

# Coaching Your Company

*by Jean-Marc Weller*

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**In her new book, sociologist Scarlett Salman analyzes a figure that embodies the new spirit of capitalism: the corporate coach. She provides a unique insight into the changes that contemporary capitalism has wrought not only within organizations, but also on types of mindsets.**

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Reviewed: Scarlett Salman, *Aux bons soins du capitalisme, Le coaching en entreprise* ("In Capitalism's Good Care: Coaching in Companies", untranslated), Presses de Science-Po, Paris, 2021. 326 pp., €25.

Since its emergence in the 1990s, coaching has become standard practice in major corporations. Whether the aim is to support people in improving their productivity, developing their creativity or boosting their well-being, the challenges posed by these coaching methods never fail to intrigue. Why has the use of these methods become so widespread over the years? Who is behind them? What do coaching clients think of them? What are their objectives, and at what cost? A first in sociology, Scarlett Salman's book provides an overview of the phenomenon. Drawing on the many studies she has carried out on the subject over the last 10 years, *Aux bons soins du capitalisme* offers an original analysis of a now highly popular managerial practice.

## An unprecedented personal turning point

The author positions coaching in the context of the extensive literature on the transformation of corporate organizations, with particular reference to the work of Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello on the "new spirit of capitalism"<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the author invites us to consider her subject as an emblematic instrument of this turning point, resulting from the revival of artistic criticism in the period following the 1968 protest movement in France, in contrast to the bureaucratic models that had prevailed up to that point. The book is structured along three lines: the history of coaching; the actors involved in coaching, in particular the coaches themselves; and the uses of coaching in the corporate world.

Seven chapters provide a framework for exploring the coaching phenomenon, situating it within the long history of relations between management and psychology since the interwar period (chapter 1); reviewing the professionalization strategies deployed by coaching associations (chapter 2); characterizing coaches as a social group, taking into account their backgrounds, experiences, discourses and the ways in which they justify their approaches (chapter 3); describing the original market from which their services are derived, based on a dual partnership with the client company on the one hand, and the coachees on the other (chapter 4); identifying three main uses of coaching in companies, focused on the challenges of managing work time, which managers are taught to optimize when dealing with urgent or fragmented demands (chapter 5); dealing with internal interpersonal tensions within companies, particularly those affecting managers, which coaching helps to resolve (chapter 6); and finally, managing the career paths and frustrations of executives, whom coaching helps to "bounce back" (chapter 7). Coaching can be described as a managerial practice, a personal support system, a self-management technique, as well as a form of professional expertise or a management tool. It provides the basis for an investigation into the transformations taking place in the workplace and, more broadly, the issues and contradictions at play in the "personal turning point" that contemporary capitalism is currently witnessing. Drawing mainly on references from the sociology of work, the sociology of professions and economic sociology, the book addresses coaching from multiple angles (its history, the market, the profession, corporate management practices) and from a wealth of rich and diverse empirical material (discourses, professional trajectories, interviews, observations).

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<sup>1</sup> See Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, London, 2005.

Three findings in particular emerge from this investigation, and we shall now look at each in more detail.

## **An original, contract-based support system**

The first finding is a continuation of the research already mentioned on the new spirit of capitalism, of which coaching appears to be an emblematic feature. It fosters the image of a hyper-connected worker who is creative, autonomous and adaptable, and focuses closely on developing people's potential and self-fulfillment. While such concerns are part of a well-known neo-managerial rhetoric, they are also in line with earlier ideas (personalism, humanization, etc.). In fact, the desire for management to pay more attention to the "human" side of business is part of the long historical tradition of psychology applied to business, and the book reviews the main stages in this process (school of human relations, psychosociology of small groups, counselling, etc.).

However, coaching is not just a question of discourse, and Salman reminds us that it is equally based on a set of conceptual and practical resources, relating to a whole range of management tools that establish individuals as a subject for intervention. Whether we are talking about training in terms of "competencies", career management in terms of "talent", or appraisal in terms of "interpersonal skills", the "person" has become a key concern and regulatory factor in organizations, both for shaping behavior or enabling "development". In fact, many of the coaches we met said they had turned to coaching following a "skills assessment" that gave them an opportunity to work "on themselves" at a crossroads in their careers. Coaching provides a genuine support system that places individuals in a reflective relationship, inviting them to think of themselves as active, responsible participants. As such, it echoes a whole range of managerial practices.

Aside from a general discourse based on authenticity, self-realization, digital connectionism and humanism, coaching is rooted in a set of actions that practitioners fine-tune as closely as possible, with the subtle difference that their intervention is defined both as help for coachees and as a service for the human resources departments of large organizations, who are the commissioning clients. This dual partnership creates an original framework, characterized by a contract (formalized targets, fixed number of sessions, etc.), ethical safeguards (volunteering, confidential

discussions) and well-identified approaches (neuro-linguistic programming, transactional analysis, etc.). Readers attentive to the knowledge and techniques used in practice may find it regrettable that these methods of intervention were not described in even greater detail, particularly with regard to the psychological theories used and their interpretations of human behavior (clinical approach, behavioral approaches, systemic model, etc.). Similarly, the "exercises" used by the coachees to undertake their "mindset transformation" are only touched on, whereas the empirical data from the surveys suggest that they could be more fully described. But the practical conditions used for coaching are nonetheless described, with a special focus on the effects on the coachees, who are satisfied to find answers to the problems that they are facing.

## **A "mental hygiene" system at work**

A second finding concerns the main uses of coaching.

Time management issues are the main reason why people turn to coaching. Feelings of pressure exacerbated by just-in-time organizations; a sense of fragmentation intensified by digital multi-activity; the effects of being overwhelmed heightened by these same technologies; and the increased porosity of the boundaries between work and non-work: these are all seen as symptoms of a lack of personal organization, which the coach can help to resolve<sup>2</sup>. Another key area where coaching can be useful is in work relations, and even more specifically, management relations.

Whether the aim is to better manage the tensions inherent to the job (leadership/supervision) or curb the appearance of figures deemed unfit (the tyrannical or rebellious manager), coaching techniques are emerging as an unprecedented resource for shaping managers' interpersonal skills. This normalization comes at the cost of what the book describes as "psychological motives for pacification": new language conventions, the suspension of judgment, moderation in the drive for performance, the need to maintain the right distance, self-control, and so on. Finally, a last important use of coaching concerns the management of executives'

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<sup>2</sup> On the unprecedented difficulties of managing fragmentation in day-to-day working life, see Caroline Datchary, *La dispersion au travail*, Octarès, 2011.

careers, specifically the frustration of those whose progress has been thwarted, in order to enable them to "bounce back" and stay motivated.

Coaching recommendations always seek to improve the connection people have with time and space through better planning (to-do lists, diaries, notebooks, etc.) and a refocusing of activity (getting things done, avoiding unnecessary responsibility). Salman rightly points out the contradiction between reasserting the virtues of a rediscovered separation of time and space, and the new spirit of capitalism, which advocates continuity and the total commitment of the individual. The optimization promoted by coaching is so interesting precisely because it is a reminder of the need for "organizational work", but now carried out "in person". Simply put, what organizations once separated into distinct work and non-work spaces and times, they now merge. And they ask their managers to link these areas together, even if it means re-separating them, but in a more precise way, since it is no longer a matter for the company but for the individual. To characterize the meaning of these recommendations, the author borrows Max Weber's notion of "psychic hygiene", believing that the use of coaching techniques also reflects a form of moral regulation that it is important to understand.

With this in mind, the book focuses on the "psychologization" of working relationships. It is a familiar phrase, often used to condemn the disappearance of a social approach to work situations in favor of strict individualization, which risks obliterating organizational and collective realities. However, not all branches of occupational psychology agree with this, and Salman's statement is more in line with Norbert Elias' perspective; Elias uses the same phrase to refer to the process by which the control of impulses and emotions has historically become increasingly internalized, leading to the pacification of morals. As such, coaching is an integral part of this tradition. It fosters the idea of "working on oneself" and makes "knowing how to be" a key issue, thereby extending the "informalization" movement conceptualized by Elias and applied here to characterize the new kind of emotional work being done in organizations. This raises the question of what is new in coaching techniques themselves, given that the replacement of "disciplinary" control mechanisms by "conscious" regulation is widely accepted. Like the author, we may question the nature of the individualization process underway in coaching, which may distract the company from reflecting on its organization. However, we might also ask whether more varied dynamics do not exist locally, combining in various ways with other resources that continue to address work-related tensions collectively (recognition of psychosocial risks, social dialogue on working conditions, etc.).

## **Market-driven professional dynamics**

Finally, a third aspect highlighted in the book concerns the professional dynamics in which coaches are involved. The author is naturally careful to describe them from the point of view of their social characteristics (primarily women; joined the profession mid-career, etc.), their career paths (encounter with the psychological approach) and their discourse (valuing self-entrepreneurship, autonomy, etc.). However, the author's most original contribution concerns the practical conditions in which they work, taking into account the risks associated with their activity: services to be delivered as closely as possible, requiring a high degree of specificity, with no advance knowledge of the field; uncertainty among recruiters as to the coach's skill level; uncertainty as to whether the company or coachee have realistic expectations of the coach, uncertainty with regard to the quality of the session, etc.

Describing coaching as a care activity that creates a market, with corporate customers, recipient managers and care professionals, Salman focuses on the "relationship expertise" championed by the coaching associations set up in the 1990s. In particular, she stresses the originality of their strategy, insofar as it relies on market mechanisms (certifications, accreditations issued by the associations) designed to remove uncertainties over quality (how to counter the risk of charlatans or "rogue" coaches?), rather than state mechanisms. This does not mean that public regulations are non-existent: there is also a diploma strategy for associations (official recognition of 'professional coaches' since 2015) and funding backed by compulsory vocational training (services are partly financed by this budget). But the fact that the activity is market-driven is shown to be crucial, even though this runs the risk of intensifying competition and exacerbating the adjustments that professionals have to make to negotiate the terms of their services.

One question raised in the book concerns the more recent evolution of coaching practices, in light of these observations. While it may bear a similarity to the care professions, the expertise claimed by coaches is priced as an expensive service originally reserved for senior executives. How can these luxury services, whose development is explored in this book, sustain themselves? Several trends could well emerge: the supply could diversify at the cost of an increased standardization of services, as seen in the emergence of online coaching platforms; or the phenomenon

could disappear altogether, given that coaching is not immune to the well-known phenomenon of managerial fads<sup>3</sup>.

Certainly, these possible transformations in professional dynamics, which the Covid-19 health crisis has probably merely accelerated, call for further investigation. By virtue of its scope and rigor, *Aux bons soins du capitalisme* has emerged as a benchmark for understanding recent developments, not only in terms of coaching, but more broadly in terms of managerial transformations in practice.

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<sup>3</sup> On these developments, see the article by Magali Ayache and Hervé Dumez, « Le coaching : exploration d'une pratique », *Gérer et comprendre*, n°145, September 2021, pp. 46-54.