



BALANCING CARING AND DARING IN PROVOCATIVE COACHING

Jakob van Wielink and Leo Wilhelm explore the delicate dance between support and stretch in the coaching relationship, and outline how attachment theory may provide a useful lens for coaches to achieve this balance, in best service of their clients.

Life is best organized as a series of daring ventures from a secure base

- John Bowlby

Imagine Anna, a senior manager who is facing difficulties with her team. Despite her best intentions, Anna struggles to build trust and create open communication. Her team members hold back, avoiding challenges and conflict, which stalls progress. Seeking support, Anna turns to coaching to help her learn how to foster a more supportive environment (caring) and challenge her team constructively (daring).

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COACHING IS LEARNING

Coaching is primarily a learning activity. The coach enables the client to learn, by offering a safe environment in which the brain and the nervous system of the client are calm enough for

new experiences. Safety, which the coach offers through the relationship with the client, is a prerequisite for learning, but in itself is not enough to enable change. To offer the client new experiences, through which the client can develop new insights and behaviour, the coach also has to challenge the client to question his beliefs and convictions and to experiment. In secure base coaching, we call this combined approach *caring and daring*.¹

IT'S ALL ABOUT ATTACHMENT

Our relationships with others bring us our greatest support and joy, yet they also inflict our deepest wounds. This paradox is unavoidable; to shield ourselves from pain is, in essence, to shy away from life itself. From the moment we take our first breath, the human system –directed by our brain – is primarily focused on seeking closeness with available others. Thus, attachment is not something we choose, it is an instinctual drive essential for survival.

Attachment serves as a survival strategy, with our brain wired for connection. When luck favors us, attachment in childhood brings protection and nourishment, evolving into comfort as we grow older. Throughout our lives, it grants us the profound experience of being known and of belonging to a place and to people.

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Human beings are not made to exist in solitude. Our attachment system is built to experience security, to discharge and recharge, and to live fully. We might say that our attachments lay the groundwork for resilience. Attachment prepares us for the inevitable act of letting go that awaits us all and enables us to embrace a life that feels complete.

Secure attachment forms the foundation for all growth and the capacity to face adversity. Recent studies indicate that this sense of security in attachment is not evenly distributed. In fact, the outlook is less favourable if you fall within the 40–50 percent of individuals who are predominantly insecurely attached due to suboptimal early experiences. These experiences might include caregivers who were insufficiently available, dismissive, unreliable, absent, or even threatening. It's a misconception to believe this applies only to extreme misbehaviour or traumatic experiences.

EARLY ATTACHMENT AND CARING AND DARING IN ADULTHOOD

Advancements in attachment research are deeply connected to the latest scientific insights into brain function. Secure attachment enables our brain to stay calm in moments of stress and danger – such as when we encounter the pain of loss – allowing us to explore pathways to healing, growth, and meaning. In essence, secure attachment ensures that our mind's eye – the brain's centre of focus – can remain oriented towards learning, rather than being fixated on survival and threat. This neurological development occurs within the context of our relationships, beginning at birth and extending into adulthood, through the intimate connections we build with others.

When we translate this attachment knowledge to our coaching practice, we can say that caring – offering safety – is about the ability to be and stay in proximity, being close. It serves to welcome, recognise and acknowledge emotions. It is about truly seeing the client and accepting the person of the client unconditionally. Daring is about challenging and encouraging the client to explore emotions and to experiment with new behaviour and new thinking.

Caring is the continuation of the attachment bond between a child and its caregiver, offering the safety of the presence of an emotionally available and attuned other. Daring is as much a part of the attachment bond as caring. When your attachment figures combined caring and daring, they became your first secure bases: resources which make you feel welcome and which inspire and encourage you to face, together, the challenges life presents. You were then able to develop a secure attachment style, enabling you to deal with life events. Not everyone is as lucky though. Many go through life with attachment wounds, causing insecure attachment patterns that can cripple their ability to engage in relationships. The coach therefore may take

on the role of secure base for the client, to offer new experiences in bonding and healing.

Like in raising a child, caring always has to come first in coaching, before daring. The relationship, a psychological contract and bond, must be established first, before the client will entrust himself to the process. In itself, there is no such thing as 'too much' caring - but caring without daring will lead to rescuing and pampering. On the other hand: daring without a solid foundation of caring will put too much strain on the coach-client relationship. A daring approach will ask too much of the resilience of the client, when there is not a sufficient investment in caring.

ON THE EDGE OF THE COMFORT ZONE

While caring can be compared to the safety net, to catch you when you fall, daring is the trampoline, to enable you to jump even higher than before. Without a safety net, you would not let go to fly between trapezes. The risk would be too great. But without the encouragement of daring, you would not even go up to the trapezes to try and stretch your limits.

No matter how important edge-of-the-zone experiences can be, real learning based on new experiences takes place inside your comfort zone. There, from calmness and security – essential for your brain, which needs to be in a calm state to evaluate experiences properly – reflection and analysis of experiences is possible. Your comfort zone is also the place where you meet your secure bases. In the presence of your secure bases, the comfort zone provides a sense of belonging, where you can anchor the learning outcome via dialogue with your secure bases.

CARING AND DARING ARE NOT OPPOSITE APPROACHES

Caring and daring are too often misrepresented as extremes on a single axis, a false either-or. Caring and daring are axes on their own and combining them offers four quadrants in the Window of Excellence.



Figure: Window of Excellence. Source: Klaartje van Gasteren, Marnix Reijmerink and Jakob van Wielink.

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Pursuing excellence is the mindset in which growing, learning and developing lead and guide your actions. You are willing to do today what it takes to be better tomorrow. It is about experimenting, taking risks and making mistakes. It asks that you engage in conflict with each other to discover new truths together, learn from this and move onward with this new knowledge and experience. When caring and daring walk hand-in-hand, the psychological safety can be created in which excellence becomes a reality.

Avoidance is the mindset in which relationship is more important than results. It sometimes looks and feels like excellence because everybody is having a pleasant time together. But the necessary dialogues do not take place, conflict is avoided and there is a strong aversion to taking risks. Anxiety and fear of disturbing relationships can keep people trapped in an avoidant style. The risk of avoidance is getting disconnected and no longer being involved, moving from avoidance to withdrawal.

Dominance is the mindset in which the goal is more important than the relationship. The longer you wait, the harder it becomes to move back into the mindset of excellence. As much as this always remains possible, you must consciously choose to move into it and bond – externally physically and internally mentally – with secure bases that help you make this happen. It always requires being more caring and/or more daring when interacting with others. And in most cases, a move towards excellence will require some measure of vulnerability, genuine curiosity and asking questions.

By focusing on maximising caring and daring equally, the mind's eye can be constantly focused on excellence through learning and development. By our nature, the mind's eye is focused on the negative, on danger and on avoiding fear, shame and pain. In the presence of secure bases, this preprogrammed tendency of the brain can be overridden, ensuring that all emotions – of any kind – are welcome without judgement.

Your brain then makes new connections and learns to forge new neural pathways. Giving meaning to experiences, while in your comfort zone, can be a motor for personal growth. This allows you to expand your comfort zone, consciously engaging in more different behaviours than before.

THE BODY

Attachment is a theory; embodiment makes it real. A secure base offers the essential closeness also in a physical manner. This means that a coach's ability to be genuinely present with a client requires them to be equally present within themselves. The coach must be aware of their own inner experiences, including any personal triggers, and possess the skill to avoid

being held captive by those triggers. This self-awareness enables them to consistently move toward and support the client. Our attachment experiences are stored in our bodies, which 'remember' past reactions to attachment breaks and separations, responding immediately and consistently in the same way they did before. Learning to sense and understand the body—our temple—and our reactions is thus inseparable from the journey of transition. The body never lies, but our brain sometimes does. As neurons work in proximity to others, they gradually overwrite old attachment experiences in the brain, forming new pathways. This is where healing begins.

ANNA REVISITED

Through establishing a secure foundation, Anna's coach creates a space where she feels truly seen and supported, opening the door for her to explore her attachment patterns and personal triggers. In this safe environment, Anna begins to uncover the roots of her discomfort with conflict, realising that her hesitancy to engage stems from past experiences where open expression was discouraged, and vulnerability was met with criticism. This vulnerable exploration brings up memories of early relationships where support and validation were inconsistent, leaving her uncertain about her place in group dynamics.

With this foundation of trust, the coach then encourages Anna to challenge her fears by experimenting with openness and assertiveness in a safe role-play exercise. At first, Anna hesitates, her voice faltering as she imagines expressing her honest thoughts to her team. She feels a tightness in her chest and a familiar sense of dread rises—echoes of the fear of rejection she felt as a child. The coach gently invites her to pause, notice the sensations, and breathe into them without turning away. He reassures her that this discomfort is a natural response and a sign that she's moving into new territory.

As she tries again, Anna begins to find her voice, expressing what she truly feels, and a mixture of fear and relief floods through her. Emotions surface – first anxiety, then the tentative excitement of having spoken her truth, even in a practice setting. The coach daringly meets her in the depth of these emotions. He gently probes into her feelings of abandonment and fear, encouraging her to articulate the sensations that arise. In these moments, the coach finds himself touched and even triggered, resonating with aspects of his own past. Yet, he remains grounded, breathing through his reactions and maintaining his calm. By being fully present and aware of his own emotions, he demonstrates for Anna how to hold difficult feelings without becoming overwhelmed. The coach watches her closely, acknowledging each moment of vulnerability, helping her to see that she can both hold and express these emotions. This process unfolds gradually, with the coach providing calm encouragement and validation, guiding her through each surge of feeling. Through these moments, Anna experiences firsthand how stepping into openness and assertiveness can bring both challenge and a surprising sense of liberation, helping her to reclaim her confidence with each step forward.

Anna begins to test new ways of engaging with her team, practicing honest and constructive communication. This blend of caring and daring helps Anna experience newfound confidence,

empowering her to embrace her role and relationships with a deeper sense of security.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

Reflecting on your own abilities as a coach may bring to light a preference for one of the quadrants. What is your favourite approach?

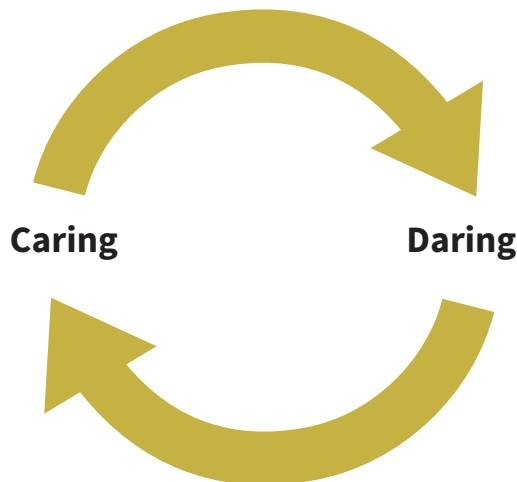
When dealing with resistance or tension when meeting a client, when dealing with possible conflict, does another quadrant, another style present itself?

How conscious are you about your own triggers?

CARING AND DARING – EXAMINED CLOSER

Now that we have established that caring and daring are not opposite approaches, we would like to propose that caring and daring are intricately interwoven and not separate. Daring is not only about challenging and encouraging, it is primarily about deepening the level of intimacy in the relationship, to further explore emotions and to enable movement in the direction of learning and growth.

This way, caring precedes daring and opens the field of learning by calming the brain and the nervous system. Daring then not only encourages learning, it deepens the connection through sharing and deepened intimacy. Daring strengthens caring that way, creating a feed forward cycle, enhancing psychological safety.



ANNA'S JOURNEY TOWARD HEALING

Anna's journey illustrates how the balance of caring and daring in coaching can be transformative. Through the secure base relationship with her coach, she learns to approach her leadership with greater trust and authenticity, fostering open communication and resilience within her team. By integrating both caring and daring, Anna experiences a profound shift that not only strengthens her professional life but also deepens her sense of personal fulfillment.

CONCLUSION

In a fully caring and daring approach, bedded in a secure base relationship between coach and client, healing is possible. We would like to provoke you to not be too cautious, but to be careful indeed.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Jakob van Wielink is a pioneer in the application of secure base thinking to coaching, therapy, and counselling. He is a partner in The School for Transition in The Netherlands. He is also a faculty mentor at the Portland Institute for Loss and Transition (USA) and a member of the International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement. Jakob has co-authored and contributed to many books about coaching, therapy, leadership and transition.



Leo Wilhelm works as an executive in the Dutch government. He is also a consultant with The School for Transition in Huissen (The Netherlands) and has been a longtime volunteer at a hospice. Leo is a secure base coach and author who has contributed to several books on loss and grief counselling, transition and leadership.

1. Wielink, J.P.J. van, Gasteren, K. van, Reijmerink, M., Verbokkem-Oerlemans, A., Wilhelm, L. & Fiddelaers-Jaspers, R.J.M. (2024). *The Craft of the Secure Base Coach. Enabling Transition*. Routledge.

We welcome your feedback

As ever, we greatly welcome your feedback on this and other former editions - what is missing, what have we under-explored, where could we turn our attention? Please, if you have comments, we'd love to hear from you - simply email

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