

Chapter Four: The Activity

This chapter describes and analyses what I did. I have covered both the process of research and the content of the activity.

4.1 Conducting the Literature Review

My exploration in the literature review resulted in a focus on the learning opportunities afforded by the career transition and the use and value of coaching to support that learning. This perspective was different to the more typical emphasis in the literature about how to accelerate the transition and be seen to be performing as expected within a certain timescale. The question that fell from the perspective I was adopting became why some people chose coaching at the time of transition and others didn't. This clarity helped as I began developing the interview framework.

Another judgement was what to leave out and my decision was those issues that had been credibly reviewed elsewhere. I decided not to enter into the debate about definitions of coaching or mentoring or recognised evaluation of either rather, in the spirit of exploration and in line with the phenomenological method, hear the participants' descriptions and make no judgements or put my value on any particular support they chose. Through this process I became much more aware that I was genuinely interested in what participants valued as support and what underpinned the differences in choice of support.

4.2 Selecting the Sample and Securing a Commitment to Participate

The emphasis in the choice of participants was 'choosing key players in the field', Denscombe (2003:172), to reflect the aim of 'delving in depth and exploring the specific' as opposed to a representative sample. This appeared appropriate, as there was no intention of generalisation from this research. Within this overall framework, therefore, the following criteria were used:

- All the participants would be known personally or through a contact who could encourage their participation
- The senior leaders would be from one of the four sectors of research focus and have experienced a career transition
- The Directors of HR and OD would have experienced a career transition and be in a position to influence their organisation's support for those in transition
- The Search and Recruitment Executives would work with senior leaders in the four sectors focused upon.
- Travel time and cost needed to be kept to a minimum

The interviews were arranged during the last week in February. Each potential participant was sent, by email, a brief outline of the research and what I was asking of them (Appendix 3). Out of the 16 contacted 15 accepted. The exception, a Director of HR, was the one participant I had not met previously. This outcome reinforced my belief that personal contacts were more likely to prioritise the time and therefore support my research.

In light of personal experience I built capacity into my diary and this capacity provided opportunity for most of the rescheduling required by the participants. There was one exception where, because of timescales, it was not possible to schedule another time and therefore one fewer NHS senior leader participated. As the sample was not representative and NHS senior leaders were in the majority in the sample I considered that this would not prevent the study from still providing useful insights.

4.3 Preparing the Data Collection Tools

4.3.1 The Interview Framework

I began this process in my research proposal when I started to identify themes. Mindful of 'tempting fate' by going forward without considerable preparation, Denscombe (2003:172), I recognised the need to do more reading and reflecting on the interview framework. Two experiences were of

significance at this time in terms of supporting the need for a well thought through framework.

The first was a prearranged exploratory meeting with a participant to discuss the research with a view of starting to develop themes for the interview framework. This proved enlightening as it demonstrated how easy it would be to focus on the experience of transitions and not make the connection with support and the role of coaching and mentoring. I also was clear how easy it was to be drawn into the discussion and lose the focus I needed to hold on to. I struggled with any legible note taking and wrote a learning log note immediately after the session to cover this discrepancy (Learning Log 1).

The second experience was a discussion with a more experienced researcher and coach focusing on achieving a record of the interview in a way that would be helpful to me in the analysis. We discussed how to create themes as a way of helping the note taking and the subsequent analysis whilst adopting an open mind to different and emerging themes. We discussed at length the resource issues connected to transcribing tape recordings from which I concluded my use would be solely to back up my notes.

4.3.2 Piloting the Interview Framework and Interview Techniques

Prior to the pilot I sent the participant an outline of the interview framework, the ethical protocol and a bibliography for their reference. I was clear on the need to structure the interview with both an introduction and ending. The former to check the participants were happy with the ethical protocol and the latter to say thanks and reinforce that the questionnaire would follow up the interview.

The pilot provided significant learning (Learning Log 2) in terms of the framework, note taking and my management of the interview. I saw the need for better time management and a less complicated format for collecting the information in themes in the interview. I was also conscious of my starting to see patterns and jumping to conclusions. The feedback from the participant advised more context and preamble and a need to manage the time better.

From the tape recording I was conscious of some unnecessary interruptions on my behalf and a need to position the recorder better.

Learning from the pilot led me to revise my interview/data collection sheet (Appendix 4) and revise the information to send to participants prior to the interview (Appendix 5) in a way that had the three inquiry areas on one sheet of paper allowing me to follow the participant's flow of speech more easily.

4.3.3 The Questionnaire

As I described in chapter three this follow up, reflective questionnaire (Appendix 6) was an afterthought as I recognised I was not collecting data that would address the final research objective. These data would directly capture the value of focussed reflection with another individual. I devised the questionnaire with three questions focusing on the additional benefits, if any, from the focussed reflection of the interview. As it was short and concise and a follow on to the interview I didn't pilot this and recognised later that I should have done as it could have been clearer and perhaps had more context.

4.4 Data Collection

4.4.1 The Interviews

This aspect of the research activity would be to undertake 15 interviews and develop the field notes into a record of the interview. Securing the participants commitment and agreeing interview dates within the proposed timescale was challenging as senior leaders are typically busy people whose diaries fill well in advance. Overall the arrangements for the interviewing schedule and the interviews themselves went according to the timescales set out in the research proposal i.e. to be arranged and undertaken during February and March 2008. The last interview was completed on the 19th March. It was therefore possible for the analysis and interpretation to begin on plan for late March and early April.

My learning from the interviewing process was considerable and I became more able to reflect on my role as researcher as I became more familiar and trusting of the process. Familiarity with the emerging themes also enabled me to respond differently as required whilst still guiding the interview through the framework. The reading on active interviewing was helpful and the actual experience stimulated my interest for greater understanding as to what was happening in research terms.

The interviews with participants who used coaching or had coaching experience certainly moved to a learning conversation and learning partnership. This was particularly noticeable with the three Directors of HR who in addition to sharing their own experiences were asked to consider these issues from an organisational perspective. In each of these three interviews it was possible to see as Holstein and Gubrium (1995) describe active subjects trying to work out together the meanings they were conveying so that interviewer and respondent are meaning constructors.

The interview framework was more difficult to use with the recruitment executives and on reflection a different framework to guide the interview would have helped. Two of the three found it helpful to consider a personal transition first to help with their thinking about others.

The interviews with the senior leaders were all very different highlighting how personal style and choice underpinned their approach to transition as well as how important the issue of their choice and control had been. The number of transitions experienced also had impact as did their age and stage in their career. Those working through thinking relevant to midlife added this perspective to their experience. Some transitions had been stressful and I had failed to anticipate managing the emotion of this in the interview despite it being usual in a coaching setting. An overall reflection of the interviews was that my skill improved as I went along. I was able to probe more deeply as similarities and differences became more defined.

Tape recording the interviews did not work well essentially because of the quality of the recording. Although with experience I improved the positioning of the tape some voices were also difficult to hear. I was assured from the tapes I was able to hear that I had captured the key themes. As I got to the last few interviews I was more confident of my ability to capture sufficient data in the interview to develop into a fuller note afterwards.

With the exception of two participants I had no prior information whether the sample of participants used coaching or their views on coaching. As a consequence I went into the interviews genuinely interested in exploring what the support arrangements might be. Despite the fact that I was known to the participants in my former role as a NHS Chief Executive I now had a clear sense of myself as a coach. It was important therefore in the interviews to be clear to them that I recognised what I did as a coach as one way of supporting senior leaders and that my genuine interest was understanding their experience of transitions and identifying what were the range of effective support mechanisms for this group of senior leaders. My sense was that this was achieved to the extent that a number of participants were clearly able to share their scepticism about coaching.

4.4.2 The Reflective Follow Up Questionnaire

I sent out questionnaires to all the 15 participants with the exception of two. One because the participant was not in a position to complete this in the timescale and the second because I met the participant subsequently and was given further reflections verbally as this was more convenient for the participant. Seven of the questionnaires were completed and returned without reminder.

4.5 Data Analysis

4.5.1 The Interview Notes

The literature points out how qualitative research is time consuming to analyse, however my time spent on refining the interview framework and the

note-taking format for data collection proved helpful in completing this analysis. I first checked and developed my field notes against the tape recording then pulled out the emerging themes. Although I was able to review my notes and fill any gaps by listening to the recording, I was not as prompt as I could have been in entering the data resulting in a substantial and time-consuming backlog. More time would have been helpful but I was restricted by the participants' availability and my coaching schedule.

Recognising that detailed, systematic work is not my strength I continually reminded myself that if this analysis were not undertaken systematically I would prematurely jump to conclusions and recommendations without sufficient consideration and triangulation. I was also aware of the potential for bias while looking for themes and patterns in my findings so I worked with a more experienced quantitative researcher, my sister, who helped challenge my analyses and findings so bringing any prior judgments out into the open.

Once the data were collated and the themes and patterns established I examined them against my research objectives. These findings were then analysed in relation to the literature and formed the basis for my conclusions and recommendations.

4.5.2 The Reflective Questionnaire

I collated the responses then examined them for similarities, differences, themes and groupings. The questionnaire was intended to help evaluate if the interview itself, as focused reflection, had added value to the participants learning from their transitions. It worked well in this respect not only identifying some themes but also informing the general findings, conclusions and recommendations.

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