood, enacted, and conceptualised as a reflexively managed coaching skill. By using pragmatism as the overarching stance, the research avoided being constrained by any single methodological tradition, instead prioritising what worked in practice to generate meaningful findings.

3.2.1 Reasons for Pragmatism

Outlined below are several compelling reasons why pragmatism is the optimal philosophical and ontological option for the research into workplace coaching praxis.

3.2.1. 1. Practical Outcomes as a primary focus

Pragmatism stresses the practical consequences of ideas and actions. In the context of workplace coaching, this means that research can be linked directly to improving coaching practices and impact on the client. Pragmatism allows researchers to monitor

and deep dive into what works in practice. This is opposed to being bound in theoretical debates about abstract concepts.

3.2.1. 2. Flexibility and Adaptability

One of the core strengths of pragmatism is its flexibility. Pragmatism does not adhere closely to any one methodological approach. Instead, pragmatism supports the use of several methods that appropriately manage and respond to the research questions at hand. This is particularly useful in workplace coaching research, where both qualitative and quantitative data can provide valuable data.

3.2.1.3. Integration of Theory and Practice

Pragmatism links the space between theory and practice and encourages researchers to develop recommendations that are founded in practical experience. Importantly, it can be applied to real world situations. This is critical for workplace coaching, where actionable outcomes are developed and implemented to enhance coaching efficacy.

3.2.1.4. Focus on Experience

Pragmatism places a strong emphasis on experience as a source of knowledge. This is particularly relevant in workplace coaching, where the experiences of both coaches and clients provide rich data for understanding and improving coaching practices. By focusing on lived experiences, pragmatism ensures that research is grounded in the realities of the workplace.

3.2.1.5. Dynamic and Evolving Nature

Pragmatism recognises that knowledge evolves over time and is not static. This is well placed for the dynamic nature of workplace coaching. Practices and strategies must adapt to changing organisational needs and individual development goals. Pragmatist research can develop alongside these changes providing insights and continuing improvements.

3.2.1.6. Problem Solving Orientation

Pragmatism is fundamentally problem solving in its application. It encourages researchers to classify and manage practical problems. It, therefore, makes an ideal

methodology for workplace coaching, where the goal is often to solve specific issues related to the workplace and the organisational strategy.

3.2.1.7. Focus on Outcomes and Impact

Pragmatism values research that has a material impact. In workplace coaching, this means that the research is designed to produce outcomes that offer solutions to directly improve coaching practices and impact on the client. This outcome-focused approach ensures relevance to the coaching community and delivers benefits for both coaches and clients.

3.2.2 Challenges and Considerations

It is remiss of any researcher to overlook challenges and considerations with any of the philosophical and ontological approaches to the research methodology. In choosing pragmatism, it is important the following are acknowledged, discussed with the supervision team, and are referenced in findings:

1. **Subjectivity:** Researchers must be cognisant of and reflexive about their own biases throughout the analysis process.

   2. Data Integration: Balancing and integrating insights from different data sources (surveys and interviews) requires careful consideration. Relying too strongly on one of the mixed methods will not give clarity of data interpretation.

   3. Relative Sensitivity: Ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in the specific contexts of workplace coaching.

   4. Ethical Considerations: Maintaining participant confidentiality while presenting rich, detailed data.

   5. Validity and Reliability: Utilising strategies such as participant checking, debriefing, and triangulation of the two methods to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis.

3.2.3 Philosophical Stance and Approach

This study takes a pragmatist stance, focused on what works in practice. Pragmatism fits the research aim because support in coaching is not a fixed concept, but something shaped in context. It also informed the design: surveys to show patterns, interviews to

explore lived practice, and analytical lenses to examine how support is expressed and negotiated, (see Table 3.1 below).

Table 3.1 Researcher Position

Element	Position Taken	How It Fits This Study
Ontology (what reality is like)	**Pragmatist:** reality is not fixed, but multiple and shaped by context and interaction. Support in coaching is not a single, universal truth, but something that takes form in practice.	Fits the research aim: "support" does not exist as a stable, pre-defined entity. It is *enacted* and *constructed* differently by coaches in different settings.
Epistemology (how we know about it)	**Practice-based, reflexive, interpretive:** knowledge is gained by examining how practitioners talk about, negotiate, and make sense of support. Multiple forms of knowing (survey trends, interview accounts, reflexive interpretation) are valid and useful.	Justifies the mixed-methods design: surveys identified patterns, interviews explored meanings, reflexivity ensured interpretation of how support is *constructed in language and interaction*.
Philosophical stance	**Pragmatism:** a practical, outcome-focused approach, guided by real-world coaching dynamics rather than abstract theory alone.	Ensures the study remains grounded in coaching practice and produces actionable insights for practitioners and educators.
Methodology	**Exploratory sequential design:** survey findings informed interviews, both qualitative in nature.	Provides a logical progression: survey gave breadth, interviews gave depth, together supporting the exploratory aim.
Analytical lenses	**Discourse analysis and symbolic interactionism:** focus on language, meaning, and the co-construction of support.	Enables analysis of how support is expressed, negotiated, and reflexively managed in coaching conversations.

Pragmatism provided a flexible and practice-oriented foundation for this study. By combining a pragmatist view of reality with a reflexive, interpretive approach to knowledge, the research was able to capture both the breadth of survey patterns and the depth of interview accounts. The exploratory design reflected the logic of building understanding step by step, while the analytical lenses of discourse analysis and symbolic interactionism ensured close attention to how meanings of support were expressed and negotiated in practice. This integration shows clear alignment between

philosophy and method and supports the study's aim of generating actionable insights to advance workplace coaching.

3.3 Research design and rationale

Mixed Methods Design and Justification

This research employed an exploratory sequential mixed methods design, beginning with a survey and followed by in depth interviews. This design allowed the research to move from a broad mapping of practitioner perspectives to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how support is enacted in real world coaching contexts. The survey phase provided initial patterns, language, and areas of interest, which were used to shape and refine the interview questions.

This sequential approach aligns with a pragmatist stance, focusing on the methods that were most effective in answering the research questions rather than adhering to a single paradigm. The combination of methods also provided triangulation, ensuring that the findings were grounded in both breadth (from 108 survey responses) and depth (from 20 interview narratives). As Harvard Catalyst (2025) notes, mixed methods research offers a way to integrate quantitative and qualitative perspectives to provide richer, more actionable insights into complex phenomena.

The survey and interviews were not treated as separate or siloed phases but as interconnected elements of the same inquiry. Insights from the survey informed the themes explored in the interviews, while the interviews added depth and reflexive interpretation to the initial survey findings. This iterative interplay strengthened the reliability and interpretive richness of the research.

The methodological decision considered three broad areas: Qualitative, Quantitative or Mixed Methods. The decision on which methodology route to take requires an analysis of the research, specifically the following:

- The research question- is it explanatory or exploratory?
- Is the data to be compiled subjective or objective?
- What are the constraints of the research, considering time, resources, and expertise?

Dawson (2009) simplistically offers a researcher the opportunity to explore the '5 W's' to assist in the decision for methodology: What, Why, Who, Where, When. Whilst this is a framework to start the decision making for methodology, the researcher believes this decision is too general. It is useful to funnel the decision making to a more detailed approach. What Dawson offers is an advantage in deciding the methodological perspective which is the linguistics around the research question: Using 'how many, test, verify, how often, how satisfied' suggests quantitative whereas 'discover, thought, motivation, behaviour, think/thoughts, problems' gives a leaning towards qualitative approach (p20).

There is a spectrum of understanding qualitative methodology as being simple data collection at one end to a deep exploration of the intricacies of the behaviour and meaning making of the world at the other. This research is centrally based on this spectrum, with data collection and analysis and a desire to understand the application of coaching as a human interaction with the aim of a positive outcome.

Quantitative methodology focuses more on the testing of hypotheses and relationships between variables. The data is more numerical in nature and can produce macro perspective of an area being researched. Whilst there is significant value to the numerical data, when analysing style, practice and how a respondent thinks, pure numerical responses can disregard the nuances and fail to gather the supplementary detail obtained though discourse. Therefore, quantitative alone would not provide the rich data required to understand the practices coaches are or are not applying when seeking the preferred support for clients.

Costly (2010) describes quantitative research as 'structured' and 'inflexible' which although can bring some constraints, can also derive clarity. Using these considerations as deciding factors the researcher drew to a methodology most appropriate to garner the richest data for analysis.

Considering there is a crossover with the researcher's data requirement to understand coaching practice with the limited variables of yes/no so to determine the scope of the coaching practice and narrative discourse, neither qualitative nor quantitative are deemed appropriate to meet the criteria. It is, therefore, appropriate that the methodology uses mixed methods to meet the requirements of the data required.

An opportunity to develop the research with symbolic interactionism is also a possibility. Dingwall (2001) is used as a theoretical lens, not a method, giving three assumptions to consider for symbolic interactionism:

1. Individuals construct meaning via the communication process.

2. Self-concept is a motivation for behaviour.

3. A unique relationship exists between the individual and society.

In addition, it is accepted that a theory based on human interaction and communication is enabled by words, gestures, and other symbols that have developed conventionalised meanings. This can be applied to coaching relationship. It is not a stretch to conceive how support within the coaching relationship has developed without the skill being deconstructed, taught, developed, and ingrained in the coaching dynamic in a similar way building rapport and contracting has.

Using the three questions referenced above, a mixed methods methodology allows for deeper understanding of the experiences of coaches in the workplace. The experiences, perspectives and the meaning making of the dialogue can be analysed through research of coaches discussing their praxis.

This research is exploratory in the dialogue and relationship creation of a coach with their client to establish how support is managed throughout the coaching intervention. Asking data-based questions for quantitative responses can then be triangulated with the narrative responses.

As an HR professional and a coach, it would be disingenuous and unethical to suggest the researcher could detach themself from the overall research. Hence, the data is subjective. The desire to improve coaching is a motivator and it is important the researcher's bias is checked regularly with the researcher's supervisors. Inside research bias is a regular consideration and is covered further in the Limitations and Potential biases section below in 3.10.

Research constraints involve resources available. Being within the HR and coaching community, the researcher has access to participants and the expertise the researcher has allows for the deeper questions based on knowledge and experience to be included in the data collection.

Triangulation and synthesis of data analysis is the essential aspect of mixed method research which serves as a monitor when addressing the workplace coaching dynamics and supporting elements. A combination of surveys and in-depth interviews can provide an extensive understanding of the complicated interactions in coaching relations and the support available. The relevance of triangulation in this regard is its capacity to enhance the validity and reliability of findings by cross-checking data from diverse sources (Flick, 2022). This means that a researcher can deal with limitations that arise from single method studies making it possible to have a clearer view on workplace coaching support.

Comparative analysis has been included in this research design throughout the data collection stages. This process assists a researcher to better understand emerging themes and concepts as they go through each phase of data collection (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2023). For example, by comparing survey data with knowledge acquired from in depth interviews, the researcher is able to notice patterns and discrepancies as well as some unique insights that may not be observable when only employing quantitative methodology.

The survey data can provide an overview of coaches' experiences and observations regarding workplace support. This quantitative data can then inform the development of interview questions, allowing a researcher to delve deeper into specific areas of interest or clarify ambiguous findings (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2022). As themes emerge from the survey, the researcher can further refine the interview questions to explore individual experiences and perspectives in greater depth.

Constant comparative analysis is particularly valuable in this research design as it allows for the continuous refinement of data collection instruments and analytical frameworks. As new insights emerge from each stage, researchers can adapt their approach to capture the most relevant and meaningful data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This flexibility is essential when researching complex social phenomena such as workplace coaching dynamics, where unexpected themes or relationships may surface during the research process. Through comparing and contrasting data from

diverse sources, researchers identify these potential limitations, hence leading to much stronger and more credible findings (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2022).

Moreover, triangulation through mixed methods and constant comparative analysis can help mitigate potential biases inherent in individual data collection techniques. For example, survey responses may be influenced by social desirability bias, while focus group dynamics could lead to groupthink. It is for this and other reasons that focus groups were considered and discarded.

The optimum approach for this research sits within the pragmatist paradigm which focuses and prioritises effectiveness in achieving the research aim. Whilst focus groups are an excellent method of exploring group meaning making, this research focuses on the individual praxis and application of the reflexive nature of support in the coaching intervention.

Reflexivity has been established in the literature review as a highly personal and individually managed process., The researcher identified that the power of data responses lies on the individual response than in a collective discussion. The research is not seeking consensus driven responses which could risk a dilution of insight into the coaching practice and the uniqueness of how support is managed.

There were also logistical considerations and managing the availability of coaches for shared group sessions proved from a practical perspective to be an unworkable task. Therefore, focus groups were not omitted as an oversight, rather as a deliberate methodological and philosophical choice.

Triangulation enables a much broader examination of the support component in workplace coaching by integrating quantitative and qualitative data. Alongside measurable insights drawn from survey data, richer, context-specific details about coaching relationships and support dynamics can emerge through qualitative methods such as focus group discussions or interviews. For example, recent coaching research using both surveys and focus groups identified deeper themes related to coach-client interactions and emotional dynamics, revealing patterns that would not appear in survey responses alone (Schneider et al., 2023)

The lenses of symbolic interactionism and narrative discourse were not only used during analysis but also shaped how the researcher designed the data collection tools. The survey's open, text questions were written to give participants space to describe their experiences in their own words, reflecting the view that meaning is built through interaction and context. In the same way, the interviews were designed to invite stories, metaphors, and personal reflections, capturing how coaches themselves talk about and frame the idea of support.

To summarise, it is vital to triangulate and synthesise mixed methods with constant comparative data analyses in order to fully understand workplace coaching support. The validity and reliability of results are also improved by this technique as well as making the research process more flexible and distinct. Therefore, the research requires continuous comparison given the collection methods which can give an accurate and overall understanding on complex interrelationships within the workplace coaching support system.

3.3.1 Research Design Summary

The overall research design is summarised in Table 3.2, which outlines the two phases of data collection, their purposes, sample sizes, and the type of data generated.

Table 3.2 Research Design Summary

Phase	Purpose	Sample	Data Type
Phase 1: Survey	Explore broad perceptions of support in coaching, gather baseline language and concepts.	100 coaching practitioners (mixed sectors).	Quantitative and qualitative (open-ended responses).
Phase 2: Interviews	Deepen understanding of how coaches enact support, test and expand survey insights.	20 in-depth participants (semi-structured interviews).	Qualitative (transcribed conversations, thematic coding).

Table 3.2 sets out the structure of the two-phase research design, but Figure 3.1 shows how the process unfolded in real time, beginning with broad insights from the survey, moving into deeper conversations through interviews, and ending with a

joined-up analysis. This flow captures the logic of the research, building understanding step by step and particularly focusing participants.

3.3.2 Data Collection and Analysis Flow

Figure 3.1 provides a visual overview of the data collection and analysis process. It illustrates how Phase 1 survey responses (quantitative and qualitative) informed the design of Phase 2 interviews, leading to integrated thematic analysis and triangulation across both datasets.

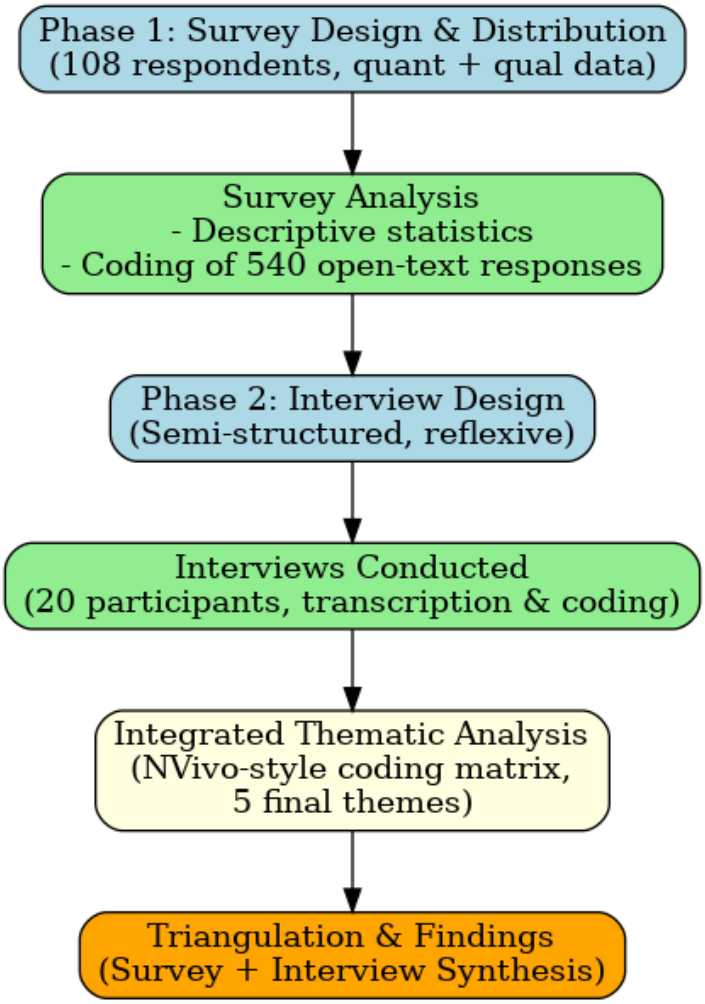

Figure 3.1 Data Collection and Analysis Flow (Napkin AI, 2025)

This visual representation reinforces the exploratory sequential logic underpinning the research design, where early survey data shaped the focus and structure of subsequent interviews. By mapping the phases of data collection and analysis in such way, the figure highlights how the research moved from breadth to depth, from initial

patterns to deeper exploration. The following section outlines the specific data collection methods used in each phase and how they align with the overarching mixed methods strategy.

To support clarity in this flow, the survey data were prepared and cleaned before analysis. This included checking for duplicate or incomplete entries, formatting numerical data for descriptive analysis, and transferring free text responses into a clean working file. Interview data were transcribed by the researcher and checked line by line for accuracy before analysis. Insights from the survey were then used to refine the interview schedule, ensuring that the second phase built directly on the patterns and questions raised in the first. This created a clear chain of evidence between the two phases and supported the triangulation that underpins the mixed methods design.

3.4 Data collection methods

To fulfil the mixed methods methodology, the research relied on surveying a population of coaches and undertaking in depth interviews. Constant comparative analysis throughout these stages allowed the data generated to be tailored and developed throughout as each stage is compared to the emerging data from the last. The survey gathered broad themes which can be honed for the in-depth interviews.

Although focus groups were originally proposed as part of the qualitative phase, they were not conducted. This decision was made after reviewing the survey data, which provided a rich breadth of responses, and recognising that in-depth interviews would offer more nuanced, reflective insights. Focus groups were also deemed less practical due to scheduling constraints and the sensitivity of the subject matter, which might have limited open discussion in a group setting.

In line with the researcher's pragmatist stance, interviews were chosen as the more effective method to achieve the research aim, ensuring that participants could share personal experiences of support in a private and flexible environment. The absence of focus groups did not compromise the quality of the data, as the combination of survey responses and individual interviews provided both the breadth and depth necessary to address the research questions.

3.5 Sampling strategy

The researcher approached sampling that was directly tied to the kind of insight the data was trying to generate. The researcher was not looking for patterns by any

specific demographic such as age or sector, but for depth and honesty in how coaches experience and manage ‘support’ in their real-world practice. That is why the researcher focused on people who are dedicated workplace coaches. Aligning to a pragmatist research approach (Waring and Hudson, 2024), the researcher chose tools and participants that would be most useful for building insight into judgement, tension, and reflexivity and not based on any identity difference.

The researcher used two data collection methods: an open-ended qualitative survey and a follow up round of one-to-one interviews. Participants needed to be trained or qualified in workplace coaching, practising coaches based in the UK and fluent in English. Crucially, the researcher consciously did not collect demographic data such as age, gender, or sector. Ethically, it aligned with the data minimisation principle in UK GDPR, which stresses collecting only what is truly necessary for research purpose (ICO, 2024). In addition, it also reflected a protective stance. In the workplace coaching profession, which is relatively small and highly networked, even basic demographic details can increase the risk of someone being identifiable, particularly in smaller subsectors. As Kaiser (2024) explains, even anonymised qualitative data can still carry the risk of “*deductive disclosure*”, where enough detail allows others to work out who said what.

By removing those identity indications, the researcher created more space for unfiltered reflection. The data required is not about comparing categories of coach, it is exploring how support is recognised, interpreted, and enacted in practice. Keeping the focus on praxis, rather than profile, was both a methodological strength and a protective measure to encourage openness.

Table 3.3 outlines the data collection methods used in this research, including the sample sizes, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and key considerations for both the survey and interview phases. The criteria were designed to ensure that participants were actively engaged in workplace coaching and able to provide meaningful reflections on the concept of support. The considerations reflect the steps taken to protect participant anonymity, maintain ethical standards, and ensure that the data collected was rich and relevant to the research questions.

3.5.1 Data collection methods used in this research.

To support transparency and rigour, Table 3.3 outlines the specific data collection methods used across both phases of the research. It summarises the sample sizes, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and key considerations considered during the survey and interview stages, including ethical safeguards and the emphasis on reflective, experienced practitioners.

Table 3.3 Data collection methods

Data Collection Method	Sample Size	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Considerations
Survey	100, 150 coaches	Trained and qualified in coaching, actively engaged in workplace coaching, based in the UK, fluent in English	Coaching as a minor or bolt-on duty, less than 6 months' coaching experience, not currently practising	Survey included screening questions, no demographic data collected to reduce risk of identification, focus kept on reflective practice and coaching judgement
Interviews	Minimum 15 (target)	Survey participants who gave rich responses and agreed to follow, up, A range of coaching contexts	Same as survey exclusion, Declined interview invite	Interviews allowed professional disclosure and emerging themes, encouraged individual reflexivity

The combination of survey and interview data created both the breadth and depth needed to explore how support is understood and enacted by workplace coaches. The survey provided an initial mapping of perspectives and practices, while the interviews offered a richer narrative and contextual insight into emerging themes. Together, these phases provided a robust dataset for thematic analysis, which is outlined in the next section on data analysis techniques.

3.6 Data analysis techniques

The data analysis was shaped by a thematic approach, but with a reflexive mindset. The researcher aimed to observe for patterns, shifts in language, and the ways participants described their own experiences of support. This meant moving beyond surface-level coding to understand how support was not just defined but lived and enacted in their coaching practice.

While much of the focus was on exploring the language and stories of participants, the survey also included quantitative elements to provide measurable insights. These questions were designed to sit alongside the qualitative data, offering a broader view of how support is understood and applied in practice. The next section outlines the quantitative measures used and how they contributed to shaping the overall analysis.

The researcher chose to code manually rather than use software like NVivo, to work reflexively with each response. To ensure rigour, a NVivo style matrix (see Table 4.5) was created to track themes across interviews and survey responses. This hands-on approach allowed the researcher to work in a way that felt natural and kept the voices of participants at the centre of the analysis. The decision to conclude data collection at 20 interviews was based on clear evidence of thematic saturation, with no substantially new insights emerging in the final interviews (see Chapter 4).

3.6.1 Quantitative Data for Measurable Outcomes

The survey included a small set of quantitative questions to capture measurable patterns in coaching practice. These questions complemented the qualitative responses, providing a snapshot of how often and how explicitly support is addressed with clients. Quantitative survey questions allow researchers to collect numerical data on elements of workplace coaching.

This part of the survey used the Likert scale and included the following:

1. To what extent is the provision of support explicitly discussed with the client at the start of the coaching intervention?

2. How frequently is the client's need for support assessed throughout the coaching intervention?

3. To what degree does the coach actively encourage the client to reflect on the support they require during the coaching sessions?

4. How often does the coach and client collaboratively review the level of support needed as the coaching intervention progresses?

5. To what extent does the coach adapt their approach to providing support based on the client's changing needs throughout the coaching intervention?

6. How frequently does the coach seek feedback from the client on the effectiveness of the support provided during the coaching sessions?

7. To what degree does the coach consider the client's personal and professional context when determining the appropriate level of support to offer?

8. How often does the coach and client engage in open discussions about the coach's role in providing support throughout the coaching intervention?

9. To what extent does the coach draw on their own experiences and reflections to inform the support they provide to the client?

10. How frequently does the coach seek external supervision or guidance to ensure the appropriate level of support is being provided to the client?

This data provides a broad overview of coaching practices to be able to get rich data for analysis which combined with questions to gain more detail for quantitative data will give a sound basis for creating the interviews.

The quantitative data were exported from Microsoft Forms into Excel and checked for any incomplete or duplicate entries. Percentages and simple frequency counts were then calculated to show the overall patterns in the responses. These figures were used alongside the qualitative data to strengthen the interpretation of findings and to support the triangulation that shaped the mixed methods design.

3.6.2 Qualitative Data for Context and Nuance

Open-ended qualitative questions allowed the respondents to provide more detailed, and tailored responses. These qualitative prompts allowed participants to speak in their own words, offering insight into how they think about and enact support in practice and not just how they rate it.

The survey questions used for this purpose were:

1. In establishing a supportive environment for your clients, how do you tailor your coaching approach to meet their unique needs and preferences?

2. Can you share examples of specific strategies you employ to develop trust and openness within the coaching relationship, creating an environment where clients feel comfortable expressing their concerns and aspirations?

3. How do you assess and address potential barriers or challenges that may impact the client's ability to fully engage in the coaching process, ensuring an accommodating atmosphere?

4. In your coaching practice, how do you encourage clients to reflect on their experiences and insights, contributing to a self-reflective learning environment?

5. Could you elaborate on the role of ongoing support beyond formal coaching sessions? How do you provide resources or assistance to help clients navigate challenges and sustain their growth independently?

These responses add context and depth to the quantitative data and allows for the narrative discourse from the participants with specific value gained through:

1. Reaching a broad audience

The combined qualitative and quantitative survey allowed the researcher to collect data from a large number of participants. This provided a broad range of information and data on workplace coaching practices.

2. Identifying Trends and Patterns

The combination of quantitative and qualitative survey data enabled the researcher to identify overarching trends while also capturing individual experiences. This twofold approach reflects pragmatism's balance between broad knowledge and context-specific detail.

3.6.3 The Value of One-to-one Interviews

To build on the survey findings, one-to-one interviews offered a deeper lens into individual coaching practice. This method created space for richer dialogue, allowing

coaches to reflect, adapt, and share experiences in their own words. The benefits included:

1. In-Depth Evaluation of Individual Experiences

One to one interviews allowed the researcher to delve deeply into individual experiences of workplace coaching. This is an opportunity for coaches to tell their story and experience reflective discourse throughout.

2. Flexibility and Adaptability

Interviews were semi-structured, allowing the researcher to reflexively adapt questions based on the participants' responses. Thus, allowing the data to be expanded, and themes identified.

3. Building Rapport and Trust

The one-to-one approach of interviews enabled the researcher to build rapport with participants, thus leading to more honest and detailed responses. The real-world focus of participants is aligned with the pragmatism approach and complies with the ethical requirements.

3.6.4 Manual Coding and Rigour

Although qualitative analysis software, such as NVivo, was considered, this research employed a manual coding process to remain closely connected to the data. This decision was consistent with the researcher's pragmatist stance, prioritising practical and transparent approaches that enhanced interpretive depth.

All interview transcripts and survey responses were reviewed line by line, and a series of coding matrices were created to track themes across the dataset. These matrices replicated the structure of NVivo, allowing systematic organisation, theme comparison, and cross-participant analysis, but in a way that encouraged direct engagement with the language used by participants.

Rigour was maintained through iterative coding, constant comparison, and regular revisiting of data extracts to ensure that emerging themes were both representative

and grounded in participant accounts. A saturation table (Table 4.1) was developed to demonstrate where themes were strongly or moderately present across the interviews, creating a transparent audit trail. This hands-on approach supported the reflexive nature of the analysis, enabling the researcher to remain sensitive to nuance and meaning in the participants' narratives.

3.6.5 Addressing Potential Challenges

While a mixed-methods approach offers many positives and benefits, it also presents challenges that researchers must consider:

1. Time and Resource Intensity

Conducting surveys and interviews requires significant time and resources. It is important to be organised, plan well in advance and have a contingency plan.

2. Data Integration Complexity

Integrating data from multiple sources can be complex. Researchers must develop clear strategies for data integration and choose a coding mechanism that suits the research data and researcher's style using, if desired, the tools available such as SPSS and NVivo.

3. Potential for Contradictory Findings

Different methods may produce what looks like contradictory findings. However, this is normal when dealing with people, practices, and the application of a process such as coaching. The exploration allows the human element to be at the forefront with differing use of language, explanation, and interpretation. It is part of the picture forming the overall intricacies and sometimes paradoxical nature of real-world phenomena. The researcher adopted the mindset that every piece of data offered an opportunity for further exploration.

3.6.6 Step by Step Data Analysis Process

The following steps describe how data across both phases of the study were collected, prepared, and analysed. These steps are presented to make the process

transparent and to show how the analysis remained consistent with the mixed methods design and the pragmatic stance that guided the research.

Step 1: Collection of raw data

Survey data were gathered through Microsoft Forms and exported into Excel. Interview data were collected through Microsoft Teams and transcribed by the researcher. All files were stored in a secure, password protected digital environment in line with the ethics approval.

Step 2: Preparation and cleaning of data

Survey responses were checked for completeness, and any duplicate or empty entries were removed. Free text responses were transferred into a clean working document, and numerical responses were formatted to allow the calculation of descriptive percentages. Interview transcripts were reviewed line by line against the recorded audio to ensure accuracy. Spelling errors, repeated words, and system generated transcription issues were corrected without altering meaning.

Step 3: Initial review and familiarisation

Survey free text responses and interview transcripts were read several times to become familiar with the content and to begin to notice recurring words, actions, and descriptions. During this stage, the researcher made tally style notes and short margin annotations to record early ideas, links, and impressions.

Step 4: Search based checking across transcripts and responses

To support consistency, keyword searches were used to revisit early ideas across the full set of transcripts and survey responses. This allowed the researcher to check where particular phrases, concepts, or descriptions appeared and to ensure that early impressions were grounded in the wider data set.

Step 5: Development of initial codes

A manual coding process was used to identify patterns across the data. Codes were created to capture actions, descriptions of support, and relational processes. These codes were recorded in an NVivo style matrix, which helped with comparison across participants and supported a structured approach to theme development.

Step 6: Formation and refinement of themes

Codes were grouped into provisional themes that reflected repeated descriptions of

how support was understood and enacted. These themes were refined through iterative reading and comparison across cases. Attention was given to variation within each theme, and a presence matrix was created to show where themes appeared across interviews.

Step 7: Integration of survey and interview data

The qualitative survey data were compared with interview themes to identify alignment, divergence, and areas that required deeper exploration. Quantitative survey data, presented as descriptive percentages, were used to support the interpretation of qualitative findings and to strengthen the mixed methods design.

Step 8: Checking for saturation and coherence

Saturation was assessed by reviewing where themes continued to repeat without new meaning or variation. The presence matrix and coding trail were used to confirm the point at which no new themes were emerging. The analysis was also reviewed for internal coherence to ensure that each theme was supported by multiple data sources.

Step 9: Reflexive review of interpretation

Throughout the analysis, the researcher used a reflexive log to examine how personal experience, assumptions, and insider knowledge may have shaped interpretation. This step was important given the relational nature of the topic and the need to ensure that themes were grounded in the data rather than researcher expectation.

3.7 Practical Applications in Workplace Coaching Research

This mixed-methods approach, rooted in pragmatism, offers several practical applications for workplace coaching research:

1. **Evaluating Coaching Effectiveness**

The researcher can utilise surveys to measure the broad outcomes of coaching, conduct interviews to delve into individual experiences of effectiveness, and encompass collective perceptions of what makes coaching effective.

2. **Identifying Best Practices**

Quantitative survey data can highlight trends in coaching practices, while qualitative data from surveys and interviews can provide detailed descriptions of these practices in action.

3. **Understanding Contextual Factors**

Interviews can explore how organisational culture and individual differences impact coaching outcomes, offering context for trends identified in survey data.

4. **Developing Coaching Modules**

The comprehensive data gathered through this mixed-methods approach can inform the development of new, evidence-based coaching modules to offer a dedicated training opportunity for coaches in the initial training and ongoing skills development.

5. **Improving Coach Training**

Insights from both methods can be used to identify areas for improvement in coach training programmes, ensuring that training is aligned with practical needs and challenges. This approach not only enhances the understanding of coaching practices but also ensures that the findings are applicable and beneficial in real-world settings.

3.8 Incorporating Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis can be integrated into the thematic analysis process to provide a deeper understanding of how language constructs and reflects culture and coaching impact in workplace coaching. This approach aligns with symbolic interactionism's emphasis on the role of symbols and language in shaping meaning. Symbolic interactionism offers a valuable theoretical lens for interpreting the themes and discourses identified in the analysis. By integrating symbolic interactionism, researchers can gain deeper insights into the dynamic and interactive nature of coaching.

3.8.1 Key Aspects of Discourse Analysis in Workplace Coaching Research:

1. **Coaching Dynamics**: Investigating how language use reflects and reinforces the dynamic within coaching relationships and organisational hierarchies.

2. **Identity Construction**: Exploring how coaches and clients construct their identities through language, reflecting symbolic interactionism's focus on the self as a social construct.
3. **Metaphors**: Identifying and interpreting metaphors used to describe coaching experiences, which can reveal assumptions and beliefs.

By incorporating discourse analysis, the researcher can gain a richer, more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics in workplace coaching. This approach not only enhances the depth of the analysis but also provides valuable insights into the ways in which language can be shaped by the coaching process.

3.9 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this research was obtained through the University of Sunderland ethics review process. All participants received an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and how data would be used. Written consent was collected before each survey and interview, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time.

Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising all data, with participants assigned codes rather than identifiable details. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely on encrypted devices and deleted once analysis was complete.

An audit trail was created to enhance transparency and rigour. This included detailed notes on coding decisions, theme development, and analysis steps. NVivo style matrices (e.g., Table 4.1) were produced manually to track the presence and variation of themes across participants. This approach ensured that findings were both traceable and grounded in the original data while maintaining participant anonymity.

Coaching is not a high-risk area, and the summary allowed for transparency in the process: ‘The research is to understand how a workplace coaching intervention creates, develops, and maintains a relevant level of support throughout. The participants will be unidentified professionals who coach as part of their work all within the UK. Trends and data collected, based only on the responses will be used for the research and no identifying information will be included. All data collated was managed as per best practice of GDPR with full consent gained and ability to withdraw up to the written stage.’

The ethical challenge when researching an area of expertise is bias. It is important to acknowledge throughout the research that coaching in the workplace is a passion of the researcher. In understanding coaching practice and how support is or is not fully and explicitly regarded at the outset requires a high level of self-awareness.

Fortunately, there is a curiosity in how other coaches undertake their work as it is a private and confidential discussion between coach and client. The researcher prepared for the possibility of being wrong when identifying whether support was explicitly expressed and agreed between coach and client. However, the researcher has identified a dearth in literature around support being defined. Therefore, there is no suggestion this research would be without any value no matter what the outcome. The interesting question if proven wrong would therefore be, how come this exists in practice and is not overtly covered within the literature? The premise of a book to add into literature is there to be written no matter the outcome.

The risks of harm from this research are low. However, all ethical considerations are addressed. Integrity is of paramount importance, and this research allows for a knowledge base within the coaching community to be improved, serving to enhance the industry and not denigrate or lessen the impact of the coaching community.

The best interests of the participant and coaching community are the basis of the research, which meets the beneficence principle. Autonomy is the key to capturing the data and will be encouraged. Participants were empowered to contribute to the research with full honesty and transparency. They were treated fairly, equitably and their contributions accepted in full faith with honesty and integrity being the motivator. There is no expectation of harm in any context, fulfilling the principle of ‘first do no harm.’

Participants were invited to contribute to the research with full transparency, clarity that it is voluntary, and were given the right to withdraw. There was no element of deception within the research approaches, for either survey or individual interviews.

The ethical issues for consideration in researching a coaching intervention are twofold. Firstly, the procedural ethics in the data gathering and management of that data which includes:

- University of Sunderland Ethics process and protocol is followed through the web application process.
- Confidentiality: all responses are anonymised and coded.
- Handling of sensitive material: full GDPR risk assessment and guidelines for data management adhered to including any hard copies of data locked away and electronic data password protected.
- Informed consent: full explanation of the research and how the participant will contribute.
- Ability to withdraw at any stage.
- Accountability lies with the researcher not the participants.
- Removal of assumption and ensuring data is based on facts.

Secondly is the ethical approach to the practice of coaching itself:

- Contracting: clarity on the coaching process, timings, location, etc.
- Role boundaries: what the researcher can and cannot deal with in any interview situation.
- Safeguarding: should there be any suggestion of danger to life or criminal activity this can be reported to the authorities.
- Coercion: allowing the participant to respond and capture the data exactly.
- Confidentiality with the discussion topic: this is not to be discussed and respect for privacy minded.

All participants gave informed consent, and data was anonymised in line with the University of Sunderland ethics protocol, with no demographic data collected to preserve confidentiality.

3.9.1 Ethical Procedures

Table 3.4 summarises the ethical procedures followed during the research, highlighting how participant rights, confidentiality, and data integrity were safeguarded throughout both phases.

Table 3.4 Ethical Procedures

Ethical Aspect	Procedure Implemented
Informed Consent	All participants received detailed information sheets and signed consent forms prior to participation.
Anonymity	Participant identities were anonymised using codes; no demographic identifiers were collected.
Confidentiality	All data were securely stored on encrypted drives and accessible only to the researcher.
Right to Withdraw	Participants could withdraw at any stage without consequence; clear deadlines for withdrawal were provided.
Data Protection	Data collection and storage complied with GDPR and institutional data policies.
Wellbeing Safeguards	Participants were reminded of their right to pause or stop interviews; reflective breaks were offered if needed.

While every effort was made to ensure ethical integrity throughout the research process, it is important to acknowledge the research's limitations. The following section outlines potential biases, methodological constraints, and areas for future exploration.

3.10 Limitations and potential biases

Despite having a compelling rationale for mixed methods methodology, further research on the impact of a new method of coaching would be an interesting area for further research.

This would enable the research to progress using an extended mixed methods design. Within this, the quantitative strand would focus on analysing the statistical impact of coaching, for example by comparing performance indicators prior to and following the intervention. This statistical analysis could be represented graphically to establish impact. Similarly, coaching on attitude, engagement, satisfaction can be analysed. This would generate significant numerical data, presented, and analysed.

Further research could focus on the qualitative outcomes of such an intervention. The ways in which participants respond to feelings and articulate their experiences would serve to complement the numerical data, resulting in a more comprehensive evidence base for the coaching community.

As both a researcher and an experienced HR Director with a coaching background, there was awareness of the self-lens to this research. The researcher's understanding of workplace coaching and the dynamics of support was both a strength and a potential risk. While this experience helped ask the right questions and interpret responses with depth, the researcher was aware it could also impact the data interpretation. To manage this, the researcher kept a reflective journal throughout, using it to challenge assumptions and document the decisions made during data collection and analysis. The researcher also sought feedback from the supervisor and peers to ensure the themes came from participant voices rather than the researcher's own preconceptions.

Managing insider research bias is a critical concern for researchers who are part of the community affected by the research. The inside knowledge and experience between the researcher and the research question can lead to bias and this requires careful management and a high degree of self-awareness.

The biases may affect the reliability of the data captured, the analytical processes and ultimately the findings. There are ways to manage this dilemma and mitigate the biases to manage the integrity of the research and align to the ethical considerations detailed below:

3.11 Reflexivity

Reflexivity and self-analysis allow researchers to consistently reflect on their positionality, underlying assumptions, and potential biases throughout the research process, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness and transparency of their work (Finlay, 2022). By applying a reflexive approach, researchers can become more aware of what influences their approach to the research and as such, manages the data collation and interpretation. This ongoing self-awareness helps to mitigate the risk of bias and strengthens the credibility of research findings by explicitly addressing how researcher positionality and assumptions are reflexively considered and managed throughout the research process (Gani and Khan, 2025).

3.12 Transparency in Research Design

Transparency is a fundamental basis of all considerations in research design and data collection methods, vital for managing bias in workplace coaching studies. By transparently documenting every step of the research process, including participant

selection, data collection techniques, and analysis approaches, researchers provide assurance of rigor and independence. Equally important is openly acknowledging how potential biases were identified and addressed throughout the research. Such transparency enables peers to critically evaluate methods and decisions, reducing unintended biases and enhancing the overall credibility of findings in workplace coaching research (Mustafa et al., 2023).

3.13 Pilot Group and Participant Feedback

The pilot group's feedback was used to refine the survey questions, ensuring that they were clear, relevant, and aligned with the aims of the research. This collaborative step helped to identify any ambiguities or overlaps, allowing for adjustments before the survey was finalised.

3.14 Pilot Group and Participant Feedback

Table 3.5 summarises the key feedback leading to the adjustments made to the quantitative survey questions based on feedback, while Table 3.6 presents the final set of survey questions following this process.

3.14.1 Pilot Group adjustments to questions

The pilot group provided their thoughts and considerations on the language and structure of the questions as well as on changes.

Table 3.5 Feedback for the Quantitative survey questions

1. To what extent is the provision of support explicitly discussed with the client at the start of the coaching intervention?	2. How frequently is the client's need for support assessed throughout the coaching intervention?	3. To what degree does the coach actively encourage the client to reflect on the support they require during the coaching sessions?	4. How often does the coach and client collaboratively review the level of support needed as the coaching intervention progresses?	5. To what extent does the coach adapt their approach to providing support based on the client's changing needs throughout the coaching intervention?	6. How frequently does the coach seek feedback from the client on the effectiveness of the support provided during the coaching sessions?	7. To what degree does the coach consider the client's personal and professional context when determining the appropriate level of support to offer?	8. How often does the coach and client engage in open discussions about the coach's role in providing support throughout the coaching intervention?	9. To what extent does the coach draw on their own experiences and reflections to inform the support they provide to the client?	10. How frequently does the coach seek external supervision or guidance to ensure the appropriate level of support is being provided to the client?
Language here feels super formal and a little confusing, so I'm wondering exactly what you're hoping to elicit. I'd personally use language like: "To what extent have you set agreements / boundaries before the coaching starts?" But appreciate you may want to formalise more for a doctorate!	Do you mean here - whether they need coaching or not? I'm genuinely not clear what this is asking 😀	The wording "the support" is throwing me a little throughout. It leads me to think more about the process rather than the coaching they are receiving - so I'm not sure which of these you're researching. Suggest if it's the latter "to what degree do you actively encourage the client to reflect on what they need during the coaching sessions"	"Level of support" - does this refer to amount of sessions or mentoring vs coaching or something else? Also suggest reword start to: "how often do" rather than "how often does"	Could this be simplified - "to what extent does the coach adapt their approach to the coaching, based on clients needs"	Could this be simplified "feedback from the client on the effectiveness of the coaching"	Confused by "determining the appropriate level of support to offer". Not sure if it means volume of sessions or the way they are coaching	Really not sure what you're asking in this one 😀	Makes sense to me!	Makes sense !
	Feels a bit vague, unspecified time options. Maybe give them frequency options...never, rarely (only when the client brings it up), sometimes (every 3-4 sessions), frequently (every 2-3 sessions) every session	Is this being answered by the coach? if so, then maybe "To what degree do you, as the coach, actively..."	Not sure if its too subjective....what might be a moderate degree to one person could be a large or small to another person						I would use specific times on this answer...weekly / fortnightly / monthly / 6 weeks / bi-monthly / twice a year / never
clear question	clear question	from here on you change from first person to 'the coach'. Is this intentional? Might be better to use first person throughout for consistency	as per Q3 - question is clear though	as per Q3 - question is clear though	as per Q3 - question is clear though	as per Q3 - question is clear though	as per Q3 - question is clear though	as per Q3 - question is clear though	as per Q3 - question is clear though. Consistent use of metrics throughout. Possibly some assumptions but I'm not sure if you could or would change the structure of each question.
A moderate extent	Sometimes	To a large degree	To a large degree	To a very large degree	Often	To a large degree	Often	A moderate extent	Often
The question is a bit wordy for me. I think this could be simplified. Also the 'start' of the Coaching Intervention', may be difficult to define in the context of the full intervention. Is this the first coaching session for example? I'd also fine the options a little difficult to work out meaningfully what the difference is between ' a large extent and a very large extent', perhaps using percentages might help.		Similar to Q1 in determining between the options.		I'd add a comma or 2 into the question to break it down and make it easier to read.		You've missed the 'T' off 'To' on the fifth option			
		This question was a little long, I had to read it a few times to get the gist							
Dear Adele, this is indeed a very interesting first question. As a respondent I'd appreciate greater clarity on what "support" means. Perhaps this in included in any participant information sheets.	Perhaps again linked to the first point, the question of what does support mean. With my own coaching practice my thinking turns fo contracting and re-contracting, it this may not be what you want to understand.	I like this question on to what extent does the coach encourage the client to reflect.	Back to the first question, if clarity is there on meaning, this question is fine.	Very clear.	This is such an important question, very much needed in our practice as coaches.	This, for me, relates to the systemic lens of coaching and the ripple effect for which there are evidence based studies demonstrating it	All clear	Interesting question	Very important

Following this feedback, the questions were adjusted to:

Table 3.6 Finalised questions for the Quantitative questions in the survey

1. How clearly do you discuss support with the client at the start of the coaching intervention?	2. How frequently is the client's need forongoing sessions assessed throughout the coaching intervention?	3. To what degree does the coach actively encourage the client to reflect on their personal progress during the coaching sessions?	4. How often do the coach and client collaboratively review the type of support needed as the coaching intervention progresses?	5. To what extent does the coach adapt their approach to providing support based on the client's changing needs throughout the coaching intervention?	6. How frequently does the coach seek feedback from the client on the effectiveness of the coaching sessions?	7. To what degree does the coach consider the client's personal and professional context when determining the appropriate type of support to offer?	8. How often does the coach and client engage in open discussions about the success of the coach's role in the coaching intervention?	9. To what extent does the coach draw on their own experiences and reflections to inform the support they provide to the client?	10. How frequently does the coach seek external supervision or guidance to ensure the appropriate level of support is being provided to the client?

3.14.2 Pilot group Questions adjustments for qualitative questions

The pilot group provided valuable feedback on the qualitative questions, leading to several refinements. Table 3.7 outlines this feedback alongside the adjusted questions and 3.8 are the finalised questions following the feedback. These adjustments strengthened the clarity and focus of the survey, ensuring that the questions encouraged richer, more reflective responses from participants.

Table 3.7 Feedback from pilot group on Qualitative questions

1. In establishing a supportive environment for your clients, how do you tailor your coaching approach to meet their unique needs and preferences?	2. Can you share examples of specific strategies you employ to develop trust and openness within the coaching relationship, creating an environment where clients feel comfortable expressing their concerns and aspirations?	3. How do you assess and address potential barriers or challenges that may impact the client's ability to fully engage in the coaching process, ensuring an accommodating atmosphere?	4. In your coaching practice, how do you encourage clients to reflect on their experiences and insights, contributing to a self-reflective learning environment?	5. Could you elaborate on the role of ongoing support beyond formal coaching sessions? How do you provide resources or assistance to help clients navigate challenges and sustain their growth independently?
Do you need the first part of this question? Could it start with "how do you…"	Love this one - making me think about what and how I do this for my clients 😊	Would recommend losing the last part "ensuring an accommodating atmosphere"	Would shorten perhaps to end after the word "insights"	Love this one! Thanks for asking me to participate- more than happy to share more about my suggestions / feedback if useful to you.
	I would put this before Q1. You have to develop trust and openness and get to know a person before you can think about tailoring your approach right?			I would split this into 2 separate questions
Question is clear and provides some context to the second part.	This is fine - no changes	consider using environment for consistency rather than atmosphere	This is fine - no changes	consider splitting this question for ease of completion.
Before commencing a coaching engagement, I discuss with the coachee the most helpful approach for them (distinguishing between pure coaching vs sounding board / thinking partner vs mentor with a coaching approach Depending on the individual I offer support outside sessions which can take many forms - access to a supportive community with others, reflection questions, access to me via messaging / voicenote, access to my own online training or podcast / blogs, providing signposting to other external resources I have recently created a podcast / blog specifically on how to make the most of working with a coach with the aim of particularly supporting clients who have not worked with an external coach before Session by session we will recontract on the level of support vs challenge that would be most helpful and if at the start of a session a client is not in a place to gain value from coaching I will normally offer to reschedule	Tight contracting around confidentiality, ensuring the coachee is aware that nothing they share will be reported back / discussed with the sponsor Discussion around the context of coaching - I often discuss prior to starting a coaching engagement that people will get more out of coaching the more they put in, and linking this to confidentiality they can express more knowing that it is purely us that will know what's been expressed I use some NLP tools within coaching - Dilts logical levels can be helpful to enable clients to feel 'seen' at a deeper identity / beliefs model Selectively, I will share examples of mistakes I've made or reassure clients that what they are expressing is common to other clients or my own experiences I will sometimes use visualisation as a technique to tap into aspirations / future vision. Values work is often some of the most meaningful work in a client programme, enabling self insight and reflection in a way that feels	As mentioned, at the start of the session when we check in I will look for signs that a coachee is not feeling robust enough for challenge within that session and will sometimes offer to reschedule. I may also choose different questions / approaches or simply provide reassurance that they can use their coaching session to express themselves 'unfiltered' which may not otherwise be possible in the workplace When planning the timing of coaching sessions I encourage clients to consider which environment (e.g. home or office) is best for them and what time of day will allow them to engage fully / gain most value (e.g. block time after the coaching to avoid rushing into a meeting and curtailing reflections) I don't ask clients to disclose if they are neurodivergent but some do share this and others may exhibit traits I recognise which can then shape the approach. For example, autistic clients may find it challenging to interpret questions that are vague / more open to different interpretations and prefer clearer, more direct	I encourage clients to take responsibility for themselves (I don't provide notes after a session or capture actions agreed), but do suggest that they have a notebook / google doc or somewhere to maintain their notes specifically from coaching sessions and associated realisations / reflections / insights At the end of a session I will sometimes use the Coaching Habit question of 'what's been most helpful for you today?' (Especially if we've covered a lot of ground) Self reflection / creating thinking time is also often a topic covered within coaching and I advocate people create thinking time within their working life	This varies a lot by individual and coaching programme For example in my first 90 days programme there are specific reflection questions shared before each monthly session For other coaching assignments which are less structured / more bespoke to the individual goals this may be specific to the individual. For example, I recently shared a feedback exercise with a client to allow her to capture feedback from others because we had discussed her tendency to become paralysed by fear of what others might think of her Towards the end of coaching (penultimate and last session) we will typically cover looking to the future, anticipating obstacles and forming strategies for when those arise as well as checking back in on goals and progress Session by session I also encourage clients to notice progress and acknowledge themselves for it One NLP tool I use with clients sometimes is the towards / away from motivation triggers,
This is a well written question, relevant and straightforward.	This is a well written question, relevant and straightforward.	This is a well written question, relevant and straightforward.	This is a well written question, relevant and straightforward.	This is a well written question, relevant and straightforward.
		I'm not sure about 'accommodating atmosphere ' is there a way of making that clearer?		
All clear	All clear	Perhaps this could also relate to boundaries	Great question	

Table 3.8 Finalised questions for the Qualitative questions in the survey

1. How do you tailor your coaching approach to meet their unique needs and preferences?	2. Can you share examples of specific strategies you employ to develop trust and openness within the coaching relationship, creating an environment where clients feel comfortable expressing their concerns and aspirations?	3. How do you assess and address potential barriers or challenges that may impact the client's ability to fully engage in the coaching process?	4. In your coaching practice, how do you encourage clients to reflect on their experiences and insights?	5. Could you elaborate on the role of ongoing support beyond formal coaching sessions? How do you provide resources or assistance to help clients navigate challenges and sustain their growth independently?

The involvement of the pilot group was more than a technical step; it was a deliberate act of ethical research practice. By engaging experienced coaching professionals at this early stage, the researcher ensured that the survey questions were not only clear and relevant but also resonated with the lived realities of workplace coaching. This collaborative process created space for critique, refinement, and challenge, allowing the final questions to invite deeper reflection rather than surface level responses. It also demonstrated respect for the practitioner voice from the outset, aligning with the researcher's commitment to co-creation, transparency, and ethical integrity. By incorporating their insights, the research upheld its ethical foundations, validating not just the content of the survey, but its accessibility, tone, and capacity to generate meaningful data.

With the research design and survey questions ethically validated through the pilot process, the research then moved into active data collection. This next section outlines how both phases, the survey and the in-depth interviews were conducted, including the rationale behind each method and the practical steps taken to generate meaningful, ethically sound data.

3.12 Collaboration for data

Integrating feedback from participants is a positive move to manage insider research bias. Preliminary findings can be shared with participants' input from them sought. This aids transparency and may uncover additional data for analysis. Researchers can validate their interpretations and ensure the findings accurately reflect participants' experiences and perspectives through the *'member checking validation strategy'* (Lloyd, 2024). Incorporating a collaborative approach allows for improvements, engagement and enhances the validity of the research.

1. **Maintaining a Neutral Stance**

Throughout the data collection phase, it is important for insider researchers to maintain a neutral stance. This self-awareness is particularly required in interviews and focus groups. Examples of this are leading questions, withholding opinions, and sharing their own experiences and opinions (DeLyser, 2001). By remaining neutral, researchers can reduce the risk of bias and ensure that the data collected is as objective as possible.

2. **Clear Documentation of Insider Position**

There is a full outline of the researcher's experience to date, career path, and academic journey within the portfolio. This transparency allows all readers and examiners to be assured of the level in which the researcher is bringing the research question to be studied. There is no hidden agenda. The researcher is proud to be contributing to the coaching community with an advancement to the coaching training and coaching practice.

Yip (2024) discusses the complexity and fluidity of insider-outsider positionality and highlights the importance of researchers articulating their positionality to contextualise findings and enhance transparency in the research process. Goundar (2025) argues for explicitly presenting positionality to improve credibility and invites critical evaluation of the researcher's influence.

Insider research bias cannot be overlooked. The researcher is a practising coach, and a Group Director of HR and People Development and as such cannot ignore their own bias within the research. This has been thoroughly discussed with the supervision team and the strategies applied have been agreed.

It is a complicated challenge which must be explicitly addressed throughout the research, analysis, and findings so the recommendations ultimately are based on the facts and reality of the coaching practice and not on assumptions or personal experiences. Reflexivity, transparency, pilot group, and participant feedback, maintaining a neutral stance, and honesty combined with clarity of insider position, are all critical components of a robust approach to mitigating bias.

3.13 Chapter Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has outlined the methodological choices that underpin the study and the strategies applied to ensure credibility, transparency, and rigour. By explicitly addressing positionality, mitigating insider bias, and adopting collaborative and reflexive approaches, the research design provides a robust foundation for the analysis that follows. These measures ensure that the findings are grounded in participants' perspectives and professional realities, rather than researcher assumption.

The next chapter presents the findings and analysis from both the survey and the interviews. The survey findings are shown in two stages: the quantitative results, followed by a thematic analysis of the 540 qualitative responses to the open-ended questions. The interview data is then explored through thematic analysis, identifying recurring ideas, patterns, and coaching practices. These findings are grouped into overarching themes that link back to the literature and the aims of the research. The analysis focuses on how support is enacted in coaching practice, keeping the emphasis on professional insights rather than demographic profiles, which are not relevant to this research.

Chapter 4

Findings and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from both phases of the research, in alignment with the mixed methods, pragmatist design. The structure reflects the exploratory sequential logic of the research: the survey phase provided breadth and initial thematic insights, which then informed the design and focus of the interview phase. Together, these findings address the research aim of understanding how support is defined and managed reflexively in coaching practice.

The chapter begins with the quantitative and qualitative results of the survey and then moves into the five analytic themes developed from the in-depth interview data. These two data sources are not presented in isolation but are cross-referenced throughout, with survey patterns shaping interview questions and interview findings deepening earlier insights. The final themes are grounded in the interview data, but they are triangulated with survey responses and the literature to ensure a coherent, layered analysis. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of patterns, trends, and direct responses to the research questions.

4.2 Survey data

A survey combining quantitative and qualitative questions was designed as part of the mixed methods approach. The survey was distributed using the networks the researcher has membership to: Humans Resourced (https://beunstoppable.uk/); The HR Geeks (www.peoplesorted.co.uk) and across LinkedIn as the only social media outlet to attract professionals to respond. There was also an opportunity to present the research to the Club 7 which is part of the Actuate Global network of coaches (www.actuateglobal.com). This presentation on March 7th, 2025, received excellent feedback and engagement both for the survey, focus groups and interviews and for the impact that could be seen on the development of coaching training. A total of 108 responses were collected over 116 days from all areas of the researcher's network using Microsoft Forms, in March and April 2025.

This provided a broad, descriptive dataset, including both Likert scale responses and 540 free text answers (Q11-Q15). The quantitative responses were analysed to identify self-reported behaviours and perceptions, while the qualitative responses offered insight into how support is described and understood by practising coaches.

4.3 Quantitative Survey Findings

The Likert scale was used for the quantitative questions to give structure and an ability to analyse consistently. The data for responses and key results are below.

4.4 Survey Response Overview

Table 4.1 provides a summary of survey participation, indicating the number of completed responses and the overall completion rate:

Table 4.1 Survey Response Overview

Metric	Value
Total participants	**108**
Completed responses	**108**
Partial responses	**0**
Completion rate (%)	**100%**

4.5 Key Quantitative Survey Results

Table 4.2 summarises the key quantitative results from the survey, presenting the most common ratings for each of the main closed questions.

Table 4.2 Key Quantitative Survey Results

Survey Question	Most Common Rating	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Importance of reflexivity in coaching (Likert 1-5)	5 (Very important)	82%
Frequency of adapting models in practice (Likert 1-5)	4 (Often)	76%
Confidence in balancing support and challenge (Likert 1-5)	5 (Very confident)	79%

These responses indicate a strong belief in adaptive and reflective coaching. However, as subsequent sections will show, there are tensions between what coaches report and how support is enacted in practice.

4.6 High Level Themes from Open Ended Survey Questions (Q11, Q15)

Questions 11 to 15 in the survey invited coaches to describe how they approach support in practice. This generated 540 open text responses, providing rich insight into common language, priorities, and recurring assumptions. These responses were thematically reviewed and grouped into five broad patterns that shaped the interview questions and informed the development of the final analytic themes.

Table 4.3 presents the high-level themes identified from the 540 open-text survey responses (Q11, Q15), along with a brief description and the number of times each theme appeared across all responses.

Table 4.3 High Level Themes from Open Ended Survey Questions (Q11, Q15)

Theme	Description	Mentions (out of 540)
Responsive and Flexible Practice	Adapting models and methods to meet client needs.	134
Challenge as Support	Using constructive challenge framed with care and empathy.	112
Trust and Psychological Safety	Creating a safe space for openness and honesty.	105
Boundary Management	Setting and maintaining boundaries as a supportive tool.	91
Reframing and Perspective, Shifting	Helping clients see situations from a new angle.	98

Although these are high level groupings, they signposted important coaching dynamics and language patterns. For example, many responses described flexibility, containment, or challenge as supportive practices, but rarely defined how support was intentionally delivered or negotiated. Listening and contracting were frequently mentioned, yet reflexive awareness and client-led tailoring were much less evident.

These initial findings do not stand as final themes. Rather, they provided a starting point for Phase 2. They informed the design of the interview questions and helped identify which aspects of support required deeper exploration. The interviews, analysed thematically and reflexively, built on this early insight, and offer a more complex, situated view of how support is understood and enacted in coaching.

4.7 Representative Quotes from Survey (Q11, Q15)

Table 4.4 provides a selection of representative quotes from the open-ended survey questions (Q11, Q15). These quotes illustrate how participants described their approaches to support, aligned with the five themes identified.

Table 4.4 Representative Quotes from Survey (Q11, Q15)

Theme	Representative Quote
Responsive and Flexible Practice	"I start with a structure but adapt constantly based on how the client responds."
Challenge as Support	"Challenging assumptions is the most supportive thing I can do for growth."
Trust and Psychological Safety	"Clients only open up when they know they are not being judged."
Boundary Management	"Setting boundaries helps my clients feel safe and understand the space."
Reframing and Perspective Shifting	"Support often means helping them see their situation from another angle."

4.8 Defining Support at the start

Survey Question 1 asked whether coaches clearly define support with clients at the beginning of the coaching relationship. A total of 85% agreed or strongly agreed. On the surface, this suggests alignment with good practice, particularly in the context of contracting. However, the literature highlights a distinction that complicates this result.

Whitmore (1992) and Grant (2013) both advocate for early clarity in expectations, roles, and responsibilities, but neither directly addresses support as a reflexive or relational element. The survey responses suggest that support may be conflated with contracting or role definition. This blurring of boundaries raises important questions,

particularly when only 28.7% of respondents reported having received specific training on how to offer or manage support (Q16).

There is a gap between what is stated and what is defined. While coaches may believe they are setting clear expectations, the language of support is rarely articulated in coaching frameworks. Bryant and Stokes (2024) argue for the ethical importance of defining support, particularly in avoiding role confusion. However, they too focus more on role clarity than on reflexive practice.

This finding highlights a misalignment between literature, training, and praxis. Coaches may assume they are defining support, but without a shared framework or language, this remains unexamined. It is one of the tensions that informed the interview phase, where deeper questions were asked about what coaches say and do when introducing support in practice.

4.9 Ongoing Needs Assessment

Two further items from the survey provide insight into how coaches monitor progress and enable reflection:

88% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they regularly assess client needs throughout the coaching process. 98% reported encouraging client reflection during sessions.

These figures suggest a strong commitment to reflective practice and ongoing calibration. However, they may also reflect surface level alignment with coaching discourse rather than evidence of reflexive management. As discussed further in the interview findings, reflection is often treated as a general technique rather than a specific, relational skill linked to support. Without deeper inquiry, there is a risk that support is assumed to be embedded in reflection, rather than actively negotiated, or reviewed.

4.10 Client Reflection as Embedded Practice

Survey Question 3 asked whether coaches actively encourage client reflection on progress. An overwhelming 98% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed.

While this suggests that reflection is embedded as a coaching practice, the finding raises a deeper question. Is reflection treated as a standalone skill, or is it being

assumed as inherently supportive? If the latter, there is a risk that reflection is used habitually rather than reflexively.

The literature differentiates between reflective techniques and reflexive engagement. Lawton Smith and Shaw (2019) caution that conflating the two can result in shallow insight, particularly when reflection is offered without framing or follow up. Daniels and Ahmed (2024) argue that effective reflection requires balance, not simply prompting but listening for meaning and adapting support accordingly.

In this context, the high agreement in the survey may mask a lack of deliberate reflection on how support is managed during reflective moments. This aligns with the broader theme that support, while present, is often assumed rather than explicitly negotiated. These issues are explored more fully in the interview phase, where coaches describe how, or whether, they frame reflection as a vehicle for adaptive support.

4.11 Collaborative Review of Support

In response to Survey Question 4, 87% of coaches reported that they collaboratively review the type of support needed as the coaching relationship progresses. This indicates a strong awareness that support is dynamic and should be revisited rather than assumed.

However, the data also raise questions. While high agreement suggests a co-constructed approach, earlier responses indicate that many coaches do not define support clearly at the outset. This raises the possibility that what is described as “collaboration” may, in practice, be more intuitive or coach led than genuinely negotiated.

Literature on relational contracting (Hawkins and Smith, 2014; Rogers, 2012) supports the idea of shared understanding but rarely unpacks how support itself is framed within that process. Jacobs and Litton (2023) argue that feedback loops play a central role in enabling reflexivity and psychological safety, yet these loops are not always embedded intentionally.

The survey responses point to a positive orientation toward dialogue, but it is unclear how explicitly this includes discussion of support. This gap informed the interview

phase, where participants were asked how they notice when support is working, or not, and how that dialogue is shaped across the coaching intervention.

4.12 Adaptation of Support Based on Client Needs

Survey Question 5 explored how coaches adapt their approach in response to changing client needs. A total of 95.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, suggesting widespread confidence in adapting support throughout the coaching intervention.

While this appears to confirm that support is dynamic, it also reflects a tension present throughout the data: the difference between flexible intention and reflexive practice. Cox (2013) argues that much of coaching is guided by intuition, with adaptation often unspoken and unexamined. This invites the question of whether support is being modified in dialogue with the client or silently adjusted by the coach.

Several responses implied that support is adapted without explicit discussion. This aligns with the broader pattern of assumed, rather than defined, support. When adaptation is described as instinctive, it may reflect experience and skill, or it may bypass the opportunity for joint sense-making.

This item helped shape a core interview question, asking coaches to reflect on moments when support was "*not quite landing*" and how they noticed and responded. That inquiry provided a deeper view of real-time reflexivity and the decisions behind adaptation in practice.

4.13 Feedback as Calibration

Survey Question 6 asked whether coaches frequently seek feedback from clients on session effectiveness. While a majority (75%) agreed or strongly agreed, one in four respondents gave neutral or negative responses.

This finding introduces an important contrast. Although earlier responses suggest high confidence in adapting support and maintaining reflective practice, this result indicates that feedback is not always actively sought or embedded. There may be an implicit assumption that if the client appears content, the session has been effective.

Kolb (1984) and Grant (2017) both emphasise the value of feedback in calibrating support and ensuring alignment with client experience. Without it, coaches may rely on their own judgement, potentially missing opportunities for adaptation. Mistry (2023)

advocates for feedback to function as a shared check-in, rather than a performance review, a collaborative tool rather than a retrospective assessment.

This gap between assumed alignment and tested alignment is relevant to the research aim. If feedback is not routinely sought, the reflexive management of support becomes harder to evidence. This tension shaped the design of a key interview question: how coaches assess whether their support is landing when client feedback is minimal or ambiguous.

4.14 Contextualised Support Delivery

Survey Question 7 asked whether coaches consider a client's personal and professional context when determining support. A combined 89% agreed or strongly agreed.

This aligns with literature suggesting that effective support must be context sensitive (e.g. O'Neill, 2007). However, the high rate of agreement may conceal tacit practice rather than deliberate discussion. While most respondents appear to factor in context, it is unclear whether this is addressed explicitly with clients or simply interpreted through intuition.

Bachkirova and Lawton Smith (2015) argue that situational understanding needs to be made explicit in coaching education. Similarly, Lee and Khan (2024) caution against tokenistic inclusion, emphasising the need for clear attention to intersectional contexts. This survey result supports the idea that awareness exists, but it may not always translate into shared understanding.

4.15 Open Discussion of Coach Role Success

Survey Question 8 asked whether coaches engage in open discussion about their own role in the coaching process. This item produced the lowest rate of agreement in the entire survey, with nearly half of respondents responding neutrally or negatively.

This signals a potential discomfort around role transparency, or perhaps a lack of clarity about how to review one's own presence in the relationship. While postmodern coaching literature encourages openness and reflexivity, this does not always extend to explicitly discussing the coach's role in-session.

The result raises questions about power, trust, and self-awareness. Lin and Armstrong (2023) suggest that reluctance to name one's role may reflect confidence gaps rather

than ethical avoidance. Kumar and Bennett (2023) argue that role review should form part of coach education, a view that supports the need for further development in this area.

4.16 Self Reflection as a Mechanism for Improving Support

Survey Question 9 asked whether coaches reflect on their own experiences to improve the support they offer. A total of 87% agreed or strongly agreed.

This finding affirms the widespread value placed on self-reflection in coaching. However, it is notable that 13% did not report engaging in this practice. Considering that coaching literature frequently frames reflection as a professional obligation (e.g. Bachkirova, 2016; Lawton Smith, 2017), this gap may indicate differing understandings of what constitutes meaningful reflection.

Several responses implied that reflection occurs informally or intuitively. This supports the broader claim that support is often managed privately, rather than through structured supervision or shared review.

4.17 External Supervision or Guidance

Survey Question 10 asked whether coaches actively seek supervision to improve the support they provide. A total of 61% agreed or strongly agreed, leaving nearly 39% reporting neutral or negative responses.

Considering that supervision is endorsed as a professional standard by both the EMCC (2020) and ICF (2021), this result is significant. It suggests that while supervision is accepted in principle, its link to support may not be well defined in practice.

Miller and Watts (2024) call for supervision to be more explicitly connected to the quality of the coaching intervention. Roy and Finlay (2023) argue that support should be a core topic in supervision itself. This finding reinforces the central theme of the research: support is present, but rarely named, framed, or reflected on as a distinct skill.

Figure 4.1 Heatmap of Quantitative responses

Figure 4.1, as seen below, is a heatmap of the 10 quantitative questions. It presents a visual summary of the quantitative survey results across 10 core items. This

heatmap highlights where agreement was strong (e.g. reflection, adaptation) and where responses were more divided (e.g. feedback, role review, supervision).

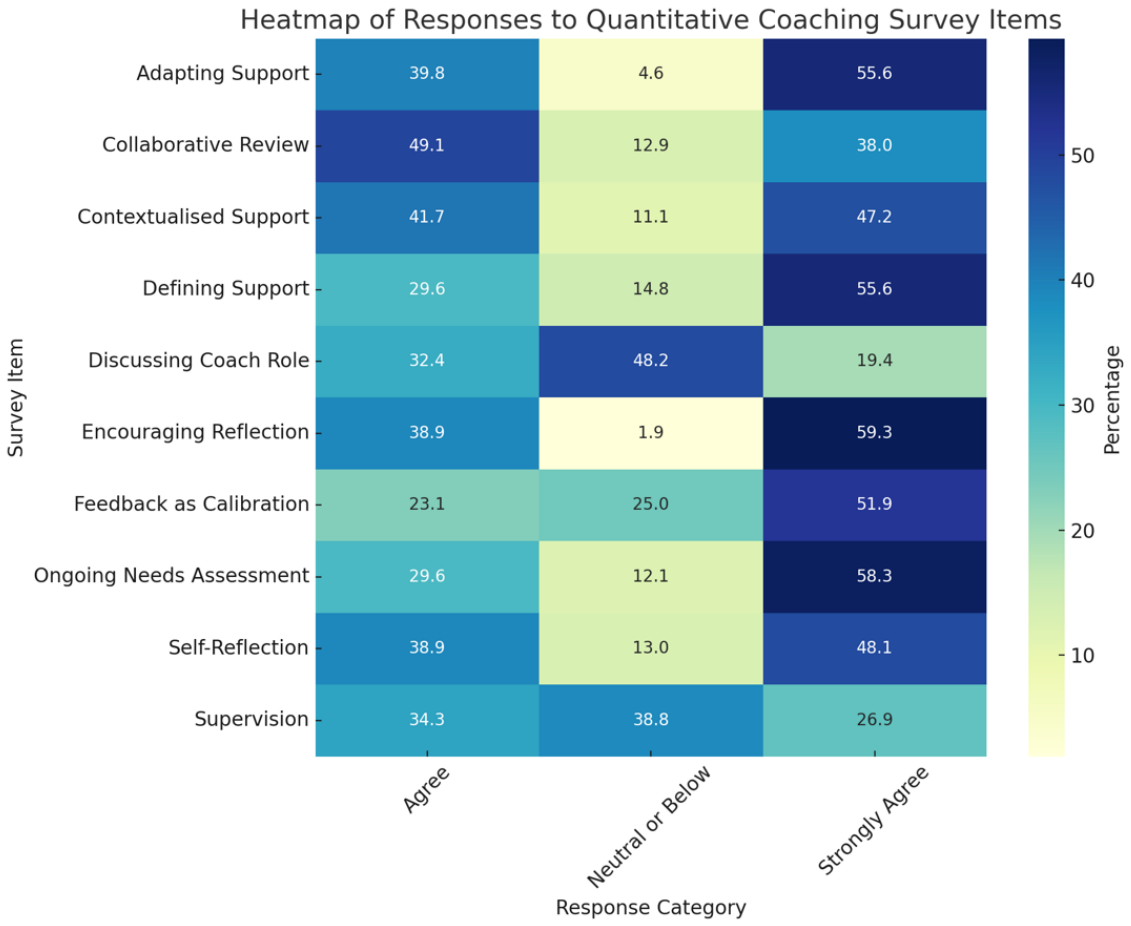

Figure 4.1 Heatmap of Quantitative responses (Napkin AI, 2025)

4.18 Synthesis

To synthesise these quantitative survey results we can highlight overall trends such as the high agreement on reflection and adaptation and yet the low agreement in the role transparency and supervision. This is indicating a trend to ‘just do it’ without the circling of continual improvement through feedback and actions to improve based on learning.

This endorses the research assertion that support is an assumed skill and is not directly involved in the design and maintenance of the coaching intervention. This combination of strengths and inconsistencies highlight the need for a quality intervention of a key training module on support, defining it, explicitly discussing it with

clients and tacitly agreeing on how the reflexivity of support adapts and flows during a coaching intervention based on progress or lack of progress.

Clearly, the literature gap identified in the Literature Review is demonstrated in practice whereby the assumption a coach knows the best support to offer and the dynamic of reflexivity. This dearth is followed with a gap in training which in turn is a gap in praxis.

Nevertheless, the data is clear on the value of supervision so an option would be to utilise the training within supervision as standard. Additionally, the inclusion of a set module with the gravitas of other fundamental modules will enhance the experience of a coach within their training and, thus, in the quality of their delivery. The caveat is that this is also followed with reflection and supervision.

Through linking these findings with pragmatism, there are clear actionable activities which can impact on the real-world experience of coaches from the basic training to master level. This is an opportunity for improvement and integration of practice which serves to enhance both the coach and their experience and the client as recipient of quality coaching.

The survey findings gave a broad picture of how coaches talk about support. Key areas such as flexible approaches, the value of challenge, and the importance of creating safe spaces all stood out. These insights informed the design of the interview phase. The survey helped to surface what is said about support. The interviews were designed to explore what coaches do, and how they describe support when asked to explain, reflect, or revisit their practice. The next section introduces the findings from that second phase, where five final themes were developed.

4.19 Figure 4.2 Findings Workflow

To show how the two research phases are connected, Figure 4.2 illustrates the flow of data collection and analysis across the research. It outlines how the initial survey findings informed the interview design, and how both sets of data contributed to the development of the five final themes. This workflow reflects the exploratory sequential design and the pragmatic emphasis on building understanding through iteration.

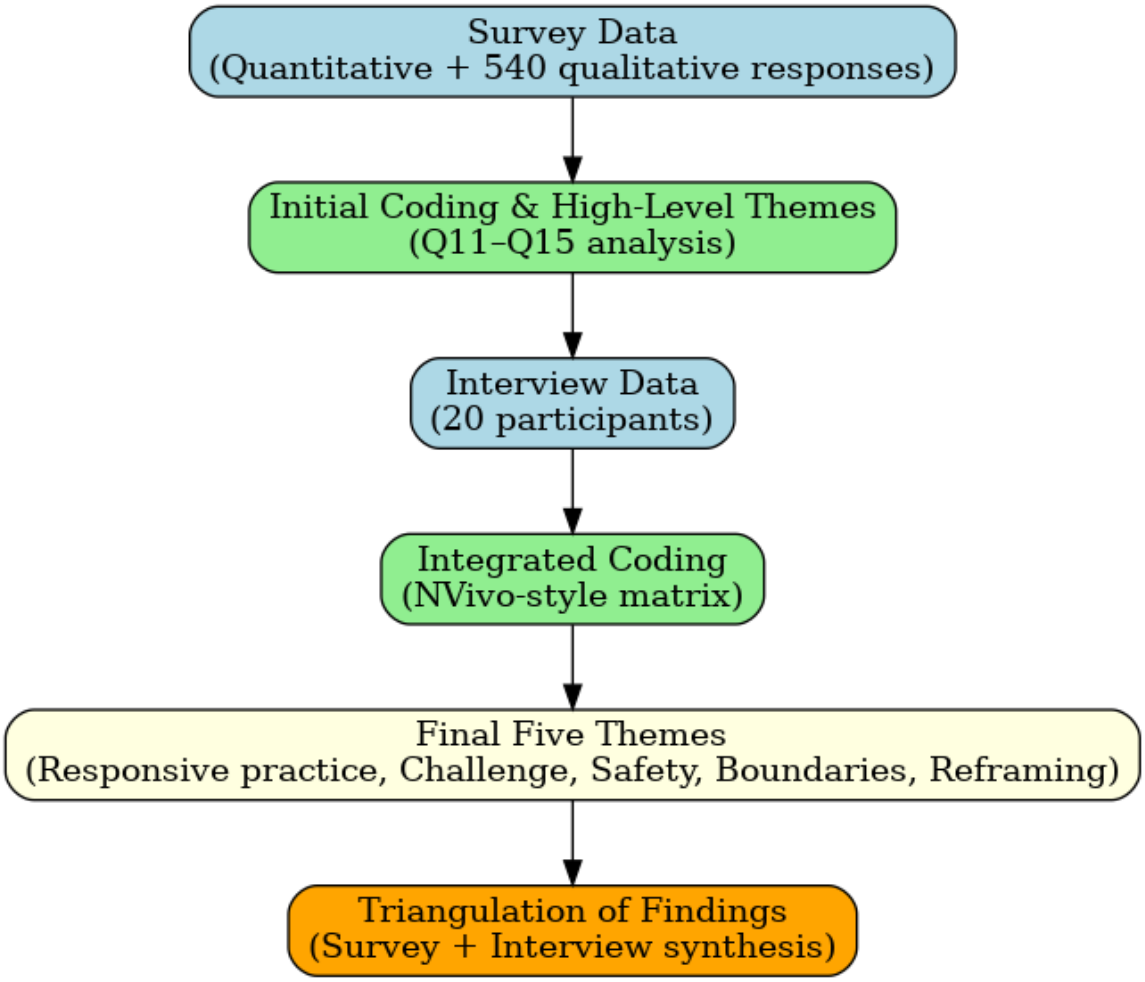

Figure 4.2 Findings Workflow (Napkin AI, 2025)

The survey findings provided a useful overview of current coaching practice and highlighted key patterns in how support is described. However, there were clear limits to what the survey could uncover. To explore the complexity behind those patterns, a qualitative phase was needed, one that could surface the 'how' and 'why' behind coaches' choices, language, and judgement.

The open-ended survey questions gave a first glimpse into this nuance, but it was through in-depth interviews that deeper insight could be gained. This shift aligns with the pragmatist focus of the research, to identify actionable knowledge grounded in real-world experience. The interviews enabled a closer examination of how support is enacted, not just described, and how it is managed reflexively within different coaching relationships.

The next section presents the findings from this second phase. It begins with an overview of the thematic analysis process and introduces the five analytic themes that were developed through this stage of the research.

4.20 Thematic analysis from qualitative results

The qualitative phase of the research explored how coaches understand and enact support in their day-to-day practice. Building on the survey insights, the interview data offered a deeper and more situated view of how support is described, negotiated, and reflexively managed within coaching interventions.

This phase was grounded in a reflexive thematic analysis approach, informed by Braun and Clarke (2021), and supported by the researchers pragmatist stance. Rather than applying pre-determined codes, themes were developed through close, iterative reading of each transcript, with attention to the language used, the meanings attributed to support, and how these evolved across different coaching contexts.

The five open-ended survey questions (Q11-Q15) helped shape the interview design, allowing for continuity across both data phases. The interviews extended this by inviting participants to share specific examples, personal reflections, and insights into their decision making in real time. This shift enabled a more interpretive lens to be applied, moving beyond what coaches say about support, toward how they construct it in practice.

The following section introduces the five final themes developed through this analysis. These themes were derived from patterns across the interviews and are supported by illustrative data, discourse features, and participant variation. Each theme is grounded in the lived experience of coaching and reflects the research aim to explore support as a reflexively managed skill.

4.21 NVivo style Coding Matrix (Themes Across Participants)

To support transparency and demonstrate cross-case consistency, a coding matrix was developed to map the presence of each theme across the 20 interview participants. Although qualitative software such as NVivo was not used, a manual coding process was adopted, mirroring NVivo style conventions to track theme strength and variation. Table 4.5 provides an overview of how the five analytic themes

were distributed across the 20 interview participants. The symbols indicate whether each theme was: ✓ Strong presence * Not evident ~ Minimal evidence.

Table 4.5 Themes Across Participants

Participant	Theme 1: Responsive & Flexible Practice	Theme 2: Challenge, Care & Containment	Theme 3: Honest & Safe Coaching	Theme 4: Skilled Boundary Work	Theme 5: Reframing & Perspective Shifting
1	✓	✓	✓	*	~
2	✓	*	✓	✓	✓
3	*	✓	✓	~	*
4	✓	✓	*	✓	~
5	✓	*	✓	✓	✓
6	✓	✓	~	✓	✓
7	✓	*	✓	✓	✓
8	✓	✓	✓	*	*
9	*	✓	✓	✓	~
10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	✓	✓	*	*	✓
12	✓	~	✓	✓	✓
13	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	✓	✓	✓	~	*
15	*	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	✓	*	✓	✓	✓
17	✓	✓	✓	✓	~
18	*	✓	✓	*	✓
19	✓	✓	*	✓	✓
20	✓	✓	✓	✓	*

This table supports the claim that the themes were well saturated and consistently expressed across a diverse range of coaching experiences. It also contributes to the audit trail, showing how the analysis was carried out and where variation existed.

Each of the five themes is explored in depth in the sections that follow, with illustrative quotes and analysis drawn directly from the interview data. These themes build directly on the earlier survey findings and offer a more detailed, grounded account of how support is enacted in real coaching relationships.

4.22 Theme 1: Support as a Responsive and Flexible Practice

The respondents frequently describe listening as the primary way they begin to tailor and create the coaching relationship with the client. Indeed 175 out of the 540 total responses reference listening, which is 32%. Examples within the survey results include these which cover three separate approaches in brackets: "*Listen to client*" (very transactional response), "*I listen to their needs and decide how I can best help*" (note the lack of collaboration and the choice positioned with the coach not client?) "*By asking what they need and what works best for them*" (more intuitive and collaborative)."

This is an ideal way to understand the client needs, hear explicitly what problems or issues are to get the specific reason for the coaching sessions. Interestingly, this appears to be framed as more of an ethical stance than purely a technique. Listening techniques are often used in coaching training (CIPD, "An introduction to Coaching"), as well as having a place within the framework of the EMCC and the International Coaching Federation who teach explicitly on the importance of listening.

Linking to the literature review, Atkinson (2022) describes listening to be a fundamental building block of psychological safety whereas Aguilar (2020) and Chan and Mallett (2011) identify listening as a key to the development of empathy. There is a potential of conflating listening with support as the researcher posits these may well complement each other, but support is specific to the individual. Whereas listening and active listening is a methodology of taking in information from a client. It may be that to the coach; listening is outside in while support is from the inside of the coach outward to the client.

This supports the contention of the research question in that listening, whilst something we (without hearing impairment) do on a daily basis, warrants a training course on how to finesse this to the degree of being able to build a relationship, whereas support which is more nuanced, changeable with innumerable variables and

can demand significant reflexivity and swift reaction to the most minute of physical or emotional changes does not warrant a module or specific course.

The pragmatist approach is to welcome listening as a key element of successful coaching as Greene (2021) says is '*actionable and situation specific behaviour'*. Pragmatism also demands usefulness, and the researcher contends that if listening is not followed by reflexive adaptation, the value of listening as a support can be questioned.

In reviewing how the response to this question validates or otherwise the research question, and to ensure bias is addressed, it can be safely claimed that whilst support may start with relational presence, there is a dearth of evidence that this listening is translated specifically to the support the client needs throughout the coaching intervention. Therefore, the case for support being an assumed skill rather an explicit one is given weight.

These findings directly connect to RQ1 and RQ3 by showing that support is not a fixed concept but something coaches shape and refine in real time, based on relational cues and judgement.

While Theme 1 highlights how support is shaped through flexibility and responsiveness, Theme 2 moves this further by exploring how support often involves holding challenge and care together and knowing when containment is just as important as encouragement.

4.23 Illustrative Data Extracts for Theme 1: Support as a Responsive and Flexible Practice

Table 4.6 provides illustrative quotes from participants that capture how they described support as a responsive and flexible practice. The extracts show how coaches adapt models, trust intuition, and respond to clients' needs in the moment. The limitations of rigid, model-driven coaching was noted by Grant (2017, 2021), and ties to Abraham (2015) who posited coaching as more judgement and decision-making. The data supports this reflexive adaptation.

Table 4.6 Data Extracts for Theme 1: Support as a Responsive and Flexible Practice

Participant	Quote	Coding Note
P3	"I rarely stick to a model from start to finish, I move between approaches depending on the client's mood or needs."	Evidence of moving beyond rigid frameworks, highlights situational responsiveness.
P7	"Sometimes you just know when the client needs you to pause and listen, rather than push the model forward."	Reflects intuitive decision- making and adaptability.
P10	"I used to lean on GROW heavily, but now I adjust on the fly, real coaching happens between the boxes."	Emphasises the shift from structured to adaptive coaching.
P12	"Being flexible isn't about being unprepared, it's about holding the space for whatever the client brings."	Highlights balance between preparation and responsiveness.
P18	"The best support I give comes when I let go of my script and respond to what's really happening."	Demonstrates real-time reflexivity and focus on the client's needs.

4.24 Theme 2: Support Structured via Tools and Models

This theme explored how coaches interpret challenge not as the opposite of support, but as a critical expression of it, when balanced with empathy, care, and emotional steadiness. Across the data, participants consistently framed challenge as a relational skill that enables growth without diminishing trust. Support, in this view, is not about comfort or avoidance but about staying present and connected while inviting clients to examine assumptions, confront discomfort, and stretch their thinking.

Several participants described challenge as an act of care, a way of demonstrating belief in the client's potential. As Participant 2 reflected, "*Challenge is caring, if I do not challenge them, I am not helping them grow.*" Here, support is enacted not by protecting the client from difficulty, but by accompanying them through it with intentionality and presence. This aligns with the findings of Blakey and Day (2012), who argue that challenge and support are mutually reinforcing, rather than oppositional.

Participants also spoke of emotional containment as a core component of support. This refers to the coach's ability to remain grounded and attentive when clients are unsettled, creating a holding space that feels safe enough for deeper exploration. As Participant 19 noted, "*Containment is about staying calm when they're unsettled, it's knowing when to hold and when to push.*" This balancing act requires both emotional intelligence and skilled judgement, underscoring the reflexive nature of supportive practice. This aligns with Clutterbuck's (2010) view that developmental models act as containers for learning, enabling both client and coach to navigate complex issues without losing direction.

Rather than positioning support as passive empathy or reassurance, coaches described it as an active commitment to the clients' growth. Participant 14 observed, "*Sometimes the kindest thing you can do is to question their assumptions,"* illustrating how supportive challenge can offer clients new perspectives without eroding rapport. This links closely with Theme 5, where reframing is used as a mechanism for expanding client awareness.

Several coaches also highlighted the importance of trust and tone when delivering challenge. Participant 5 commented, *"I hold the space for discomfort when I challenge, they know I am still on their side."* This suggests that the impact of challenge is less about content and more about relational context: the coach's ability to signal care, stay attuned, and avoid crossing into criticism. As Participant 9 summarised, *"Pushing someone's thinking doesn't mean being harsh, it's about doing it with empathy."* These accounts support the argument made by Clutterbuck (2025) that challenge is not separate from support, but rather one of its most sophisticated forms.

Taken together, the data in this theme illustrates that support is not diminished by challenge, it is defined by how challenge is offered. When care and containment are

present, challenge becomes a conduit for trust, clarity, and transformation. This interpretation advances the research aim by showing that support in coaching is not merely a soft skill, but a reflexively managed discipline requiring emotional literacy, situational judgement, and presence.

4.25 Illustrative Data Extracts for Theme 2: Support Through Challenge, Care and Containment

Table 4.7 provides representative quotes illustrating how participants framed challenge as a form of support when balanced with care and emotional containment. These extracts highlight the relational skill required to challenge effectively without undermining trust.

Table 4.7 Data Extracts for Theme 2: Support Through Challenge, Care and Containment

Participant	Quote	Coding Note
P2	"Challenge is caring, if I don't challenge them, I'm not helping them grow."	Frames challenge as a supportive intervention.
P5	"I hold the space for discomfort when I challenge, they know I'm still on their side."	Shows the link between containment and trust.
P9	"Pushing someone's thinking doesn't mean being harsh, it's about doing it with empathy."	Emphasises challenge as relational, not adversarial.
P14	"Sometimes the kindest thing you can do is to question their assumptions."	Positions challenge as a form of respect and care.
P19	"Containment is about staying calm when they're unsettled, it's knowing when to hold and when to push."	Highlights containment as an advanced coaching skill.

4.26 Theme 3: Creating the Conditions for Honest, Safe Coaching.

Clearly there are many coaches within the survey respondents who rely on and use models and tools to assist the application of a coaching intervention. The survey results showed a total of 145 from the 540, equating to 26.9% referencing tools, models, frameworks, or structure. This research is not to analyse the specific tools, rather to understand how the tools are used in relation to the topic of support.

Some direct quotes from the survey to demonstrate this include Culture Map, Insights Discovery psychometric testing, NLP, learning styles questionnaire. Using these as a primary method to personalise support may suggest a structure; however, this can be countered with the argument that it is in fact rigid conception of tailoring. The question for actual support against the reliance of these tools raises the question of whether the adaptation of coaching is externalised and 'handed over' to the results of a tool rather than the deep and reflexive management of support. No doubt these tools are designed with the best of intentions, however, the researcher feels this may be abdicating the accountability for support to the results of a test, which if the topic of support were embedded as a fundamental module, a tool would in fact only complement the trained skill. The theme of tools and models was raised in the literature review, and the researcher posits the possibility of the reliance on this as structured but shallow. The results of the survey support this assertion.

Passmore and Tee (2023) give a warning of the habitual nature of applying models which could mask a level of inattentiveness whereas Garvey et al. (2021) references the possibility of '*model myopia*' if the application becomes the process as opposed to the supplement to a coaching intervention.

Within pragmatism, tools are not inherently problematic as the value lies in what works in a given context. Moreover, there is a focus for pragmatists to demand continual reflection and the adaptation to improve. Therefore, we can take an inference from the survey results that there may be an unexamined reliance.

This theme partially corroborates the research question and offers healthy challenge as while it confirms that coaches may not attempt to personalise support, many may well do so without reflexive awareness as the support is delivered through tools and not managed dynamically. The research is still demonstrating that support is under defined and may be being assumed. However, the question for future research may

involve whether a reliance on structure replaces (or even negates) reflexive management of support.

Building on this balance of challenge and care, Theme 3 turns to the conditions that make coaching truly honest and safe. It shows that trust and openness are not just created, they are continually negotiated in the coaching space.

4.27 Illustrative Data Extracts for Theme 3: Creating the Conditions for Honest, Safe Coaching

Table 4.8 presents key quotes from participants illustrating how they create honesty and psychological safety in coaching relationships. These extracts highlight the deliberate, reflexive skills used to foster trust and openness.

Table 4.8 Data Extracts for Theme 3: Creating the Conditions for Honest, Safe Coaching

Participant	Quote	Coding Note
P1	"Clients won't be honest if they sense you're judging them, safety is something you build, not assume."	Highlights the active creation of psychological safety.
P6	"Honesty comes when they know I'll listen, not rush to fix them."	Shows the link between non-judgemental presence and openness.
P11	"It's about making them feel it's okay to fail or not have the answers, then real conversations start."	Demonstrates normalising vulnerability as part of safety.
P15	"You can't fake trust, it's built by being consistent, present, and fully engaged."	Emphasises trust-building as an ongoing reflexive practice.
P20	"Safety doesn't happen just because you're friendly, it's knowing when to push and when to hold back."	Reflects the dynamic balance between challenge and safety.

This theme examines what is not being articulated regarding flexibility and reflexivity as this is a theme that has a strong correlation with the research question and the researcher's assertion of support being an assumed skill with a literature gap and a clear omission in the training of coaches. There are some powerful quotes from the survey detailing reflexivity and flexibility beautifully: "*every client is different, and you will gauge with each person," "I change what I do depending on how they show up that day", "it is their space, not mine"*.

Comments such as this equate to only 11% of the 540 responses, meaning 89% are not referencing this fluidity and reflexive practice. Whilst we cannot assume that just because something is not mentioned it, therefore, does not exist, 89% is a compelling statistic, especially given the questions all invite a level of flexibility in the responses.

The literature review demonstrates the case of reflexivity being central to ethical coaching practice specifically regarding the relational dynamics of support. This datum gives gravitas to that assertion and strengthens the researcher's offer of support as a reflexive tool is not explicit, and a coach adopts the assumption of best intentions rather than apply deep learning to be the basis of praxis. Clark and Braun (2023) determine there is a risk with applying flexibility without reflection which may conceal biased choices or habits whilst appearing professional.

Flexibility aligns well with pragmatism but also demands the reflection to determine its usefulness for continual review of being able to increase the quality of coaching offer. There is a distinction that matters and is evident in the research data and that is that coaches need to not only do what may feel right but also continue with reflecting on why it was right and whether it worked. This datum is not evident in this survey and raises questions for further debate. The research is reinforced with this response in that support is implied and not defined, not framed directly and without training it can easily be seen as a cause and effect issue.

These insights connect strongly to RQ2 and RQ3, showing that creating honest, safe coaching spaces is not about scripted techniques but about a coach's ability to read the moment, manage trust, and respond with careful judgement. This naturally leads into the next theme, where the focus shifts to how boundaries, both spoken and unspoken, are part of how support is skilfully managed.

Portfolio Link: The emphasis on trust and psychological safety connects directly with the reflective stories in the portfolio, particularly around handling conflict and authority.

4.28 Theme 4: Support as Skilled Boundary Work

This is an interesting and critical theme which complements themes 2 and 3 as only 99 out of the total 540 responses, equating to 18.3%, mention structured support, meaning 81.7% did not. This could be viewed as a blind spot rather than only a gap. Supporting this, de Haan and Nilsson (2023) argue that structure can mask relational work with the focus on a '*veneer of professionalism'*. It appears the coaches may be equating support with the modules and training traditionally delivered such as contracting goal setting, check in and session review.

This is interesting in that the assertion of support being assumed is underpinned here as 87.1% is a compelling figure to have a gap in the specifics of support. There is an inference that the support is embedded in the structure as opposed to a standalone approach to how each client receives the tailored and reflexive support throughout the coaching intervention. A question is whether support is becoming a procedure rather than the reflexive practice best for the client and the structure resolves the support issue, which the researcher rejects.

Both the ICF and EMCC frameworks have depth of focus on contracting but without the correlation of support within or as a drive of either, (ICF, 2021; EMCC, 2020). The pragmatist frame on this theme is that structure has value only if it is tested and reflection applied often so the context is often reviewed, and usefulness is applied as a key feature. This theme does not reject structure, but it highlights that structure was mentioned by only a minority of respondents. That minority perspective is still important, offering a compelling reminder that structure can inform a coaching intervention, but should not define it in its entirety. The concern the researcher has raised through the question and literature review is that not only is support under-theorised, but it is also being hidden behind other functions of the coaching practice.

Having explored how support involves careful boundary work, Theme 5 looks at how coaches use reframing and perspective, shifting to move clients forward. This final theme shows that support is not only about holding the space but also about opening up new ways of thinking and seeing.

4.29 Illustrative Data Extracts for Theme 4: Support as Skilled Boundary Work

Table 4.9 highlights how participants described boundary-setting and management as active, supportive elements of coaching. These quotes show how boundaries provide structure, safety, and clarity in the coaching relationship.

Table 4.9 Data Extracts for Theme 4: Support as Skilled Boundary Work

Participant	Quote	Coding Note
P4	"Boundaries aren't about being distant, they're what make clients feel safe to explore deeply."	Frames boundaries as enablers of trust and openness.
P8	"I'm clear about what's in scope, but I also explain why those limits exist, it reassures clients."	Shows transparency as a supportive boundary practice.
P10	"Holding boundaries is caring, it stops me from rescuing them or making it about me."	Highlights boundaries as a form of care and professionalism.
P14	"If you blur lines, you risk losing their trust, support means keeping the container strong."	Positions boundaries as a protective 'container' for the work.
P18	"I see boundaries as scaffolding; they hold the coaching process together while clients grow."	Uses metaphor to show boundaries as supportive structure.

4.30 Theme 5: Support Through Reframing and Perspective, Shifting

There is a significantly striking data set underpinning the power and relational dynamic between coach and client and that is that only 15 out of the 540 responses equating to only 2.8% referenced support as being client led. This is the most compelling statistic regarding this vital subject. It is worth reiterating the questions were purposely inviting participants to discuss how they tailor their approach and yet 87.2 % hold the tailoring of coaching themselves as coaches. This can certainly raise the question of the lack of collaboration with the client on the way and type of support that suits and overwhelmingly supports the assertion that support is well intentioned and assumed to be the right support offered by the coach.

This small percentage was clear on the collaboration and that the support was framed as something to be worked ‘with’ the client rather than delivered or given. Examples included chemistry checking and co-design and ongoing dialogue: ‘*I ask how I can best be of service,’ ‘I follow their lead’; ‘we co-create the agenda at the start of each session’*. The researcher asserts that the joint working on support and the definitions, management and reflexive approach is of higher value than the EMCC and ICF as well as others posit through their focus on the frame of the coaches’ actions rather than the invitation from the client to give context and collaboration. In support of this, Denniston (2023) believes control and structure is not the ideal, rather the ‘*presence and responsiveness’* of the coach.

The research is supported by the pragmatist view of ‘what works’ and while some coaches build relationships on client terms, there is compelling data to show the coach is making an assumption of support for the client, despite all the best of intentions.

Linked to the research aims, this data set demonstrates the reflexivity and negotiation with the client is largely absent and the scarcity of examples given is evidence. The researcher remains with the assertion that support is underdefined, undertaught and underdiscussed.

These five themes provide rich data and a springboard for the in-depth interviews. Whilst it is clear that support is present in the coaching practice, and there is no suggestion of unethical working, support is rarely defined, intentionally directed, or collaboratively agreed with the client.

4.31 Illustrative Data Extracts for Theme 5: Support Through Reframing and Perspective Shifting

Table 4.10 presents key quotes from participants demonstrating how they use reframing and perspective shifting as deliberate strategies to offer support. These extracts highlight how coaches help clients gain new insights and alternative ways of understanding their challenges.

Table 4.10 Data Extracts for Theme 5: Support Through Reframing and Perspective Shifting

Participant	Quote	Coding Note
P2	"Reframing is about showing them a different lens, not telling them what to think, but expanding options."	Highlights reframing as a facilitative, non-directive support tool.
P5	"I help them step outside their story to see it from another angle, that's where shifts happen."	Demonstrates the transformative nature of perspective shifting.
P9	"Support means helping them discover the meaning they've missed, not giving advice."	Shows reframing as a process of client-led discovery.
P15	"Sometimes it's as simple as changing the language, a single word shift can change how they feel."	Illustrates reframing at the micro level of language use.
P20	"Perspective shifting is about curiosity, asking the questions that make them see the bigger picture."	Reflects reframing as a questioning-based intervention.

4.32 Survey vs Interview Triangulation Summary

Table 4.11 presents a synthesis of survey and interview data, highlighting where Phase 2 interviews reinforced, extended, or challenged insights identified in the Phase 1 survey. This triangulation demonstrates the iterative, exploratory approach to building the final five themes.

Table 4.11 Survey vs Interview Triangulation Summary

Theme/Insight	Survey Evidence (Phase 1)	Interview Evidence (Phase 2)
Responsive and Flexible Practice	Survey respondents highlighted the need to adapt coaching models as experience increased.	Interviews confirmed that coaches move away from rigid frameworks towards intuitive, real-time adaptation.
Challenge as Support	Open text responses noted the value of constructive challenge for growth.	Interviews deepened this by framing challenge as a relational, caring act requiring emotional containment.
Trust and Psychological Safety	Trust and rapport were frequently mentioned as enablers of support.	Interviews revealed that creating psychological safety is a reflexive skill, not a static trait.
Boundary Management	Professionalism and 'clear boundaries' were referenced but underdeveloped.	Interviews reframed boundaries as scaffolding that actively supports the coaching process.
Reframing and Perspective, Shifting	Survey participants identified reframing as a useful technique.	Interviews expanded this to show reframing as a deliberate skill for client insight and empowerment.

4.33 Findings Snapshot: Overview of Themes

Table 4.12 provides a summary of the five analytic themes, each illustrated with a representative quote and a concise insight. It serves as a visual overview of the key findings from the interview analysis.

Table 4.12 Overview of Themes

Theme	Representative Quote	Key Insight
1. Support as a Responsive and Flexible Practice	"I rarely stick to a model; I move between approaches depending on what the client brings."	Real-world coaching relies on adaptive, reflexive practice rather than fixed models.
2. Support Through Challenge, Care and Containment	"Challenge is caring, if I don't challenge them, I'm not really supporting their growth."	Constructive challenge is framed as a core form of relational support.
3. Creating the Conditions for Honest, Safe Coaching	"Safety isn't assumed; it's something you build and hold for the client."	Psychological safety emerges as a dynamic, reflexively managed skill.
4. Support as Skilled Boundary Work	"Boundaries are like scaffolding; they hold the coaching space together."	Boundaries are viewed as proactive, supportive structures rather than restrictions.
5. Support Through Reframing and Perspective, Shifting	"Support often means helping them see their story from a new angle."	Reframing and perspective shifting are used as intentional tools for insight.

Coaches frequently draw on listening and questioning to personalise the coaching dynamic. Training tends to focus on these skills, yet it overlooks the reflexivity required to develop and manage support across the intervention. There is evidence of the proceduralising of coaching in the use of tools and models. This is the structured approach which can develop more with experience, however, can become the professional mask to meet the process rather than the deeper relational dynamic which creates and tailors the support needed for a healthy dynamic.

There was clear evidence with a compelling 89% of responses not referencing the reflexivity required for the coaching support throughout the intervention. This gives gravitas for the researcher's assertion of a specific training module on this so coaches can learn the skill as opposed to leaving the process to assumption.

Support could be hiding within this overly structured approach to coaching, as the data gave evidence of a reliance on formal processes that may contain support but not necessarily deliver it as a tailored solution.

Finally, the most critical evidence was secured from the low 2.8% of responses detailing the support they as coaches offer as being co-created or client led. There is no suggestion of any unethical practice, however, the researcher feels this is a huge opportunity to progress the coaching training to a new level of modernity and include training coaches in the skills and application of reflexive support.

Collectively, these themes are largely invisible in the coaching narratives and are less evident over the well-established modules like contracting, tools, models, listening skills and structure. The data also supports the research aim to have support as a taught and relational skill and not as a vague byproduct of other modules traditionally delivered.

4.44 Support as a taught module

A yes/no response to question 16: Finally, when you undertook your training to become a coach, were you taught how to offer and manage support? Provided an interesting insight. From the 108 responses, the ratio was 77 no and 31 yes, equating to a 71.3% no to 28.7% yes. This confirms the central premise of the research in support being an assumed skill and not a taught skill.

This fully supports that the gap in the literature correlates with the lack in training and thus praxis. Coaching frameworks, models, and structure without this specific training in defining and managing support within the coaching dynamic may be leaving coaches relying on the assumption that their offer is the best option. The researcher sees this as an opportunity to update coach training, focusing on collaborative and explicit dialogue to create tailored solutions that achieve optimum results.

4.45 Survey findings conclusion

The research used a mixed methods design, grounded in pragmatism. Whilst the quantitative questions revealed a high self-reported agreement with supportive behaviours, the qualitative data evidenced that those responses may well be based in good intention rather than deep level of collaborative and reflexive support.

The survey of 16 questions has provided rich data and key insights to the understanding and application of support, in line with the research question and aims. The quantitative patterns from the Likert scale data allowed the researcher to understand the impact of how the respondents understand and how support is

underused. This was further complemented and developed by the qualitative themes which revealed the how and what elements behind the initial claims.

The final question provides clear evidence of the research gap showing that 71% have not received specific training leaving support skills to assumption. This continual complementing of each other triangulates and synthesises the data with the literature review and the ontological stance. This data strengthens the argument that support is widely accepted as a principle, the actual skill is left to interpretation, hidden within structure and protocol, and not given the gravitas it deserves within a formal framework of standards and taught as a specific module.

4.46 In-depth Interviews findings

This chapter presents the findings from 20 in-depth interviews held with coaches for qualitative data capture. This was to develop the survey results further into a deeper level of scrutiny and analyse the application of support within the coaching praxis. The participants were informed their contribution was to assist in exploring how support is described, understood, and dynamically handled throughout the coaching intervention. This linked directly to the exploratory sequential design within the methodology, specifically as phase 1 being the survey and phase 2 being the interviews. In phase 2 themes are created from the more detailed and nuanced interpretation and examples of support can be discovered and triangulated with the literature and training for coaches.

Interviews give the researcher an opportunity for deeper insight into individual coaching contexts, language use and the coach and client dynamic. The open questions are purposely designed to allow the participant to give not only opinion but also provide specific examples so the interviews flow naturally and with a conversational tone. This enabled the participants to feel their own experiences were of value and not that they had to fit a ‘type’ or ‘role’ of a coach to fit in. Using this approach, the participants visibly relaxed into the process. The researcher was able to gain significant value from the identity construction, the coaching dynamics and the linguistic similarities and differences.

Thematic analysis was applied, and interpretive elements were drawn from the two key areas linking the methodology and philosophical stance of discourse analysis and symbolic interactionism. Language and metaphor provided consistent evidence of the

power of semantics. The significant similarities across participants generated rich data that directly informed the research question, directly connecting this with the focus of meaning and identity of the coach, their identity and collaborative working with a client evidenced the co-construction of a powerful dynamic between coach and client. The significant data presented in the 20 interviews was coded reflexively and saturation was reached with five strong themes.

The findings are presented as an overview of the participants 'role style and context,' followed with five key analytical themes. Each theme is supported by illustrative quotes and cross participant variation. The themes all link back to the research question and the aims of the research so to define support as a continually moderated coaching skill.

The researcher's own critical positionality is one of a reflexive stance. The interpretation and findings are a result of the experience and lack of specific training and availability of literature on the subject of support. Further discussion and interpretation will be deepened in the relevant chapters which follow the findings.

The next section introduces the five core themes identified through a detailed thematic analysis of the in-depth interview data. This process was carried out manually using an NVivo style coding matrix to support transparency and rigour. Themes were derived from repeated patterns in participants' accounts, with particular attention to how language, role identity, and context shaped their descriptions of support.

Quotes are selected to reflect both commonalities and variation, while the analysis draws on both discourse theory and symbolic interactionism to interpret how meaning is co-constructed. These themes build directly on the earlier survey findings and offer a richer, more situated perspective on the reflexive management of support in coaching practice.

4.46.1 Interview questions

The questions for the interview were directly derived from the survey results. The table 4.13 below has the questions and links to the survey result.

Table 4.13 Interview questions and link to Survey

Question number	Interview Question	Link to the survey
1	"If I observed your first coaching session, what would I see or hear that tells the client how you'll support them, not just contract with them?"	This question expands on Survey Q1, where 85% of coaches claimed they "define support" for clients. However, qualitative survey data revealed vagueness and conflation with contracting. This interview question moves beyond surface-level definitions and probes observable practice, allowing the researcher to interrogate the practical enactment of 'support' and its distinction from routine contracting behaviours.
2	"Tell me about a time you thought the support you were offering wasn't quite landing, how did you notice, and what did you do?"	Builds on Survey Q4/Q5 (how support is adapted), but shifts focus from general intent to real-time reflexivity. Survey responses often cited "flexibility" without evidence of reflexive practice. This question addresses that gap directly, asking for a specific instance where the coach had to reassess their approach, probing reflexive judgement, not just adaptive rhetoric.
3	"Some coaches rely on models to structure support. In your experience, when does that add value, and when might it get in the way?"	Extends from qualitative survey responses where some coaches mentioned using models but without detail on context or effectiveness. This interview question draws out nuanced reflection on the use of tools, directly supporting Theme 2 (Support via Tools vs Judgement), and explored how structured approaches interact with coaching intuition and client need.
4	"If a client doesn't give much feedback, how do you assess whether the support you are offering is actually working?"	In the survey, 25% of respondents reported not seeking regular feedback, yet this was not explored further. This question addresses the implicit power dynamic and probes self- trust, judgement, and ethical calibration in the absence of explicit client cues. It builds from Survey Q6 but adds contextual realism and decision, making pressure.
5	"Where in your coaching do clients shape the support you offer, and where do you think the coach should lead?"	Builds from survey findings that showed only 2.8% of responses explicitly described co-designed support. While "client-led" was often cited, few explored the boundary between agency and guidance. This question surfaces deeper reflections on power-sharing, ethics, and the negotiated nature of support, directly addressing underexplored tensions in the survey data.
6	"How do you think your own view of 'what support looks like' has changed since you were first trained?"	Aligns with Survey Q16, where most respondents had not received formal training on 'support' as a concept. This question invites a developmental narrative, revealing how coaches construct their understanding over time, and how support becomes reflexively owned rather than mechanically applied. It supports the thesis aim of reframing support as a reflexive skill.

4.46.2 Participant information

Table 4.14 below provides an anonymised overview of the 20 participants who contributed to the interview phase of the research. Each section summarises the coach's role style and a generalised description of their coaching context. Specific

sector or demographic data were not collected, in line with the ethical approach and commitment to confidentiality.

This table supports transparency while preserving anonymity and illustrates the interpretive richness that emerges from the diversity of coaching practices. It reinforces the researcher's pragmatist commitment to variation and transferability.

Table 4.14 Overview of the 20 participants

Participant	Role Style	Coaching Context Summary
1	Empathetic, emotionally attuned coach with a strong belief in partnership and client readiness	Focus on continuity of support and readiness across coaching stages
2	Solutions-focused, goal-oriented coach who values clarity and measurable outcomes	Coaching in change and development environments
3	Reflective and facilitative, leaning towards person-centred support	Mentoring and developmental coaching across career stages
4	Straight-talking, strategic coach with a background in leadership consultancy	Executive coaching for senior professionals
5	Flexible, agile practitioner who balances support and challenge	Coaching across operational and team roles
6	Trauma-informed, calm, and nurturing style with high emotional intelligence	Support-focused coaching with attention to resilience and recovery
7	Practical, no-nonsense coach grounded in lived experience	Career and leadership progression in varied settings
8	Encouraging, gently directive style with a focus on growth mindset	Coaching for individual and team development
9	Energetic, values-led coach who champions inclusion and equity	Inclusive coaching supporting belonging and voice
10	Deeply reflective, supervision-trained coach	Reflective practice and psychological insight orientation
11	Warm, relational style with strong equality and diversity lens	Coaching with a strong focus on inclusive practice
12	Forward-thinking coach with systems-thinking approach	Leadership and change-oriented coaching across roles
13	Intellectually curious, strengths-based coach	Talent and leadership development focus
14	Bold, senior level coach with experience in high-stakes contexts	Coaching for confidence and presence in pressured environments
15	Observant, softly challenging style rooted in practice experience	Performance and learning-oriented coaching
16	Curious and open style, values exploration, and dialogue	Coaching for professional growth and clarity
17	Adaptive, insight-driven coach with strong value on belonging	Coaching to enhance confidence and insight
18	Policy-literate, systems-informed coach focused on local priorities	Developmental coaching connected to wider agendas
19	Quiet, attentive presence who enables psychological safety	Resilience coaching and emotional containment
20	Confident, evidence-informed practitioner with sector-specific experience	Strategic coaching with practical and adaptive focus

The following elements of the overall findings describe the five core themes developed through thematic analysis of the interview data, captured in table 4.15 below. These themes reflect how support is experienced and enacted in coaching practice. Drawing

on NVivo style coding principles, the themes were generated through a reflexive process that paid close attention to patterns in language, metaphors, and practitioner insight.

While each theme stands independently, there are similarities and oppositions between them that speak to the complexity of how coaches make sense of support. The five themes are:

1. **Support as a Responsive and Flexible Practice;**
2. **Support Through Challenge, Care and Containment;**
3. **Creating the Conditions for Honest, Safe Coaching;**
4. **Support as Skilled Boundary Work;**
5. **Support Through Reframing and Perspective Shifting.**

Each theme is covered individually in the following sections. The thematic write-up for each theme follows a structured framework informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis and adapted from Nowell et al. (2017) to support transparency, consistency, and rigour.

Table 4.15 five core themes developed through thematic analysis of the interview data.

Participant	Theme 1: Responsive & Flexible	Theme 2: Challenge & Care	Theme 3: Creating the Conditions for Honest, Safe Coaching	Theme 4: Skilled Boundary Work	Theme 5: Reframing and Perspective Shifting
1	✓	✓	*	✓	*
2	✓	*	✓	✓	✓
3	✓	✓	✓	*	✓
4	*	*	~	✓	*
5	✓	✓	*	✓	*
6	✓	✓	✓	*	✓
7	✓	*	✓	*	✓
8	*	✓	✓	~	*
9	*	✓	*	✓	~
10	✓	✓	✓	*	*
11	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	✓	*	✓	*	✓
13	✓	✓	✓	*	✓
14	*	*	*	*	~
15	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	*	✓	✓	*	✓
17	✓	✓	*	✓	✓
18	*	✓	✓	✓	*
19	✓	*	✓	*	✓
20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

4.48 Theme 1: Support as a Responsive and Flexible Practice

The first theme explored how support was described by participants as something responsive and flexible. They described how it shaped and adapted to the needs of

the client. Rather than applying a fixed model, coaches spoke about the importance of noticing what was needed in the moment and adjusting accordingly.

This often involved tuning into tone, energy, silence, or shifts in language. Several referred to support as something that “moves” with the client, based on relational judgement rather than predefined technique. This theme was evident across many of the interviews and was also reflected in the survey findings, where 68% of respondents indicated they tailored their approach depending on client behaviour or emotional tone.

4.48.1 Illustrative Data Extracts for Theme 1: Support as a Responsive and Flexible Practice

To support transparency and demonstrate the depth of analysis, NVivo style tables were developed to show how each theme appeared across the participant interviews. These include selected data extracts that illustrate how the themes were constructed, along with links to relevant survey findings. While not generated from software, these tables reflect the kind of structured thinking behind tools like NVivo and are part of a wider approach to triangulating data and strengthening the credibility of the findings.

Table 4.16 below builds on this by bringing together individual interview accounts, related survey findings, and the analytic insights developed through thematic analysis. Each row summarises a participant’s role style, provides a direct quotation, identifies the linked survey item, and sets out the thematic interpretation. The final column shows how these insights connect directly to the research questions and overarching aim. Table 4.16 acts as a synthesis point, demonstrating how the data moves from lived practice to analytic interpretation and contributes to the argument that support is a managed coaching skill rather than an assumed trait.

Table 4.16 Illustrative Participant Accounts Linked to Survey Findings, Themes, and Research Questions

Participant	Role Style Summary	Interview Quote	Survey Link	Thematic Insight	Link to Research Questions (RQs) / Aim
3	Attuned, trauma aware	"It's almost like jazz, you're improvising, but you've trained for it."	Q11: Adapting approach throughout	Support as relational, fluid, and embodied rather than planned	RQ1: How is support understood? RQ2: How is it reflexively managed?
6	Emotionally intelligent, responsive	"I think it's about being what the client needs in that moment."	Q11 & Q12: Tailoring based on client need; moment-to-moment judgement	Coaches reject one size fits all support, responding reflexively to emotional and verbal cues	Links directly to the research aim: defining support as a managed coaching skill
11	Deep, listening, present	"I don't go in with a plan. I listen for what's not being said and let that guide me."	Q12: Reading tone, silences, and language	Support constructed through attentiveness to implicit communication	Symbolic interaction lens: meaning co-constructed in coaching dialogue
17	Tools-aware, client-responsive	"I only use tools if the client asks for them. I've learned to listen for when they need something to hold onto."	Q10 & Q14: Models used flexibly; support changes with confidence	Challenges modular coach training; supports need for reflexivity in practice	Links to RQ2 and recommendation for coach education reform
5	Pragmatic, flexible	"Sometimes you offer structure, other times you get out of the way. That's the art of it."	Q11: Judging how directive to be	Support as situational judgement, shaped by client flow not coach agenda	Supports research's argument that support is a skill, not a personality trait
1	Relational, reflective	"It's about knowing when to hold back and let them breathe."	Q11 & Q12: Adapting intensity and tone of support	Support seen as withdrawing as well as providing; active listening as action	Reinforces the call for reflexive presence over structured input

These examples highlight how support is enacted through reflexive judgement in practice, connecting survey patterns with the lived accounts of coaches. The synthesis reinforces the argument that support is not incidental, but an active, relational skill that directly addresses the research aim.

While the majority described adapting their support based on client cues, a smaller proportion (32%) gave more structured or model-led responses, often referring to a preferred coaching framework or fixed process. This suggests that while responsiveness is dominant, some coaches still lean on more consistent structures, perhaps linked to their training or organisational context. It is important to note that even with this model-led approach, the majority of participants rejected models once confidence and experience increased.

Support was rarely described as a fixed or pre-planned element of the coaching intervention. Rather, the participants relied on their judgement, or how they were sensing the process and mentioned how they were feeling throughout. This was supported by the lack of tacit discussions on support and what the client's view, input or ideas of what support they needed and evidences the assumption of support given by the coach that the client needs.

Participants frequently used metaphors such as *"mirror," "anchor,"* or *"scaffold"* to describe their role. This suggests that support, in this context, was not a stationary concept but something negotiated within the coaching relationship, albeit applied reflexively and not tacitly discussed at the outset or throughout. This theme contributes to the understanding of how support is both perceived and managed reflexively, aligning with the first two research questions.

Additional evidence lies in the responses about how support is constructed 'in the moment.' Participants used phrases such as 'real time', and 'as it happens' which is central to this theme. Interestingly, a majority view of coaches adjust their input and support according to the client's tone, body language, use of silences, linguistics, and emotional state. This technique veers to the nonverbal rather than approaching the support as an explicit discussion for debate. Many referred to this as 'instinct' which is an option for supplementary research on what and how instinct is and how it is applied within the coaching context.

The discourse lens for the relational impact demonstrated rich use of metaphors such as ‘mirror, ‘scaffold,’ and ‘dance’. This framing of coaching as a reflection, building support and a two-way discussion with a level of combined steps is powerful and endorses the gravity of a coaching relationship and how important managing that dynamic is.

Language was used to construct their identity: ‘I am whatever they need me to be’, ‘I hold the space’, ‘I am there as a safe space’ defines their identity in a way that the client can create a psychologically safe environment for the coaching intervention with greater impact. This language positions the coach’s identity not as fixed, but as something co-constructed through the interaction, in line with the symbolic interactionist view that self is shaped through social engagement.

Coaching was clearly accepted as a responsive and flexible practice noted by one participant who said *“I used to plan sessions. Now I listen more and let the client take me where they need to go.”* This is further supported by the clear rejection of models for those who have practised coaching for some time. Participant 5 gave their insight to this saying; *“Sometimes you have to offer structure, other times you have to get out of the way. That’s the art of it.”* One participant gave insight into how the shift away from pre-planned models came with confidence and experience by saying: *“I only use tools if the client asks for them. I’ve learned to listen for when they need something to hold onto.”*

Overwhelmingly, the responses demonstrated models were of use as a structure for learning coaching but are not used or are deconstructed for reflexive use as and when the situation required it. This is further developed in the recommendations.

The ability to tailor the sessions was supported by the 68% response from the survey of those who welcome the flexibility of a coaching session. This theme echoes the survey result and gives alignment to the reflexive nature of coaching. As one participant said: *“I read the room while staying anchored in what is ethical.”*

Support is clearly more than an attitude for a coach. It is a reflexive skill that whilst the results have identified this, coaches themselves are unaware of this as an explicit element of their practice. The researcher firmly believes this challenges the idea of support being a passive or generic skill, and rather it is a nuanced and highly

necessary skill that appears to develop with experience rather than aligns with what is taught.

While this theme highlights the fluidity of support in the moment, the next theme explored how coaches manage a deeper tension. This included offering challenge while also containing and supporting the emotional needs of the client.

4.49 Theme 2: Support Through Challenge, Care and Containment

Support was often framed through the lens of psychological safety, not as ease or comfort, but as a space where challenge could land safely. This theme explores how coaches understand support not as comfort or compliance, but as the ability to challenge clients within a trusting, caring relationship. There was an element of putting the client at ease, at the contracting stage. However, the actual coaching and support being offered for a client to work through their issue or problem was not about comfort or ease.

Far from seeing support as passive or purely reassuring, many coaches viewed it as an active process. That process also included naming uncomfortable truths, pushing boundaries, and holding clients to account. This was consistently framed as something relational, not imposed. Challenge could only be offered if the relationship were fundamentally based on trust, and also if care had already been established.

Participants described *“naming what’s really going on,” “saying the hard thing,”* or *“holding up the mirror”* as vital expressions of support. Other participants described support as *“saying the hard thing kindly”* or *“helping them face what they’re avoiding.”* Far from soft, care was seen as creating enough emotional safety for challenge to be both ethical and effective. This was repeatedly described as a balance, and a relational edge that demanded courage, timing, and sensitivity. For many, challenge was the support.

A significant majority of participants referred to trust as the foundation of the coaching relationship, particularly when challenge was involved. Trust enabled coaches to prompt clients to think more broadly, consider difficult truths, and reflect deeply.

Participants frequently described support as the courage to hold a mirror up to the client, especially when others may not have done so. Participant 5 captured this clearly: *“Sometimes support is being the one person who says it like it is, even if it*

stings." Others echoed this view, emphasising the importance of tone, care, and emotional containment. As Participant 13 explained: *"Support isn't just being nice, it's calling something out kindly."* There was a strong sense that challenge, when offered ethically and with care, helped the client grow. As a coach, the researcher had an affinity with this approach and the responses.

While challenge was a common theme, participants differed in how confidently they offered it. Several, such as Participant 11, spoke about the importance of consistency and trust as a foundation: *"They trust me because I'm consistent. That lets me say the hard things."* Others, like Participant 18, described how their ability to challenge had developed over time and was grounded in a strong relationship: *"I wouldn't go in hard if I hadn't built the care and trust first."* This variation suggests that while challenge is widely recognised as part of support, it is often developed through experience and is deeply influenced by the individual coach-client dynamic.

Although challenge was common, participants varied in how easily or confidently they delivered it. Participant 14 put it simply: *"You have to say the hard thing kindly. That's what support means sometimes."* Others described a learning journey: *"It felt safer to avoid it at first, but I've gradually found my voice"* (Participant 9). Several coaches reflected that challenge had to emerge from a secure base. For some, mastering the tone, pace, and timing of challenge became a skill developed with experience, not something taught. One participant even described the tension as *"walking a tightrope between soothing and poking. Both are needed."* This suggests that challenge is not an innate trait, but a skilled reflexive act.

Discourse analysis revealed coaches constructed themselves as both caregivers and truth-tellers. Metaphors like *"holding the mirror," "I name what's not being said"*, and *"I help them look at what they've tucked away"* repeatedly surfaced. These linguistic frames position the coach as ethically present and relationally strong.

Care was often implied rather than explicitly named, yet it shone through in talk of *"holding steady while they wobble"* (Participant 7). The symbolic interactionist lens is evident here. Coaches shape and define what 'support' means through their interactions with clients. It is not fixed, it is negotiated moment by moment, using emotional cues, language, and relational signals. The role of the coach, and how

support is expressed, is co-constructed in the coaching relationship. The identity of the coach emerges as someone trusted to hold space and break silence with integrity.

The interview data align closely with the survey findings and further develop the researcher's central question: how is support actively managed within the coach-client dynamic? In Question 13 (How do you balance supporting the client with challenging them?), coaches pointed to trust, timing, and kindness. One respondent wrote: *"You can only challenge when you've built safety first."* In Question 15, responses included phrases like *"challenge is real support"* and *"truth with compassion"*. The consistency across methods reinforces the researcher's conclusion that challenge is not a peripheral nuance. Challenge is a core form of support. These survey insights, combined with robust interview data, evidence that coaches reflexively manage the emotional intensity of support rather than defaulting to structure or warmth alone.

These findings strengthen what was already clear in the literature review. The researcher asserted that support is often an assumed skill, taken for granted. It is treated as a passive quality and something coaches just 'have,' rather than a skill that needs to be thought about, refined, or managed as it unfolds. Traditional frameworks like GROW offer structure, but they rarely unpack what support actually looks like in practice. This research shows is that support is not a static stance. It is something relational and responsive, shaped in the moment, through care, trust, and challenge.

Clutterbuck (2025) argued that coaching needs to move beyond linear models to reflect this complexity. His call for *"compassion, accountability and trust"* matches what these participants described. This research takes that point further. It shows that experienced coaches learn to balance all of this themselves and usually without being taught how to do it. That raises fundamental questions for how coaching is trained and assessed.

4.50 Key data extracts from the interviews

To exhibit how this theme demonstrates in practice, Table 4.17 collates key data extracts from the interviews. Each quote has been chosen to show how coaches managed challenge and care. It is to be noted this is often delivered without a script, and in a reflexive manner. These examples complement relevant survey responses and brief commentary to show how the theme is grounded across both phases of the

research. This table shows that challenge was not occasional or ad hoc. It is part of how many coaches understood support within the dynamic of a coaching intervention.

Table 4.17 Key data extracts from the interviews

Participant	Role Style Summary	Interview Quote	Survey Link	Thematic Insight	Link to Research Questions (RQs) / Aim
5	Pragmatic, relational	"Sometimes support is being the one person who says it like it is, even if it stings."	Q13: Balancing support and challenge	Challenge as a form of care; directness as a gift	RQ1 + RQ2: Support as managed discomfort
13	Emotionally intuitive, bold	"I try to be lovingly challenging. Support isn't just being nice; it's calling something out kindly."	Q15: Final reflections on support	Merges care and challenge into one relational act	Aligns with research aim to define support as skilled
11	Warm but direct	"They trust me because I'm consistent. That lets me say the hard things."	Q13 & Q12	Trust enables challenge; containment supports truth	Reflects symbolic interactionism: trust shaped in interaction
18	Trauma, informed, thoughtful	"I wouldn't go in hard if I hadn't built the care and trust first."	Q13 & Q15	Challenge only works when the ground is safe	Links to conditions of support (Theme 3 crossover)
1	Anchoring, reflective	"Sometimes support is holding them together while they unravel and still saying what they need to hear."	Q15	Holding emotional weight while remaining honest	RQ2: Support reflexively managed through containment
3	Gentle and with boundaries	"If you just agree with them, it's not coaching. Support is saying what others won't."	Q13	Ethical responsibility to challenge	Discourse: 'Saying what others won't' shows identity as truth-teller

While this theme highlights the sharp edge of support, it also makes clear that challenge cannot happen in a vacuum. It only works when care, containment and trust

are already in place. That takes skill, judgement, and the kind of reflective practice that only develops over time. The next theme explores how coaches create those conditions. The importance of safety, honesty and emotional permission that make challenge (and coaching itself) possible.

4.51 Theme 3: Creating the Conditions for Honest, Safe Coaching

This theme is the lynchpin of the research and pivotal to the research question. It captures the point where coaching becomes more than technique. This is where support is understood not as a model or method, but as the emotional space that makes coaching possible.

Across the interviews, coaches described how they create conditions for honesty, risk, taking, and psychological safety. These were not surface-level rapport techniques, but deeply attuned acts of support. Coaches spoke about *"holding space," "creating the conditions for truth,"* and *"making it safe enough to say the thing they've never said out loud."*

What emerged is that support is not offered at the start and then assumed. It is co-created and actively held throughout the relationship, often in ways that are invisible, intuitive, and entirely missing from formal coaching education. This is where experience takes over from instruction and where the research question lands: what does support really mean in coaching, and how is it managed in practice?

Participants consistently described the work of creating a safe, open coaching space as essential and not optional. This was about building enough trust for the client to risk honesty and not superficial rapport building. Coaches referred to *"holding space," "creating safety,"* and *"making it safe enough to say what they're really thinking."* Participant 20 put it clearly: *"If they don't feel safe, they won't say the thing that matters."* Others echoed this. Participant 3 said: *"It's not that I make them comfortable. It's that I make it okay to be uncomfortable."* This captures how coaches view safety not as a fixed state, but something dynamic, earned, and emotionally held. Participant 17 described it as *"permission to be vulnerable,"* while Participant 10 said: *"I'm holding the emotional risk so they can explore it."*

These responses show how coaches actively manage tone, pace, and presence to enable honesty. As Participant 12 noted: *"They need to feel safe enough to say the messy stuff. That's when we really start."* For many, support meant creating a space

where the client could *“go to places they usually avoid”* (Participant 5) which is a place not built by model, but by presence and trust. Several coaches linked this to *“slowing down”* or *“dropping the need to fix”* allowing the client to lead the depth and timing. The cumulative message was clear: without emotional permission, there is no real coaching.

Coaches constructed their identities in language that signalled emotional steadiness and ethical responsibility. Metaphors such as *“holding space,” “walking beside them,”* and *“being their anchor”* appeared across many interviews. These choices suggest a coaching presence that is both grounded and deliberately non-intrusive. Participant 6 described support as *“being a calm constant, so they can wobble and still feel okay,”* while Participant 1 said: *“I try to be the person who can hold what they are not ready to name.”* These metaphors reveal how coaches see themselves as containers for emotional truth, not to fix or interpret, but to create enough safety for the client to explore their thoughts, options, and ideas freely.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the meaning of support in these accounts is shaped in the moment, through relational cues and interaction. Coaches did not describe a fixed strategy for support. Instead, they adapted continually in response to the client’s language, pace, and emotional energy. Participant 15 explained: *“I tune into their tone, their silences, their hesitation. That is how I know when to go deeper or hold back.”* This reinforces the idea that support is not a static skill, but a dynamic, co-constructed role.

Coaches claimed the identity of *“safe person,” “listener,”* or *“mirror”* through the trust they earned in conversation which is a clear expression of support as an interactional act.

The interview findings were strongly supported by the survey data, particularly in responses to Questions 12 and 15. When asked to define what support meant in their own practice (Q12), a significant number of respondents used phrases such as *“making it safe to speak,” “creating space to be vulnerable,”* and *“being present without judgment.”* These expressions mirror the language used in interviews, reinforcing the idea that psychological safety and relational steadiness are central to how coaches understand and enact support.

In the final reflections section (Q15), multiple respondents referred to trust and honesty as prerequisites for depth. One respondent wrote: *"Support is not handholding. It is knowing when to step back, and when to hold steady so they can tell the truth."* Another commented: *"Coaching only works when people feel safe enough to be real."* These survey insights confirm that the theme is not isolated to a few participants, but part of a broader understanding across both phases of data collection. Together, the survey and interviews strengthen the claim that support is constructed and sustained as a psychological and trusting space, one that is rarely made explicit, but deeply felt.

This theme highlights a critical gap in both coaching literature and education of coaches. The ability to create conditions for honesty and emotional risk is essential, yet it is rarely defined, taught, or assessed. Much of the dominant literature continues to prioritise structural models, contracting frameworks, and goal alignment (Passmore, 2021; Hawkins and Smith, 2022), while overlooking the relational groundwork that makes those processes effective. What participants described in this research, such as creating safety, holding silence, tuning into emotion, is not covered in core coaching curricula. As one recent critique observes, *"there is a difference between the syllabus of coaching and the lived experience of it"* (Clutterbuck, 2025).

These findings suggest that support, when understood as psychological safety, is both a condition for and an outcome of skilled coaching. It is not merely a personality trait or ethical position, but a relational skill that evolves through reflective practice. This aligns with the researcher's symbolic interactionist lens, where meaning is created through interaction and not imposed through models or structure.

The theme contributes directly to the research aim by showing how support is deliberately navigated as a dynamic condition, not a one-off event. In doing so, it challenges traditional assumptions about where the value in coaching lies, and who decides what is 'supportive' in the first place.

To further illustrate how this theme manifested across the data, Table 4.18 presents a rich selection of interview quotes that highlight how coaches actively create and maintain the conditions for psychological safety. Each extract is accompanied by brief commentary, links to relevant survey responses, and connections to the research questions and theoretical framework.

The data excerpts show how coaches tuned into tone, silences, and emotional nuance to shape a space where truth could be spoken. In contrast to fixed approaches or scripted techniques, this table reinforces the argument that support, in its most impactful form, is a co-created and thoughtfully guided process.

4.52 Psychological Safety

Table 4.18 also serves to evidence the depth and consistency of this theme across the dataset, supporting the research's claim that psychological safety is not a backdrop to coaching, but a central act of professional support.

Table 4.18 Psychological Safety

No.	Role Style Summary	Interview Quote	Survey Link	Thematic Insight	Link to RQs / Aim
20	Intuitive, emotionally grounded	"If they do not feel safe, they will not say the thing that matters."	Q15: Final reflections	Safety as a condition for honesty	RQ1 + RQ2: Support as psychological holding
3	Calm, steady presence	"It is not that I make them comfortable. It is that I make it okay to be uncomfortable."	Q12: Defining support	Holding emotional risk with boundaries	Research Aim: Support as reflexive act
6	Containing, ethical coach	"I am the constant while they unravel. That is what lets the truth come out."	Q15	Emotional containment enables honesty	Symbolic interactionism: identity shaped in role
12	Quietly confident	"They need to feel safe enough to say the messy stuff. That is when we really start."	Q12	Honesty as relationally enabled	Discourse: 'Messy stuff' as permission language
10	Relational, values-led	"I hold the emotional risk so they can explore it."	Q13: Balancing support and challenge	Risk is shared and held in the relationship	RQ2: Reflexive judgement in practice
1	Holding, reflective	"I try to be the person who can hold what they are not ready to name."	Q15	Coaching as emotional readiness work	Survey triangulation + discourse frame
15	Intuitive listener	"I tune into tone and silences. That is how I know when to go deeper or hold back."	Q12	Non-verbal cues as support signals	Reflexivity + moment-to-moment decision making
5	Warm, honest challenger	"I help them go where they usually avoid. That takes safety, not scripts."	Q15	Challenge emerges from safe connection	Supports critique of model-based training

This theme makes clear that support in coaching is not simply about being present. More importantly it is about creating the emotional safety that makes truth possible. It is built through trust, held through relational judgement, and sustained through reflexive presence.

Coaches do not just set the tone once, they manage it moment by moment, without fanfare, scripts, or formal techniques. Yet, this vital work is rarely defined, taught, or measured in coach education, and is scarce in the literature.

As the data show, psychological safety is not a passive condition, it is a skilled act of emotional intent, one that sits at the heart of ethical practice. The next theme explores what happens when that safety comes under pressure. It seeks to uncover when the boundaries of the coaching role must be defined, held, and sometimes redefined in response to client need.

4.53 Theme 4: Support as Skilled Boundary Work

This theme explored how coaches understand support as a practice of boundary, setting. This is not as separation or distance, but as containment, clarity, and ethical protection for both coach and client. Participants described boundaries as something they actively held and negotiated, not just assumed. Several highlighted that support sometimes means *"saying no," "naming limits,"* or *"not rescuing."*

In contrast to the assumption that support involves emotional openness, these accounts suggest that support is often about providing a structured space in which challenge, emotion, and risk can safely unfold. This theme aligns closely with the researcher's second research question, illustrating how support is managed reflexively through role clarity, pacing, and the containment of emotional energy.

Participants frequently spoke about needing to balance emotional presence with professional distance. Participant 9 described this tension clearly: *"Support is not stepping in and fixing. It is knowing where I end, and they begin."* Similarly, Participant 19 explained: *"Sometimes I have to let them sit in the discomfort. That is a boundary I hold, I do not fill the space just because it feels hard."*

For some, support meant resisting the urge to over identify with the client's emotions. Participant 7 noted: *"If I absorb it all, they have nothing to work with. My job is to hold the space, not carry it."* Others described a learning curve around emotional

boundaries. Participant 14 reflected: *"I used to get really drained. I have learned to stay with them without losing myself."* These examples show that support is not about emotional entanglement, it is about being the coach who is the professionally invested partner in the dynamic while preserving psychological and relational boundaries.

The language used to describe boundaries often revealed how coaches constructed their identity as steady, ethical, and relationally aware. Metaphors such as *"container," "anchor," "the line holder,"* and *"steadying force"* appeared throughout the data. These reflect a discourse of controlled, responsive support rather than emotional absorption. Participant 10 described their role as *"holding the edge of what they can cope with"*, while Participant 2 referred to themselves as *"the consistent one when everything else feels messy."*

Symbolic interactionism is particularly relevant as boundaries were not always fixed traits; they were often enacted through interaction and adapted in the moment. Contracting boundaries were noticeably clear in the ethical foundation of the coaching dynamic. The majority talked of contracting and some conflated contracting with support. The researcher feels these are two quite different elements to the coaching relationship. It is clear that the module taught on contracting has a significant impact on coaches as they rely on that for their ethical approach, and for self-protection as well.

Coaches shaped their role identity through phrases like *"I do not save them,"* and *"I trust them to hold it too."* This is evidence of a coach asserting agency while also reinforcing the client's own resilience.

This theme was also present in the survey data, particularly in responses to Questions 12 and 13. In defining support (Q12), several respondents wrote about *"creating structure," "staying grounded"* and *"not being drawn into fixing or rescuing."* One respondent captured this clearly: *"Support means I do not take over. I stay with them, not in place of them."*

In Question 13, which explored how coaches balance support and challenge, responses included: *"I offer safety, but not comfort at all costs,"* and *"I let them feel it without jumping in".* These insights reinforce the interview data, confirming that support through boundary setting is not a niche idea but a widespread aspect of professional coaching practice.

This theme directly extends the research core argument in that support in coaching is a skill to be learned and not an attitude or behaviour, it is much more intrinsic to the dynamic than that. While the literature often highlights rapport and trust (e.g., MacDougall, L., 2024; Bachkirova, T. and Baker, S.,2019; Grant, 2014), it rarely explores how boundaries operate within supportive relationships. Clutterbuck (2024) has begun to challenge this, noting that *"over functioning by the coach can erode the client's agency."* The findings in this research expand on that view, showing that experienced coaches reflexively manage boundaries not to protect themselves, but to protect the coaching process. By resisting over helping, they enable the client to grow. This positions boundary setting as an act of support in its own right, and one that is relationally attuned and grounded in ethical judgment.

4.54 Boundary setting

To illustrate how boundary setting featured across the interviews, Table 4.19 presents selected data extracts. These examples show how coaches described the act of 'holding the line,' whether emotional, procedural, or ethical, as a fundamental part of support. Each quote is triangulated with relevant survey responses and aligned with the research questions.

Table 4.19 Boundary setting

No	Role Style Summary	Interview Quote	Survey Link	Thematic Insight	Link to Research Questions (RQs) / Aim
9	Calm, boundary-conscious	"Support is not stepping in and fixing. It is knowing where I end, and they begin."	Q12: Defining support	Clear self-other boundary as a form of respect	RQ2: Reflexive boundary work
7	Containing emotional presence	"If I absorb it all, they have nothing to work with."	Q13: Support and challenge	Presence without emotional overreach	Symbolic interactionism as boundaries shaped in role
19	Thoughtful, structured	"Sometimes I have to let them sit in the discomfort. I do not fill the space just because it feels hard."	Q13 & Q15	Holding discomfort as ethical restraint	Supports argument for support as managed containment
2	Steady, reliable	"I am the consistent one when everything else feels messy."	Q12	Role identity constructed through steadiness	Discourse: ethical role framing
14	Previously over involved	"I used to get really drained. I have learned to stay with them without losing myself."	Q15: Reflect on support	Learning boundaries through experience	Research Aim: Support as skilled, evolving practice
10	Structured, ethically grounded	"I hold the edge of what they can cope with."	Q13	Boundary as emotional containment	Reflexive support and ethical framing
5	Anchoring, honest	"If I jump in too quickly, I take away their learning."	Q12	Support through stepping back	Challenges assumption that helping is always active
6	Intuitive, reflective	"I trust them to hold it too. That is the support."	Q15	Client agency as part of boundary work	RQ1: Reframing support as shared responsibility

While previous themes explored support as responsiveness and safety, this theme reframes it as disciplined care. It is the ability to stay present without stepping in too far. The final theme builds on this by exploring how coaches use perspective, shifting and reframing to create insight, often challenging default thinking patterns and encouraging deeper personal agency.

4.55 Theme 5: Support Through Reframing and Perspective Shifting

This theme explored how coaches use support not as comfort or containment, but as a way to help clients reframe, reconsider, or see things differently. Participants consistently described moments where support meant inviting a shift in perspective. This was often through questioning, silence, or reflective feedback.

Reframing was seen as a skilled act, offered at the right time and with the right tone and something that was not evident when first practising as a coach. Several coaches described their role as *"disrupting default thinking," "widening the lens,"* or *"offering another angle."* In these accounts, support was not just about providing a stable foundation or providing safety, it was also about challenging narratives, surfacing assumptions, and helping clients step outside of stuck patterns. This theme highlights how support is offered through insight and challenge, not just passive affirmation.

Participant 11 captured this dynamic well: *"Sometimes support is helping them see that they are not stuck. They just need a different angle."* Others spoke about the subtlety of reframing. Participant 16 explained: *"It is not about telling them what to think. It is helping them look at it differently."*

Many coaches noted that the most powerful support came through a well-timed question or a metaphor that shifted something. Participant 8 described using silence as a tool: *"When I do not fill the gap, they start to fill it themselves. That is where the shift happens."* Reframing was often described as a quiet, reflective act, more about opening a window than delivering the answers. As Participant 4 said: *"I do not hand them the answer. I hold the mirror up and they see it differently."* These accounts show how support is offered through presence, timing, and linguistic precision.

Discourse analysis revealed a language of movement and change. Coaches used phrases like *"shifting gears," "seeing through a new lens," "flipping the narrative,"* and *"changing the question."* These metaphors indicate that coaches position themselves as facilitators of insight, not by providing answers, but by gently disrupting fixed meaning.

The symbolic interactionist lens is especially relevant here. The meaning of the client's experience is not stationary. It is shaped and reshaped through interaction. Coaches reported that reframing was most effective when the relationship allowed for playfulness, reflection, and occasional challenge. Participant 13 summed this up: *"It is*

like we take the thought apart and put it back together again, but they are the ones holding the pieces." This partnership approach positions support as a collaborative reconstruction of meaning, rather than a one-sided intervention.

Survey responses echoed this theme, particularly in Questions 13 and 15. When asked how they balance support and challenge (Q13), several respondents described using reframing as a way to shift the client's view gently. One wrote: *"I ask questions that change how they see it."* Another noted: *"Sometimes support is saying, "What if that is not true?"* These responses align with the idea of support as perspective shifting.

In the final reflections (Q15), respondents spoke about helping clients to *"see new possibilities," "change the story they are telling,"* and *"reframe setbacks as learning."* These insights confirm that reframing is not an occasional tool, but a recognised part of how coaches express support, offering space and structure for new ways of seeing.

This theme challenges a persistent gap in the literature, where support is often assumed to mean comfort or emotional presence. While those are important, the findings suggest that support also includes cognitive and narrative challenge, offered not as confrontation, but as invitation. Whitworth et al. (2018) describe the coach's role as *"evoking transformation through awareness,"* a view reflected in the data. Clutterbuck (2025) similarly argues that modern coaching must move beyond scripted models to embrace co-created insight, stating: *"Support is not about agreement, it is about enabling new understanding."*

This theme reinforces the argument that support is reflexively constructed, requiring timing, emotional literacy, and linguistic skill. It contributes directly to the research aim by evidencing support as an active, developmental skill grounded in relational trust.

4.56 Reframing

To illustrate how this theme emerged across the interviews, Table 4.20 presents a selection of data extracts that highlight reframing, insight, and the co-construction of new meaning. Each quote is supported by relevant survey data and brief thematic commentary.

Table 4.20 Reframing

No.	Role Style Summary	Interview Quote	Survey Link	Thematic Insight	Link to Research Questions (RQs) / Aim
11	Reflective, strength, based	"Sometimes support is helping them see they are not stuck. They just need a different angle."	Q13: Balancing support and challenge	Insight reframes emotional stuckness	RQ1: How support is understood
4	Calm, client-led	"I do not hand them the answer. I hold the mirror up and they see it differently."	Q15	Mirror as metaphor for perspective	Symbolic interactionism + discourse frame
16	Thoughtful, process-focused	"It is not about telling them what to think. It is helping them look at it differently."	Q13	Support as perspective facilitator	Reflexive skill, not directive technique
8	Steady, uses silence strategically	"When I do not fill the gap, they start to fill it themselves. That is where the shift happens."	Q15	Silence enables client insight	Challenges coaching-as-talking model
13	Bold, creative challenger	"It is like we take the thought apart and put it back together, but they are the ones holding the pieces."	Q12	Support through collaborative reconstruction	RQ2 + symbolic interactionist lens
2	Curious, question-led	"Support is asking the one question that opens the whole thing up."	Q13	Insight as catalytic support	Literature aligned: Whitworth et al. (2018)
6	Relational, metaphor-rich	"Sometimes I help them walk to the edge of their view and look further."	Q15	Visual metaphor for reframing	Supports critique of comfort = support assumption
1	Quiet, insightful	"Support is not agreement. It is showing them another way it might be."	Q12	Gentle challenge through language	Aligns with aim: support as developmental practice

These examples demonstrate that support is not only about emotional safety, but also about expanding thinking and gently disrupting assumptions. This theme closes the chapter by reinforcing the research's central claim which is that support is not a passive and contracting position, but a dynamic, purposefully steered skill, undertaught in the training of coaches.

The final theme of perspective shifting connects directly to broader trends across both survey and interview phases, summarised next.

4.57 Patterns and trends in the data

Results across both the survey and interviews, offer some clear patterns. Interestingly, the strongest patterns emerged in how coaches spoke about support, rather than in the quantitative analysis. These point to a shared shift in thinking in that support is not fixed, passive, or simply kind. It is something constructed and adjusted, shaped moment to moment, and learned through experience rather than taught.

One of the most striking trends was how many coaches talked about adapting in the moment. In the survey, 68% of respondents said they flex their approach depending on the client's behaviour, mood, or emotional tone. Interview participants echoed this strongly. They spoke about *"reading the room," "listening for what's not said,"* and *"moving with the client."* Support, in this context, is not a checklist, it is often an instinctive and always relational judgement.

This connects to a second pattern which straying away from models. Many coaches said structured frameworks like GROW gave them confidence at the start of their coaching practice but were now more of a safety net than a blueprint. The phrase *"I used to follow GROW, now I listen"* came up as a pattern more than once. Both phases of the research revealed that experienced coaches lean more on reflexivity, emotional intelligence, and tone than on structure. Support is not delivered by the book or a tick list, rather it is negotiated, felt, and shaped live in the coaching session.

A third trend is the use of metaphors and relational language. Whether in surveys or interviews, coaches described themselves as *"anchors," "mirrors," "containers," or "scaffolds."* These are not technical coaching terms; they are identity statements. This metaphor-rich language was found in every theme and shows that support is not just something a coach does, it is part of who they are. This is especially relevant to the symbolic interactionist lens, where meaning and identity are shaped through interaction.

Another shared pattern was the emphasis on trust and timing. Coaches consistently described support as something that depends on trust. This was not in a vague way, but as a precondition and foundation for everything else within the coaching intervention. In both data sets, challenge was framed as support, but only if the coach

had first created enough psychological safety. This theme around *"saying the hard thing kindly,"* appeared across survey responses and interviews alike. Trust was not just the start of the process; it was the condition that made real work possible.

A fifth trend was a quiet but powerful one. This focusses on the shift away from fixing. Several interviewees reflected that in their early coaching days, they jumped in too quickly, felt responsible for solutions, or blurred boundaries in trying to help. Over time, they learned that support is not rescuing, it is enabling. In the survey's final open question, one coach wrote, *"Support is not doing the work for them. It is believing they can do it."* That quote could have come from any of the interviews too. The mindset shift from fixing to empowering was present across the data, regularly articulated and clearly deeply felt.

Finally, the survey revealed a crucial gap. In Question 16, 71% of respondents said they had received no specific training on what support is or how to manage it reflexively. Coaches described support as something they had picked up through experience, through trial and error, or *"by accident."* The interviews supported this assertion with several participants saying they had never really thought about support until asked. That absence matters and shows that something central to coaching is still mostly assumed, not articulated.

These patterns matter because they align. The consistency across both data phases, in tone, metaphor, behaviour, and learning trajectory, strengthens the central argument of this thesis which is that support is not a soft default or passive stance, but a skill which develops, deepens, and deserves to be taught.

4.58 Key findings related to research questions.

This section draws together the core findings from both survey and interview phases and maps them directly to the two research questions. The research aim 'to better understand how support is defined and managed reflexively in coaching practice' is addressed throughout.

Research Question 1:

How is 'support' understood in coaching practice?

The data show clearly that support is not understood as a fixed act or a simple expression of care. Both survey respondents and interview participants described it as

adaptive, relational, and often invisible. It is described as something shaped by tone, trust, and timing rather than technique.

Across the survey, respondents offered metaphors, emotional descriptors, and phrases such as *"being present," "challenging with kindness," "walking besides,"* and *"not fixing."* In Q12, very few coaches gave textbook definitions. Instead, they used identity-based language such as *"I'm someone who listens differently," "I help people feel seen," "I hold the edge with them."* Interview data echoed this and gave deeper context. Support was described as something co-constructed with the client, often felt rather than spoken, and the skill in managing this developed over time.

The key finding here is that support is not a uniform concept. It is interpreted through experience, expressed through relationship, and built through interaction. The symbolic interactionist lens helps explain this. Meaning is not imposed but made as a collaboration in the space between coach and client.

Research Question 2:

How is support managed reflexively by coaching practitioners?

The second question gets to the heart of what this research uncovered. Support is not just understood differently by coaches, it is actively, but often unconsciously, managed and in many different ways.

Interview participants described making moment-to-moment decisions about when to offer space, when to speak, how far to challenge, and when to hold back. One said, *"I read the room and stay anchored in what is ethical."* Another explained, *"I used to plan sessions. Now I listen more and let the client take me where they need to go."* These are acts of judgement, with skills that are developed and applied in a multitude of ways throughout a whole coaching intervention.

The survey data reinforced this. In Q11, 68% of respondents said they adapted their approach based on the client's mood, tone, or emotional state. Many explicitly said their support was guided by instinct, but few described it as something they had been taught. In Q16, 71% said they had never received formal training on 'support' as a coaching skill. This shows a disconnect between what coaches do in practice and what is prioritised in training, or as the researcher has asserted, assumed to be already in existence as a skill.

Put simply, coaches are reflexively managing support every day. However, they are doing so without shared language, guidance, or reflection. This creates risk and also opportunity. The findings suggest that support should be treated as a visible, teachable skill which will develop and change the way coaches will deliver their service over time as confidence grows, and the reflexivity develops. It is more important and has a more powerful impact that assuming support is just something coaches must learn along the way.

The data show that support is both understood and managed in ways that are complex, relational, and under theorised. Support is an essential and dynamic capability, one that underpins challenge, honesty, safety, and transformation in coaching practice. These findings challenge current coaching frameworks that position support as either assumed or secondary. They suggest a need to reframe support as a reflexive, learnable skill, central to ethical and effective coaching.

The next and closing section of this chapter offers a brief conclusion and reflection on how the research was conducted ethically and with methodological integrity. The following conclusion draws the chapter to a close by revisiting the research questions and synthesising insights from both phases of the research.

This chapter set out to explore how ‘support’ is understood and carefully orchestrated by coaches in practice. Drawing on both phases of the research starting with an anonymous survey followed by 20 in-depth interviews, five strong and well-evidenced themes were developed. These themes, together with cross-phase patterns and a clear response to the research questions, provide a rich and nuanced picture of support as a dynamic, relational skill.

4.59 Phases of Research

To show how the two research phases informed one another, Table 4.21 outlines the purpose and contribution of each stage within the researcher’s exploratory sequential design. The survey acted as a foundation to bring to the surface the key patterns, tensions, and coaching practitioner language around support. This informed the interview questions and areas of focus. The five analytic themes were then developed from the interview data, with insights from the survey phase integrated throughout. This approach ensured the themes were grounded in real-world coaching experience and also tested and reinforced across a broader dataset.

Table 4.21 Phases of Research

Phase	Purpose	Role in Theme Development
Phase 1: Survey (Responses = 108)	To explore how coaches define and describe 'support' anonymously across contexts	Identified recurring patterns (e.g. adapting to client tone, balancing challenge with care); surfaced language and metaphors that shaped interview questions
Phase 2: Interviews (Participants = 20)	To deepen understanding of how support is enacted and managed reflexively in practice	Generated rich, contextual data for thematic analysis; five final themes developed from interview transcripts
Integration (in Chapter 4)	To synthesise both data sets	Survey data embedded in each theme through triangulation (quotes, trends, % responses); strengthened claims and reinforced patterns

By the time the researcher had completed the 20 interviews, the same ideas were coming through repeatedly. The five themes developed were presenting across almost every conversation, and nothing genuinely new was emerging. The NVivo style coding tables (Tables 4.5 and 4.15) show this clearly, every theme was present, sometimes in diverse ways, but the pattern was consistent. When reflecting across both the interviews and the 540 survey question responses, there was confidence that the data was rich enough and that a natural point of saturation had been met.

The findings show that support is not a passive stance or a soft default. It is something negotiated, sensed, and shaped within the discourse. Whether framed as listening, challenging, containing, or reframing, support was consistently described as situational, fluid, and built on trust. It is managed through tone, timing, and emotional awareness, rather than formal technique. For many it is learned over time, but rarely named, taught, or reflected on with intentionality.

Throughout the five themes, it became clear that support plays a significant role in coaching yet remains under articulated in mainstream frameworks. Coaches frequently spoke of moving away from rigid models as their confidence grew, favouring a more responsive, reflexive approach. This shift from structure to judgement, from fixed frameworks to flexible presence was evident across the data. This challenges assumptions in coaching literature and training. The idea that support simply 'happens' was powerfully disrupted.

4.60 Chapter Conclusion

The strength of this chapter lies in the way the two phases of data were brought together. The survey provided breadth and anchoring, showing patterns in how coaches described support in their own words. The interviews added depth and complexity, revealing how those patterns played out in practice. Together, they built a layered picture showing not just what support looks like, but how it is constructed, experienced, and managed.

Importantly, this chapter was also shaped by the research's pragmatist stance. The data were analysed not only for what they said, but for what they meant in context, and how that meaning was created through interaction. The use of discourse analysis and symbolic interactionism helped to surface the role of language, identity, and relational cues in how support was both expressed and understood. In short, this was not just a research about what coaches do, it was a research about how they think, feel, and construct their role through practice.

Ethical standards were upheld throughout. Participants were given clear information, consented voluntarily, and were able to withdraw at any time. Transcripts were anonymised, and demographic data were not collected to preserve confidentiality and reduce the risk of identification. While the interviews were analysed manually rather than using software, NVivo style matrices were used to track themes and ensure consistency, saturation, and variation. This transparent approach was designed to stay close to the data while allowing for critical synthesis.

These conclusions are drawn from both phases of the research. The survey provided a broad, anonymous picture of how support is described in coaching, while the interviews allowed for deeper exploration of the nuances and contradictions within that practice. Insights from each phase were not analysed in isolation but were actively

integrated through the chapter, ensuring that the final themes and interpretations are grounded in a full and structurally layered evidence base.

Finally, the findings highlight not just what is happening in coaching, but what may be missing. There was a keen sense that support is expected to be ‘natural.’ This is not something coaches either have or do not have. Support in coaching is apparent throughout all of the interventions, albeit presented in a multitude of ways. Support, as described here, is a difficult dynamic, a human skill that evolves with practice, and deserves more attention in training, supervision, and theory.

to the next chapter, the discussion chapter, explores findings in relation to the wider literature, and draws out the implications for coach education, practice, and future research.

Chapter 5

Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the meaning and implications of the research findings, building a bridge between what was discovered in practice and what should change in coaching education and professional standards. It integrates insights from both the survey and the interview phases, showing how coaches currently understand and manage support, and where significant inconsistencies remain.

The analysis confirms that support is viewed as central to effective coaching, yet it is not consistently defined, taught, or reflexively managed. While many coaches appear to offer support in practice, the data suggest this often happens instinctively, rather than as a result of deliberate training or supervision. This echoes concerns in the literature that coaching has prioritised model delivery over relational reflexivity (Bachkirova et al., 2015; Garvey, 2021), leaving support as an implicit practice rather than an explicit skill. This reveals several shortfalls in current coaching practice, particularly in how support is named, negotiated, and developed. It also highlights a persistent gap in coach education and evidence that structured models are taught, but reflexive support skills are not (van Nieuwerburgh, 2024).

Coaches in this study demonstrated clear strengths in how they build trust, create safety, and respond to clients with care and flexibility. Many showed an ability to judge what a client needed in the moment, and they used challenge, reframing, and boundary work in thoughtful ways that supported client insight. However, the findings also reveal weaknesses that mirror gaps in the literature and professional frameworks. Support is unnamed, unstructured, and developed informally. Boundaries are managed inconsistently, the balance between care and challenge varies widely, and power is rarely examined with reflexive intention. These weaknesses echo wider concerns raised by authors such as de Haan and Gannon, Passmore and Tee, and Cox et al., who note that relational capability is central to coaching, but not explicitly taught or assessed. Bringing these strengths and weaknesses together provides a clearer picture of why support requires a more explicit place within coach education.

In response, this chapter does not only interpret the findings, but it also begins to propose a way forward. Based on the five analytic themes and the survey patterns, the researcher has developed a framework that reconceptualises support as a reflexive, teachable skill. This framework, constructed through a four dimensional lens, directly addresses the shortfalls identified here and is developed in Chapter 6 as the core contribution of this research. It is already being piloted in practice through a commissioned module to be delivered across a five-college FE group for the Apprenticeship Programme of 2025/26 academic year. Alongside this theoretical contribution, the commissioned teaching module represents a practical application, embedding the Lens into coach education and confirming its relevance and uptake in professional contexts. The portfolio shows how this framework and module have already been applied in practice, strengthening the impact of the contribution beyond the thesis.

The following sections compare the findings with the existing literature, draw out the implications for theory and practice, and outline the researcher's contribution to advancing how support is understood, taught, and embedded in coaching development.

5.2 Positioning the Findings Within the Literature

This section explores the interpretation of the findings when viewed alongside existing coaching literature. It combines insights from both the survey and interview phases, highlighting where this research confirms established perspectives, extends emerging debates, or challenges prevailing assumptions. The aim is to show how 'support' is understood and managed in real world practice, and how these findings contribute to theory, training, and professional development.

By situating the data in dialogue with existing research, this section also draws out practical implications for coach education and supervision, advocating for support to be treated as a visible, deliberate skill, rather than an unspoken assumption or background trait. This emphasis responds directly to gaps identified in the literature, where support is often described but rarely established as a reflexive, teachable competence (Bachkirova et al., 2015; van Nieuwerburgh, 2024).

The researcher's pragmatist stance justifies this blended approach. Rather than isolating theory from practice, pragmatism encourages inquiry that connects lived

experience with actionable insights. The use of empirical data, drawn from survey patterns and in-depth interviews, allows for a grounded comparison between what coaches say they do, how they reflect on it, and what the literature currently prioritises. This also exposes shortfalls where coaching practice risks becoming instinctive rather than structured, reinforcing the need for a framework that bridges this divide.

While the literature recognises the importance of relational skill, this research challenges several underlying assumptions. Psychological safety is often presented as a stable condition, yet the findings show it must be negotiated continually and cannot be taken for granted. Challenge is frequently separated from support in coaching models, but the data indicate that challenge becomes genuinely effective only when framed as a supportive act. Boundaries are discussed in ethical texts as rules to follow, but the findings show that boundary work is an active part of how support is delivered in practice. The literature also tends to treat reframing as a cognitive tool, whereas this research positions it as a relational act that offers the client clarity and perspective. These areas of difference show that support is not a background trait or a secondary function. It is a dynamic skill that shapes every moment of the coaching relationship and needs a more explicit place in coach education.

A key aspect of this research is the reflexive management of support, how coaches adapt and co-construct support in practice rather than following fixed techniques. To explore this further, the table below compares each of the five analytic themes from the research with dominant ideas in the literature. It identifies where alignment exists, but also where this research offers new or alternative insights that warrant attention, which is the basis for the four-dimensional lens developed in Chapter 6.

5.2.1 Interpreting the Survey Findings in Context

The survey findings offer a clear indication of how support is currently understood and used in day to day coaching. Most coaches described adapting their approach in response to the client, yet only a very small number reported co-creating the coaching process in an intentional way. This pattern shows that coaches value responsiveness, but the reflexive negotiation of support is not yet a consistent habit across the profession. The survey responses also revealed that many coaches rely on personal judgement rather than structured guidance when working with

boundaries, emotional cues, or client pace. These findings echo concerns in the literature that coaching leans heavily on relational instinct and experience instead of explicit relational skill development.

A significant result was that seventy one percent of respondents stated that support was not covered in any formal training they had received. This percentage strengthens the argument that support remains an unnamed and unstructured element of coaching education. When this figure is placed alongside the qualitative findings, it becomes clear that support is both expected and underdeveloped, leaving coaches to piece together their own approach with limited guidance. This absence in training aligns with the gaps seen in professional competency frameworks, where support is rarely identified as a distinct capability.

Taken together, the survey findings highlight the need for support to be treated as a visible and teachable skill. They show that the profession values the relational quality of coaching but does not yet provide the structure or clarity required to develop these skills with confidence. These insights strengthen the case for the Coaching Support Lens, which offers a practical way to bring support into coach education and supervision. The Lens is built directly from the patterns revealed in the survey and the deeper insights from the interviews and provides a route for coaches to work with support in a deliberate, reflective, and skilled way.

5.2.1a Table 5.1 Findings vs Literature

A key aspect of this research is the reflexive management of support, how coaches adapt and co-construct support in practice, rather than following fixed techniques. To explore this further, the following table compares each of the five analytic themes with dominant ideas in the coaching literature. It highlights where existing knowledge is reinforced, where new insights emerge, and where this research challenges widely held assumptions. It also identifies shortfalls in current practice, where the literature sets expectations that are not yet consistently met. This comparative view strengthens the core argument which is that support is not a passive backdrop to coaching, but a dynamic skill that is often underrepresented in models and training curricula.

Table 5.1 Findings vs Literature

Theme	Literature Alignment	New Insights/Gaps from This Research
1. Support as a Responsive and Flexible Practice	Traditional models (e.g., GROW, CLEAR) are recognised for providing structure (Whitmore, 2009).	Coaches often move beyond rigid frameworks, favouring reflexive, responsive approaches. Gap: while responsiveness is evident, it remains instinctive rather than systematically developed through training.
2. Support Through Challenge, Care and Containment	Challenge is discussed as a tool for growth (Clutterbuck, 2024) but not always linked to care.	This research frames challenge as an inherently supportive act when paired with empathy. Limitation: integration of challenge and care is rarely emphasised in coach education.
3. Creating the Conditions for Honest, Safe Coaching	Psychological safety and trust are widely valued (Cox et al., 2018).	These conditions are described here as dynamic, reflexively managed skills developed over time. Inconsistency: literature often treats safety as static, while practice shows it must be continually co-constructed.
4. Support as Skilled Boundary Work	Boundaries are commonly referenced in ethics literature (Bachkirova, 2017).	Boundary management is reframed as an active skill that directly contributes to client support. Gap: boundaries are taught ethically, but rarely as part of the reflexive skills of support.
5. Support Through Reframing and Perspective, Shifting	Reframing is noted as a coaching tool (Starr, 2016).	This research emphasises reframing as a deliberate form of support that empowers client insight. Weakness: literature recognises reframing but seldom frames it explicitly as a supportive act.

These five themes highlight weaknesses in how support is currently conceptualised and taught in coaching practice and form the backbone of this research's contribution and are explored in greater detail in the following sections. Each one is examined in relation to coaching practice, survey findings, and the wider literature to understand how support is enacted, and where limitations or gaps persist.

Taken together, these comparisons reveal that support may be central to coaching, yet it remains inconsistently defined, negotiated, and developed. The findings highlight a clear shortfall between what the literature values and what is taught in practice, with relational and reflexive skills often assumed rather than developed intentionally. This

gap is why the Coaching Support Lens was created. It offers a structured way to make support visible, grounded, and teachable, drawing directly on the patterns in the survey and the depth of the interview data. The Lens is therefore used in Chapter 6 to show how support can be embedded more deliberately within coaching education, supervision, and professional standards.

5.3 Defining Support at the Start of the Coaching Relationship

The statistic of 85% of survey respondents that indicated that they define support explicitly at the start of coaching, suggests most coaches recognise its importance. However, 15% do not do so which reveals a potentially significant gap in practice. In these cases, support remains implied rather than named, a tacit assumption rather than a collaboratively constructed agreement.

This resonates with Stabler and James's work on reflexivity in organisational coaching, which argues that key elements such as support often reside beneath the surface unless deliberately surfaced in dialogue (Stabler & James, 2023). It also confirms Cox et al.'s (2018) observation that while contracting is central to trust-building, relational elements like support are frequently under specified. By contrast, Bachkirova (2017) stresses that the failure to name support at the outset risks leaving ethical and boundary expectations implicit, which can compromise psychological safety.

From a supervision perspective, Lewis (2024) notes that early session contracting often includes roles, goals, and confidentiality. This omission reflects a wider critique identified by van Nieuwerburgh (2024), who argues that coach education remains over reliant on structured models while under emphasising reflexive relational skills. The findings extend the literature by showing that while a majority of coaches now name support, a significant minority still fall back on tacit assumptions, reinforcing that training interventions must move beyond technical contracting to make support an explicit and reflexive skil**l.**

Portfolio Link: The researcher reflected on their own shift from assuming support was understood to naming it explicitly during contracting, which mirrors what many participants described. This is noted in the portfolio under the coaching practice discussion.

The question arises as to what stops the remaining 15% from naming support upfront? One explanation may lie in Davidsson and Stigmar's (2023) research on supervision

training, which reports a tension between building client autonomy and offering guiding presence. This may explain why some coaches hesitate to discuss support upfront, for fear of over-structuring the relationship. This inconsistency, between literature emphasis on autonomy and practice reluctance to articulate support, underscores the need for clearer pedagogical guidance in how to balance these dynamics**.**

Training interventions such as role-play contracting conversations, supervision reflections focused on early session recordings, or coaching in supervision circles could all help make support a co-constructed part of the process (Lewis, 2024; Stabler & James, 2023). Ultimately, these findings confirm the argument made in the literature that support underpins effective coaching (Cox et al., 2018; Bachkirova, 2017), but they also highlight a limitation in practice: coaches may recognise its importance without consistently naming it. To be genuinely responsive, coaches must also revisit client needs as the relationship unfolds, a focus explored next.

5.4 Continuous Assessment of Client Needs

The survey shows that 92% of coaches say they regularly assess client needs. This suggests that continuous assessment is seen as an important part of coaching. However, the remaining 8% either do not do this or are unsure, which raises questions about how consistent this practice really is across the profession.

In the literature, continuous assessment is consistently described as essential for maintaining relevance and responsiveness. Clutterbuck (2020) emphasises that coaching relationships should be regularly “re-contracted” as goals and contexts evolve, while Cox et al. (2018) argue that failing to review progress risks reinforcing outdated assumptions. Jarosz (2023) goes further, presenting empirical evidence that structured, multidimensional assessment frameworks improve coaching effectiveness by ensuring alignment between client goals and intervention strategies. These studies frame assessment as an active, visible practice, yet the data here suggest that a minority of coaches still approach it inconsistently.

This is important because without deliberate reassessment, support risks becoming static. Several interviewees described realising too late that the support they were offering no longer fit, illustrating how practice can stall without conscious review. If a coach does not pause to consider whether the support still aligns, it becomes harder to adapt in a meaningful way, echoing Clutterbuck’s (2020) argument that unchecked

routines can quickly reduce coaching to a repetitive cycle. Continuous assessment, therefore, is not only a practical habit but a reflexive discipline that keeps support intentional and visible throughout the relationship.

Reflection plays a crucial role in this process, helping both coach and client make sense of how support is working, or where it may need to shift. The next section explores how reflection is encouraged in coaching practice.

5.5 Encouraging Reflection

Almost all survey respondents (98%) said they encourage reflection as part of their coaching. This strong agreement suggests that reflection is widely seen as a core element of good coaching practice.

The literature also places a high value on reflection. It is often described as essential for building self-awareness, supporting change, and helping clients make sense of their experiences (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Stober & Grant, 2006). Recent studies suggest that how coaches encourage reflection matters just as much as whether they do it. For example, McCormick and Forsyth (2024) found that group-based reflective learning not only improved coaching outcomes but also deepened the coach's understanding of their own role in the process.

However, even when reflection is encouraged, it may not always be done in a structured or intentional way. The interview data showed that while many participants invited reflection, they often assumed it would happen naturally through dialogue or did not check whether it was happening between sessions. This aligns with McCormick and Forsyth's (2024) emphasis on the *form* of reflection but also challenges the assumption in earlier literature that reflection is universally embedded as a deliberate skill. This raises a familiar issue in this research which is that support is often well intentioned, but not consciously managed.

There is a clear opportunity here for coach training. Reflection is taught as a skill, not just something that happens on its own. If it becomes optional or superficial, it risks undermining the reflexive quality of support that this thesis identifies as critical. Structured reflective practice would help coaches review how they are offering support, and enable more collaborative, in the moment adjustments.

Encouraging reflection is one part of the picture. The next section considers how often, and how meaningfully coaches review the type of support they offer throughout the coaching process.

Portfolio Link: This discussion is also informed by my own professional evolution, as described in the portfolio, which highlights the move from 'fixer' to coach and strategic partner.

5.6 Reviewing the Type of Support Provided

87% of coaches in the survey said they review the type of support they offer during the coaching process. This suggests that many coaches are at least checking in with their clients to see whether their approach still feels helpful. However, 13% either do not do this or are unsure. This gap raises a significant concern. If nearly one in seven coaches is not reviewing the support they provide, or is unclear about doing so, it calls into question how intentional and collaborative that support really is.

This reflects a recurring issue in the research, the assumption that support is understood without being made explicit. In the interviews, coaches often describe support in broad terms, but what they mean varies widely. Some refer to emotional encouragement, others to structure, practical input, or simply presence. Passmore and Sinclair (2020) highlight how key terms in coaching are often used without shared definitions, leading to inconsistencies in practice. Similarly, Ives (2008) argues that coaching frameworks frequently carry unspoken assumptions about concepts like support, without surfacing them explicitly. The data, therefore, extend these critiques, showing that even when coaches report reviewing support, they may not always be engaging in the same kind of conversation with clients.

Stabler and James (2023) also show that unless relational dynamics are examined reflexively, key elements, and support may be one of them, can easily be taken for granted. The research findings illustrate this risk: in the interviews one coach might focus on tools and structure, another on empathy or affirmation. If the client's understanding is different, these check ins risk being superficial rather than meaningful.

This highlights the need for coaches to surface their own assumptions and explore the client's interpretation, as well. If support is to be managed well, both parties need to know what they are actually reviewing. This reinforces the case for treating support as

a reflexive, co-constructed skill, one that can be taught, named, and re-evaluated throughout the coaching process.

While reviewing support is important, it is not enough on its own. The interview data showed that participants frequently spoke about adapting support in real time, shifting tone, boundaries, or focus as client needs evolved. This aligns with Clutterbuck's (2020) argument that coaching requires ongoing re-contracting, but the findings highlight how such adaptation is often instinctive rather than explicitly taught. Responding to shifts in client need, context, and relational dynamic therefore emerges as both a lived practice and a gap in coach education, an area explored in the following section.

5.7 Adapting Support Based on Changing Needs

The survey showed 95% of coaches saying they adapt the support they offer based on the client's changing needs. This suggests that most coaches see flexibility as part of their role. However, the 5% who do not adapt (or are unsure) highlight a small but significant shortfall. Interview data reinforce this gap: while most participants described making adjustments in response to clients, a small number admitted relying on their initial plan even when circumstances shifted.

Adaptability is a consistent theme in the coaching literature. Passmore & Fillery-Travis (2011) describe coaching as a "*dynamic relationship that requires regular adjustment*", especially as the client's goals, emotions or circumstances evolve. Bachkirova et al. (2015) make a similar point, arguing that good coaching includes responsiveness not just to what the client says, but to how they are showing up in the process.

More recently, McDowall and Butterworth (2023) highlight that adaptability is not just about style or personality, but a skill that needs to be developed. Their research on learning agility in coaches shows that flexibility comes from ongoing reflection, feedback, and supervision, rather than from instinct alone. Without those supports in place, there is a risk that a coach will fall back on familiar strategies, even when those no longer meet the client's needs.

This connects directly to the argument in this research, that support must be mindfully adapted and to be able to do that effectively, the researcher asserts this requires specific training. Being adaptable does not just mean being open or easy-going. It means noticing when something has shifted and being willing to name it, reflect on it,

and respond intentionally. Some coaches may be doing this already, but not all are making those decisions consciously.

In terms of coach development, this suggests that adaptability on support and the reflexive management of support can be taught and continually developed through review of praxis and supervision. Supervision, in particular, can help coaches explore how and when they make changes in their approach. Adapting support effectively also depends on knowing whether it is landing as intended.

The next section explores how coaches seek (or sometimes avoid) feedback from clients, and what this reveals about reflexivity and trust in the coaching relationship.

5.8 Seeking Feedback

It was encouraging to see the survey showed that 84% of coaches actively seek feedback from their clients. This suggests that most coaches understand the value of feedback as part of a healthy coaching relationship. However, 16% do not appear to do this, or are unsure. This is a concern, especially if feedback is being avoided or overlooked altogether.

Feedback is widely recognised in the literature as a key part of ethical and reflective coaching. Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) describe it as essential for helping coaches to stay responsive and avoid drifting into unexamined habits. Stober and Grant (2006) also highlight feedback as one of the ways coaches stay aligned with client needs and ensure that the coaching remains helpful and effective.

More recent work by Lewis (2024) focuses on how coaches receive and respond to feedback in supervision. She points out that feedback is often treated as a formal checkpoint, rather than something woven into everyday practice. When it is invited only at the end of a coaching programme, it may be too late to act on it in a meaningful way. The interview data support this concern, in that several participants admitted that feedback was sought mainly at closure, framed as an evaluation rather than a live adjustment. Others described avoiding feedback if they feared it might undermine their credibility. This suggests that some coaches may be missing chances to check in with clients and adjust their approach within the conversation.

This links to the idea that support should be visible and negotiated. The findings extend the literature: while existing research assumes feedback is a routine element of

reflective practice, and the data reveals that feedback is sometimes avoided, delayed, or treated superficially. If coaches are not asking for feedback, they may be making assumptions about what the client wants or needs. Worse, they might avoid feedback out of fear it will reflect badly on them. Either way, feedback becomes a missed opportunity for growth, both for the client and for the coach. These patterns suggest that many aspects of support are happening in practice, but not always in a conscious or consistent way.

The next section brings these threads together to consider what this means for coaching as a profession, and what shortfalls this research has revealed.

5.9 Considering Personal and Professional Context

89% of coaches said they consider the client's personal and professional context when offering support. This suggests that most coaches recognise that context matters. However, the 11% who do not do this (or are unsure) highlight a potential blind spot in how support is shaped.

Context has long been recognised as important in coaching, but how it is understood and applied can vary. Passmore and Fillery-Travis, (2021) describe context as a key influence on coaching outcomes, particularly when it comes to helping clients link insights to real-life change. More recently, Lucas, (2024) argued that a lack of contextual awareness can lead to "*content-free*" coaching. This is where techniques are applied without enough attention to the client's identity, setting, or situation.

The insights from the interviews add weight to these concerns. Several participants described tailoring support differently depending on organisational culture, client role, or sector norms. However, others admitted that contextual factors were considered privately rather than discussed explicitly with the client. This reflects a gap between recognising context and making it a reflexive, co-constructed part of the coaching dialogue A coaching approach that feels supportive in one organisational culture may feel intrusive or unhelpful in another. Similarly, what counts as support for one client might be experienced as pressure by another. Without attention to these differences, support risks being generic, rather than tailored or reflexive.

The finding that most coaches do consider context is reassuring. Whilst encouraging, unless those reflections are made explicit by the coach and with the client, there is a

risk that assumptions go unchallenged. This both confirms the literature's emphasis on the importance of context and highlights a shortfall, and the findings show that even when context is recognised, it is not always surfaced or shared in practice. This reinforces a core claim in this research which is that support can only be consciously adjusted when it is examined in light of the client's wider world, not just the coaching conversation itself.

These findings suggest that while context, reflection, adaptability, and feedback are often considered, the survey and interview data show they are not always made explicit or discussed openly with clients. This extends existing literature, which tends to assume these elements are integrated into reflective coaching, by demonstrating that their enactment in practice is uneven. The next section explores this question more directly.

5.10 Open Discussions on Coaching Success

Only 52% of coaches in the survey said they engage in open discussions about whether coaching is working. Nearly half either do not do this or are unsure. That is a significant gap, especially considering how much emphasis is placed on partnership and mutual reflection in coaching theory.

The literature is clear that evaluating coaching success should not be left until the end or avoided altogether. Bachkirova et al. (2015) describe evaluation as a shared responsibility, something that helps both coach and client reflect on progress and course-correct if needed. Ives (2008) also argues that open dialogue about effectiveness is part of maintaining ethical standards and trust.

Recent work by Smith et al. (2024) shows that these conversations often fall by the wayside. Their analysis of coaching transcripts found that discussions about whether coaching is helpful tend to be vague, infrequent, or avoided altogether. This may be due to discomfort on either side. This it completely understandable if expectations have not been made explicit. This is echoed throughout the research interview data in that while some participants described candid check ins about progress, others admitted these conversations were rare or avoided if they feared negative feedback.

This is one of the clearest examples in the data where the principle of support does not always translate into practice. In this sense, the findings confirm the literature's concern that evaluation is too often neglected, while also extending it by showing how

avoidance is sometimes a conscious choice by the coach. Without honest conversations about how coaching is going, it becomes hard to know whether support is having an impact. For this research, the finding strengthens the case that support must have conscious attention. It must be surfaced and explored, even if that feels uncomfortable. That reflexive stance lies at the heart of the research question.

These findings highlight a broader theme, that coaches often value support and related practices, but do not always make them visible, deliberate, or adaptive. The gap between intention and action is subtle but important, and it shows up not just in client-facing behaviours, but in how coaches relate to their own development. This makes the role of self-reflection particularly significant. The following section explores how coaches reflect on their own experience and how that process influences the way support is understood and delivered.

5.11 Reflecting on Own Experience

Survey insight

87% of coaches said they reflect on their own experience as part of their coaching practice. This strongly suggests that most coaches see self-reflection as an important part of learning and development. However, the 13% who do not do this (or are unsure) raise questions about how consistently reflective habits are embedded across the coaching profession.

Self-reflection is widely endorsed in the literature. Bachkirova et al. (2015) describe it as a foundation for ethical and effective coaching, especially when dealing with uncertainty or complexity. Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) go further, arguing that reflection is part of what distinguishes coaching from more directive forms of workplace support.

More recent studies have connected reflection to professional identity. Lucas (2024), for example, shows how reflective practice helps coaches explore their own assumptions, values, and blind spots and not just the coaching techniques they apply. Without this process, coaches may continue to offer support based on habit or personal preference, rather than what is appropriate to the client's context.

In the survey responses, coaches often described reflection in positive terms. This is important, but few explained *how* they reflect or whether it leads to change. This creates the challenge to know whether reflection is being used as a structured learning

tool or simply as a general mindset. That distinction matters. If support is to be treated as a skill, then reflection needs to go beyond comfort or routine. It becomes part of how coaches examine the impact of their support and make intentional decisions. While the literature such as Nash (2022) assumes reflection automatically leads to growth, the research data suggest this is not always the case, as many participants reflected but without describing change.

This raises a final, critical point which is while personal reflection is valuable, it may not always be enough. Without external input, blind spots can remain hidden. This is where supervision plays a vital role, not just as oversight, but as a reflective partnership that challenges and develops the coach's capacity to manage support with greater depth and intention.

5.12 Seeking External Supervision

Only 61% of coaches in the survey said they actively seek external supervision. That means almost four in 10 do not which is the widest gap across all 10 indicators. For a profession that emphasises reflection, partnership, and ethical awareness, which is a significant finding.

Supervision is widely recognised in coaching literature as a space for critical thinking, ethical questioning, and emotional support. Bachkirova et al. (2015) describe it as a key ingredient in practitioner development, not just a safety net but a learning environment. More recently, Hankovszky Christiansen (2025) reflects on supervision as a reflective "*third space*" where coaches can explore their assumptions, client-focussed dynamics, and blind spots.

Despite this, supervision is not universally embedded in practice. Some coaches may feel they can self-reflect without external input; others may face practical barriers like cost, availability, or confidence in the process. The EMCC (2024) has made supervision a clear requirement for accredited practitioners, but not all coaches work within such frameworks. This inconsistency is reflected in the research data as several participants described supervision as essential to their practice, while others admitted they rarely used it, often citing cost or limited availability.

This gap is essential for the research question. If support is to be managed reflexively, there needs to be an external mirror. This is a space where the coach is supported in

thinking about *how* they support others. Supervision offers this opportunity. Without it, there is a risk that even well-meaning support remains unexamined and habitual, rather than intentional.

These findings suggest that while many coaches are reflective and responsive in their practice, there are clear gaps when it comes to consciously managing and reviewing support. One of the underlying issues may be how (or whether) support is taught in the first place. The final question in the survey asked coaches to reflect on their own training, specifically, whether support had been addressed as an explicit part of their development.

5.13 Support in Coach Training (Question 16)

When asked whether their original coach training had included specific guidance on how to offer support, within the research survey 71% of coaches said 'No'. Only 29% reported that it had been explicitly covered. This represents one of the most significant findings in the dataset which is that support is underdefined, undertaught, and too often left unarticulated in practice. The absence is striking when considered alongside the rest of the data. Coaches in this research consistently expressed that they *do* offer support, yet most had never been taught how to do so, and there is little in the literature that gives this skill clarity or weight. This raises questions about where those practices are coming from. Are they instinctive? Borrowed from other roles? Picked up informally? Without training, coaches are left to interpret support for themselves, with no shared structure or understanding.

The literature suggests this is not a new problem. Bachkirova et al. (2015) note that coaching programmes tend to prioritise techniques and models over processes. More recently, van Nieuwerburgh (2024) and Lucas (2024) both highlight that emotional presence, empathy, and psychological support are central to coaching, but rarely given equal pedagogic weight. If support is treated as a 'soft skill' or something that comes naturally, it risks being overlooked entirely in formal training.

This finding also helps explain some of the inconsistencies in the data. For example, almost all coaches said they encourage reflection, but far fewer engage in supervision or structured evaluation. Without formal grounding, support may become ad hoc, optional, or dependent on personal style, rather than being purposefully steered.

For this research, the implications are clear. If coaching is to be ethically sound, then support must be recognised as a distinct skill. A skill that can be taught, reflected on, and developed over time. This single survey item strengthens the argument that support cannot be left to chance, option, or informal learning. It must be surfaced, made visible, and embedded explicitly within coach education.

This final survey insight acts as a pivot point for the discussion. It brings together what the data has revealed across multiple areas, that while many coaches are trying to offer support reflexively, they are often doing so without a clear framework or shared language.

The next section considers what this means for coaching education more broadly, and how support might be embedded more intentionally into training and development practice.

5.14 Overall Implications for Coaching Training and Development

The survey findings largely align with recent literature in recognising the essential role of support in coaching. Coaches generally report engaging in reflection, adaptability, and contextual awareness. Nevertheless, this study highlights persistent gaps in how support is defined, reviewed, and made visible, especially in relation to feedback, open discussion, and supervision.

These gaps extend existing critiques (e.g. Ives, 2008; Passmore & Sinclair, 2020), showing that while support is valued in principle, its enactment in practice is inconsistent. Training programmes should embed experiential learning methods such as role play, peer feedback, reflective group sessions, and guided supervision to ensure support becomes an explicit and self-aware skillset rather than an implicit backdrop.

Comparing the survey data with literature reveals broad acceptance of support as central to coaching, while also uncovering inconsistencies in how it is enacted. This supports the thesis assertion that support must be consciously managed and scrutinised as a reflexive competency.

Recent literature, such as McCormick and Forsyth (2024) on group reflective practice and Hankovszky Christiansen (2025) on supervision, provides practical methods to address these gaps. If coach developers integrate these methods into training and

accreditation standards, support can shift from being silent and implicit to being visible, accountable, and skilfully managed.

Portfolio Link: These implications are consistent with the lessons and professional contributions I outline in the portfolio, such as designing leadership interventions rooted in coaching principles.

These findings offer a clearer picture of where coaching practice is aligned with ethical and developmental ideals, and where it still relies on tacit knowledge or informal habit. To deepen this understanding, the next section draws directly on the in-depth interview data, comparing what coaches say they do with how they talk about support in real practice, and linking this back to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

5.15 Comparison of In-Depth Interview Data with the Literature Review

The interviews with the coaches provided a deeper and more nuanced view of how support is understood and managed in coaching practice. This built directly on the survey patterns already discussed: the survey revealed broad trends (for example, that most coaches encourage reflection, adapt to client needs, and consider context), while the interviews deepened those findings by showing how these practices were enacted, negotiated, and sometimes contradicted in real coaching conversations. While the survey data highlighted where support practices were evident or absent, the interviews revealed how coaches enacted those practices in context, and how they spoke about them in their own words. This enables a more critical dialogue with the literature, showing not only points of alignment but also areas where assumptions in existing research are challenged or reframed.

This section, therefore, compares the five key themes drawn from the interviews with the literature, highlighting where findings reinforce established ideas, where they question them, and where new insights emerge. In doing so, it consolidates the chapter's argument that support is not a static concept but a reflexively moderated skill, continually shaped by context, relationship, and professional judgment. This qualitative insight offers a richer understanding of how the themes identified in the survey are applied in practice, and where they challenge or extend the literature.

Portfolio Link: Some of these themes resonate strongly with my own reflective coaching log entries, referenced in the portfolio.

5.15.1 Theme 1: Support as a Responsive and Flexible Practice

The interviews confirmed what the researcher has often felt in their own coaching, which is that impactful support is rarely delivered through rigid models, but by adapting to the client's needs reflexively. Several participants referred to using frameworks like GROW as a starting point but said that effective coaching happens when they step away from these structures and respond to what is emerging. This echoes Stober and Grant's (2009) description of coaching as a *"dance"*, where flexibility and responsiveness matter more than following a set routine.

Participant 6: *"I think initially I was quite eager to fix things for people... but I think now I'm much firmer on my boundaries because I understand the toll it takes if you get dragged too far into things. It's actually much more beneficial to the process if you stay one step removed and remain objective."*

Participant 3: *"As I became more confident and experienced, I moved away from rigid models. It just ends up being a much more natural conversation. If you try to use a model, it can feel clunky and get in the way."*

Participant 1: *"I think for me it's changed... I no longer feel the need to give answers. Instead, I ask, 'How would you like to do that? What do you think?' It's about them owning the solution rather than me providing it."*

A striking outcome from the interviews is that this ability is developed through experience, reflection, and supervision rather than being taught as part of formal coach training. This aligns with McDowall and Butterworth's (2014) work on learning agility, which highlights how coaches become more fluid in their approach over time.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the interviews highlight that the meaning of 'support' is co-constructed through the language of the session itself rather than according to a model. Participants described moving from "*fixing"* to *"enabling,"* a broad shift that frames support as a shared and emergent process rather than a prescriptive technique. Significantly, this theme shows support as something that is co-created with the client, not a tool that the coach applies in a fixed way.

Portfolio Link: I reflect on this same shift in my coaching log, where moving beyond frameworks helped me to build more authentic connections with clients.

This theme directly connects to the first research question on what 'support' means in practice. This exposes a risk whereby when models are used rigidly rather than reflexively, they constrain rather than support. This shortfall points to a need for training that frames tools not as fixed solutions but as adaptable resources. Theme 2 reflects on this next.

5.15.2 Theme 2: Support Through Challenge, Care and Containment

The interview data highlighted that effective support often combines challenge with care. This creates a holding environment where clients feel both held and stretched. Coaches talked about offering *"tough honesty"* in a way that feels caring and contained and helps clients deepen awareness with the development of psychological safety. Clutterbuck's (2025) framing of challenge as connecting rather than adversarial, by showing how coaches operationalise that balance in real practice also resonates with Hawkins and Shohet's (2012) notion of containment as a core aspect of reflective supervision, though unlike their supervisory lens, here containment is described as enacted in the coaching relationship.

Participant 18: *"I believe we owe it to clients to challenge them... I always have this discussion at the beginning: 'How do you feel about being challenged, and how will I know if I'm pushing too hard?' It's a fine balance, challenge should still feel safe."*

Participant 20: *"I think the shift for me was moving from fixing problems to enabling people. With credibility and experience, I've learned to create that safe space where I can challenge constructively and ask the difficult questions."*

Participant 21: *"At the start of my coaching, I was very much the problem solver. I felt I had to fix things. Now, I see support as prompting people to find the answers themselves but also having the confidence to offer challenge where it's needed."*

What is interesting in the interviews is that this approach is not taught explicitly in coach training. Instead, it emerges through experience, reflection, and supervision. Indeed, recent writing from Abramska (2025) on coaching supervision quotes Erik de Haan's definition as *"reflection in relationship, a place where experiences from practice are transformed into new potential for action"*. Online supervision training, discussed by Mitchell et al. (2025) also emphasises care and containment, noting that reflection spaces must be safe to allow effective challenge.

Portfolio Link: I reflect on balancing challenge with containment in my coaching log, where I navigated delivering honest feedback while maintaining trust.

From a discourse perspective, participants framed challenge not as separate from support but as its extension, enabling clients to see what they could not see alone. What could easily be perceived as confrontation was instead described as a shared process, rooted in trust and care, where both coach and client lean into honest conversations that move solutions forward.

This theme responds to the second research question: how is support managed in practice? It demonstrates that challenge, when offered thoughtfully, is not the opposite of support but one of its strongest forms.

5.15.3 Theme 3: Creating the Conditions for Honest, Safe Coaching

The interviews highlighted that trust and psychological safety are at the heart of real support. Coaches spoke about how establishing a safe space where clients feel they can be honest without judgement is foundational to the positive creation of a coaching and client dynamic. Yet, the profession has not made this reflexive management of safety explicit. Leaving it implicit risks inconsistency and uneven client experience. One coach explained it this way:

Participant 12: *"I make it clear from session one that this is a 'no blame zone.' The moment they feel they can't speak honestly, we lose everything."*

Participant 9: *"I noticed that when I admitted I didn't have all the answers, it made it easier for them to do the same. That vulnerability opened up deeper dialogue."*

Participant 14: *"It's not just about confidentiality, it's about showing up as a person yourself, relatable. That's when I've seen real breakthroughs happen."*

These findings align with Percy's (2024) argument that psychological safety requires leaders to permit '*productive discomfort*' and create space for openness, but they extend it by showing how coaches operationalise this safety through modelling vulnerability themselves. Similarly, (Suner, 2025) highlights that balancing coaching with direct input can build trust, but participants went further, describing honesty not just as a tactic but as a mutual stance and the coach's openness became permission for the client's**.**

From a symbolic interactionist standpoint, these quotes show how safety is constructed through interaction. Vulnerability, honesty, and shared norms are built through back and forth dialogue, not pre-set protocols. This contrasts with much of the literature, which tends to frame psychological safety as a condition to be created by the leader or coach. The data shows it is actively co-created in the session itself. It is these moments of co-created trust that allow coaching to move beyond the surface and into transformational work.

Portfolio placeholder: I reflect on a session where I chose to share my uncertainty first, opening the door for a client to share more deeply, it felt like permission for vulnerability.

This insight connects with research questions 1 and 2, showing that supported environments are built collectively, requiring both human-centred skills and reflective awareness.

5.15.4 Theme 4: Support as Skilled Boundary Work

The interviews consistently highlighted that effective support often hinges on boundary setting, especially emotional, ethical, or organisational. Unlike standard contracting, which often focuses on logistics and safeguarding, participants described boundary work as an ongoing, reflexive process. Coaches spoke of needing to hold the line, and of that line itself offering security and clarity. This research shows boundary work is not peripheral but central to support and must be taught as such.

Participant 4: *"I always check the scope before a session, am I coaching, advising, mentoring? If I don't, everything becomes muddy in five minutes."*

Participant 10: *"It's strange, but I found that saying, 'That's outside what we agreed,' actually feels supportive. It tells clients I respect our agreement and trust them to hold the space, too."*

Participant 15: *"When a client drifts into operational issues, I gently redirect them by saying, 'Tell me more about your thinking rather than your tasks.' It keeps the session focused and respectful."*

This resonates with Chandler's (2024) emphasis on role clarity and the risks of ambiguity, but the interview data develops further by framing boundaries not as restrictive but as actively supportive. In contrast to the literature's tendency to present

boundaries as protective "*limits,*" participants described them as relational anchors that enhanced trust and focus.

From a symbolic interactionist view, these quotes show that boundaries are not static rules. It is clear they emerge through interaction and dialogue, and they are negotiated reflexively. Saying *"that's outside our agreement*" is not just enforcing policy, it is actively co-creating relationship clarity which reinforces shared understanding.

Portfolio Link: I reflect on a session where I consciously reset boundaries midsession, and how that anchor helped both of us to reconnect with the coaching purpose.
This theme aligns with the second research question and supports the third, showing that boundary work is a critical skill with significant training and coaching practice implications.

5.15.5 Theme 5: Support Through Reframing and Perspective, Shifting

Participants described reframing as a powerful form of support in helping clients reframe their own narratives and see situations differently:

Participant 8: *"When a client gets stuck, I often ask, 'What if we looked at this from X's perspective?' It shifts the frame and suddenly they see options they didn't before."*

Participant 13: *"It's almost like holding up a mirror but with a new lens. Clients often say, 'I never saw it that way,' it breaks the loop of their own assumptions."*

Participant 5: *"Sometimes I literally say, 'Let's step outside your story for a moment,' and that small step shifts the whole energy of the session."*

These insights echo Grant's (2017) argument that reframing is central to coaching's developmental function, enabling clients to reappraise assumptions rather than remain locked in habitual narratives. Similarly, Stelter (2014) links reframing to narrative identity work, where clients are supported to construct new meanings through dialogue. The participant accounts confirm these ideas but go further by positioning reframing not as a technique applied by the coach, but as a relational process that emerges dynamically in conversation.

Recent practitioner writing also reinforces this. For example, the Forbes Coaches Council (2024) emphasises how reframing encourages "*cognitive flexibility*" and resilience, aligning with participants' "mirror moments." However, while the practitioner

literature tends to frame reframing as a discrete tool, the interview data illustrate its co-constructed nature, less about applying a method, more about inviting clients into shared meaning making.

Symbolic interactionism helps make sense of this as reframing is a shift that emerges through conversation, co-constructed in real-time dialogue, which shifts the shared meaning of the coaching situation. When participants invited clients to “step outside the story,” they were not simply offering an alternative lens, but actively shaping the interaction so that new interpretations became possible. This positions reframing as a change in both the narrative and the relationship. This theme strongly supports research question three by highlighting how reframing is not a tool, but a dynamic skill. The finding strengthens the argument that reframing should be embedded explicitly in coach training as part of reflexive support, so that it is developed deliberately rather than left to chance or instinct.

Portfolio Link: I reflect on a session where I invited a client to “step outside the story,” and witnessed how shifting that frame led to real clarity and movement.

5.15.6 Summary of Interview Themes

The five themes together present a clear picture of how support is understood and enacted in coaching practice. Across the interviews, support emerged as flexible and co-created, moving beyond structured models to become a reflexive process shaped by trust, challenge, and boundaries.

Participants described support as mutually negotiated, and deeply contextual, rather than as a fixed technique. This aligns with the survey data, but the interviews add a richer narrative that shows how coaches adapt reflexively, reframing and shifting perspectives to meet individual needs.

Symbolic interactionism is evident; support is constructed through dialogue, and the language and meaning shared between coach and client. What is striking is the gap between what coaches are taught (models, frameworks) and what they actually do (fluid, adaptive, reciprocal support). This points towards a need to rethink how support is approached both in coach education and ongoing professional development.

These findings raise important questions for both theory and practice. If support is not a background concept but a central, correlative skill, then it deserves greater focus in

coaching training programmes, and supervision practices. The following section explores these implications, drawing out what the findings contribute to the coaching literature, where they challenge existing assumptions, and how they can inform future practice and research.

These five themes deepen and humanise the survey findings. While the survey identified general patterns and potential gaps, the interviews brought support to life, not as a single skill, but as a dynamic, situated practice. Across all themes, what stands out is the reliance on experience, reflexivity, and personal judgement, rather than formal training. Coaches spoke in deeply reflective ways about what it means to support others, but they rarely used the word ‘support’ itself. This absence reinforces the central claim of this research which is that support is enacted, felt, and reflexively managed, but often remains unnamed and under-defined.

These findings offer a powerful springboard into the next section, where a new framework is proposed, one that brings visibility to support and offers a structured way to embed it into coaching education and practice.

5.16 A Framework for Reflexive Support in Coaching

The five themes identified from the interviews provide a coherent account of how support is enacted in coaching practice. Table 5.2 summarises these themes, showing how each connects to the research questions and where the findings align with, extend, or challenge existing literature.

Table 5.2 Summary of Interview Themes with Links to Literature and Implications

Theme	Interview Findings	Relation to Literature	Implications
1. Responsive & Flexible Practice	Coaches move away from rigid models; support is reflexive, co-created.	Confirms Stober & Grant (2009) on coaching as a "dance." Extends McDowall & Butterworth (2014) on learning agility.	Coach education must move beyond model driven training to teach reflexivity explicitly.
2. Challenge, Care & Containment	Support combines challenge with safety; co-constructed trust.	Aligns with Clutterbuck (2025) and Hawkins & Shohet (2012). Extends Abramska (2025) on supervision as reflection-in-relationship.	Train coaches to integrate challenge and containment as a deliberate supportive skill.
3. Honest, Safe Coaching	Trust and vulnerability enable deeper dialogue.	Supports Percy (2024) and Suner (2025) on psychological safety. Extends symbolic interactionist lens: safety is co-created.	Safety must be taught as a relational process, not assumed as a byproduct of confidentiality.
4. Skilled Boundary Work	Boundaries negotiated reflexively, not just at contracting.	Confirms Chandler (2024) on role clarity; extends Ives (2008) on assumptions.	Boundary work should be embedded as a supportive skill within training and supervision.
5. Reframing & Perspective-Shifting	Reframing seen as dynamic co-construction, not a static tool.	Confirms Forbes Coaches Council (2024) on reframing/cognitive flexibility. Extends symbolic interactionism lens: reframing reshapes shared meaning.	Reframing should be taught as an adaptive skill that enables reflexivity, not a single technique.

This synthesis highlights both the strengths and weaknesses evident across the profession. It also establishes the foundation for the next section, where the implications are drawn together and a framework is introduced to address the current gap in coaching education and practice.

5.16.1 Introducing The Four Dimensions of The Coaching Support Lens

This framework is the defining contribution of the research. It emerges directly from the data, is reinforced through triangulation across survey and interview findings, and is sharpened through comparison with the literature. Given the limitations identified, The Four Dimensions of The Coaching Support Lens brings to the forefront what has too often remained hidden which is having support as an explicit, reflexively managed skill. It challenges the assumption that support is simply intuitive, and instead provides a practical, adaptable structure for coaches, supervisors, and educators to embed into

real practice. In response, the Four Dimensions of the Coaching Support Lens is offered as the primary contribution of this research: a framework that makes support visible, structured, and ethically grounded across the coaching process. In doing so, it positions support not as background noise, but as a central dimension of effective coaching.

Figure 5.1 The Four Dimensions of The Coaching Support Lens (Napkin AI, 2025)

The Four Dimensions of the Coaching Support Lens is the central contribution of this research: a practical framework for embedding support reflexively into coaching practice. Developed from interview data, triangulated survey insights, and comparison with the literature, it makes support visible, structured, and ethically grounded. Unlike existing coaching models, which emphasise stages or competencies, the Lens focuses specifically on the reflexive management of support as a dynamic and teachable skill is not an alternative to existing models but a complementary

perspective that enhances them by integrating ethical, relational, and reflexive awareness. The four dimensions (Figure 5.1) are designed to interact fluidly, providing prompts that coaches, supervisors, and educators can return to as client needs, contexts, and dynamics evolve. The lens acts as a compass rather than a checklist, continually orienting practice back to the question: what does support mean here, now, and for this client? What follows is an exploration of each of these four dimensions, grounded in data and informed by theory, to illustrate how the lens can be applied in real coaching contexts.

5.16.2 The Four Dimensions of The Coaching Support Lens

The Four Dimensions of The Coaching Support Lens is built on four interdependent dimensions, each representing a critical area in which support must be made visible, intentional, and reflexively managed. The lens does not prescribe linear steps; instead, it offers a practical framework to navigate the dynamic terrain of coaching practice. Table 5.3 below details the interaction of each dimension, research link, literature link, and the practice implications.

Table 5.3 Interaction of each dimension, research link, literature link, and the practice implications

Dimension	Research Link	Literature Link	Practice Implication
Naming Support	Participants often discovered their style of support retrospectively; only a minority reported structured conversations about support at the outset.	Cox (2023) argues that the absence of shared language around support increases the risk of assumption and mismatch. Naming support early enables alignment.	Contracting should include discussion of emotional boundaries, preferred forms of challenge, and what 'support' means to the client, not just logistical or ethical elements.
Examining Power	Theme 3 showed coaches rely on felt sense and presence to "read the room," adjusting support to shifts in client energy, emotion, or resistance.	Clutterbuck (2025) describes "holding complexity" as a marker of experienced practice, resonating with participants' accounts of supporting without rescuing.	Coaches should develop language for noticing, naming, and adjusting support live in the session, not only in post-hoc reflection.
Adapting in the Moment	Several participants only realised in hindsight that they had over-supported, avoided challenge, or missed cues.	Bachkirova et al. (2015) call for reflection to move beyond content and outcome, into process and relationship. Support is central to this.	Reflection tools, journals, or supervision prompts should explicitly review support style, effectiveness, and unintended impact.
Accountability	61% of survey respondents reported using external supervision, but interviews showed wide variation in how it was applied.	McCormick and Forsyth (2024) highlight group reflective practice as surfacing relational dynamics often missed in solo reflection.	Supervision should frame support not just as a competency but as a relational force, raising questions about who defines support and how it is managed ethically.

Together, these four dimensions form a reflexive lens, not a checklist, but a professional stance. They reposition support as an integral, actively managed element of coaching rather than a passive assumption. The data shows that when support is named, negotiated, reflected on, and supervised, it becomes a shared, ethical, and skillful practice.

The following section illustrates how the lens operates in practice, drawing on participant narratives to show how coaches adaptively navigate boundaries, ethical issues, power dynamics, and relational cues. In this way, the lens is both practical and

conceptual, revealing not only what coaches do, but how they think and reflect in real time.

5.16.3 Applying the Lens: Illustrative Examples

The following examples have been drawn from interview data to show how The Four Dimensions of The Coaching Support Lens can be applied in real coaching situations. Each example is based on a genuine participant case and has been anonymised and adapted to protect confidentiality. While the accounts are constructed for clarity, the language, patterns, and scenarios reflect what coaches actually described in the interviews.

These examples demonstrate how support was reflexively managed in the moment, across contracting, boundaries, challenge, and reflection, rather than being left to assumption or instinct. They are not intended to offer a right way of coaching, but to illustrate how the four dimensions of the lens can bring visibility and structure to the otherwise invisible work of support.

Each example is also cross-referenced with the relevant analytic theme from Chapter 4, showing how theory, data, and practical application come together in this proposed framework.

Example 1: "I'm Not Here to Be Fixed"

(*Theme: Creating the Conditions for Honest, Safe Coaching*)

Scenario: In a workplace coaching session, the client becomes visibly frustrated. *"I'm not here to be fixed,"* they say, after the coach enthusiastically offers several strategies to help them 'move forward.' The coach had interpreted the client's reflective silence as 'stuckness' and jumped in to offer direction. The trust that had been growing between them now feels fragile.

Reflexive Question:

What version of 'support' was the coach offering, and whose definition of support was it?

How the Lens Helps:

This is a moment for the coach to pause and explore how support is being perceived in the relationship. The Naming Support element encourages the coach to return to the foundations of the alliance and question what does support mean *to* this particular

client? Has that changed? The Adapting in the Moment element helps the coach consider how their own assumptions and habits (e.g., equating action with progress) might have shaped the moment. Through the lens, this becomes not a failure, but a nuanced point. A chance to recalibrate, renegotiate, and honour the client's agency.

Example 2: "They Just Want Me to Listen"

(Theme: Support Through Challenge, Care and Containment)

The coaching moment:

A coach recalls feeling sidelined during a session:

"She just kept talking. She did not want anything from me. I felt useless, like a sounding board with nothing to offer."

What felt uncomfortable:

The coach experienced discomfort, describing the session as *"flat"* and *"directionless".* They questioned their value, wondering if they had *"just been a good listener"* rather than delivering a meaningful intervention.

The lens in action:

Using The Four Dimensions of The Coaching Support Lens, the coach revisits the experience through four key points:

1. **Ethical Intentions**: Reflecting on the urge to *do* something rather than *be* present. What ethical expectations does the coach hold around offering value? Who defines what 'support' looks like in that moment?
2. **Positionality & Power**: Considering whether the coach's discomfort was about loss of control or perceived authority. Was their professional identity tied to giving insight or outcomes, rather than holding space?
3. **Interpersonal Alignment**: Tuning into the client's cues: Did the client need challenge or containment? Was silence and space really the most supportive intervention?
4. **Critical Reflexivity**: Recognising the session as an opportunity to expand their range. If *"just listening"* felt uncomfortable, is that revealing a developmental edge in their own practice?

What changed:

The coach re-evaluated the session. Rather than seeing it as ineffective, they reframed it as deep emotional processing for the client. They later used supervision to explore their own biases around passivity and value, and learned to sit more confidently in quiet, reflective spaces.

Example 3: "She Was Waiting for Me to Notice"

(Theme: Support as Skilled Boundary Work)

A senior coach described a moment where her client became increasingly withdrawn over several sessions*. "She kept saying everything was fine, but something in her tone had shifted. She was performing wellness."* The coach explained that she initially hesitated to name it, worried about crossing a boundary, but eventually said, "*I'm noticing something different, are you ok with us exploring that?"* The client then disclosed that she felt *"emotionally overheld"* in a different mentoring relationship, and this was affecting her trust in the coaching space.

This example illustrates the Adapting in the Moment dimension of the lens. The coach noticed a shift but paused to consider whether, how, and when to name it. Rather than react instinctively or retreat from the discomfort, she used her self-awareness and knowledge of the relationship to guide a gentle but important intervention.

It also touches on the Examining Power lens. By explicitly asking permission to explore emotional territory, the coach upheld ethical boundaries while creating space for deeper support. This was not about emotional rescue but about co-creating clarity and consent around the emotional tone of the coaching relationship.

In reflective practice, the coach noted how supervision had helped her see the difference between over identifying with a client and supporting them through careful witnessing. *"I am not her fixer, but I am her coach, and that carries responsibility."*

Example 4: Navigating Over Involvement and Ethical Boundaries

(Theme: Support as Skilled Boundary Work)

Context:

The coach had built a strong rapport with a long-term client who was navigating both professional challenges and personal upheaval. As the relationship deepened, the coach found themselves being drawn into more emotionally charged conversations,

with the client beginning to rely on them for reassurance outside of scheduled sessions.

Reflexive Support in Action:

The coach began to feel a discomfort, a sense that they were becoming *"too important"* to the client. This unease prompted a reflective supervision session in which the coach explored their emotional response, sense of obligation, and the emerging boundary risks. Following this, the coach revisited the original contract and used a session to openly discuss the coaching relationship. They shared their observations and invited the client to explore how support was being used, and whether it was still enabling growth or beginning to create reliance.

Lens Dimension:

Boundary Management

The coach demonstrated the lens in action by noticing relational drift, seeking supervision, and re-contracting to reset the professional frame.

Reflexivity Insight:

Rather than withdrawing support abruptly, the coach used a relational moment to model self-awareness and invite shared meaning-making. This turned a potential ethical dilemma into a developmental pivot.

These examples show that support in coaching is not an abstract concept, it is enacted through choices, language, boundaries, and reflexive awareness. Each case illustrates a real dilemma or turning point, drawn from the interview data, where the coach had to navigate support consciously rather than rely on assumptions or instinct. These moments bring The Four Dimensions of the Coaching Support Lens to life and demonstrate its practical application. In the next section, the focus turns to how this lens, and the principles it represents, can be embedded within coaching education, supervision, and professional development.

5.16.4 Integration into Coaching Education and Supervision

Having presented The Four Dimensions of The Coaching Support Lens as a conceptual and practical framework, the next step is to consider how it can be meaningfully embedded into coaching education, supervision, and ongoing professional development. While coaching programmes typically cover contracting,

active listening, and feedback, the concept of support is often left implicit and absorbed through experience rather than taught with clarity or ethical awareness. This section argues that by surfacing support as a structured, reflexive skill, coach educators and supervisors can better prepare practitioners to navigate power, adjust in real time, and remain accountable for the quality of their relational practice. Practical strategies are now explored for integrating the lens across curriculum design, supervision models, and reflective tools.

Coach training programmes offer a crucial opportunity to bring visibility to support early in a coach's development. Just as models such as GROW are used to scaffold coaching structure, The Four Dimensions of The Coaching Support Lens can be introduced as a tool for understanding and navigating the relational dimensions of practice. Each of the four dimensions: Naming Support, Examining Power, Adapting in the Moment, and Accountability, can be taught using experiential learning approaches, including supervised practice, peer coaching, and critical incident reviews. For example, early coaching simulations can include moments of ethical discomfort, where trainees are invited to pause and discuss what 'support' would look like in that context, and whose needs are being prioritised.

In supervision, the lens offers a valuable structure for reflexive dialogue. Supervisors can use the four dimensions to guide exploration of specific client cases, helping coaches to notice habitual patterns, unexamined assumptions, or imbalances in relational power. This approach aligns with the shift in supervision literature towards dialogic and relational models, where supervision becomes a space not just for compliance but for ethical inquiry and deepening practice. The Accountability dimension, in particular, can support supervisors in helping coaches reflect not just on what was done, but how support was offered, received, or misunderstood.

Beyond formal education and supervision, The Four Dimensions of The Coaching Support Lens can also shape ongoing professional development. Coaches may choose to use the lens as a journaling tool, a peer dialogue framework, or as a periodic self-audit to check the balance of their support strategies. This approach is already reflected in some professional bodies' CPD expectations, where reflective practice is encouraged but not always guided. The lens helps fill that gap by providing a language

and structure for interrogating how support is enacted across contexts, especially in complex or emotionally charged client relationships.

By embedding The Four Dimensions of The Coaching Support Lens into coach training, supervision, and professional learning, the profession takes a step towards recognising support not as a passive byproduct of good intentions, but as a teachable, accountable practice in its own right.

This section has outlined how The Four Dimensions of The Coaching Support Lens can be practically embedded into coaching education and supervision. To aid application, the following visual model (Figure 5.1) presents the four dimensions as an integrated framework, offering a clear and adaptable tool for use in training, supervision, and ongoing reflective practice. This gives a clear directive for the implications for theory and practice in the next section.

5.17 Implications for theory and practice

The implications outlined in this section directly address the research questions, particularly RQ1 and RQ2, by clarifying how support is defined, enacted, and adapted in real coaching contexts. The analysis of both survey and interview data demonstrates that support is not a background assumption but an active skill that is consciously applied and refined in practice.

The findings show that support is at the heart of coaching, yet it is often treated as if it will just ‘happen’ rather than something to be taught, explored, or practised. The five themes paint a picture of support as fluid and adaptable, built in the moment through trust, challenge, and honest dialogue. This is a quite different picture from the structured, model-driven approach described in much of the literature, where support is rarely named or explored as a skill in its own right.

This matters for both theory and practice. For coaching theory, it suggests that support needs to be given more attention. It is not a side effect of coaching but part of what makes coaching work. For practice, the findings point to a gap in training and supervision. If 71% of survey respondents say their training never taught them how to manage support, then there is clearly more that could be done to help coaches develop this skill consciously rather than relying on experience and instinct alone.

In this section, the researcher looks at how findings fit with, and sometimes challenge, what the literature says, and what this means for the way coaches are trained, supported, and supervised. These implications also connect with RQ3 by positioning support as a distinct coaching competence that deserves explicit inclusion in training and professional standards. Together, the findings and their implications underscore that support must be treated as a visible, deliberate skill if coaching is to remain effective and ethically grounded.

5.17.1 Alignment with the Literature

The findings of this research reinforce key ideas presented in the literature review, particularly around trust, psychological safety, adaptability, and reflective practice. Across both the survey and interviews, the data confirm that effective coaching depends not only on structured techniques but also on the ability to create a dynamic, co-constructed relationship with the client, an argument echoed by several key authors (Whitmore, 1992; Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011).

Relational Trust and Psychological Safety: The importance of trust and safety, which emerged strongly in Themes 2 and 3, aligns closely with the literature. Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) argue that trust is the foundation upon which all coaching outcomes are built, while Percy (2024), writing in Forbes, notes that psychological safety is essential for enabling honest dialogue and growth. The interviews confirmed this, with participants describing how creating a safe, open space early in the relationship allowed clients to take risks and share more authentically.

Adaptability and Reflexivity: The findings also affirm the literature's emphasis on flexibility and reflexive practice. While structured models such as GROW (Whitmore, 1992) provide useful frameworks, both the literature and the participants highlight that real coaching success often comes from knowing when to move beyond these structures. Clutterbuck (2025) describes modern coaching as a *"fluid and adaptive practice,"* and the interviews reflect this, with coaches prioritising the ability to respond to the client's context over rigidly applying a model.

Reflection and Supervision: The survey data shows that 61% of coaches engage in external supervision, supporting the argument that reflection and third party feedback are crucial for ethical and effective practice. Bachkirova et al. (2015) emphasise that reflection is not an optional extra but a core developmental process for coaches. The

interview data reinforced this, with participants linking supervision to their ability to manage support consciously.

Support as a Co-created Skill: Finally, the findings confirm the growing recognition in recent literature that support should be seen as a deliberate, co-created skill rather than a defined quality (Cox, 2023). This was evident in how participants described negotiating boundaries, reframing perspectives, and balancing challenge with care as active elements of their work, aligning with current practitioner insights (Forbes Coaches Council, 2024).

5.17.2 Gaps and Challenges to the Literature

While the findings align with much of the existing literature, they also expose important gaps and limitations. The most significant challenge is the assumption, often implicit in coaching texts, that support is an inherent quality that coaches naturally develop over time. The research data shows this is not the case. Both the survey and interviews highlight that support is rarely taught as a structured skill in coach education. In fact, 71% of survey respondents stated that their original training did not include specific guidance on how to offer or manage support (see Chapter 4). This directly questions the adequacy of training programmes that focus on frameworks like GROW (Whitmore, 1992) but overlooks interpersonal competencies such as boundary management, reframing, and psychological safety.

The interviews further illustrate that many of the most essential elements of support such as balancing challenge with care, or enabling reflection without judgement, are learned through trial and supervision rather than formal instruction. This contrasts with the growing recognition in the coaching field that relationship-driven skills are at least as important as technical skills where according to Cox, Bachkirova, and Clutterbuck (2023), reflective practice and boundary management are essential competencies that underpin effective coaching. It also highlights a gap between what the literature values conceptually and what is operationalised in practice.

Another challenge related to the under-theorisation of support in coaching research is shown as the literature discusses concepts like trust, presence, and empathy (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011), where there is little exploration of support as a dynamic and reflexive process. The findings extend this discussion by showing how support is actively co-created and adapted throughout the coaching relationship. This

shifts the narrative from support being a “background condition” to being a core coaching skill that requires specific training, deliberate practice, reflection, and supervision.

Current practitioner insights also suggest that the coaching profession is beginning to recognise these gaps. For example, People Management (2024) notes that many workplace coaches lack training in how to create psychological safety or navigate complex emotional contexts. These are skills that the participants viewed as essential. Forbes Coaches Council (2024) similarly calls for reframing to be treated as a critical capability rather than an instinctive habit. These findings suggest that formal training still lags behind the realities of practice.

5.17.3 Implications and Practical Opportunities

The findings of this research suggest that support should be recognised as a core competency in coaching, rather than an unspoken or assumed skill. While the literature acknowledges the importance of trust, presence, and adaptability, the research data shows that these qualities are not consistently developed in formal training programmes. This has implications for both the theoretical framing of coaching and the design of training, supervision, and ongoing professional development.

The data indicates that while coaches may begin with a general sense of how to offer support, their practice evolves into something more situational, negotiated, and critically managed. This shift challenges the dominant discourse that relies on structured models as the basis for coach training.

The contrast between intuitive and reflexive framings of support is to be addressed within training practice. It illustrates not only how support is enacted, but also why assumptions about its naturalness are problematic for coach education and consistency of practice. Table 5.4 below outlines this distinction.

5.17.4 Contrast Between Intuitive and Reflexive Framings of Support

Table 5.4 Contrast Between Intuitive and Reflexive Framings of Support

View of Support	Defined as Intuitive	Defined as Reflexive
Nature	Based on instinct, personality, or tacit presence	Developed through awareness, practice, and situational judgement
Development	Assumed to emerge naturally over time	Requires deliberate reflection and critical engagement
Teaching	Rarely taught; assumed to be an innate trait	Can be explicitly taught, explored, and developed
Risk	Leads to inconsistency and over, reliance on personality	Supports ethical, contextual, and accountable practice
Coach Education Implication	Reinforces invisibility of support	Calls for structured, practice, based development and reflection

5.17.5 Implications for Coaching Theory

The concept of support, as explored in this research, invites a shift in how coaching is conceptualised. Rather than viewing support as a byproduct of techniques or structured models, the findings indicate that it is a reflexive and interpersonal practice that must be explicitly designed, trained and intrinsic to the application of the rest of the coaching practice training.

Authors such as Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck (2023) call for a broader understanding of coaching competencies, including the ability to manage boundaries, adapt instantaneously, and facilitate reflection. This research supports this perspective and extends it by demonstrating that support is not a static attribute but a skill that evolves through collaboration with clients. Coaching frameworks and models should place greater emphasis on collaborative processes, not just outcomes or methods.

5.17.6 Implications for Training and Supervision

The data also highlight a gap between the skills coaches need and those taught in standard training. With 71**%** of survey respondents reporting that their training did not explicitly address support, there is a clear case for redesigning coach education programmes. Training should go beyond the application of models like GROW (Whitmore, 1992) to include experiential learning that focuses on relationship-driven skills such as reframing, creating psychological safety, and balancing challenge with care. Role plays, peer feedback, and reflective exercises can help coaches develop these competencies in a structured way.

Supervision is another critical area. Both the literature and the research findings emphasise that supervision is a vital space for reflecting on the people-oriented dynamics of coaching. Yet, 39% of survey respondents did not engage in regular external supervision. This suggests that professional bodies, such as the EMCC or ICF, could place stronger emphasis on supervision as a tool for developing the people-oriented aspects of coaching. Forbes Coaches Council (2024) similarly argues that supervision and reflective practice are essential for building resilience and avoiding complacency.

The next section looks at unexpected insights that surfaced during the research and findings that challenge conventional views of coaching support and offer fresh perspectives for both educators and practitioners.

5.18 Unexpected results and their significance

While this research set out to explore support as a socially connected skill, the interviews and survey data revealed additional insights that were not expected. These do not replace the five core themes, rather they deepen the understanding of what support looks like in modern coaching contexts. They show that coaching is increasingly shaped by organisational demands, the realities of hybrid work, and the personal resilience of the coach. To capture these insights, the summarised unexpected findings and their significance for coaching theory, training, and practice are in the table 5.5 below.

5.18.1 Table 5.5 Unexpected Findings and Their Significance

Alongside the expected patterns that aligned with the research questions, several unexpected findings emerged during the interviews. These insights did not form part

of the original design but reveal important implications for the future of coaching practice. Table 5.2 summarises these emergent themes and their wider significance.

Table 5.5 Unexpected Findings and Their Significance

Unexpected Finding	What This Means in the Research	Significance for Coaching
Supporting Middle Managers as Change Agents	Interviews revealed that coaches often support managers not only as individuals but also as leaders navigating organisational change.	Highlights the need for coach training to include systemic awareness and tools for working within organisational complexity.
Coaching Fatigue and Burnout Awareness	Some participants described emotional fatigue and the hidden toll of offering deep support over time.	Underlines the importance of boundaries, supervision, and self-care in both training and ongoing professional development.
The Emergence of AI, Digital Platform Coaching	A few coaches noted the use of AI tools or digital platforms for reflection and follow up.	Suggests the need for digital literacy and ethical guidance on blending technology with relational coaching.
Boundary Challenges in Hybrid Settings	Remote coaching required new ways to create safety and interpret relational cues.	Indicates that boundary setting for virtual environments is now a critical skill in coaching practice.
Coaching as a Strategic Talent Tool	Several participants mentioned being asked to show ROI or link coaching to organisational metrics.	Highlights a shift towards measurable, outcome-focused coaching, requiring new skills to balance relational depth with organisational demands.

While these findings were not the central focus of the research, they reflect the evolving pressures, ethical considerations, and systemic demands shaping how support is practised. They reinforce the need for adaptive, reflexive approaches, such as those outlined in the Support Lens, and open up new areas for inquiry and professional development.

These unexpected findings reflect wider trends in the coaching profession. For example, the increasing role of middle managers as change agents mirrors recent observations from the International Coaching Federation (2025), which emphasises

the growing need for coaches to understand organisational dynamics. Similarly, concerns around burnout raised by participants align with reports in the Financial Times (2025), which note a rise in emotional fatigue among professional coaches due to the empathetic demands of their work.

The growing presence of AI tools in coaching, as highlighted by the Financial Times (2025), also confirms that the field is evolving towards hybrid and technology-supported models, something that coaches in my research acknowledged as both a benefit and a challenge. The shift to hybrid working has created new boundary issues, a finding supported by Loeb Leadership (2025), which reports that emotional intelligence and boundary awareness are critical in remote coaching environments. Finally, the strategic use of coaching as a business tool aligns with Loeb Leadership's (2025) findings that organisations increasingly demand measurable outcomes and ROI from coaching interventions.

These unexpected findings add a new layer to what the research has shown about support. They show that coaching is not just about the relationship in the room (or on the screen) but is shaped by wider shifts. For example, this ranges from how organisations use coaching to how technology and hybrid work are reshaping the way connections are made. This makes the researcher more certain that support is both a personal and a systemic skill, influenced by the contexts we work in.

Reviewing this research, the strength lies in how the survey and interviews synchronise to provide both breadth and depth. The mixed methods design allowed the collation of quantitative data on patterns while also exploring the qualitative lived experience of support in detail through interviews. The manual coding approach, while time consuming, ensured close alignment to the data and gave the ability to spot subtle themes that may have been missed by software-driven analysis.

Using pragmatism and symbolic interactionism also helped keep the focus on how meaning is created between coach and client, which sits at the heart of the research question. The main limitations, such as the absence of demographic data and the focus on a UK sample, do not diminish the quality of the findings but instead highlight where future studies could extend this work. These areas of strength and opportunities for challenge together give a balanced picture of the research credibility and scope.

5.19 Future Research Opportunities

This research offers several opportunities for further exploration. First, future studies could build on these findings by taking a longer term view of coaching support, tracking how coaches develop their approach to support over time. A longitudinal research could reveal how reflexivity and boundary work evolve as coaches gain experience. Second, including demographic data or exploring international perspectives would allow comparisons across cultures, industries, and coaching contexts. Third, the role of technology in coaching, particularly the growing use of AI tools and hybrid platforms, deserves more focused investigation. Finally, exploring the impact of support on measurable coaching outcomes, such as organisational performance or employee engagement, could bridge the gap between client-led coaching practices and business priorities.

The findings, implications, and reflections presented here provide a solid foundation for the conclusions that follow. The next chapter draws together the overall contribution of this research, outlining how it advances understanding of support as a core coaching skill and what recommendations emerge for both theory and practice.

5.19.1 Practical Implications Matrix

The findings highlight several actionable areas where coaching practice and education can evolve to better embed support as a visible and deliberate skill. Table 5.6 summarises these implications, translating the research insights into clear recommendations for practitioners, training providers, and supervisors.

Table 5.6 Practical Implications Matrix

Theme	Practical Implications for Coaching Practice	Implications for Coach Education/Training
1. Support as a Responsive and Flexible Practice	Coaches should learn to adapt models as they progress, drawing on intuition and reflexivity.	Training programmes should reduce over reliance on rigid frameworks and emphasise situational judgment.
2. Support Through Challenge, Care and Containment	Practitioners must balance challenge with empathetic care to build resilience and trust.	Coach education should explicitly teach challenge as a form of support and explore techniques for 'safe challenge.'
3. Creating the Conditions for Honest, Safe Coaching	Psychological safety requires ongoing reflexive management, not just initial rapport.	Modules on building and maintaining trust, safety, and non-judgemental presence are essential.
4. Support as Skilled Boundary Work	Boundaries should be seen as enabling support rather than restricting it.	Training should include boundary-setting as a relational skill, not just an ethical obligation.
5. Support Through Reframing and Perspective Shifting	Coaches can empower clients by helping them explore new narratives and viewpoints.	Coach education should integrate reframing as a conscious, support, driven technique.

These recommendations align to the research questions by showing how support can be defined, enacted, and taught as a distinct coaching competence. They underline that support is not a background assumption but a deliberate skill that needs attention in both practice and education.

These practical implications provide a roadmap for how support can be more deliberately integrated into coaching practice and education. Prior to referring to the overall conclusions of the research, it is important to reflect on the strengths and limitations of the research that underpin these findings.

5.20 Strengths and Limitations of the Research

Every research project is shaped by its design choices, and this research is no exception. This section reflects on the strengths that underpin the credibility of the findings, as well as the limitations that offer useful direction for future research. The aim is to provide a transparent account of what this research could, and could not, claim, in line with its pragmatic and interpretive foundations.

Reflecting on this research, it is important to acknowledge both what worked well and where there were limitations. The aim is not to criticise the work, but to critique to show an understanding of the research scope and boundaries. Some of these decisions, such as not collecting demographic data, were deliberate and based on the researcher's ethical stance, while others were shaped by time and resources.

It was a deliberate choice to conduct the coding process manually rather than using software such as NVivo. This approach kept the researcher close to the data, allowing deep reflection on what participants were saying instead of relying on automated queries or word frequency counts. The researcher created structured coding matrices to track how themes appeared across the interviews, ensuring the process was systematic and transparent. While some may see the lack of software as a limitation, the researcher believes that this hands-on approach improved the quality of analysis. It gave the opportunity to make sense of the data in a more intuitive and connected way. This is important when dealing with language, meaning, and the human aspects of coaching. Rigour was maintained through careful cross checking of codes and by reviewing each transcript multiple times.

Reviewing this research, the strength lies in how the survey and interviews synchronise to provide both breadth and depth. The mixed methods design allowed the collation of quantitative data on patterns while also exploring the qualitative lived experience of support in detail through interviews. The manual coding approach, while time consuming, ensured close alignment to the data and gave the ability to spot subtle themes that may have been missed by software, driven analysis.

Using pragmatism and symbolic interactionism also helped keep the focus on how meaning is created between coach and client, which sits at the heart of the research question. The main limitations, such as the absence of demographic data and the focus on a UK sample, do not diminish the quality of the findings but instead highlight where future studies could extend this work. These insights together give a balanced picture of the research credibility and scope.

5.20.1 Strengths and Limitations

Table 5.4 summarises the key strengths and limitations of this research, providing a clear overview of its methodological rigour, practical relevance, and areas where further research is needed.

Table 5.7 Strengths and Limitations

Strengths	Limitations
Use of an exploratory sequential design, ensuring that survey insights informed in depth interviews.	Lack of demographic data means the diversity of participant perspectives cannot be fully analysed.
Integration of survey and interview phases, providing rich triangulated evidence.	Manual coding approach lacks automation, which may limit replicability (though adds reflexivity).
Development of five robust, evidence-based themes linked directly to practice and literature gaps.	The research is limited to English speaking practitioners, which may affect cultural generalisability.
Reflexive analysis informed by symbolic interactionism and discourse analysis, enhancing depth.	Findings reflect self-reported data rather than observational evidence of coaching sessions.
Practical recommendations for coach education and supervision derived directly from practitioner insights.	Limited time limit and resources restricted the inclusion of focus groups or additional data sources.

These strengths and limitations offer a transparent view of what this research contributes and where further exploration is needed. The following section builds on this by identifying specific areas where future research could extend, refine, or challenge the findings presented here.

5.21 Future Research Opportunities

This research points to several avenues for future exploration. Longer-term studies, cross-cultural perspectives, and the impact of technology all represent valuable directions. Equally, examining how support influences organisational outcomes could strengthen the bridge between practice and performance. Together, these opportunities provide the basis for the conclusions that follow.

5.22 Chapter Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has drawn together the findings, literature, and theoretical perspectives to articulate how support functions as a reflexively managed coaching skill. It has introduced the 4 Dimensions of Coaching Support Lens as the central contribution of the study, set out practical implications for training and supervision, and acknowledged both the strengths and limitations of the research. By balancing critical reflection with forward-looking recommendations, the discussion establishes a clear platform for the concluding chapter. The next chapter consolidates these insights by returning to the research aims and objectives, presenting the overall conclusions, and highlighting the legacy and future direction of this work.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This chapter draws together the research's key findings, reflecting on how they address the research questions and contribute to the wider understanding of support as a reflexive coaching skill. Every research journey begins with questions, but the true measure of its value is in the clarity it brings, the assumptions it challenges, and the practical shifts it inspires. This research set out to explore a deceptively simple question: what does 'support' in coaching really mean? Through the voices of practitioners, survey responses, and in-depth interviews, a more complex, layered understanding has emerged. Support is not a background quality or a vague sense of encouragement; it is an active, reflexive skill that requires both presence and judgement.

The findings reveal that support is neither fixed nor one-dimensional. It is fluid, situational, and co-created in the moment, shaped by the coach's ability to balance challenge with care, to hold boundaries without rigidity, and to create a space where clients feel both safe and stretched. This interpretation is strengthened through a triangulated analysis that draws on survey data, interview narratives, and the dual analytic lenses of narrative discourse and symbolic interactionism.

This concluding chapter brings together the key outcomes of the research and translates them into practical, educational, and theoretical recommendations. It begins by addressing the research questions, providing clear answers drawn from both survey and interview data. It, then, outlines the unique contributions of this research to coaching knowledge and practice, before highlighting areas for future research and broader implications for the field.

Portfolio Link: This conclusion links back to the portfolio, showing how the research and my professional practice inform each other in building a clearer understanding of support as a deliberate skill.

6.2 Key Findings and Recommendations

Introduction

This research uncovered five interconnected themes that together redefine what it means to offer meaningful support in coaching. The findings move beyond traditional assumptions that support is simply about being helpful, encouraging, or empathetic. Instead, support is revealed as a deliberate, multi-dimensional practice that integrates flexibility, challenge, containment, psychological safety, boundaries, and the ability to reframe perspectives.

The insights gained from this research highlight that support cannot be reduced to a single technique or confined within a model. It is an adaptive process that depends on the coach's attentiveness to the evolving needs of the client and the specific context of the coaching relationship. This perspective challenges the over reliance on linear frameworks in many coach training programmes and underscores the importance of teaching reflexivity, judgement, and relational presence as foundational skills. These conclusions are framed through a pragmatist lens, emphasising practical outcomes and actionable insights that reflect the lived realities of workplace coaching.

Table 6.1 provides a concise synthesis of the five key findings, aligned with actionable recommendations for both coaching practice and coach education. By linking each finding to concrete steps, the table bridges the gap between research and application, ensuring that the lessons from this research can inform both the ongoing development of professional coaches and the future design of training curricula. These recommendations also extend into policy, encouraging a shift towards coaching standards that explicitly recognise support as a core competence rather than an assumed trait.

Table 6.1 Synthesis of the five key findings, aligned with actionable recommendations.

Key Finding	Recommendation for Practice	Recommendation for Education/Policy
Support is enacted as a responsive, flexible practice, moving beyond rigid models.	Encourage ongoing reflective supervision to develop adaptive coaching skills.	Reduce over emphasis on linear models in training curricula; prioritise reflexivity.
Challenge, care, and containment work together as a form of relational support.	Embed safe challenge techniques in coaching engagements.	Explicitly teach balancing challenge and care in accredited coach training.
Creating psychological safety is a reflexive skill, not a fixed trait.	Coaches should prioritise real-time responsiveness to client needs.	Integrate modules on trust-building and maintaining non-judgemental presence.
Boundaries function as scaffolding for support, not restrictions.	Use boundary setting as a proactive support mechanism in sessions.	Develop training on relational boundary setting beyond ethics compliance.
Reframing and perspective shifting enable clients to see new possibilities.	Use reframing deliberately as a supportive intervention.	Include reframing exercises and narrative techniques in coaching education.

6.2 Answers to research questions

The research questions were designed to explore the role of support in coaching as both a concept and a practice, with a focus on how it is enacted, defined, and taught. The answers presented here draw on the combined evidence from the survey and interview phases, interpreted through two complementary analytic perspectives:

- Narrative discourse, which examines how coaches talk about and frame their experiences, and

- Symbolic interactionism, which explored how meaning is co-created within the coach-client relationship.

Together, these perspectives offer a richer understanding of how support is enacted and why it warrants recognition as a deliberate coaching competence.

6.2.1 RQ1: How is support conceptualised and enacted by workplace coaches?

Support, as understood by workplace coaches, emerged as far more than a background quality or a simple gesture of encouragement. Across both survey responses and interview narratives, coaches described support as something active, deliberate, and shaped by the moment. Rather than being seen as a static trait or a checklist of techniques, it was more as a dynamic process that changes with the client's needs, the conversation, and the relationship itself.

Survey responses suggested that most coaches believed they offered support consciously, yet when asked to define it, many found their answers imprecise or overly broad. The interviews revealed the depth behind these initial statements. Coaches spoke of support as *"fluid," "responsive,"* and *"something you sense rather than decide,"* which aligns closely with the symbolic interactionist idea that meaning is co-created through interaction.

The narrative discourse analysis highlighted that participants often used metaphors to capture the essence of support. Phrases such as *"disrupting default thinking"* or *"flipping the narrative"* illustrated that support is both a presence and a perspective, so it is about being alongside the client without stepping in front of them. These expressions point to a relational understanding of support, where the coach is neither distant nor directive but engaged in a shared journey of exploration.

One striking theme was the shift away from rigid, model-driven approaches. Several experienced coaches spoke about how their early reliance on frameworks had softened over time. With growing confidence, they learned to adapt their methods, weaving in structure only when useful, and letting the conversation breathe when it served the client's needs. This reflective, adaptive practice is not just a sign of maturity but a conscious recognition that support cannot be prescribed.

These findings, grounded in both survey breadth and interview depth, suggest that support is best understood as a reflexive, relational practice, not an automatic by-

product of coaching. They challenge the dominant assumption in coaching literature that support is implicit, instead positioning it as a skill that requires deliberate attention, training, reflective supervision, and ongoing professional development.

6.2.3 RQ2: How do workplace coaches tailor their supportive approach to meet the individual needs of clients?

Tailoring support emerged as both a skill and an attitude, requiring a coach to read the moment and adjust their approach in real time. Survey data showed that while many coaches claimed to personalise their style, the interviews revealed what this truly looks like in practice. It is less about designing the perfect session in advance and more about being alert to micro signals, emotional shifts, and the client's readiness for challenge.

Coaches described tailoring as *"meeting the client where they are"* rather than imposing a fixed structure. This resonates with a pragmatist view of coaching, where the focus is on what works in context. One participant shared, *"I have a toolkit, but I do not force it. I listen first, and what I offer next depends on what I see and hear in that moment."* This ability to pivot, to hold back or to gently stretch the client, was seen as a hallmark of truly supportive coaching.

The narrative discourse revealed that language itself is part of this tailoring. Coaches talked about the words they chose, the tone they adopted, and even the silences they allowed as acts of support. These subtleties were not accidental but intentional, designed to match the client's emotional and cognitive state.

A common thread across both data sets was the balancing act between care and challenge. Coaches recognised that too much reassurance can keep a client comfortable but stagnant, while too much challenge can erode trust. Tailoring support meant staying close to this edge and creating a space that felt safe enough for discomfort, but not so safe that the conversation lost its power to change.

This finding reinforces the argument that support is not intuitive or incidental. It is a skill that develops through reflexive practice, supervision, and experience, supported by professional training that moves beyond models and frameworks to cultivate situational judgement. In pragmatist terms, tailoring support is about responding to

what matters in the moment, rather than pursuing abstract ideals of what coaching *should* look like.

6.2.4 RQ3: How is the creation of psychological safety and trust understood and enacted as part of support in coaching?

The findings reveal that psychological safety and trust, though often assumed outcomes of good coaching, actually emerge from the quality and reflexivity of support. Participants described these conditions as emerging from the way support is consciously, or unconsciously, managed during a session. In other words, the quality and reflexivity of support determines the level of safety and trust a client feels.

What is striking is that, while psychological safety is widely discussed in coaching literature and sometimes taught in training programmes, *support* itself is not addressed in the same way. Support tends to be left to the coach's intuition, personality, or accumulated experience. Several coaches described learning what feels supportive only through years of practice, reflective supervision, and trial and error. This reinforces the gap that this research set out to highlight, that support is neither defined nor explicitly taught, despite being foundational to creating the conditions where psychological safety can emerge.

Survey responses and interview narratives both demonstrated that trust and safety are built through relational, moment-to-moment acts of support. These include carefully chosen language, attentive listening, skilful timing of challenge, and maintaining ethical boundaries. As one coach explained, *"Safety is not something I can just declare. It comes from how I show I am with them, when I listen, when I push, and when I hold back."*

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, this finding reflects how support, trust, and safety are co-created in the interaction between coach and client. The narrative language of *"walking alongside"* and *"offering a lens"* illustrates that safety grows when clients feel seen, heard, and respected, all of which are expressions of support, not separate from it.

This research, therefore, argues that psychological safety is a byproduct of professionally managed support, not a standalone skill. Without conscious attention to

how support is defined and enacted, safety risks being treated as an abstract concept rather than something embedded in the practice itself. By recognising support as a skill that requires deliberate reflection and training, coaching can move towards a more intentional and effective approach.

6.2.5 RQ4: What implications do these findings have for coaching practice, education, and professional standards?

The findings point to a clear need for coaching practice and education to move beyond the assumption that support simply 'happens' as part of a coach's natural style or personality. Instead, support should be recognised, named, and intentionally developed as a distinct competence, much like contracting, active listening, or questioning. This has implications not only for individual practitioners but also for the design of coach training programmes and the wider professional standards that define the field.

In practice, the research shows that support is most effective when it is reflexively managed, when coaches consciously balance care, challenge, and boundaries, tailoring their approach to the client's needs and context. Yet, this skill is rarely taught or assessed in formal coach education. Participants reported learning how to manage support largely through experience, trial and error, or reflective supervision, rather than structured training. This highlights a critical gap in the way coaching curricula are currently framed.

There is an opportunity for coaching educators and professional bodies to embed explicit modules on managing support. These could include case-based learning on relational dynamics, exercises on reframing and perspective shifting, and reflective practices that help coaches identify when their support is enabling versus when it risks becoming rescuing or overprotective.

From a policy and standards perspective, the findings also suggest that support could be more visible in competency frameworks and accreditation requirements. By treating support as a measurable and teachable skill, rather than an implicit trait, the coaching profession can raise its standards and better prepare practitioners for the nuanced realities of coaching relationships. This alignment between objectives and findings

reinforces the research contribution in that support should be recognised, defined, and embedded as a deliberate, teachable coaching skill.

6.2.6 Addressing the Research Objectives

The analysis in this chapter has shown how the findings speak directly to the research objectives set out in Chapter 1. Each objective has been addressed through the survey and interview data, from how support is described and enacted, to how it is reflexively managed and represented in education and standards. The full consolidation of these objectives is reserved for Chapter 7, where the conclusion demonstrates how, taken together, they resolve the central research aim. Here, it is sufficient to note that the objectives are embedded throughout the findings, and that their achievement provides the platform for the contribution to knowledge and practice outlined in the next section.

6.3 Contribution to knowledge and practice

This research makes a significant contribution by addressing a gap that has long been overlooked in both coaching literature and training, which is the role of support as a distinct, reflexively managed coaching skill. While coaching discourse frequently references psychological safety, trust, and presence, support itself is rarely defined, conceptualised, or taught in formal curricula. It is assumed to emerge naturally through a coach's personality or relational style. This research challenges that assumption.

Through a mixed methods design combining survey data with the in-depth interviews, the findings demonstrate that support is not incidental but a complex and adaptive skill. It involves balancing care with challenge, managing boundaries with sensitivity, and enabling clients to shift perspectives in ways that empower rather than rescue them. By naming and conceptualising support, this research offers both a language and a framework that coaches and educators can use to intentionally develop this capability.

6.3.1 Contribution to Knowledge

This research advances the understanding of workplace coaching by positioning support as a deliberate, multi-dimensional competence rather than an unexamined background quality. While existing literature often prioritises competencies such as contracting, questioning, or presence, it frequently treats support as an assumed outcome of a coach's empathy or relational ability rather than a skill that can be named, defined, and developed. By exploring how support is understood, enacted, and adapted in practice, this research addresses a significant gap in both academic and professional discourse.

The findings demonstrate that support is not a fixed attribute or a checklist of behaviours. Instead, it emerges as a reflexive, context-driven process, shaped by the client's needs, emotional cues, and the evolving dynamics of the coaching conversation. This perspective challenges the traditional reliance on structured models or prescriptive frameworks that dominate much of the coaching literature. While models provide valuable foundations for new practitioners, the evidence here suggests that true expertise lies in knowing when to step beyond formulaic approaches and respond with flexibility, presence, and judgement. This observation strengthens the argument for coaching education to focus more explicitly on cultivating reflexivity, relational awareness, and adaptive thinking.

From a theoretical standpoint, the research contributes by integrating narrative discourse and symbolic interactionism as complementary lenses. Narrative discourse analysis highlights the metaphors and language coaches use, such as *"widening the lens," "flipping the narrative,"* or *"opening a window,"* which reveal how they construct meaning around support and define their roles within the coaching relationship. Symbolic interactionism deepens this analysis by illustrating how meaning is co-created between coach and client, showing support as something negotiated in real time rather than delivered as a static or predefined offering. This combination of perspectives provides a richer understanding of how support is both performed and perceived.

The research also reframes the relationship between support and psychological safety. While safety and trust are widely recognised as essential conditions for coaching, they are often treated as independent competencies. This research

demonstrates that they are more accurately understood as outcomes of well-managed support, rather than separate practices. This conceptual shift provides a more integrated way of understanding how coaching relationships create conditions for honest reflection, challenge, and growth.

Finally, the research offers a new conceptual framework for understanding support in workplace coaching. By synthesising insights from both survey and interview data, it identifies key elements, including responsiveness, safe challenge, ethical boundary work, and perspective shifting, and shows how these interact in practice. This framework contributes not only to academic knowledge but also provides a foundation for strengthening professional standards and designing targeted training interventions that explicitly address support as a core competence.

6.4 Conceptual Framework of Support as a Reflexively Managed Skill

Figure 6.1 illustrates the conceptual framework developed from this research, positioning support as a reflexively managed skill at the centre of effective workplace coaching. The four dimensions identified: responsiveness and flexibility, safe challenge and care, boundary work, and reframing, can be understood as the first ripple as the immediate practices coaches use to shape client experience. These do not remain contained within the coaching interaction. Like concentric circles spreading from a single drop of water, the effects extend outward.

The second ripple reflects the relational outcomes that emerge directly in the coaching space as psychological safety, trust, and empowerment. These are not accidental byproducts, but consequences of coaches working reflexively with the four dimensions. A third ripple extends into the client's wider practice and organisation, where new perspectives, greater confidence, and enhanced capability influence decision-making, relationships, and culture beyond the coaching room. The outer ripple connects these insights back to the profession itself, where implications for coach education, training, and standards reinforce the argument that support must be explicitly recognised, taught, and supervised as a core competence.

By using the ripple metaphor, the framework shows that support is not a static construct but a dynamic, expanding force. What begins as moment-to-moment reflexive practice in a coaching conversation can travel outward to shape client growth,

organisational culture, and professional standards. Figure 6.1 therefore provides a visual representation of both the dimensions of support and their wider impact.

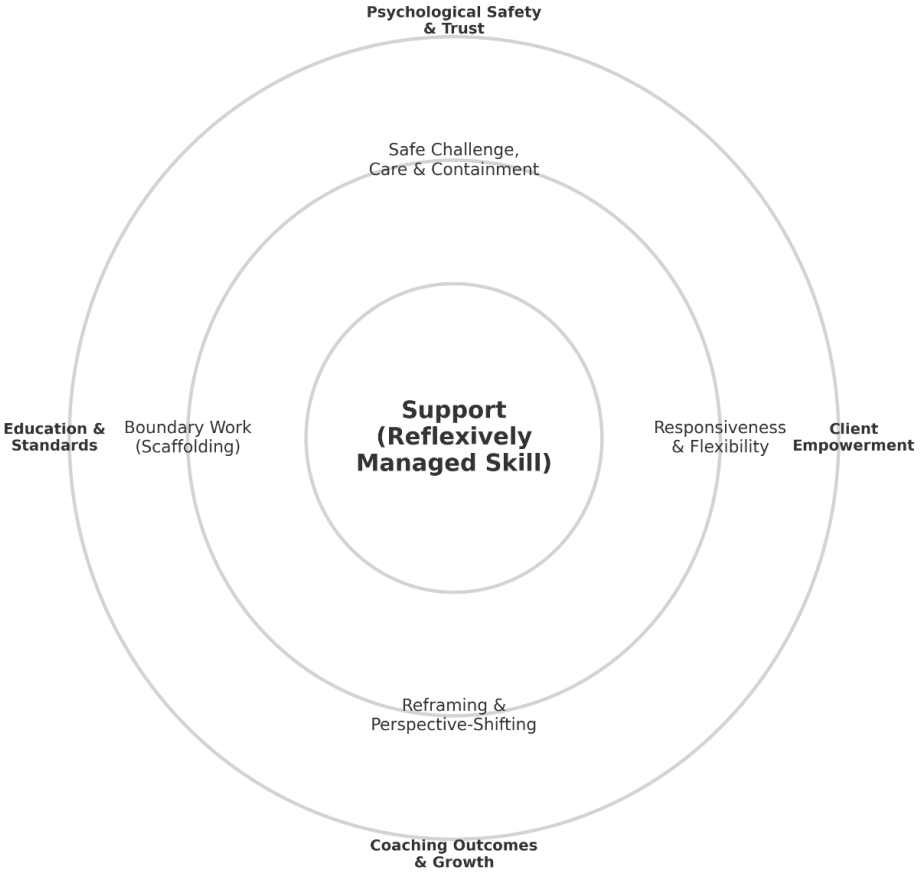

Figure 6.1 Conceptual Framework of Support as a Reflexively Managed Skill (Napkin AI, 2025)

6.5 Contribution to Coaching Practice

This research shows that support in coaching is not an automatic by-product of an enjoyable conversation but a skill that can be identified, refined, and consciously managed. Coaches often described learning how to offer meaningful support through experience, by reflecting on mistakes, engaging in supervision, or working through pivotal client moments. The findings highlight that this learning does not need to be left to chance. By making support visible and deliberate, coaches can bring greater clarity and depth to their practice.

Building on the conceptual framework in Figure 6.1, this section illustrates how the four elements of support: responsiveness and flexibility, safe challenge and care, boundary work, and reframing, are enacted in real coaching practice. Each is described below with examples of how practitioners developed and applied these skills.

6.5.1 Responsiveness and flexibility

Responsiveness and flexibility stood out as central to effective practice. Coaches who relied too rigidly on structured models or pre-prepared questions often risked missing what was most important to the client in that moment. Participants spoke of learning to *"read the unspoken,"* noticing tone, silence, or subtle shifts in energy. These moments often revealed more than any pre-planned framework could. This suggests that practitioners need to develop sharp observational skills and use reflective tools, such as supervision or journaling, to enhance their ability to adapt without losing focus.

6.5.2 Safe challenge and containment

Safe challenge and containment also emerged as a defining aspect of support. Growth often comes from discomfort, but it only takes root when clients feel safe enough to engage with that discomfort. Coaches described the skill of challenging with care, naming difficult truths while maintaining a foundation of trust. This balancing act was rarely something they were formally taught. Several coaches reflected that it took years of experience to find this balance, reinforcing the need for it to be explicitly taught in training.

6.5.3 Boundary work

Boundary work was described as a form of scaffolding that holds the coaching relationship steady. Rather than being seen as an administrative step, boundaries were treated as dynamic tools that give structure, clarity, and safety to the session. Similarly, reframing and perspective shifting were described as moments of transformation, where the coach helps the client to see alternative viewpoints or fresh

possibilities. These interventions were effective only when timed with sensitivity and when the coach had built a trusting, open space.

Overall, these findings suggest that coaching practice would benefit from treating support as a visible, teachable competence. By focusing on reflective supervision, experiential learning, and deliberate development of the four elements identified in this research, coaches can create deeper, more empowering, and more sustainable outcomes for their clients.

The conceptual and practical contributions of this research underline one consistent message, that support should no longer remain invisible or assumed. By naming and framing support as a deliberate skill, this research opens the door for change at multiple levels, for practitioners, educators, and the professional standards that shape the field. The next step is to translate these insights into actionable recommendations that strengthen how support is recognised, developed, and embedded in coaching. These recommendations draw directly from the findings and are designed to ensure that the value of support is both understood and applied in real-world coaching contexts.

6.6 Recommendations

The findings of this research point to clear opportunities for strengthening how support is recognised, developed, and applied across workplace coaching. These recommendations are designed to translate the research insights into actionable steps for practitioners, educators, and professional bodies. They emphasise that support should be treated as a deliberate competence, one that can be taught, refined, and critically reflected upon, rather than left to emerge intuitively or by chance. Based on these findings, the researcher recommends that:

- Coaching qualifications should include explicit modules on support, including psychological safety and reflexivity. The Four Dimensions of the Coaching Support Lens developed in this research offers a practical and theoretically grounded structure through which these elements can be introduced, taught, and practised.
- Professional bodies could strengthen competency frameworks by recognising support, and its fluid, negotiated nature, as a distinct and teachable skill. The

four dimensions of the lens provide a shared language and scaffold for assessing how support is enacted across different coaching contexts.

- Supervision and peer learning groups should be embedded as ongoing developmental spaces, rather than optional extras. The lens can be used within supervision to prompt reflection on relational dynamics, boundary navigation, and the evolving nature of support in practice.

These steps would ensure that the interaction-based and adaptive dimensions of coaching are treated with the same importance as structured models, thereby improving both the quality and impact of coaching.

These recommendations respond directly to the gaps identified in the data, where support was often under-theorised, inconsistently taught, and left to emerge through experience. The Four Dimensions of the Coaching Support Lens bridges this gap by offering a clear, adaptable structure that can be embedded across education, supervision, and professional practice.

This research has shown that support is not an assumed backdrop to coaching but a skill that coaches actively shape in practice. The implications for both theory and practice highlight the need for training, supervision, and professional standards to recognise and develop this skill more explicitly. Each are reviewed independently in the following sections starting with coaching practice.

6.6.1 Recommendations for Coaching Practice

Coaches are encouraged to view support as a dynamic skill that is continually shaped by the client relationship, context, and in-the-moment interactions. Practitioners should prioritise reflective supervision, using it to examine how they balance care and challenge, respond to client cues, and create conditions that enable psychological safety and trust. Regular reflection, whether through supervision, peer discussions, or structured journaling, can help coaches recognise when their supportive approach is empowering and when it risks becoming overprotective or directive.

Developing observational awareness is also critical. Coaches should learn to notice tone, silence, body language, and other non-verbal signals, as these often reveal the deeper needs of the client. Responsiveness, flexibility, and timing are essential for

tailoring support effectively, and these skills benefit from intentional practice and feedback.

Finally, reframing and perspective shifting work best when offered thoughtfully, not as techniques to impress, but as gentle prompts that open space for clients to see their situation differently. This process is built on trust and timing, ensuring the client feels supported rather than steered.

6.6.2 Recommendations for Coaching Education and Professional Standards

Coach training programmes should embed explicit modules on support which explore not only what support is but how it is enacted and reflexively managed. This could include case studies, live supervision exercises, and structured reflection sessions focused on identifying the boundaries, challenges, and relational dynamics of support. By moving beyond linear models and over reliance on techniques, educators can help new coaches develop confidence in managing support intentionally.

Professional bodies and accrediting organisations are also encouraged to update competency frameworks to include support as a distinct capability. This would ensure that support is not treated as an implicit by-product of presence or empathy but as a measurable, teachable skill that is essential for ethical, effective coaching. Introducing assessment criteria that examine how coaches create, sustain, and adapt support would elevate its visibility and importance across the profession.

6.6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Further research should continue to explore support as a coaching competence. This includes studies that incorporate client perspectives, providing a fuller picture of how support is experienced and valued from both sides of the coaching relationship. Longitudinal studies could also examine how support evolves as coaches develop over time, and whether explicit training in reflexive support impacts coaching effectiveness.

Table 6.2 outlines the key research gaps and suggested directions for future studies.

Table 6.2 key research gaps and suggested directions for future studies

Identified Gap	Suggested Research Direction
Lack of explicit theorisation of support as a coaching skill.	Further refine and test the conceptual framework of support developed in this research, validating its components through empirical and cross-context research.
Over reliance on linear models in current coach education.	Conduct comparative studies to evaluate how reflexivity-focused training influences coaching outcomes relative to traditional model-driven approaches.
Limited understanding of boundary setting as a form of support.	Investigate boundary dynamics as a supportive mechanism, using observational or longitudinal studies that capture how boundaries are managed across different coaching contexts.
Insufficient exploration of cultural and contextual influences.	Conduct cross-cultural and cross-sector studies to explore how support is enacted, perceived, and negotiated across diverse coaching environments.
Lack of client perspectives on support.	Integrate client narratives and feedback to develop a shared language of support that reflects both practitioner and client viewpoints.
Minimal research on support's ethical dimensions.	Explore how ethical decision making and dilemmas intersect with supportive practices, particularly in complex organisational or leadership coaching scenarios.

The research directions outlined in Table 6.2 offer practical routes for advancing the field, not only by addressing theoretical blind spots, but also by grounding future studies in real world coaching practice. These gaps reaffirm the relevance of this thesis and highlight the need for continued investigation into support as a reflexively managed skill.

6.7 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has drawn together the key findings of the research, answering the four research questions and presenting recommendations that flow directly from these insights. It has demonstrated that support in coaching is neither incidental nor simply an outcome of empathy but a dynamic, reflexively managed competence. By framing

support as an intentional skill, this research challenges existing assumptions within coaching literature and practice, which often leave support undefined and overlooked in formal training.

The conceptual framework developed here provides both a language and a structure for understanding support. By setting out its four core elements the framework offers a practical and adaptable guide for coaches, educators, and professional bodies:

- responsiveness and flexibility,
- safe challenge and care,
- boundary work, and
- reframing or perspective shifting

The recommendations presented in this chapter show how support can be made visible in practice and education, through reflective supervision, experiential learning, and a deliberate focus on balancing care and challenge. These steps are vital for creating deeper, more empowering, and sustainable coaching outcomes.

In closing, this research calls for the recognition of support as a teachable, measurable competence that lies at the heart of effective coaching. By naming and reframing support in this way, the research contributes to both academic understanding and professional practice, offering a pathway for coaches to work with greater clarity, intention, and impact.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that support in coaching is not an unspoken backdrop or intuitive trait, but a skill that can and should be reflexively managed. The central research aim which was to define and explore support as a reflexively managed skill and to argue for its explicit inclusion in coaching education, has been achieved.

The literature review established that while support is frequently implied in coaching texts, it is rarely defined, taught, or reflexively managed. This created a clear gap in both scholarship and practice. The methodology chapter showed how an exploratory sequential mixed methods design was developed to address this gap, combining the breadth of survey data with the depth of interview narratives. This design provided a coherent and pragmatic way to move from description to deeper analysis.

From these foundations, the study generated original insights into how support is understood, enacted, and negotiated in coaching. The analysis revealed that support is not instinct alone, but a reflexive practice that requires conscious management across the coaching relationship. These insights culminated in the development of a conceptual and practical model: The Four Dimensions of the Coaching Support Lens, which makes support visible, structured, and ethically grounded.

The research questions outlined in Chapter 1 have been answered in Chapter 6, where they were addressed systematically through the integrated analysis of survey and interview data. While five scoping questions were outlined in Chapter 1, these were consolidated into four operational research questions, as presented in Table 1.1 and addressed in Chapter 6. This closing chapter, therefore, turns to the research objectives, consolidating how each has been fulfilled and demonstrating how, collectively, they resolve the research aim.

The contribution of this research lies in both conceptual clarity and professional application. Conceptually, it makes visible the dimensions of support that have too often been assumed or underexplored, positioning support as ethically grounded, relationally attuned, and adaptable across contexts. Practically, it has delivered a framework that enables coaches, supervisors, and educators to engage with support intentionally, and it has extended impact beyond academia through the commissioning

of a training module that embeds support explicitly into coach education. By attending to the language, metaphors, and identity work coaches use to describe and negotiate support, this thesis also contributes to discourse-based understandings of coaching practice.

At the same time, the study has illuminated shortfalls in current coaching practice: the absence of a shared language, the risk of assumption, and the underplaying of ethical and relational dimensions. These shortfalls reinforce the need for coaching education and supervision to treat support as an active and reflexive practice rather than an implicit trait. The findings also affirm the symbolic interactionist perspective underpinning this study, showing how the meaning of support is negotiated in the moment between coach and client, rather than fixed or predetermined.

The findings, framework, and impact of this thesis establish a coherent case for repositioning support as a core coaching skill. The legacy of this work lies not only in its academic contribution, but in its practical influence on training, professional standards, and the coaching community.

What follows consolidates the five research objectives, showing how each has been addressed and how, collectively, they resolve the central research aim.

Objective 1: To investigate how 'support' is described and understood in coaching practice.

The enquiry began by asking how coaches themselves talk about support and the place it occupies in their practice. The survey revealed that support was valued almost universally, yet it was often described in vague or generic terms such as "being there for the client" or "helping them feel safe." Strikingly, 71% of respondents reported that their initial training had not explicitly addressed support, which confirmed a significant gap between what is assumed within the profession and what is formally taught.

The interviews added depth by showing how coaches move beyond description to lived understanding. Rather than offering neat definitions, participants portrayed support as fluid, relational, and context dependent. They spoke of "creating the conditions" for openness, "walking alongside" the client, and "holding the space honestly but safely." These accounts illustrate that support is co-constructed in the

moment, negotiated between coach and client, and shaped by the evolving dynamics of the relationship.

Together, the survey and interview findings demonstrate that support is not an assumed backdrop or a passive quality of care. Instead, it emerges as a central and complex feature of coaching practice. This challenges the literature that tends to position support as implicit or secondary. By making visible the ways in which coaches describe and enact support, this first objective is achieved. The analysis provides a foundation for treating support as a definable and reflexively managed skill. It also sets the stage for Objective 2, which examines how support is enacted in practice and the ways in which coaches bring these understandings to life during the coaching process.

Objective 2: To explore how support is enacted within the coaching process.

The survey findings showed that while coaches valued support, their enactment of it was often left to instinct. For example, 98% encouraged reflection, yet almost half (48%) admitted they did not have open conversations with clients about whether the coaching was working. This reliance on assumption rather than dialogue pointed to inconsistency in practice and a lack of explicit strategies for embedding support within the coaching process.

The interviews offered a more nuanced account of what enactment looks like in practice. Coaches described making active choices in the moment: when to challenge and when to contain, how to create safety without removing accountability, and how to balance encouragement with honesty. Participants spoke about flexing their style, shifting between directive and non-directive approaches, and judging when silence, reframing, or questioning would best serve the client. These accounts demonstrate that support is not a single behaviour, but a repertoire of practices that require reflexive judgement.

These findings reveal that the enactment of support is less about following a model and more about reading the relational context and adjusting accordingly. This challenges assumptions in coaching literature that equate support with warmth or encouragement alone. Instead, the data show that support is enacted through a combination of challenge, containment, and the skilful creation of conditions in which

clients can think, reflect, and act differently. Effectiveness in coaching support rests on the careful balancing of safety and challenge, the management of boundaries, and the ongoing creation of conditions that allow clients to develop new perspectives and take purposeful actions. In fulfilling this objective, the study demonstrates that support is not a fixed method, but a dynamic practice that evolves across the coaching relationship. Building on this, the next objective analyses how such enactment is not only performed but also reflexively managed by coaches as part of their professional stance.

Objective 3: To analyse how support is reflexively managed in coaching practice.

Having established how support is described and enacted, the next step was to consider how coaches reflexively manage it. The survey data suggested that reflection was frequent practice, with 98% of respondents encouraging clients to reflect. However, when asked about their own reflexivity, coaches often implied rather than described how they reviewed or adjusted their practice. This pointed to reflexivity being valued but not always made explicit and sometimes left to assumption or habit.

The interviews revealed how reflexive management of support takes place in real coaching contexts. Coaches described paying close attention to their embodied responses, noticing relational cues, and adjusting their stance in response to what they observed. They spoke about supervision as a vital space for testing their judgement, acknowledging blind spots, and re-calibrating their approach. Reflexivity was also evident in how participants questioned their use of models, frameworks, or tools, with many highlighting the importance of adapting these resources rather than applying them rigidly.

Together, the findings show that support is sustained not only through what a coach does in session, but through how they actively reflect on, monitor, and refine their practice. Reflexive management emerged as a discipline in itself, one that requires honesty, supervision, and a willingness to question personal biases. In turn, the next objective evaluates how support is represented within training, education, and professional standards.

Objective 4: To evaluate how support is represented in coaching training, education, and professional standards.

Survey and interview findings indicate that support is under-represented in formal training. In the survey, 71% reported that their original training did not explicitly address how to offer or manage support. Coaches commonly described learning how to support through experience, mentoring, or trial and error rather than structured teaching. This evidences a gap between what is taught and what practice requires.

The interviews reinforced this picture. Participants spoke about tools and models receiving emphasis, while relational work, reflexivity, boundary judgment, and challenge-with-care were often assumed rather than taught. Supervision was repeatedly identified as a place where support is clarified and strengthened, yet uptake remains inconsistent. These findings suggest that current curricula and competency frameworks do not consistently name support as a distinct skill or assess how it is managed across a coaching relationship.

The analysis shows that support lacks visibility in education and standards despite its centrality in practice. This evaluation meets Objective 4 by evidencing precisely where the gap lies and why it matters for ethical, effective coaching. Such findings make it necessary to set out clear, evidence-based recommendations for embedding support within training and professional standards, which is the focus of Objective 5.

Objective 5: To provide evidence-based recommendations for embedding support as a core coaching skill.

The research translates its findings into practical recommendations. First, embed a taught module on the Four Dimensions of the Coaching Support Lens within initial training and CPD. This should explicitly develop explicit discourse on support, safe challenge and care, ethical boundary work, and reframing/perspective shifting as named capabilities, with practice-based assessment.

Second, make support visible in competency frameworks and accreditation. Professional bodies should include criteria that examine how coaches define,

negotiate, and review support across an intervention, and how they use supervision to calibrate their stance.

Third, normalise structured feedback and re-contracting about support within programmes and supervision. The data show reflection is near-universal (98%), but open discussion of effectiveness is not. Training should require explicit check-ins on whether support is working, and how it may need to change.

Fourth, strengthen supervision expectations in training and post-qualification practice, recognising supervision as the external mirror for reflexive management of support.

These steps align education and standards with what practice demands. They render support teachable, discussable, and assessable, rather than assumed. In consolidating this final objective, the thesis demonstrates achievement of its overall aim: to reposition support as a reflexively managed coaching skill and to provide the evidence and tools to embed it within professional practice.

This thesis has shown that support in coaching is not instinct, intuition, or kindness alone. It is a professional skill that can be defined, enacted, and reflexively managed. By evidencing this and translating it into a framework for practice, the research has achieved its central aim and demonstrated why support should no longer remain invisible within the coaching profession.

The contribution of the research is threefold. Conceptually, it reframes support as a skill that must be recognised and actively managed, rather than an assumption to be taken for granted. Practically, it provides the Four Dimensions of the Coaching Support Lens and a commissioned training module that embed support explicitly within education, supervision, and professional standards. Methodologically, it illustrates how an exploratory sequential mixed methods design can illuminate professional practice by combining breadth with depth. The adoption of the commissioned module by an FE college group demonstrates that this contribution is already influencing professional practice

There are, of course, limits. This research has focused on the perspective of coaches, and future studies could explore how support is experienced by clients or examine the long-term impact of explicit training on professional practice and outcomes. Such avenues of enquiry offer scope for building on the foundation established here. These

limits do not weaken the contribution but highlight opportunities for future research to extend the foundation established here.

What endures, however, is clarity. Support can no longer be dismissed as an unspoken backdrop or reduced to good intentions. It is visible, definable, and teachable. The final legacy of this research is that support stands as an ethical and enduring skill, one that shapes coaching practice today and will continue to shape the profession in the future.

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