In this chapter I address some current positions that reflect a critical view of coaching. I elaborate on the coaching concept and clarify the necessary reorientation towards coaching as an open, fruitful and transformative dialogue. With this, I address justified points of criticism by presenting third-generation coaching as a dialogue format that offers an innovative option for people who need to find themselves as a crucial condition for being able to survive the pressures we face, as individuals, in today’s society. I outline the key characteristics of third-generation coaching, define and describe its purpose and lay out the foundation for an understanding of coaching as a special form of co-creative dialogue.

Experience with third-generation coaching and relevant points of criticism

Throughout my many years of work with coaching I have increasingly realized how important it is for the coach to be a fellow human being and a co-creative partner in the dialogue. Coaching should not be limited to a performance-oriented and goal-driven agenda. An ethically sound dialogue framework has to be shaped in accordance with the dialogue partner’s own agenda and readiness. In a world where we are leading increasingly isolated lives, and where we are often left to fend for ourselves to meet the demands we face, it is crucial that we establish a meaningful counterweight in the form of analogue social venues and communities with room for fruitful conversation – where no one feels that they have to say something in order to earn ‘likes’. We need to rediscover the art of lingering in dialogue.

My main ambition with this book is to present coaching as a sustainable dialogue form. The term ‘sustainable’ was carefully chosen, and in this context it carries the following meaning: ultimately, the dialogue partner (the coachee or focus person) should be liberated from the dialogue guide (the coach) by discovering his or her standpoint and rootedness in a set of personal values. The dialogue should always support the individual’s search for personal meaning and thus promote a framework and an integrity that help the person ‘be him/herself’,
‘find him/herself’ or – to quote Kierkegaard – ‘choose himself’.¹ Naturally, however, this individual quest should always unfold in interaction with others. At a time when individuals are increasingly losing control over their own lives and lacking a sense of being rooted in stable and enduring social relationships, interpersonal dialogues should serve to enhance the individual’s identity and self-concept – given the awareness that the self does not exist as a stable core self but develops in the contexts of our social engagements with others and in the dynamics of our relationships.

My colleague Svend Brinkmann pursues a similar ambition in his much-debated book *Stand Firm*, published in 2017. He too is an advocate of allowing people to be themselves and find themselves. Brinkmann’s ideas have provoked both uncertainty and anger among professional therapists, coaches and mindfulness instructors. He even proposed seven guidelines for life, one of which was ‘Sack your coach!’² The ensuing debate clearly showed that many misunderstood Brinkmann’s agenda, which takes aim squarely at today’s prevailing demand for people to embrace permanent change. Brinkmann lends a hand to people who are willing to do anything to keep up with development and who are thus at risk of burning out. He offers an alternative. And he has a point! As long as coaches offer to help their clients pursue the ill-conceived desire to ‘keep up’ at all costs, they should be sacked. Such a narrow focus on goals and performance is not helpful. We need to rediscover the art of lingering in dialogue – for our own sake and for the sake of those around us!

**Dialogue as shared meaning-making**

The agenda of third-generation coaching³ is to offer a space for reflection where the coach and the focus person together can search for the meaning of life or find meaning in certain events or situations that the focus person is involved in. In many cases, the answer does not lie within the individual him/herself, but in the relationship – in the interaction and dialogue between two people or, in group coaching, in the larger group. In a comment acknowledging the merits of Brinkmann’s book, I have been quoted as follows:

> Sometimes one needs to return to oneself, engaging in a reflection process in order to find out who one is. So, coaching has a new agenda now. It is not only

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¹ In *Either/Or* from 1843 Kierkegaard describes the ethical challenge as a crucial task for a human being: choosing oneself means taking responsibility for oneself, embracing one’s history and thus also living with the opportunities and limitations that life has to offer (see: http://sks.dk/EE1/txt.xml).


³ Grant (2017) introduced the term ‘third “generation” of workplace coaching’, which has a different meaning and should not be seen as similar to the use of the term here.
supposed to move people, it should also tell them where they are, in order to give them a sense of certainty and a basic understanding of themselves.\footnote{The popular Danish research website: http://videnskab.dk/kultur-samfund/fa-et-bedre-liv-vendselvhjaelpsbogernes-budskaber-pa-hovedet}

It is in dialogues, in interactions with another or others, that we become who we are. Martin Buber\footnote{Buber, M. (1997). \textit{I and Thou}. Charles Scribner’s Sons. 1937. Reprint Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004. (Original German edition: 1923).} wrote: ‘Through the Thou a man becomes I’. In a society that is increasingly individualized, where people often struggle alone to survive, we need to develop solidarity and a form of dialogue that strengthens both or all interlocutors.

First-generation coaching has its roots in sport. Its focus is on goals and problems. Second-generation coaching revolves around possible solutions and appreciative dialogues and is rooted in systemic and social-constructionist theory.\footnote{A more in-depth description of the three coaching generations can be found in Stelter, 2014, pp. 51–53.} These coaching approaches still offer much that we can use today. Times have changed, however, and we need to rethink coaching fundamentally. That is even happening in the world of sport, where the focus is shifting away from an exclusive emphasis on results and towards shaping development and strong performances in a good environment, in cooperation with coaches with insight into human nature.\footnote{See, e.g.: \textit{Træneren som Coach} by Jakob Hansen and Kristoffer Henriksen, Dansk Psykologisk Forlag, 2009; or see Mark Nesti’s work at Liverpool John Moores University.} Coaching with an exclusive focus on specific goals that aims to solve individual problems by boosting the person’s skills and performance capacity may result in a sense of inadequacy and, ultimately, in stress and despair. Workplace performance standards – our own and others’ – can sometimes seem inhumane and overwhelming. The individualization of complex issues in the workplace that is often a part of traditional coaching promotes ‘dangerous leadership’.\footnote{Cf. Ørsted, C (2013). \textit{Livsfarlig Ledelse}. Copenhagen: People’s Press. The book warns against the use of coaching in relation to leadership and management.} With its focus on specific personal goals first-generation coaching, in particular, is unsuited as a dialogue form for leaders or managers in relation to their staff. With reference to Ole Fogh Kirkeby I have always warned against leaders abusing coaching as a form of intimate technology.\footnote{Cf. Kirkeby, O. F. (2006). ‘Coaching: For madonnaer eller ludere?’ \textit{LPF-nyt om Ledelse}, 9(2), 10–11.} Second-generation coaching also perpetuates the concept of untapped resources in dialogue partner that need to be mobilized. The co-creative perspective is missing. In the first two generations of coaching, the coach is a more or less neutral dialogue facilitator. In third-generation coaching, the coach becomes an engaged fellow human companion. That is the only way for human beings to meet in a shared space based on empathy and solidarity.

I invite you, the reader, to share a dream with me of leading dialogues that enrich both parties. Naturally, one of the parties, often referred to as ‘the coach’, has
a special responsibility for driving the dialogue forward – a professional responsibility to be a good dialogue guide. The coach should also be willing to empathize with the dialogue partner’s life world by showing understanding, acceptance and empathy. The coach can provide direction for the conversation and ensure progress by entering his or her own experiences into the dialogue, engaging as a fellow human being by attuning with and providing feedback to the dialogue partner.

In Figures 1.1 and 1.2 I attempt to outline the differences between three different dialogue forms. Figure 1.1 describes the difference between an every-day conversation about something and a coaching conversation based on first- or second-generation coaching. Figure 1.2 presents third-generation coaching as a basis for transformative, fruitful and genuine dialogues (the concept of a ‘genuine’ dialogue refers to the dialogue philosopher Martin Buber; he describes the dialogue as a meeting between two human beings aimed at inviting oneself and the other into a conversation on a deep, existential level). Many coaching conversations will rely on an interactive mix of the three generations of coaching with the purpose of promoting one’s third-generation coaching ambition. The two figures may help coaches and other dialogue guides become more aware of their intention in a given conversation. When I speak of transformative, fruitful and genuine dialogues, the ambition is clearly related to the dialogue structure outlined in Figure 1.2.

**Figure 1.1** Differences between a standard everyday conversation and a first- and second-generation coaching conversation. The symmetry or asymmetry lies in the dialogue guide’s own engagement in the topic and the challenge: in the everyday conversation both parties ideally have an equal investment in the topic. This means that the conversation is symmetrical. A first- or second-generation coach acts mainly as a facilitator on behalf of the focus person. That leads to asymmetry, because the coach is not engaged in the topic or the challenge but merely helps the focus person arrive at a solution.
My coaching research adventure

Over the past five years (2013–2018) I have had the great pleasure of heading a research project\(^\text{10}\) where 24 volunteer coaches,\(^\text{11}\) many of them with many years of experience, each served as a coach and mentor to a group of young boys, mainly with an ethnic-minority background. The project lasted two years, with conversations every two or three weeks. The purpose of the project was to challenge the young people to work with the themes of ‘life skills’, resilience and active citizenship to give them an active experience of being able to manage themselves and others in the arenas of their everyday life.

My own involvement as a coach, together with a female co-coach – who was fully accepted by the boys – was a very rewarding experience. I got to know a group of five boys whom I would not otherwise have met or become acquainted with. Many people in society are suspicious or wary of these 14–15-year-old boys. In the early stages of the project, when the boys asked me, ‘Why are you here? What’s this about?’ I said, ‘I would like to get to know you better. If I ran into you guys late one night, I might cross over to the other side of the street. Now I have a chance to

\(^{10}\) See more at www.teamsport-health.ku.dk/research/project4/ [retrieved on 13 Feb. 2018].

\(^{11}\) See: https://www.holdspil.ku.dk/forskning/forskningsprojekter/projekt4/frivillige-coaches/ – the project was operated by Copenhagen Centre for Team Sport and Health, which was supported by the private foundation Nordea Fonden.
get to know you properly – and I’m looking forward to it’. With this invitation I created a sense of equality, which is an important base element in third-generation coaching. I did not meet them as a therapist or with a fixed agenda. I showed an interest in them, and I disclosed my own insecurity and my desire to learn.

In hindsight I appreciate how much everyone enjoyed the process. I got to know the boys in a way that would never have been possible otherwise. And the boys, in turn, appreciated me and my interest in them. As their trust in me grew, they began to call me bro’, habibi or shabab. Although guiding them and the conversation was not always an easy task, the boys saw our dialogues as a good opportunity to speak of important issues. I got close enough to them that I agreed to smoking a pipe with them in the local Aladdin Club. They were aware that the focus was on them, as individuals and as a group. All the conversations dealt with their relationship with peers, teachers, family, friends, culture, religion and the Danes, the latter being a group that formally includes them too, but maybe not quite. They were given the time to articulate things that they probably never considered or attended to in depth. In this forum, they said things to each other that made them grow on a personal level. They began to experience a sense of community that empowered them to address each other, also outside the shared space of the coaching conversations. The talks became a meeting place for all of us, and in certain moments they formed an ideal setting for the underlying concept of third-generation coaching.

The key characteristic of fruitful dialogues

I describe third-generation coaching conversations as fruitful dialogues. A parallel term that is often used is ‘generative dialogues’, which characterize a dialogue that is not based on arguments and counterarguments, but on mutually appreciative curiosity, where both (all) parties suspend their pre-existing judgements, assessments and perceptions of each other in an effort to understand and support each other in the common desire to see oneself, the world and each other more clearly. My unique conversations with the boys contained certain ideal aspects of third-generation coaching and fruitful conversations, which I briefly discuss in the following.


1. The dialogue becomes a meeting place

The optimal point of departure for third-generation coaching conversations and fruitful dialogues is to create a shared meeting place around a topic that is important to both parties. In a coaching conversation, the focus person naturally often brings in a topic, a challenge, a problem or a situation that he or she wishes to discuss – in many cases because the situation presents a problem. In my talks with the boys, I was often the one to introduce a topic that I thought it would be worthwhile to discuss, often driven by my own curiosity or puzzlement. Fundamentally, both parties in the conversation are entitled to shape the direction of the dialogue, either at the outset or during the process. That adds a dynamic to the conversation that was lacking in previous generations of coaching because the coach was required to remain a neutral facilitator based on the challenge brought up by the focus person.15

2. The dialogue becomes a journey of discovery

Coaching is at times a journey into uncharted territory, where neither party knows the destination or the route. Both parties – the coach and the focus person – are each other’s companions on this journey, and none know the destination at the outset. Their journey is based on a desire and an agreement that something must and will happen. The focus person often comes in with a vision of and a need for new discoveries, a change of course or new perspectives on his or her life. The coach does not provide a road map but acts as an empathic and professionally qualities companion and partner on this journey. In this sense, the dialogue reflects a journey into the unknown, which both parties shape in cooperation, but framed by a fairly safe setting and by an ambition of a satisfactory and life-affirming outcome.

3. The coach/dialogue guide’s engagement and professional background are crucial

In our research project, as mentioned above, it was crucial for the coach to be present as a fully engaged dialogue guide. Sometimes, the coach or other members of the group will provide feedback to the statements made in the dialogue. This is where the appreciative perspective takes form. As a dialogue guide the coach acts as a withness-thinking and responsible dialogue partner who relates to what the other says. In narrative thinking, this is called witnessing.16 Here, a dialogue guide

– often the coach – reflects what the other said, not in the form of an assessment but as an appreciative and caring curiosity and wondering. The coach becomes a co-reflecting partner in the dialogue, along with any additional group members.

4. The focus person’s interest in and commitment to the conversation is supported

In a group setting it is crucial to make active and fruitful contributions to the conversation. Assessments of others should be avoided; instead the aim should be to understand others’ unique characteristics as different from one’s own; this may ultimately contribute to one’s own self-insight. In a therapy context researchers have found that the client’s commitment and willingness to develop and change his or her own situation is a key condition for a satisfactory treatment outcome.¹⁷ Thus, the focus person and any other group members can make active and fruitful contributions to the development of the conversation. Here it is important to invite the participants’ feedback on whether the conversation – the journey of discovery – is moving in a desired direction. If they have any new ideas or requests, these should be addressed.

5. The dialogue participants form an alliance

In a therapy context, the alliance between the parties is viewed as a key factor for moving the conversation in a fruitful and healing direction. In the research project mentioned above, such an alliance clearly developed in my relationship with the boys. The parties are able to co-create a new reality that is rewarding for everyone involved. This trust, confidence and openness constitute fertile ground for creativity and innovation. Intensity in the conversation and the dialogue participants’ mutual appreciation and acknowledgement of each other are crucial indicators of fruitful dialogues.

6. The dialogue is an opportunity for learning

Third-generation coaching and fruitful conversations generally offer an opportunity for creating a shared and personal learning process. A given reality emerged for a person (in the research project, such a reality emerged for myself and the group members) and at the same time, the person opened him/herself up to this new reality, based on his or her experience, insight and understanding.¹⁸ Reality is

explored anew and emerges as meaningful to the focus person, with a value that may not have been previously appreciated or realized. Through the dialogue the individual’s perception of reality is challenged, and a need for further exploration arises. Here, coaching becomes a part of the person’s self-formation through a process of continuous self-development that includes virtually all situations in his personal and working life.

**Viewing third-generation coaching as a dialogue form in a societal perspective**

I am often asked whether it might not be time to jettison the coaching concept. I agree that the concept is somewhat tired, and that it has become burdened with associations that I would want to distance myself from. In many regards, mentoring in its current meaning is a fairly apt term for the dialogue form that I strive for. The mentor acts as a volunteer, unpaid adviser or trainer. It is therefore important to fashion the conversation in such a way that it is also rewarding for the mentor. Unlike the coach in a traditional coaching relationship, the mentor should benefit from his or her role. It is the *match* between the mentor and mentee that determines the success of the mentor relationship and the fruitful development of the dialogue. The main difference between mentoring and coaching is the volunteer aspect and, to some extent, the absence of professionalism. The mentee cannot expect or demand that the mentor have any professional dialogue skills. The mentor’s qualifications are his or her commitment and, to some extent, seniority. Although mentoring in its current form has some of the same characteristics as third-generation coaching, the mentor often lacks the professional qualifications that professional dialogue partners should be required to attain through quality training.

**Defining third-generation coaching**

My own earliest definition of coaching stems from my first published book, *Coaching – Læring og Udvikling* (*Coaching – Learning and Development*) from 2002. I still embrace this definition, with a minor update:

> Coaching is participation in the dialogue partner’s/group’s development and learning process.\(^{19}\)

\(^{19}\) As the attentive reader will have noticed, I used the term ‘focus person’ in my first book, *Coaching*, and the term ‘coachee’ in the book *Third-Generation Coaching*. In the present context, I use the term ‘dialogue partner’ because I wish to include both coaching and, more broadly, professional everyday dialogues.
The key word in this definition is *participation*, which references a larger theory on learning and development: the situated learning theory developed by Lave and Wenger.\(^{20}\) The theory of situated learning shifts attention away from learning in school contexts (such as formalized learning in school) and thus offers a critical alternative to functionalist understandings of knowledge and learning. Situated learning and development take place in practice communities, for example through fruitful dialogues, constituting a new form of collective learning where the participants have access to a practice ground in certain situations and thus a chance to develop in a learning community with others. Another concept is *legitimate peripheral participation*, where no single person takes centre stage. Anyone who is a recognized member of a practice community is legitimate – everyone should feel included as a member. All the parties in the practice community are more or less peripheral, depending on the situation they find themselves in and on their qualifications, understanding and interest in relation to the given task, topic and so forth. In the fruitful and transformative dialogue and learning practice, the dialogue guide (coach, teacher, manager, experienced practitioner) acts as the leader and co-reflecting interlocutor. The dialogue guide should not appear as an external expert but enters into a learning community where knowledge is viewed as a discursive phenomenon, and where everybody contributes to the shared meaning-making and the generation of knowledge. There is no final answer; knowledge is contextual and situated.

I also have a more complex definition of third-generation coaching, which includes the theoretical foundation of my understanding of dialogues, which are

- the phenomenological existentialist position;
- the narrative co-creative position.

Both positions are, however, closely interrelated in the actual dialogue practice and should only be treated as distinct and separate for analytical purposes. This expanded definition further clarifies that third-generation coaching is moving towards a reciprocal relationship where the dialogue may be reward for both (or all of the) parties. This definition goes as follows:

Coaching is described as a developing conversation and dialogue, a co-creative process between coach and coachee with the purpose of giving (especially) the coachee room and opportunity to linger on, reflect on and gain a new understanding of his or her 1) own experiences in the specific context and 2) interactions, relationships and negotiations with others in specific contexts and situations. This coaching conversation should enable new possibilities of action within the contexts that the conversation addresses.

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The key purposes of third-generation coaching and fruitful dialogues

Based on the latter definition, three key purposes emerge, which are closely interrelated in the dialogue process:

1. The dialogue invites self-reflection, mainly by virtue of what Ole Fogh Kirkeby calls ‘the principle of translocutionarity’:\(^{21}\) I do not know what I mean until I hear what I am saying; I am made to listen to myself by speaking to someone else. When one listens, the self occurs, that is: I meet myself in my own words. Karl Weick\(^ {22}\) describes this phenomenon in similar terms by linking the emerging meaning with an act: How can I know what I’m thinking before I hear what I’m saying?

Moreover, self-reflection can be promoted by the coach’s co-reflecting questions and through the witnessing by the coach and other dialogue participants. The coach or the group members act as co-reflecting partners, offering feedback to the focus person’s statements. We develop self-reflection by being involved in other peoples’ life perspectives. As part of the reflection process it can be helpful to acknowledge and appreciate differences or multiversity, that is, the existence of multiple local truths, which the participants present from the perspective of their own respective experiences and worldviews. We may expand and enrich our own positions by developing our ability to embrace different perceptions of reality and incorporating others’ perspectives on specific challenges.

2. The dialogue aims for a shared reflection by the involved parties. That is the first step towards learning in practice communities. The dialogue partners create something together, new understanding and knowledge that emerges based on shared reflection, which goes beyond what a single individual can achieve.

3. The dialogue invites a shift in perspective. The most important purpose of coaching and fruitful dialogues is essentially to enable a shift in position and perspective and to find a new and more appropriate position. The coach’s questions are intended to induce a shift in the dialogue partner’s perceptions and provide impulses for a narrative shift. Ideally, the coach’s questions should encourage both reflection and transformation.

Closing remarks

Certain questions have been raised about the term ‘coaching’, but I choose to continue to use it – in part for want of a better alternative. My ambition is not to

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replace the term with something else, but instead to develop the coaching profession, clarifying its role in relation to the current requirements of coaching. I view third-generation coaching as a necessary development and define the approach as an open, fruitful and transformative dialogue that, ideally, unfolds in a reciprocal relationship between both or all of the dialogue partners. Coaching should move away from a narrow focus on goals and performance and instead contribute to the art of lingering in dialogue. Through self-reflection and shared reflections between the dialogue guide and the dialogue partner, this dialogue should result in a new position that is enriching for one’s life in general or in relation to the specific situations or topics that were the focus of the conversation.