

COACHING OUTDOORS: HEAD OUTSIDE AND INVITE NATURE IN

What is your unique relationship with nature? **Anna-Marie Watson** encourages us to get closer to nature and consider how we can incorporate coaching outdoors in our work with clients.

'That bunch of trees represents the past; they're all gnarled, shrivelled and standing isolated, whereas these ones are taller and straighter, yet intertwined and supportive of each other.' She addresses them directly: 'I want you to be my champions within my network. It'll be a reciprocal partnership and I'll do the same for you.'

We're stood amidst a copse of beech trees near Avebury Circle in Wiltshire, UK. Rain clouds pass overhead, though beneath the canopy we're snug and dry. The landscape feels as old as time. Rebecca, HR director for a large tech company, stands animated; her initial despondence at the beginning of our session has disappeared and she's talking quickly and confidently. Admittedly, talking to trees hadn't been part of my professional coaching qualification. The entire course had been conducted within the temperature-controlled comfort of a hotel in Abu Dhabi. Heading outdoors and acknowledging nature typically lies beyond our collective accepted norm of what coaching 'should' look like.

It's not surprising: research from Ambius – a British human resources consultancy – reveals that almost 40% of office workers spend a maximum of 15 minutes outside each day.ⁱ This is considerably less than UN guidelines for the humane treatment of prisoners, where it's explicitly stated that inmates must have 'at least one hour of suitable exercise in the open air daily'.ⁱⁱ If you combine this factor with the sedentary nature of our indoor activities, we basically sit indoors for the majority of our lives. This is fundamentally opposed to our evolutionary heritage: as humans we're genetically designed to walk up to 12 miles per day.

NATURAL BENEFITS

The benefits of connecting with nature can be traced back to ancient Greece, where Aristotle walked with his students around the Lyceum. More recently, scientific research reveals positive evidence from the Japanese art of *shinrin-yoku*ⁱⁱⁱ, otherwise known as forest bathing; attention restoration theory (ART)^{iv}; stress reduction theory (SRT)^v; biophilia hypothesis^{vi}; nature deficit disorder (NDD)^{vii}; restorative qualities of favourite places^{viii}; and bird soundscapes^{ix}; as well as links between natural environments and mental health.

These studies focus on a range of physiological and psychological data such as heart rate variability, systolic and diastolic blood pressure, hormone levels and brain activity alongside mood profiles, impressions of nature, and evaluations of stress. The physical, emotional and mental benefits of acknowledging nature and integrating movement have been shown to enable:

- deeper ability to contemplate and reflect;
- increased cognitive control and replenishment of attention;
- greater awareness of behaviour, emotions, values and beliefs;
- stronger connections towards self, others and the environment;
- and an expanded sense of identity beyond the ego and development of the ecological self.

However, the field of study that directly connects the benefits of coaching with nature and movement is still in its infancy. More research is needed to understand how these elements interact.

'Thoughts come clearly while one walks'
Thomas Mann, German author

YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE

Before coaching others outdoors, start with your unique relationship with nature. Dedicate some time to reflect on the following questions as you wander and wonder.

- What's your earliest memory of being outdoors?
- Describe your relationship with nature.
- What attracts your attention outdoors?
- What risks do you find in nature?

Everyone will have a different connection, belief system and personal narrative around nature and the outdoors. It can be a place of freedom, space and escape; conversely it can be a great unknown, full of risk and uncertainty. Be conscious and mindful of your relationship and how this could influence the coaching dynamic. It can be worth inviting prospective clients to consider their personal relationship with nature and the outdoor environment during the onboarding process. Seek to understand what potential triggers there might be and preempt how to manage in advance.

There are numerous techniques that can be integrated into coaching outdoors alongside possible existing coaching methodologies, theories and styles. The spectrum can range from unconsciously interweaving different approaches into the conversation to actively inviting nature to co-create the coaching process. The techniques in the table opposite offer possibilities to shape and develop your coaching practice.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Coaching outdoors necessitates essential planning and preparation where the following must be considered:

Dynamic environment: the outdoors involves an element of the unknown and risk – from physical safety to hidden psychological safety and emotional containment. The multi-sensory environment can be both distracting and overwhelming for both coach and client.

Health and safety: ensure first aid, public liability and professional insurance are covered. Clarify any medical conditions relevant to walking outdoors. Consider your personal safety, especially when meeting a new client for the first time.

Client comfort: some clients are content to experience all weathers and terrains, though some might prefer more comfortable options. Co-create the entire outdoor element with your client and reference it in your coaching contract.

Technique	Comments
Deeper questions	These provoke how clients think, feel or believe differently about information within a frame of reference as opposed to simply eliciting more information. Deeper questions challenge beliefs, assumptions and norms to generate alternatives and possibilities – and then then create change.
Deep ecology	This theory focuses on ethical and moral responsibilities to ourselves, others and environment. The process involves self-actualisation where the 'egoic' moves towards a more 'ecological self'. Deeper questions can be framed to explore connections and disconnections with nature (and within ourselves) against the wider natural environment.
Systemic approach	Our natural ecosystem offers a lens to view the world, based on a client's connection and/or disconnection within the wider social system. Networks of relationships and perceptions of gestalts can be explored to encourage self-reflection and self-confrontation of personal responsibility to the wider system. The hierarchical pyramidal system can also be used to contrast thoughts, feelings, values and beliefs in comparison to a more networked approach.
Natural cycles	Annual seasonal and life cycles (birth, life, death and decay) can be linked to cyclical themes that arise during coaching (career, self-development or within a specific project). Timelines (or circles) can be created to identify interrelated elements, connections, opportunities and possibilities (link to nature play, below).
Evolution	Change over time forms the basis of evolutionary theory and is a desired outcome from coaching. The nature versus nurture binary could be introduced as a metaphor to explore a fixed mindset versus a growth mindset.
Nature play	This creative approach uses natural resources (stones, leaves, moss, bark, flowers etc.) to symbolise and externalise timelines, relationships, networks and so on. The experiential element enables different perceptions and emotions to emerge and shift.
Visual and linguistic metaphors	Visual metaphors observed in natural environments (e.g., path junctions, light or water) can be used to externalise and explore ideas. Linguistic metaphors that reference nature can be explored, such as 'rays of light providing hope' or 'everything's mirrored in the stillness of the lake'.
Mindfulness	There are different approaches that encourage moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations and surrounding environment (such as body scans, loving kindness and breathwork). Try it out: identify a quiet and restorative location near home or work. Make the commitment to visit regularly over a period of time. Record observations in a journal related to changes in the environment and personal thoughts and feelings when there.
Nature retreats, vision quests or pilgrimages	These are generally longer than an individual coaching session and a variety of coaching approaches could be incorporated. Nature retreats usually focus on a holistic lifestyle approach; a vision quest is a powerful ritual process that can include solitude, nature and/or fasting; whereas pilgrimages are prolonged journeys with a possible moral or spiritual component, often to a specific destination of significance.

Location, location, location: time spent in recce is seldom wasted. Review the venue and route in relation to terrain, distance, accessibility, toilets, refreshments, session timings, fitness levels, confidentiality and medical issues.

Experiment: trial the concept in advance with your peers or willing clients. Select an accessible local park or open space to test it. Reflect on the experience and adjust and develop it.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Happiest outdoors, Anna-Marie Watson grew up free-range and served as a British Army officer in order to avoid the confines of four walls. Her coaching work with global leaders has taken her across five continents, visiting locations from icy Arctic tundra to hot and sandy deserts. She is on a mission to encourage a different approach to business – one where our natural environment is valued. An active writer, podcaster and facilitator, she has contributed to *The Coaches Handbook*, *Succeeding as a Coach* and the *Coaching Outdoors* podcast, and has led outdoor-inspired events for international organisations.

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