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Coaching and Identity in the Age of AI: Executive Coaches' Experience and Navigation of AI-Related Leadership Challenges

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Abstract

As artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes organizational structures and forces leaders to reevaluate their professional identity, executive coaching has emerged as a key developmental resource. Despite this relationship, the coach's perspective on how their practice evolves in AI contexts remains largely underexplored. This study examined how executive coaches experience and navigate AI-related leadership challenges in their coaching practice. Eleven semi-structured interviews with executive coaches based in the German-speaking organizational context were conducted. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006) from an interpretivist stance, resulting in five core themes. Coaches perceived AI-related leadership challenges as distinctively severe in their affective appearance, marked by powerlessness and identity threat. Their directiveness in addressing those challenges varied along a spectrum that simultaneously reflected an ongoing negotiation of their own professional identity. To restore leaders' sense of agency, coaches applied established methodology and practitioner-developed AI-specific interventions. Empathy and presence were described as the irreducible human core of coaching. Furthermore, coaches seemed to process AI disruption in parallel with their coachees, with biographical readiness functioning as a key personal resource. The findings suggest that coaching in AI contexts is a shared sensemaking process, shaped by coaches' own identity dynamics. Coach training programs should integrate AI-specific methodology and identity-focused guidance. Organizations should consider executive coaching as a developmental resource in AI-disrupted contexts.

Keywords: executive coaching, artificial intelligence, leadership challenges, professional identity, sensemaking

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Introduction

"Nobody the f*ck knows what will happen in two years. Nobody knows. Nobody knows what will happen with AI, where does it take us." These words, spoken by an experienced executive coach reflecting on the current moment, illustrate the profound uncertainty that technological advancements such as AI have introduced into organizational life (Faraj et al., 2018), and into coaching itself (Bajpai, 2024). Executive coaching has emerged as a central developmental resource for leaders faced with complex organizational change (Grant, 2014). Empirical evidence shows a positive impact by providing a space to make sense of challenges, refocus on goals, and provoke behavioral change (Bickerich et al., 2018; Du Toit, 2007). Central to this effectiveness are the coaches themselves, who guide leaders and build relationships based on trust (Lai & Palmer, 2019).

At the same time, AI disrupts organizational structures, roles, expertise, and decision-making in ways that directly intensify leaders' need for developmental support (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Faraj et al., 2018). Coaches are not external to this disruption. They are both directly and indirectly affected by the same pressure as their clients, as the challenges that leaders bring to coaching evolve (Schermuly et al., 2024). Yet especially the latter dimension remains largely unexamined empirically.

Their dual positioning makes the coaches' perspective analytically significant and worth examining. This study explores that perspective through an interpretivist qualitative interview study involving 11 executive coaches. It thereby aims to contribute empirical insights into a largely underexplored dimension of coaching practice. Furthermore, it offers theoretical implications for how the coaching profession understands its own role and development in an AI-disrupted organizational landscape. This study is guided by the following research question: *How do executive coaches experience and navigate AI-related leadership challenges in their coaching practice?*

Executive Coaching

Executive coaching has grown into a central organizational development tool, with an estimated 123,000 active practitioners worldwide and a global market value of $5.34 billion (International Coaching Federation, 2025). It is conceptualized as a developmental, relational process between a professional coach and a client (in the following: coachee) in a one-to-one setting. Over the course of several sessions, it aims to foster behavioral change through enhanced self-awareness and personal learning, ultimately contributing to both individual and organizational success (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Bozer & Jones, 2018; Joo, 2005).

Central to this process is the assumption that personal change emerges through structured, reflective dialogue. This enables individuals to examine their beliefs, behaviors, and decision-making processes mainly in a work-related context. Executive coaching is goal-oriented and often explicitly aligned with organizational objectives and strategic priorities (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). The present study focuses on external workplace coaching and therefore adopts the term "executive coaching" as widely used in the literature. External coaches operate outside their clients' organizational systems and engage through contractual agreements. This positions them as independent actors who must address both individual and organizational expectations (Grant, 2017). Executive coaching integrates a range of methodological approaches, often rooted in psychology. One such example is the systemic approach that treats the coachee as connected to and shaped by different parts of a larger system (Feldman & Lankau, 2005).

Coaching and Related Practices

A clear distinction is typically made between coaching and similar practices such as training, consulting, or psychotherapy. In contrast to psychotherapy, executive coaching is forward-oriented on professional development and leadership-related challenges (Grant, 2017; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). One tension that shapes coaching practice and becomes especially relevant in complex organizational change contexts concerns the boundary between coaching and consulting. These two positions follow two fundamentally different philosophies. While coaching assumes that the coachee is an expert for their own problems and the solutions already lie within them, consulting diagnoses a problem and offers a solution directly (Lambrechts et al., 2009). Systemic coaching approaches treat the boundary as non-negotiable: the solution should be discovered by the coachee through self-directed insights provoked by the coach (Hawkins & Turner, 2019). However, this distinction may not be as clear in practice. Lambrechts et al. (2009) argue that the two orientations have long been blended, particularly in change contexts.

Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), one might argue that coaches' commitment to the non-directive stance is not only a methodological preference but an expression of their professional identity. The theory proposes that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in valued professional groups. Blurred group boundaries are perceived as a threat not just to practice but to one's self-concept (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). How coaches position themselves within this tension and make sense of it, especially regarding

AI-related challenges, remains unclear and is explored empirically in this study. At the same time, a parallel dynamic is observable in organizational leaders, which will be explored later.

Coaching Effectiveness and Coach Characteristics

Regardless of this tension, empirical evidence consistently supports the effectiveness of executive coaching across a range of outcomes, including improvements in self-awareness, leadership capabilities, well-being, and goal-directed self-regulation (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Nicolau et al., 2023; Theeboom et al., 2014). Meta-analytic findings confirm a moderate positive overall effect (Burt & Talati, 2017; Jones et al., 2016). Importantly, these outcomes are not solely individual but embedded in a broader organizational and social context.

Several factors shape coaching effectiveness, with the quality of the coaching relationship consistently identified as a central mechanism (Blackman et al., 2016; Lai & Palmer, 2019). Key determinants are coach characteristics such as empathy, integrity, and the ability to shift perspectives, paired with coachee characteristics including motivation (Kilburg, 1997; Lai & Palmer, 2019). As Bluckert (2005) elaborates, coaches need to find a balance between supporting and challenging their coachees and at the same time establish trust for an effective coaching relationship. This connects directly to Schön's (1983) reflective practitioner framework, which positions practitioners as factors that shape the intervention's outcomes rather than as independent of the process. Following this theory, coaches can be seen as active participants of the coaching process, influencing its content and dynamics through their own experiences and reflective engagement.

Executive Coaching in Technological and Organizational Change

The increasing complexity of organizational environments, characterized by uncertainty and evolving leadership demands, has important implications for executive coaching. Grant (2017) argues that these conditions require a shift from purely performance-oriented approaches towards more agile, developmentally focused forms of coaching. From this perspective, coaches need to enable leaders to process complexity and manage the emotional demand associated with organizational change.

Empirical support for this positioning comes from several studies, demonstrating that coaching effectively supports leaders through organizational transitions (Bickerich et al., 2018; Grant, 2014). When applying coaching as an intervention in organizational change, leaders showed clearer strategic decision-making and increased resilience, as well as leadership self-efficacy. The authors emphasize that coaching in change contexts is a dynamic process and that

relationship quality remains central to its effectiveness as a change management tool. This situates coaching as a relational and flexible process rather than a fixed intervention.

In line with this, the coaching space is especially well-suited for facilitating sensemaking processes to gain clarity in times of change. In their theoretical paper, Du Toit (2007) underlines that coaches open a reflective space where leaders can make sense of their challenges in retrospect, surfacing unconscious blockades or patterns. In times of transformation, coaching helps to develop the interpretive flexibility needed to handle ambiguity and uncertainty. Furthermore, Huflejt-Łukasik et al. (2022) found that coaching serves as a psychological buffer against the negative effects of organizational change by reshaping leaders' perceptions of it. In addition, they claim that the subjective experience of change matters more than its actual impact. This dimension is exactly where executive coaching intervenes, positioning it as a well-suited development tool in change contexts.

Technological developments, particularly the rise of AI, further intensify the demands for such reflective spaces. Schermuly et al. (2024) argue for a dual impact of AI on coaching: it changes the challenges leaders bring to coaching and, at the same time, affects coaching practice through new technologies and economic pressure. Bajpai (2024) illustrates this in his qualitative study with executive coaches in the broader context of digitalization. He found that with technological advancements, the coaching agenda is shifting, and coaches are being asked to engage with leadership challenges that are still emerging and not yet fully understood. This simultaneously requires coaches to adapt to new technology and develop new skills. Furthermore, Bozer and Kotte (2026) found that internal coaches in AI-disrupted organizational contexts face significant role ambiguity and engage in active identity work as a response. Therefore, coaching emerges not only as a reflective space for coachees but also as an increasingly complex room to navigate for coaches. How external executive coaches experience and make sense of this, considering recent technological advancements, remains empirically unclear. The following section examines the landscape of organizational change in the age of AI to illustrate the current context in which executive coaches need to operate.

Organizational Change in the Age of AI

Understanding how AI is reshaping the organizational landscape requires first to establish what AI is and its capabilities. AI can broadly be defined as technological systems that process data, interpret and learn from it, and adapt their behavior accordingly to achieve a specific goal (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019; Sheikh et al., 2023). Such capabilities make AI, unlike

humans, particularly valuable for analyzing large volumes of organizational data and supporting data-driven decision-making processes (Faraj et al., 2018; Shrestha et al., 2019).

Recent technological advancements have further extended the capabilities of AI systems, particularly through the emergence of generative AI. Generative AI refers to systems capable of performing tasks like image, text, or code generation (Zhao et al., 2023). Building on these developments, research has also begun to explore the innovation of agentic AI systems. These systems can autonomously pursue complex goals through reasoning, planning, and tool interaction. While such AI systems promise increased efficiency and support in a variety of cognitive tasks, they also raise new challenges regarding governance and control, especially if applied in organizational contexts (Acharya et al., 2025; Lynch et al., 2025).

AI-Related Organizational Challenges

Advancements in AI technologies are associated with fundamental changes in organizational structures. Claus and Szupories (2023) state that in the age of AI, it is necessary for organizations to adapt to the dynamically changing professional landscape and increasing competition by integrating AI in their practice. This pressure to adapt is continuously leading to broader changes in organizational design including more fluid structures, evolving roles, and increased cross-functional collaboration (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Shrestha et al. (2019) emphasize that AI's inclusion in decision-making processes disrupts organizational hierarchies and blurs boundaries. Moreover, research suggests that AI reframes how expertise in organizations is perceived and evaluated (Faraj et al., 2018).

Literature commonly distinguishes between AI augmentation and AI automation in practice. Jarrahi (2018) describes AI augmentation as a form of cognitive extension, boosting human information-processing capabilities in complex decision-making situations. At the same time, some contributions point toward the possibility of increased automation, including scenarios in which AI takes over more complex tasks and potentially even leadership functions (Quaquebeke & Gerpott, 2023). These two poles introduce a tension, in which relevant stakeholders need to make sense of their own identity within an organization (Goto, 2022; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021).

A theoretical framework that helps explain the depth of this AI disruption is socio-technological system theory (STS), originally developed by Trist and Bamforth (1951). Further contextualized into modern organizations by Baxter and Sommerville (2011), it illustrates that organizations function as interdependent systems. This includes the technical subsystem, describing tools, processes and infrastructure, and the social subsystem, spanning people, roles

and relationships. The theory further states that performance is optimal when those two systems are designed to complement each other. Yu et al. (2023) explain that the introduction of AI disturbs the balance of those systems, as it reorganizes the technical system in a way that influences the social system. From an STS perspective, the organizational challenges described above are therefore symptoms of a deeper systemic reorganization, which necessarily influences people and the organization.

Empirical evidence supports that the integration of AI systems into existing social structures often is challenging (Davenport & Ronanki, 2018). Organizations frequently struggle to introduce AI in a well-structured way and to foster clear and transparent communication to provide stability for its members (Claus & Szupories, 2023; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). Collectively, the disruption of AI in organizational contexts reinforces the concept of sensemaking (Weick, 1995): the ongoing process through which individuals and organizations construct meaning in response to ambiguous or novel situations. When familiar routines are interrupted and established ways of understanding work no longer hold, people must actively construct new meanings. As Maitlis and Christianson (2014) argue, sensemaking becomes most consequential in situations that are uncertain and expectation-violating, which applies to the organizational encounter with AI. As AI enters organizations as an inherently ambiguous stimulus, sensemaking on the individual and team level emerges as a central analytic lens to describe how organizational members navigate this restructured reality. Given leaders' traditional role as primary organizational decision-makers, they occupy a particularly consequential position in steering these processes.

Leadership in the Age of AI

The shift away from expertise as currency within organizations requires leaders to fundamentally rethink the foundations on which their identity and authority have traditionally rested (e.g., Tabata et al., 2025). A key demand on leaders in managing digital transformation is guiding employees through change in work processes and fostering acceptance of AI-driven systems. In this context, the successful integration of AI largely depends on how leaders communicate its purpose, address concerns, and structure its introduction (Claus & Szupories, 2023). Leadership is therefore not external to technological change but evolves alongside it. This can be seen as an interdependence, in the sense that leaders both shape and are shaped by technological developments (Moldenhauer & Londt, 2019; Parry et al., 2016). More concretely, leaders act as drivers of AI integration by coordinating human-AI interaction, managing knowledge processes, and aligning technological capabilities with organizational goals. At the

same time, leadership becomes increasingly context-dependent, as leaders need to make sense in complexity between automation and augmentation (Cortellazzo et al., 2019).

These new leadership demands challenge the sufficiency of established frameworks. For example, empirical work shows that no single leadership style adequately captures how leaders are expected to act during AI-driven digital transformation (Frick et al., 2021; Jeong et al., 2024; Wijayati et al., 2022). Accordingly, as leadership effectiveness depends more on contextual demands of technological change, scholars call for more integrative frameworks, such as combining human qualities with AI's analytic capabilities (Kesting et al., 2015).

AI-Related Leadership Challenges

As the preceding theory suggests, AI confronts leaders with disruption that forces a form of ongoing existential sensemaking about their role (Goto, 2022; Weick, 1995). The first dimension of the emerging challenges contains ethical aspects of AI, including issues of bias, transparency, accountability and especially data privacy (Kandasamy, 2024; Madanchian et al., 2024; Medlama et al., 2025). Responses to AI output must be interpretive, critically evaluated, and ethically conscious. Leaders play a central role in shaping how ethical principles are understood and enacted in practice, and they need to actively decide how to address them (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Peifer et al., 2022).

In parallel to ethical considerations, the integration of AI into leadership processes introduces tensions between human judgment and technological support, introducing the risk of overrelying on AI systems without reflecting their output. Particularly in situations characterized by high ambiguity or ethical complexity, leaders need to be able to prioritize human judgment over AI-based decisions (Madanchian et al., 2024). In addition, as AI agents seem to become increasingly present in organizations, questions about the nature of leadership when both employees and AI systems are involved become salient. Leaders face the challenge of leading hybrid constellations of human and technological actors, a task that requires revising established structures (Hoque et al., 2025; Smith & Green, 2018).

The introduction of AI induces uncertainty regarding roles and future work not only on leaders' individual level, but also within teams. As AI systems transform everyday tasks, employees experience increasing stress or concerns about their position within the organization (Jeong et al., 2024; Moldenhauer & Londt, 2019). Leaders are therefore required to address underlying concerns about potential displacement or loss of relevance, which requires strong interpersonal management and communication (Kollmann et al., 2023). At the same time, this includes considerable uncertainty as developments in AI are fast and unpredictable.

Consequently, experiences of identity conflicts and perceived loss of control are triggered (Kollmann et al., 2023).

Social identity theory offers a theoretical explanation for why the threat of AI feels so acute to organizational members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Following this perspective, leaders' self-esteem and self-concept is heavily built on being part of the professional category of the expert decision-maker. When AI devalues the fundaments of this category, leaders experience a threat to a core component of their professional identity. Jussupow et al. (2022) found evidence for this relationship in their empirical study with medical professionals. Through an online survey they showed that threat to professional capabilities and recognition resulted in resistance to AI and perceived self-threat. While the professional context differs, the underlying identity mechanism, expertise devaluation triggering resistance, is identical to the leadership challenges described above. This identity disruption does not remain cognitive; it contains a distinct affective component that requires closer examination.

The Affective Response to Change

The SCARF-model (Rock, 2008) based on neuropsychology, introduces a framework that explains how the introduction of AI to the workplace challenges leaders affectively. The model encompasses the dimensions status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness, which, when seen as endangered, trigger a neuronal threat-response that can induce anxiety. As elaborated, AI threatens social status, introduces high uncertainty and limits autonomy directly (Faraj et al., 2018; Quaquebeke & Gerpott, 2023). This model therefore contributes to the understanding of existential disruption that AI brings and the challenges that leaders need to face.

The psychological mechanisms underlying these threat responses are further explained by cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This theory proposes that individuals evaluate events along two dimensions: whether the situation is relevant and threatening to them, and whether they have sufficient resources to cope with it. When both appraisals are activated simultaneously, as they are when AI disrupts established expertise and role clarity, the result is an affective stress response. This connects directly to the SCARF model, which shows that threats to status, certainty, and autonomy represent precisely the conditions that trigger a negative appraisal. This explains how the structural AI disruption translates into individual psychological strain.

Research on organizational change confirms that such affective responses follow consistent patterns. Oreg et al. (2011) identify affective, cognitive, and behavioral components

of resistance to change. The affective component, encompassing anxiety, fear, and feelings of loss, is most immediate and difficult to regulate. Fugate et al. (2008) further demonstrate that employees' capacity to cope with organizational change depends on their appraisal of the change itself and their perceived personal resources to manage it. When change threatens professional identity, the affective response is amplified. Executive coaching offers a structured space in which leaders can process these affective responses, make sense of their experience, and develop their capacity to navigate ongoing uncertainty.

Leadership competencies in the Age of AI. These affective challenges collectively position sensemaking as a core leadership demand in AI transformation, pointing toward a distinct set of competencies that becomes increasingly relevant. For one, several sources concern the need for leaders to develop AI literacy. This encompasses not only technical awareness but also the ability to critically evaluate AI outputs and assess their relevance for decision-making (Chiu et al., 2024; Li & Kim, 2024). In parallel, the literature consistently emphasizes the relevance of relational and emotional capabilities. Emotional intelligence, adaptability, collaboration and the capacity to foster trust and team cohesion are frequently identified as becoming more salient as AI takes over technical functions (Aziz et al., 2024; Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Dwivedi, 2025).

Importantly, developing these capabilities requires more than technical training. Scholars point to self-reflection and the ability to navigate ambiguity as central developmental needs. These capabilities cannot be acquired through knowledge transfer alone (Myszak & Filina-Dawidowicz, 2025). Executive coaching provides precisely this reflective space for the development of context-sensitive leadership practices, supported by coaches' skills and experiences.

Research Gap

Despite the well-documented relationship between coaching and effective leadership development in change, existing research largely neglects the coach's perspective. As Kim et al. (2025) note, coaching research consistently trails behind practice and current organizational and technological developments such as AI. Schermuly et al. (2024) argue that coaches are affected by AI directly and indirectly through their coachees. Still, research has not yet fully followed this dual positioning, even though it consistently calls for treating coaches as embedded participants in the coaching process (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018).

Existing research at the intersection of AI and coaching largely focuses on one side of AI's impact on coaching. Currently, AI is predominantly treated either as a delivery mechanism

or as a potential replacement threat to human coaches (Passmore et al., 2025; Passmore & Tee, 2023). These designs exclude interpersonal dynamics within the coaching conversation itself as a unit of analysis, making new, real-world qualitative investigation especially relevant. While Bajpai's (2024) study addresses the call for treating coaches as embedded practitioners, it examines digitalization broadly rather than AI specifically, highlighting the need for further investigation in that area. More recently, Bozer and Kotte (2026) have explored how internal executive coaches renegotiate their professional identity in response to AI. Yet the content of coaching conversations about AI-related leadership challenges remains unexamined.

Coaches occupy a structurally distinctive position in the organizational landscape. They operate outside the organizational system while remaining embedded in its most consequential developmental leadership conversations. The coach's perspective captures the intersection of professional practice, identity negotiation, and organizational change, making it a uniquely situated lens for examination.

Research Aim

This study aims to address the described gap by producing practice-relevant insights into how executive coaches experience and navigate AI-related leadership challenges. Particular attention will be paid to how coaches' professional identity and sensemaking shape their responses. Coaching is treated not as a standardized intervention, but as a contextually shaped meaning-making practice. The coach's perspective is centered as the primary unit of analysis. The study thereby aims to contribute to coaching theory, inform professional training, and extend organizational psychology frameworks by examining AI disruption at the level of professional practice. It is guided by the following research question: *How do executive coaches experience and navigate AI-related leadership challenges in their coaching practice?*

Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative design to answer the research question. This approach was chosen, as the study's aim was to explore subjective experiences, interpretations, and meaning-making processes from coaches, not to capture predefined variables (Willig, 2019). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which are widely used in qualitative organizational research to explore participants' experiences while allowing them to elaborate on topics relevant to them (Willig & Rogers, 2017). The interviews were conducted online via Lund University's Zoom, chosen due to its data security provisions and the geographical

distribution of participants. During the interviews, the audio was recorded and subsequently transcribed using Lund University's secure AI-based transcription tool. All transcripts were reviewed and corrected by the researcher to ensure accuracy. Informed consent about participation and data handling was obtained before conducting the interviews. Data were analyzed following the reflexive TA approach by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Epistemological Positioning

This study adopts a critical realist ontology, following Bhaskar (1978), assuming that AI-related leadership dynamics exist in reality but are only partially observable phenomena within organizational systems. However, access to these phenomena is always mediated through interpretation, language, and context. Epistemologically, the study adopts a constructionist-informed interpretivist stance, focusing on how such real but unobservable mechanisms are enacted and experienced in coaching practice. Knowledge is understood as situated and perspectival. It is produced through the specific relational conditions of each interview and shaped by both the researcher's and participants' prior experiences and interpretive frameworks (Willig, 2019). The study therefore does not aim to produce generalizable findings but to generate rich, contextually grounded insight into how coaches make sense of and navigate AI-related leadership challenges. Reflexive TA is used in its constructionist orientation (Braun & Clarke, 2019), in which themes are understood as analytic interpretations developed through engagement with the data, rather than as pre-existing entities to be discovered. The analytical process is therefore substantially shaped by the researcher's perspective, which must be acknowledged and reflected upon.

Being reflexive as a researcher includes being aware of prior experiences, assumptions, and biases that might influence the meaning-making process. A few factors shape my personal understanding of the topic, its interpretation, and interaction with participants. First, rooted in my background as a psychology student, I obtain a human-centered interpretation of workplace phenomena and see AI as augmenting rather than replacing human capability. This assumption was actively monitored during coding to avoid over-interpreting data through this lens. The most influential property may be my current position as a working student for a digital coaching platform. This position largely motivated the research question and provided contextual understanding of the coaching practice. Simultaneously, it risks presenting coaching as inherently valuable and effective. Finally, I was aware of the risk of confirmation bias during data collection introduced by my prior assumption that AI-related leadership challenges are a

genuine and widespread issue. This was addressed by actively seeking disconfirming accounts and coding for complexity and contradiction, not only what confirmed the premise.

A reflexive log was maintained throughout the research process. It documented assumptions brought into the study, decisions made during recruitment, analytical choices during coding and moments of interpretative uncertainty during theme development. This serves as evidence of confirmability. The findings are grounded in the data, and the researcher's interpretative process is documented and traceable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants and Recruitment

Sampling Strategy

This study applied purposeful sampling to recruit participants capable of providing in-depth insights into the research question (Patton, 2015). Given the exploratory aim of understanding how executive coaches experience and navigate AI-related leadership challenges, participants were selected based on predefined professional criteria. After the limits of this sampling strategy were reached, participants were recruited via LinkedIn.

Eligible participants were required to:

- Be certified executive coaches with at least 5 years of coaching experience
- Have conducted at least two coaching processes in which AI played a substantial role in relation to a leadership challenge, and
- Be actively coaching in the German-speaking organizational context to produce transferable results

During recruiting, AI-related leadership challenges were broadly defined to include: the implementation of AI tools, shifts in competencies within leadership roles, strategic or ethical decision-making related to AI, and organizational transformation processes triggered by AI integration. While this definition may have introduced a degree of conceptual priming, it was intentionally kept broad to ensure that participants possessed relevant experience while avoiding overly restrictive inclusion criteria. An additional criterion was sufficient language proficiency to be able to conduct the interviews in English. When the sampling reached its limits, the criterion was loosened and the option to hold the interview in German was given. The general aim was to keep the sample narrow within the German-speaking coaching environment.

Recruitment Procedure

First, participants were recruited from the professional coaching network in which the researcher is employed. The organization is an executive coaching platform that collaborates

with freelance executive coaches. The researcher has ongoing professional contact with many coaches in this network. However, she does not hold evaluative authority, assignment power, or decision-making responsibility regarding future collaborations.

Potential participants were contacted directly via email with a standardized invitation outlining the study's purpose, criteria, and interview format. The invitation clarified that the study was conducted independently within a university master's thesis framework, that participation was voluntary and that it would have no influence on professional collaboration. No information about who chose to participate was shared within the coaching organization.

The second recruiting approach via LinkedIn became necessary, as only about 20% of the initially contacted coaches had experience with AI-related leadership challenges. This provided an initial indication of the emerging nature of this topic within coaching practice. A call for participation was posted from the researchers' LinkedIn account, reaching executive coaches through direct connections and re-posts. Coaches stating AI as a coaching focus were additionally contacted directly. A final participant was recruited via personal network connection to provide context for the low overall response rate.

Exclusion Criteria and Boundary Management

To reduce potential relational influence and minimize insider bias, coaches with whom the researcher had closer professional collaboration were excluded from recruitment. Selection was based solely on the predefined professional inclusion criteria. This decision was made to strengthen the integrity of the study and to mitigate possible social desirability effects or perceived pressure associated with pre-existing professional relationships. Coaches were excluded who had no official training in coaching or weren't certified explicitly in leadership coaching.

Participant Characteristics

In total, 11 coaches participated in the study. Six of them were recruited directly via the coaching organization, five via LinkedIn. On average, the coaching experience was 9.4 years. Only two of the participants were female coaches. Implications of this gender imbalance are noted and elaborated in the discussion section. All participants previously held senior professional roles and had a successful professional career prior to their coaching training. The professional background included mainly tech & IT, as well as consulting, HR, and people development. Most commonly, coaches conducted a systemic coaching training, while two coaches were also certified by the International Coaching Federation (ICF). Four coaches were actively marketing themselves as AI-professional coaches. Nine coaches were native German

speakers and the remaining two spoke German fluently. All coaches were active in the German-speaking coaching industry but also experienced with international clients.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection method, grounded in the analytical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interview guide was developed based on the research aim and literature. The guide allowed flexible questioning and was probed in a pilot interview prior to the original data collection. The interviews took between 45 and 60 minutes. Even though almost all the coaches were native German speakers, interviews were conducted in English, as it was one of the coaches working languages and simplified the coding process. This decision carries a limitation worth acknowledging, and one interview was conducted in German for this reason. This does not invalidate the dataset, as participants demonstrated high English proficiency and produced detailed accounts, but it should be considered when interpreting the depth of individual responses.

Interview questions included first the background and coaching experience, then covered the emergence of AI in coaching practice. The main part of the interview was a case-based exploration, where the coaches were asked to describe one concrete coaching case where AI-related leadership challenges played a substantial role. Following up, coaches were asked about their navigation techniques and reflections. For the full interview guide, see the appendix. Data were collected over a span of four weeks.

Data Analysis

Analytical Approach

Data were analyzed using reflexive TA, following the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This methodology provides a flexible yet systematic framework for developing interpretative patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets. The analysis was data-informed and theoretically situated. Initial coding remained closely tied to participants' language, but interpretation was continuously shaped by the researcher's epistemological positioning and theoretical sensitivity. No claim is made that themes emerge directly from the data; in contrast, they are actively constructed through iterative engagement with the dataset. NVivo (Version 15.4.0) was used for data storage, code development, and memo documentation. This study adopted the theoretical frameworks from Schön (1983) and Weick (1995) as primary analytical lenses, treating coaches as active practitioners that make sense of the AI-related challenges alongside their coachees.

The Six Phases of Data Analysis

As a first step, I uploaded all the transcripts to NVivo and read them repeatedly. After each transcript, I drafted a memo documenting what stood out and how I interpreted the content. This way, I made sure to protocol how my view shaped the analysis development and remained reflexive.

During Phase two, I started coding one transcript at a time. After the first transcript, I had to significantly revise my codebook because I found myself summarizing content rather than meaning and drifting from the analytic coach lens I chose. Continuing with the revised codebook, I did another revision after three transcripts, ensuring the codebook was structured in a way that would be easier to manage for the following transcripts. I documented this revision process closely in reflexive memos to construct a traceable account of how coding decisions developed over time. I coded several passages multiple times and focused on deriving meaning from the transcripts. After full coding, I did a final revision round and merged duplicates and highlighted interesting quotes and contrasting content.

Phase three consisted of constructing preliminary themes from the coded content. In this study, themes are understood as patterns of shared meaning constructed by the author through systematic engagement with coded data. I developed themes using Miro, a digital pinboard tool. I pasted each code onto a sticky note and arranged them to form thematic clusters. This was an iterative process, whereby 10 preliminary thematic clusters were identified. During this process, I continued my reflexive log, describing the developing meaning and significance of the themes and my own role in constructing them.

In phase four, the themes were refined. I read all the coded excerpts again and decided if they form consistent patterns or if the themes did not feel cohesive yet. If the latter was the case, I reworked the themes and moved around codes to where they fit most. This resulted in five final themes. All the themes were compared with the complete original dataset to ensure that they fit the overall narratives. Therefore, I reread all the transcripts and codes again. In the end, I had an idea about the different themes, how they fit together, and what the overall story might be.

Phase five marked the final development of themes. I tried to identify the central meaning of each theme and what they contributed to my research question. I observed each theme on its own and in the context of the other themes. Hierarchies were identified and the overall narrative was developed. By the end of this phase, each theme was clearly defined, contrasted within the whole picture, and named.

Lastly, I summarized the results of the analysis in a report. I tried to tell a narrative that convinces the reader of the cohesiveness of the analysis. For every theme, evidence in the form of illustrative quotes was collected to support each claim. To increase readability, small grammatical errors were adjusted without changing the meaning of the quote. I argued why each theme has the right to be presented the way it is. Results were summarized as interpretative findings as opposed to objective representations of the data.

Research Quality and Trustworthiness

Following Elliott et al. (1999), several strategies were employed to ensure high research quality. Credibility was supported through in-depth interviews and probing follow-up questions. Transparency was ensured through detailed documentation of coding decisions and theme development. Reflexivity was treated as an epistemological practice through which the researcher's positioning actively shapes knowledge production. Instead of functioning as a mechanism to control bias, the reflexive process documented how interpretation is co-constructed through the researcher's professional background in coaching contexts, assumptions about AI as an augmenting technology, and embeddedness within a coaching platform. The reflexive log therefore serves as a trace of interpretative decisions, shifts in coding orientation, and evolving analytic sensitivity, not as a tool for validating objectivity.

This study produces *analytical generalization* in the sense of Lincoln and Guba (1985). This means that the findings are transferable to contexts that share key structural features (external executive coaches, comparable AI disruption dynamics, similar professional identity pressures), not to populations.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical guidelines outlined by the Swedish Research Council were closely followed. All participants received written and verbal information about the study prior to participation. Informed consent was obtained before each interview. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. Interviews were treated confidentially, and all data were anonymized during transcription and analysis. In the analysis, gender-identifying pronouns are avoided to ensure anonymity, given the sample imbalance. No identifiable information was shared with the coaching organization. As an insider researcher embedded in the professional context from which participants were recruited, I remained attentive to potential influences of pre-existing relationships and contextual knowledge. While insider positioning facilitated access and contextual understanding, reflexive practices were employed throughout data collection and analysis to critically examine assumptions and minimize

interpretative bias. Data were stored securely on encrypted university servers and will be retained for 10 years in accordance with Lund University's research guidelines.

Results

The TA resulted in five final themes; each describing another dimension of how the coaches experience and navigate AI-related leadership challenges. Themes one and four encompass the experience dimension, while themes two and three illustrate coaches' navigation techniques and mechanisms. Theme five serves as an overarching explanatory framework. Descriptives of the results are presented in Table 1 as illustration. Figure 1 shows the theme architecture diagram, describing the relationships of themes. The following section will analyze each theme in detail, presenting its key argument and illustrative quotes.

Table 1

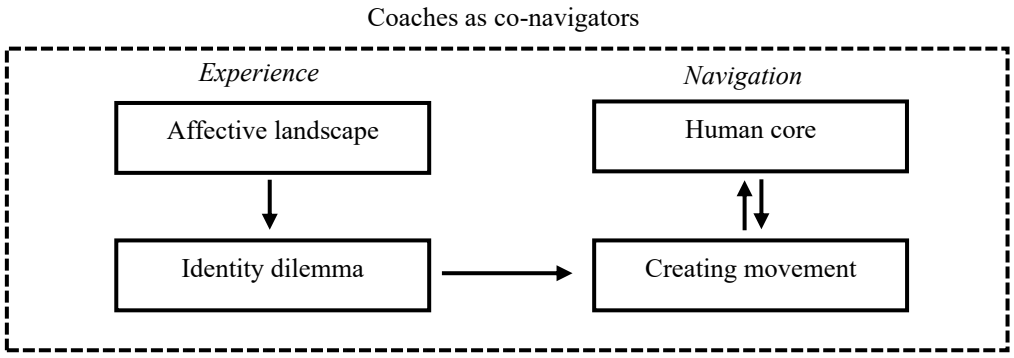
Descriptives of Final Themes

Theme Description	Participants	Codes	References
The affective landscape: fear, powerlessness and identity threat as the dominant affective register of AI-related leadership challenges	11	18	253
The coach identity dilemma: the tension between non-directive and directive stance, resolved across a spectrum of professional identities	11	8	99
Creating movement from overwhelm to agency: established methodology and AI-specific interventions as two complementary routes to restoring a leader's sense of agency	11	21	273
The irreducible human core: empathy, presence and relational attunement as coaching's distinctive contribution and what leaders most need to develop	11	7	76
Coaches as co-navigators: coaches navigate AI disruption in parallel to their coachees, with biographical readiness as explanatory framework	11	5	64

Note. Participants, codes, and coded references are presented in absolute numbers. Descriptives are presented for illustrative purposes only and do not function as validation of the theme development. They are intended solely to illustrate the structure and composition of each theme.

Figure 1

Theme Architecture



Note. The left side represents coaches' experience of AI-related leadership challenges, beginning with the affective landscape, which gives rise to the coach identity dilemma. The right side represents coaches' navigation practices, where the human core of coaching supports the process of creating movement from overwhelm to agency. The overarching frame indicates that coaches simultaneously navigate similar AI-related uncertainties and disruptions alongside their coachees.

Theme 1: The Unique Affective Landscape of AI-related Leadership Challenges

"The biggest challenge is that nobody the f*ck knows what will happen in two years. Nobody knows. Nobody knows what will happen with AI, where does it take us, what will happen to organizations" (P3). As illustrated by this quote, theme 1 suggests that AI produces a qualitatively distinctive affective experience for leaders, characterized by fear of redundancy, identity threat, and an omnipresent sense of powerlessness. Several participants describe this state as exceeding in intensity compared to other organizational change processes: "we have all the problems (…) of normal coaching, but then sort of maybe on steroids (…), because it's simply much more complex and to a much larger degree unknown" (P10). This interpretation appears consistently across the dataset, with coaches repeatedly describing a landscape of severe organizational disruption. Theme 1 serves as the foundation of the analysis, as it indicates how coaches experience AI-related leadership challenges and how these manifest in coaching.

The Organizational Backdrop

Common leadership challenges described by the participants include team conflicts, resilience difficulties or communication issues, related to AI introduction and market competition. Coaches consistently position these challenges as rooted in specific organizational and structural conditions. P2 illustrates this context: "there is a big uncertainty on the leader side, because on one hand, they know we have to introduce AI in our organization, but the

leaders very often don't know exactly: what does it mean practically?" A recurring structural factor across participants' accounts is top-down cost pressure and meeting efficiency demands, often embedded in a geopolitical context: "recurring themes are always the budget pressure (…). It's always about the integration of the technology, combined with the need to become extremely more productive and laying off people" (P4). P9 describes this structural dimension through the concept of the "Great Flattening", referring to the disruption of hierarchical information systems that have traditionally defined organizational life: "all the things, the pillars on which they base their growth in a hierarchy seems to erode. The decision-making process is changing. You cannot rely on your experience anymore." P5 brings in another dimension, stating that there is a huge gap between organizational adoption promise and reality: "especially when you work with larger companies, sometimes the speed is really not there. So in practice, it means, I don't know, they have access to Co-Pilot and that's it." Multiple coaches in this sample furthermore mention the speed of change and the omnipresence of AI as an important stressor, being topic of public discourse and spanning from professional work to private life: "[AI] is impacting everything from A to Z (…). It's really profound. It's in every industry. It's for every role and it's fast, evolving like nothing before" (P5).

The Affective Response

Participants' accounts suggest that these leadership challenges seldom appear directly in the coaching conversation. Mostly, coaches must dig down until they can identify AI as the underlying root cause for the broader challenges described above. P2 describes it the following way: "I would say it's a little bit undercover at the moment, but it's obvious here that this is on the plate." P2 continues by explaining that these AI-related leadership challenges often appear as a "side issue" but constitute the core of the challenge. After uncovering the topic, coaches consistently describe an affective core of the challenge as fear, powerlessness, and overwhelm. This manifests at two poles depending on the leader's orientation toward the disruption. P8 states:

> Generally, there's a certain vulnerability about AI, about feeling either a loss of identity, I'm the boss, I'm supposed to know but I don't. Or a threatened fear of loss of job or fear that the future is no longer within their control, for example. And there's also a certain feeling of just being overwhelmed by the number of tools and the pace of change.

This claim represents one side of the affective response, where leaders appear almost paralyzed, overwhelmed by technological developments, resistant to the adoption and avoidant in the

articulation of the topic. On the other hand, some leaders try to approach AI more actively, seeking the opportunity to advance their business. These leaders often come into the coaching conversation with an open and curious mindset: "but you have also the opposite cases that you have very, very engaged, ambitious leaders. And then they want to push for it […] and they know that this is the future" (P2). Coaches' narratives make clear that both poles are affective responses to the same underlying disruption – one expressed as paralysis, the other as pressing urgency.

The Identity Question

Throughout the interviews, it is consistently emphasized that this affective experience described above cuts deeper than job insecurity, as it threatens the foundation of professional identity. P3 uses the iceberg model as a metaphor to articulate this. Following that model, the challenge lies not on the surface in the form of tool adaptation or skill gaps, but below, in the form of purpose, growth and identity.

> And then you implement something on the surface, but the question is always like (…) what is happening to my identity, or if I am identifying myself with this role and this job, which will be changed by technology tomorrow (. …) And the question is always like, am I still the right person? Will I be unemployed as of tomorrow? (P3).

P2 adds that these challenges are intensified with agentic AI. Leaders question their own role within an organization when agents take over positions and suddenly perform tasks autonomously: "They also understand really, oh, wow, the world will completely change with this, in particular with agentic AI" (P2).

This affective dimension does not only encompass fear but also moral distress. P4 articulates the central question leaders need to deal with: "Am I willing to be part of a system that implements AI in a human way or not?" This adds nuance to the identity question, as it also indicates that leaders need to actively revise their self-concept in relation to their organizations' AI-adoption. This plays an especially significant role on team level, when leaders need to address fears of their employees: "anxiety leads to problems in their teams as you start seeing that people start fighting for their work (…) because they fear that a much stronger usage of AI (…) might make them redundant" (P1). This indicates that leaders need to address their own anxiety alongside their teams' fears, raising moral questions about their leadership identity.

In summary, coaches consistently describe leaders' severe affective reactions to AI-related leadership challenges. Simultaneously, they position coaching as the first space in which

this experience can be named and worked with. The affective landscape of AI-related leadership challenges is the foundation which all subsequent themes respond to.

Theme 2: The Coach Identity Dilemma – Between Coaching and Consulting

Participants repeatedly indicate that AI-related leadership challenges provoke a fundamental professional identity question: whether to maintain a non-directive stance that locates expertise within the coachee or to draw on their own AI knowledge to provide directive guidance. How coaches resolve this tension reflects their core professional self-concept and increasingly their own relationship to AI as a professional resource. Different manifestations of this identity question can be observed along a spectrum that serves as an organizing framework for this theme. Along the spectrum, four different positions emerge throughout the analysis. This variation across the sample reflects meaningful differences in how coaches have constructed their professional identity in relation to AI.

The Strict Coaching Position

On one side of the spectrum sits the "strict coaching" position, which P1, P3, P10, P11, and P4 take on. Importantly, these coaches do not avoid sharing personal experience altogether, but limit it to situations where the coachee is stuck and draw a clear line that that's where coaching ends. P1 describes this position as "resisting the kind of shortcut of consulting (…) he is the expert for his team, he is the expert for the situation, so I'm just kind of helping him unpack his knowledge to use it in the right way." P10 illustrates this from a different angle: "I truly focus on coaching (...) it's more around the human element, the intimacy, the way I'm asking questions." Notably, both P10 and P4 possess meaningful AI knowledge yet maintain this strict boundary, indicating that AI literacy and identity integration are genuinely separate variables. For these coaches, AI has not become part of their coaching identity; it sits external to it as a topic they may know about but have not integrated into who they are as practitioners. Commitment to the coaching stance represents their belief that the answer lies within the coachee and that directive input undermines both autonomy and the integrity of the coaching relationship.

The Conscious Navigation of Stances

P2 and P5, on the other hand, describe deliberate movements between roles depending on session needs, while remaining conscious of the tension this creates. P5 articulates this switch precisely: "when you talk about AI specifically, then it's more you put on the advisor hat or the consulting hat" (P5). What distinguishes this position from the strict coaching stance is the identity from which the switch is made: P5 positions their entire professional identity around

AI, describing it as their "bread and butter." This frames the advisory move not as a departure from their coaching identity but an expression of it. P2 reaches a similar position through a different route, switching into a consulting role specifically when AI literacy gaps make it necessary: "after we realized that education is necessary in that area, I switched to a consulting role" (P2), framing the shift as pragmatic and temporary rather than a question of identity.

The Hybrid Integration: AI as Identity Extension

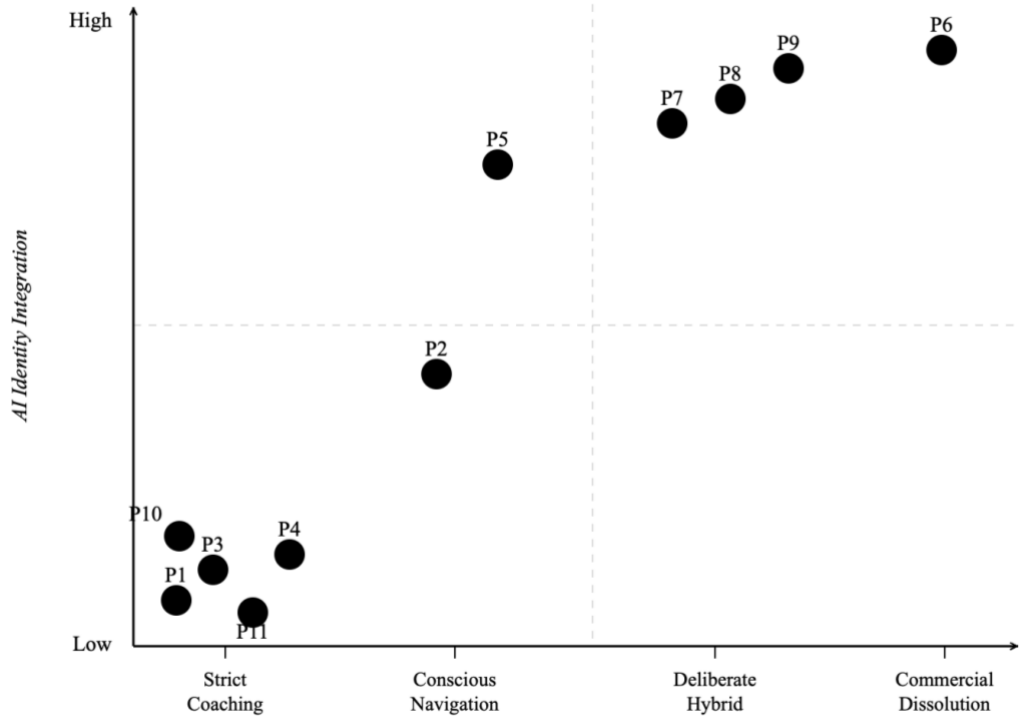
Moving further along the spectrum, P8, P7 and P9 position themselves as deliberately hybrid coaches, in which boundaries are dissolved by choice. P7 describes his practice as "a mixture between coaching and consulting (…) I bring the methodology, I bring the set of tools that a coach has, but I also, with my professional background, I can also add content." P8 describes an ongoing identity renegotiation that becomes visible in their professional presentation: "I've just changed my headline on LinkedIn. Before I only had coaching with AI. Now I've changed it to coaching with and without AI." This shift is not a retreat from their AI-integrated identity but as an expression of the coaching philosophy: "it's also about meeting the other where they are and what they need, which is kind of a credo of mine." P9 is the strongest instance of the hybrid position, describing themself as an "AI augmented coach", who works with AI every day as a co-worker. In this instance, AI and human coaching are not competing but complementary: "I automated so many of my tasks that I have lots of time to talk about the important thing: why do you feel, what do you want to feel like" (P9).

A New AI-Coaching Category

On the far end sits P6, who has dissolved the boundary most completely while simultaneously expressing the position as an AI expert and "sparring partner". They describe a business model in which the boundary between coach and AI tool is deliberately designed: "you have the opportunity to work with [coach name] the original. And during then at night or so when you wake up, have an idea or had a nightmare, you can also ask the co-coach." In this framing, AI does not compete with the human coach but serves as a complementary offering, with P6 marketing access to personal coaching as the premium product that distinguishes them from the bot. They remain confident in the continued relevance of human coaching while simultaneously integrating AI as a structural feature of practice: "AI will become a co-coach, so to say and this is also what I'm trying to develop as my own business model." In this case, the commercial boundary between coaching and consulting has not been crossed but declared irrelevant by a new professional category altogether. The relationship between coaches' identity positioning towards AI and their coaching approach is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Spectrum of Coach Identity Positioning and their Resolution of the Coaching Approach Tension



Note. Figure generated by Claude AI (Sonnet 4.6). The x-axis represents coaches' navigation stance, ranging from a strictly non-directive coaching position to commercial dissolution of the coaching-consulting boundary. The y-axis represents the degree to which coaches have integrated AI into their professional identity. Participant positions are based on the researcher's interpretive judgment derived from the TA and the constructed meaning of participants' accounts. The figure is intended as an analytical illustration of the relationship between the two dimensions, not as a discrete empirical finding.

A pattern interpretable across the dataset suggests that AI-related leadership challenges intensify the coaching-consulting tension, as they often require content knowledge that a non-directive methodology alone cannot address. As P11 describes, coachees actively demand answers: "right now, when it comes to the topic of AI, people are desperately looking for someone who can provide immediate, substantive assistance" (translated from German). This demand is harder to resist when the stakes are high, and the timeline is tight. Therefore, some coaches have shifted their coaching identity actively to include AI advisory, seeing it as "much faster and much more efficient" (P2). AI literacy is therefore not a determinant of a coach's position on the spectrum, but rather an enabler. It expands the range of directive support a coach can offer once they have chosen to integrate AI into their professional identity. P5 addresses this directly: "If I was not a speaker on AI and leadership, if I didn't run an AI native company, I think I would really, really struggle", underlining how deeply integrated AI-literacy is into

their self-concept as a coach. How coaches have resolved this identity dilemma also shapes the navigation practices they bring to AI-related coaching work, which will be analyzed in the following theme.

Theme 3: Creating Movement from Overwhelm to Agency

This theme suggests that coaches address AI-related leadership challenges through a consistent, sequential response: surfacing AI as the underlying concern, anchoring the leader in personal reflection, and translating those insights into concrete actions. Within this sequence, coaches primarily draw on established coaching methodologies, while a subset actively incorporates AI-specific interventions. The balance between these methodologies reflects how coaches approach the identity dilemma described in theme 2.

Diagnosing the Hidden Challenge

The first step in the coaching conversation is to identify the root cause of the challenge the leader is facing. As established in theme 1, AI-related challenges are rarely the initial reason coaches are approached, making this a multi-step, iterative task. Coaches primarily describe an iterative questioning process as a tool to uncover the root cause. P1 describes this as "dig deeper, deeper, deeper and come to the real problem" and P5 similarly illustrates: "and then when you drill down, then you come to these topics (…) and then the AI comes out." Participant accounts consistently note that this diagnostic move is not AI-specific. They describe that uncovering and working around AI is not more challenging than uncovering any other change issue; it just appears more unavoidable and complex.

Applying Established Methodology

Once the topic is surfaced, coaches draw primarily on established methods to address it. Among those are profiling tools, systemic questioning, the GROW model, SCARF model, Covey's circles of control, the iceberg model, and the feeling wheel. Most of these approaches are rooted in positive psychology and/or in a systemic coaching view. Established coaching approaches seem suitable for addressing AI-related leadership challenges, suggesting that the core of these challenges is not fundamentally different from other change-related topics. P2 states this directly: "the approach is not rocket science, that's the typical coaching approach you would go for." P5 adds to that: "At the end of the day, it's a change. And the coach has to understand how the client goes through change best. In this case, it's AI." This indicates that coaches see AI-related leadership challenges as intensified change topics and established coaching methods are evaluated to provide adequate support.

AI-Specific Interventions

Alongside these classic coaching methods, some coaches have established novel AI-specific interventions to address those challenges. Multiple coaches deliberately start with a non-professional, non-threatening use of AI to reduce avoidance. P8 encouraged one client to start vacation planning using Chat GPT. P11 describes a similar approach: „he first had to (…) develop a roadmap for himself on this. Yes, and if it was, let's say, planning a weekend trip (…) with an assistant that happened to be called ChatGPT" (translated from German). P9 regularly starts with AI "example tasks that help them very much." After these low-stakes private applications, personal gains are transferred into a professional context. This pattern emerges independently across several coaches with different backgrounds. Therefore, this approach appears as practitioner-developed rather than a taught methodology. In addition to this pattern, some coaches have further adjusted their coaching approach to address AI-related challenges. For example, P7 follows a specific AI-literacy education approach, guided by the premise that coachees need to understand the context of AI in their industry to be able to act upon that: „I would help him understand: what are the capabilities of AI? How do you approach that in your industry? (…) And then we speak about how do you implement a culture of AI that is communicated in the entire organizations by the management." P6 offers a specifically designed AI strategy coaching aimed at creating a vision of his coachee's personal future with AI: "so what I have developed is on the one hand a coaching program where I advise executive managers how to develop an AI strategy, a lasting AI strategy." This connects directly to theme 2: the more coaches are leaning towards an AI-integrated identity on the spectrum, the more experimental they are with AI-specific interventions.

Restoring Agency as the Overarching Goal

Despite the variation, all approaches are aimed at a consistent goal: provoking self-directed insights to restore the leader's felt sense of agency. The movement reported is always from a feeling of uncertainty or powerlessness to a sense that the challenge can be actively shaped. P3 draws on Covey's circles of control as an orienting frame for this process, describing the coaching task as expanding the coachee's circle of influence:

> What can I control? (…) Circle of influence. Circle of concern is bigger. And in between there is a space and in this space there happens like fear, anxiety, being not in control (. …) So this is where coaching comes in to cool down a little bit.

P11 describes this process as "step by step getting ahead of the wave" (translated from German). P8 reports the case of a female leader that was very uncertain in the beginning of the coaching relation but ended up receiving recognition from her supervisors for a self-developed AI database. P8 describes that ultimately "it's about empowerment and (…) you feel more confident about using it." P9 summarizes the process: "they understood that it's not against them but with them." Interestingly, despite all the different routes the coaches take, they all agree that their task is to restore the leader's agency rather than solving the AI problem directly. Within that framework, the coach is not the answer. The leaders restored capacity to navigate the challenge is. To do so, coaches draw on fundamentally human abilities such as empathy and relational work, which function as a lever for their practice. The next theme describes that these capabilities are central to enabling personal development.

Theme 4: The Irreducible Human Core in Coaching

Theme 4 summarizes coaches' underlying core belief that becomes visible when dealing with AI-related leadership challenges. Coaches experience the human core both as their primary navigation resource and their professional differentiator in times of AI. This core contains empathy, relational trust, presence and the ability to create inner clarity. At the same time, it describes the leadership capabilities that AI-disrupted organizations need to develop.

Empathy and Presence as Active Professional Capacities

Across the whole sample, coaches describe empathy and presence as trained professional capacities that they deliberately apply in AI-related coaching work. P9 contributes to this theme in the most technical way, stating: "I'm ahead because I feel I really rely on my empathetic reaction (…) I have a feeling, and the gut feeling is usually so well-trained after eight years that I'm right mostly." Furthermore, empathetic attunement is framed as an active step to elevate the coaching into a very intimate, personal setting. In addition, P4 highlights the importance of presence: "I try to really, really, really be there – that's the art of executive coaching." P8 connects directly to that: "it's very often in helping them slow down and reflect. Sometimes it's with using tools, sometimes it's also with this kind of authentic presence in a coaching situation." These capabilities enable coaches to read what is not said, hold complexity without resolving it prematurely, and create conditions for insights.

In addition, the ability to slow down and center their coachees represents both a coaching instrument and leadership capability. Presence is thereby seen as a relational offer: a behavior that coaches actively integrate into their practice to be able to listen, make sense of the coachees' challenge, and guide them to find the solution. Simultaneously, they model the

very behavior they seek to develop in leaders to enable them in overcoming their challenges. Significantly, P10 highlights that in this context, "carving out time for reflection and stillness is even more important." P4 places heavy emphasis on reflection in practice as well: "we see our role as a learner, as a curious learner, that enables the clients to be creative and give them a reflection space about their life, or its challenges, no matter what challenges these are." It is further argued that presence is needed to be able to reflect, which is exactly the offer that the coaching conversation makes. P6 pursues a similar goal: "and at the same time the role of a coach is to maintain without all that uncertainty, this personal inner stability." P8 describes actively slowing down coachees to enable more conscious decision-making and perspective-taking. Importantly, most coaches explicitly see this practice as a counter position to the speed and complexity of AI-related leadership challenges as described in theme 1. From this point of view, coaching offers exactly what the AI age threatens to eliminate.

The AI Distinction

Coaches' emphasis on empathy and presence is consistently paired with an explicit distinction from what AI can offer. This distinction emerges specifically in the context of AI-related challenges through coaches articulating what their practice consists of by naming what AI cannot replicate. P10 explains: "Empathy can't be delivered by machine. It can mask and masquerade as such, but it can't truly be delivered." And P8 declares: "AI can't do that — holding space, presence, dealing with complexity." P3 illustrates the distinction further: *"*Reading the field, is he enraged, is he crying, is he furious, and taking that into the coaching conversation and pacing that. This is not AI. It cannot be done by AI." Notably, this articulation also comes from coaches who have built AI tools themselves (P7, P8). The AI context appears to function as a trigger that makes the human core of coaching explicitly visible to practitioners. Consequently, they describe this dimension of their practice as both irreducible and increasingly salient.

The Symmetry: What Coaches Bring Mirrors What Leaders Need

At the same time, these capabilities are precisely what coaches identify as most urgently needed from leaders the age of AI. P5 emphasizes that "we need to focus a lot on those areas where we have a competitive advantage against AI: critical thinking, ethical judgment, presence, relational work. I believe the distinction and recognition of these different skills is the leadership skill itself." Thereby, the symmetry becomes visible: what coaches bring to the coaching conversation is exactly what leaders need. P9 makes the connection directly: "you need to be more empathetic, more team-leading (...) your leadership role is keeping the room."

P4 argues that the pace of life in the AI age requires leaders to be present. This in turn enables them to make well-informed decisions and be self-aware of their role on individual and team-level. The irreducibility of the human core of coaching is therefore not accidental. It is based on a structural alignment between what coaching is as a practice and what AI-disrupted leadership most needs as a competence. Whether coaches can draw on these human capacities with confidence, or struggle to access them under the pressure of AI disruption, depends on the parallel experience described in theme 5.

Theme 5: Coaches as Co-Navigators of AI-Related Challenges

Theme 5 functions as an overarching explanatory frame for the previously described dynamics. Across the whole sample, a consistent pattern can be constructed: Coaches are not outside of the disruption their coachees' experience, they are part of the same system. In parallel to their coachees, they face uncertainty about AI's impact on their professional role, economic impact on the coaching market, and the need to actively adapt their practice and identity. One predisposition of how coaches approach this challenge lies in their individual professional biography and how much they are used to adapting to different environments. Those who have repeatedly faced private and professional disruption approach their own AI adoption as familiar territory. Coaches without this biographical resource show more visible vulnerability.

This theme is an analytical construct built across cases rather than a finding stated directly by participants. No single coach describes their own parallel processing in these terms. The interpretation rests on several observable patterns in the data. Coaches frequently shift from third person to first-person plural when discussing AI uncertainty, thereby placing themselves inside the disruption they are describing. They also draw on the same framework for their own AI experience as for their coachees', which includes language of not knowing, of needing to reinvent, of adapting through biography. The structural parallel between the agency-restoration goal in theme 3 and the coaches' biographical readiness concept further supports the cross-case construction. The following section examines these patterns through participants' accounts.

Coaches' Parallel Processing of AI

Multiple coaches report experiencing similar uncertainties, identity questions, and adaptation pressures to those their coachees face. Expressed in various degrees, this takes the form of parallel processing. Like their coachees, coaches need to make sense of the labor market disruption, how they want to position themselves, and what the future may hold. P9 illustrates this most explicitly, by explaining that specific AI-related homework they give their coachees is something they did in the past as well: "Drop this into the AI and ask it: where will you

replace me? I did this in 2022. ChatGPT said it would help me in 45% of what I do. This is revenue. I'm self-employed. So, 45% is like shit." P6 makes a connected statement: "you have those moments where you think: holy shit, where is this everything heading to? And then it helps to (. …) I follow my own recommendations." P3 suggests this parallel processing more directly: "the biggest challenge that we have at the moment is that nobody the fuck knows what will happen in two years."

Coaches' parallel navigation manifests in three concrete dimensions: their own AI literacy development, the active integration of AI into their coaching practice, and the economic pressure of a disrupted coaching market. Participants' accounts consistently describe ongoing AI self-education in response to the disruption, including both formal training and independent learning. Furthermore, most coaches actively integrate AI into coaching as a competitive response to save time, increase effectiveness, and sometimes as a feedback source to improve their own coaching practice. For example, P10 explains that he uses AI to analyze some of his session transcripts for "very specific guidance in terms of how I can actually improve, optimize, how I behave, how I act, how I communicate in those coaching sessions."

At the same time, coaches experience this need to adapt as pressure within the coaching market. P3 declares: "I used to have like 30 something coaching conversations a month like a year ago and I now have one or two (. …) So and this is happening due to the fact that everybody is like under big cost pressure." P11 openly expresses uncertainty about clients who continuously request shorter and faster coaching engagements to keep up with the pace of transformation: "The other trend I'm seeing here, and I'm not entirely sure it's the most effective approach, is this constant drive to break everything down into small, easily digestible chunks" (translated from German). These statements can be seen as evidence that coaches are affected by the AI-disruption themselves, not only observing it through their coachee's eyes.

Coaches' Personal Resources

Coaches who have repeatedly overcome personal or professional disruption in the past approach their AI uncertainty with greater confidence, more active adoption strategies and a more stable coaching identity. P9, a coach that integrated AI heavily into their work and offers a self-description as an "AI augmented coach" illustrates this: "I needed to look for moving jobs, not only once, but five times. I know how this feels. And I had to reinvent myself actually four times." P5, actively marketing their own coaching framework around AI on LinkedIn makes the connection to AI more directly: "I have changed in my own life a lot (. …) also with AI, I see it more as an opportunity than a threat, but because that is something that you do when

you had to adopt a lot in your life." This active reflection on their own past positions the personal history of change as the main determinant of how AI is approached and made sense of. P6, who trains their own chatbots and developed an AI strategy program, expresses a similar line of thought, while still being openly uncertain:

> Being born somewhere completely different, having seen a lot of very different challenges myself worldwide (…) yes, I feel all in all pretty well equipped methodically, also from my inner stability. And yet at the same time, you have those moments where you where you think, holy shit, where is this everything heading to?

In addition to biographical readiness, a second resource is described repeatedly. Several coaches built successful careers in technology and IT before transitioning into coaching, equipping them with domain-specific knowledge that shapes how they approach AI-related cases in practice. P7, a former global CIO, describes this directly: "I can also talk somewhat intelligently about the topic, which makes it a little different to when you come in just as a coach with a set of tools." P10 points to a relational function: the shared professional history creates trust with coachees: "it's just the knowledge at the coachee's end that I've gone through the same thing. That does some type of magic." Biographical adaptability and domain proximity therefore emerge as two distinct but complementary resources.

Taken together, the five themes form the following argument: coaching in the AI context is neither a standardized intervention nor a one-directional sensemaking process. Coaches and leaders navigate the same disruption from different positions, one inside the organizational system, one outside it. The themes indicate how that shared condition shapes the affective landscape coaches encounter, the identity questions it raises for them, the navigation practices they develop in response, and the biographical resources they draw on to sustain that work.

Discussion

This study's aim was to explore how executive coaches experience and navigate AI-related leadership challenges. Following the TA approach by Braun and Clarke (2006), five distinct themes were constructed from the data. The five themes collectively support and advance the understanding of coaching as a sensemaking process affected by AI disruption itself. The following discussion interprets these findings through two primary lenses: sensemaking theory (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995) and social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Coaching as a Shared Sensemaking Space

A central interpretive thread across all five themes is sensemaking. The findings of this study suggest that AI-driven organizational disruption complicates individual sensemaking in ways that appear to exceed other organizational change contexts.

Theme 1 indicates that leaders struggle to articulate the affective experience they bring into coaching. This indirect entry pattern may be itself understood as a sensemaking disruption. Leaders cannot directly identify and articulate what they are experiencing, which shows the depth of the disruption. This may partly account for the feeling of overwhelm, as sensemaking is a central mental and intrapersonal process for gaining clarity and staying actionable in times of change (Weick, 1995). The organizational conditions described in theme 1 appear to produce this affective response directly, as the foundations of professional identity are eroded. The coaching relationship then offers the first space in which the affective dimension can be named.

Importantly, the coaching relationship seems to function as a structured sensemaking space not only for leaders but for coaches themselves. As illustrated in theme 5, the parallel-processing dynamic extends existing sensemaking theory. Coaching in AI contexts can be seen as a shared rather than one-directional sensemaking process, as both the coach and the coachee engage in meaning construction simultaneously. While the coach still sits outside the coachee's organizational system, they are part of the experienced technological disruption. This adds another dimension to existing research, positioning the coaching space as primarily a sensemaking space for coachees.

This also extends Schermuly et al.'s (2024) and Bajpai's (2024) dual impact thesis in a significant direction. The present findings suggest that the dual impact of technological advancements on coaching is also observable on an affective, identity-based level. This dimension is absent from Bajpai's (2024) research and represents a substantive development of it. Recent empirical work at the intersection of AI and coaching shows parallels. Bozer and Kotte (2026) found that internal coaches engage in both protective and expansive identity work in response to AI adoption in their organization. The present study complements this finding by suggesting that the identity reevaluation may be partly provoked by a shared sensemaking between coach and coachee.

Parallel Identity Dynamics in Coaches and Leaders

While sensemaking theory explains how leaders and coaches construct meaning under disruption, social identity theory illuminates that this disruption feels so acute because it operates at the level of professional self-concept (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). On the one hand,

leaders' resistance to AI adoption reflects an identity threat within a valued professional category. On the other hand, coaches' navigation of the consulting boundary, described in theme 2, reflects identity maintenance and reconstruction within their own professional self-concept. The parallel between these two identity dynamics is itself analytically significant. Both coaches and leaders are engaged in social identity work in response to the same disruption, which the parallel processing finding in theme 5 makes structurally visible.

Furthermore, the coaching identity dilemma finding in theme 2 directly engages with the documented tension between coaching and consulting orientations (Lambrechts et al., 2009; Popovic & Jinks, 2013). The contribution of this study is the identification of professional identity formation as the primary driver of coaches' positioning along the spectrum in the context of AI coaching. This adds important nuance: a coach can be highly AI-literate and maintain a strict non-directive boundary at the same time, as P1 and P10 demonstrate. Theme 3, describing the navigation approach, connects directly to this pattern. Coaches who have included AI in their professional identity experience the more directive or educational coaching approach not as boundary crossing, but as an extension of their practice. In addition, the commercial dissolution of P6 and partly P9 as a fourth position on the coaching-consulting spectrum is not yet described by existing boundary frameworks. Until now, this boundary was treated as a professional tension to be managed. P6's position suggests that their professional identity was actively reconstructed in response to AI, making the professional boundary obsolete.

It is also worth considering whether coaches' commitment to the non-directive boundary, particularly those with lower AI integration, reflects a genuine belief. Another possible explanation could be that this is a defense mechanism in response to AI as a threat to their expertise. The data cannot resolve this question, but it is analytically important to consider.

This finding also raises an ethical question that should be acknowledged. As coaches increasingly integrate AI advisory into their practice, the boundary between developmental support and commercial AI consultancy becomes less clear. This raises questions about the scope of practice and whether coachees are aware of the shift in role they are receiving. Professional bodies have begun to address these questions in relation to AI coaching tools (Passmore et al., 2025), but equivalent guidance for coaches navigating AI-related content in leadership conversations remains underdeveloped.

Methodological Contributions. A further contribution of this study concerns coaching methodology in AI change contexts, closely tied to the question of coaches' identity. Coaches

in this sample primarily rely on systemic questioning, reframing, profiling tools, and reflective dialogue as coaching techniques. This is in line with Bickerich et al. (2018), demonstrating that coaching effectively supports leaders through organizational transitions with communication, emotional regulation and transfer of learning. The findings of this study suggest that change-oriented coaching methodology is adequate for AI-related challenges. This supports the analytical claim that coaches treat AI as an intensified change topic instead of a categorically new phenomenon. The present findings extend Du Toit's (2007) argument by identifying a specific mechanism through which interpretive flexibility is actively developed in coaching practice. Through low-stakes experimental exercises, leaders can revise unconscious blockades and develop an understanding of the construct that is causing their identity disruption.

Human-Centered Capabilities. Lastly, theme 4 provides empirical grounding for the claim that human-centered capabilities become more salient as AI takes over technical functions (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Dwivedi, 2025; Frimpong, 2025). Empathy, relational attunement, and presence are components of the emotional intelligence that those sources describe and are at the same time coaches' core competencies. Especially the symmetry finding, illustrating that what coaches bring mirrors what leaders need to develop, adds a structural observation. This connects the coaching findings back to the leadership literature and positions coaching as a specifically appropriate developmental response.

However, it should be noted that this symmetry may partly reflect a professional self-justification dynamic. Coaches who position their core competencies as precisely what the AI age demands have a commercial interest in making that case, even if it happens unconsciously. Importantly, the results suggest that the AI context itself triggers coaches' articulation of the human core. It is made explicitly visible precisely because it is perceived as under pressure. This connects to the ongoing identity evaluation described in theme 5. Coaches express uncertainty about their own role regarding AI and may therefore become more conscious of what their practice irreducibly consists of. The consistency of the structural alignment observation does indicate credibility of the interpretation, but the possibility of motivated reasoning cannot be fully excluded. Whether this articulation reflects genuine practitioner insight, identity defense, or both remains an open question that future research should examine directly. What the present study contributes is the empirical observation that AI disruption does not leave the coaching relationship unchanged. It enters the coaching conversation on both sides, shaping which challenges leaders bring and how coaches approach those in ways that are analytically inseparable.

Limitations and Methodological Reflection

Participant Selection Bias

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the purposeful sampling introduced a self-selection dynamic. Participating coaches were defined by the inclusion criteria as those who had encountered AI-related challenges and were willing to discuss them. Therefore, the sample likely over-represented coaches who are reflective about AI and professionally confident in discussing it. Simultaneously, the research question induced a sample constraint. As the phenomenon of AI-related leadership challenges from the coaches' perspective was the research objective, exclusion of those with no experience regarding those challenges was predetermined. Consequently, this study examined how coaches who experience those AI-related challenges navigate them, not how the coaching profession in general responds. Still, the low response rate to study participation was surprising. About 80% of initially approached coaches reported no relevant encounters with those challenges; therefore, it can be hypothesized that their perspective on the topic largely differs from that of this sample. This contradicts the prior assumption that AI literacy is a genuine widespread issue which coaches are dealing with and is an analytically interesting finding itself. Consequently, the results of the analysis present limited transferability.

To explore the non-detection rate, a supplementary expert conversation was conducted with a German-speaking coach with over 20 years of experience who had not explicitly encountered AI-related challenges in practice. This conversation was not part of the primary data analysis, was not coded through the same process, and cannot support analytical claims with the same evidential weight as the primary data. Its value is purely explanatory, to illustrate the discussion of this study's findings. The interview raised the possibility that collective professional avoidance of the topic, instead of absence of the phenomenon, may partly account for the non-detection rate. This connects to findings of the present study. Resistance to AI-related change seems to be not only a leaders' reaction but one shared by coaches as well. Coaches may try to ignore the topic because of its potentially severe affective disruption regarding their identity. Coaches in this sample seem to be aware of this dynamic as well. P5 states: "I generally think there is still among coaches there is a lot of resistance as well." And P6 explains their professional positioning towards AI: "for me, it's a matter of also indirectly of a competitive advantage against coaches who basically ignore AI or are so afraid of AI that they don't touch that thing." Importantly, this claim remains a hypothesis and is not fully consistent with the primary data, it only presents an interpretation of the non-detection rate of

this study. Further, it cannot support any analytical statements and is presented for illustrative purposes only.

Participant Characteristics Limitations

Another limitation of this study is found in the sample composition. Despite initial outreach to a gender-balanced group of coaches, there was significant gender imbalance. This may have shaped findings in ways that are not fully visible. If the coaching identity dilemma, parallel processing, or biographical readiness are experienced differently across the gender line, it cannot be explained by this sample. A few hypothetical explanations could explain this circumstance. First, the sample showed that biographical readiness, particularly a background in Tech and IT, shaped coaches' engagement with AI. Since women are generally underrepresented in that profession, there may be a smaller number of female coaches with that professional predisposition to begin with. Furthermore, a study by Aldasoro et al. (2024) showed that women in general are less likely to use and engage with AI. The gender imbalance in this sample may reflect this pattern, showing that female coaches tend to engage to a lesser degree with AI compared to male coaches in general. These explanations are preliminary and not empirically grounded in this sample but could have influenced the study's sampling procedure.

Regarding the sample composition, the German-speaking organizational context further limits transferability. The coaching profession's relationship to AI, norms around the coaching-consulting boundary, and the specific challenges of German-speaking organizations may differ from those in other cultural and linguistic settings. The findings of this study should therefore be understood as contextually situated rather than universally applicable.

Study Design Limitations

Apart from sampling, results must be interpreted against the backdrop of the single-coder design. Since this thesis was conducted by a single researcher, codes and themes were not independently verified. Systematic coherence checking, reflexive memo-keeping, and documented codebook revision across all eleven transcripts addressed this issue to a meaningful degree. Still, alternative analytical interpretations cannot be ruled out.

A further design aspect worth mentioning is the online setting of the interviews. While Zoom is generally seen as an appropriate way to conduct qualitative interviews (Archibald et al., 2019), it still presents some limitations. For example, connection issues disrupted the flow of interviews from time to time. This limitation is acknowledged but does not invalidate the data, as the interviews produced detailed accounts across all participants.

Finally, this study explored a specific moment in time (end of 2025, beginning of 2026), during which AI is emerging but not yet fully embedded in most organizational contexts. As AI capabilities evolve and organizational adoption matures, both the nature of the challenges and the coaching response will likely change. Consequently, the study can be viewed as a situated empirical snapshot instead of a stable account of an established phenomenon.

Researchers' Inside Positioning

A circumstance that requires special reflexive attention is the researcher's employment position in an executive coaching start-up from which about half of the participants were recruited. This potentially introduced social desirability effects despite structural safeguards. Coaches from the professional network may have presented their practice more positively than with a fully external researcher. Even if during recruiting the research's aim was clearly connected to the researcher's role as a student and not as an employee of the company, such effects cannot be ruled out. During the interviews, the researcher could not find any indication of such biases. To remain reflexive regarding that issue, coaches with whom the researcher had closer contact were excluded and for every interview a reflexive log was kept to document interview dynamics. This log included prior knowledge about each participant and an evaluation of relational observations and researcher-participant dynamics after each interview. Furthermore, the researcher stated their position in the beginning of every interview and refrained from engaging in any conversation that involved the coaching employer before the interview was conducted. These reflexive acknowledgements define the study's boundaries without invalidating its findings.

Future Directions

Several productive directions for future research are indicated by the present study's findings and limitations. First, connected to the momentary snapshot argument, a longitudinal study could track how coaching practice evolves as AI matures and organizational adoption deepens. This could offer more insights into how the parallel processing and coaches' sensemaking processes vary over time. Second, a comparative study across cultural and linguistic contexts could test transferability of the identity spectrum, the biographical readiness argument, and parallel processing findings. Furthermore, an extension of the current study to include leaders' experience of AI-related challenges would help to establish complete frameworks of the coaching relationship within the age of AI. The present study explored only one side of the coaching relationship and is therefore insufficient to provide full interpretive accounts of the dyadic coaching relationship.

Connected to the discussion points around the sample limitations, two studies would help to clarify implications for a broader sample: on the one hand, this includes the empirical investigation of the collective defensive avoidance hypothesis through a study specifically designed to examine coaches who report no AI-related leadership challenges. This would require a different sampling strategy than the one employed in the present study. On the other hand, the examination of gender as a variable in AI-related coaching identity and parallel processing is currently underdeveloped and would benefit from future research.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study carry implications for practice across three levels: The coaching profession, coach training and development and organizations. First, described in theme 3, the examples of low-stakes AI experimentation suggest that coaching practice is generating its own specific methodology without institutional guidance. The fact that this pattern emerged independently across several coaches with different backgrounds has implications for how the profession develops and validates new approaches. Coaches' training programs should begin to integrate AI-specific coaching methodology based on empirical research. At the same time, it should be ensured that practitioner-generated knowledge becomes accessible to the broader coaching community.

Second, this study suggests that AI literacy training for coaches is in demand but underdeveloped. Coaches in this sample who had prior careers in technology reported that coachees' awareness of this background strengthened the coaching relationship by fostering trust and credibility. This indicates that AI literacy meaningfully expands coaches' professional effectiveness in these contexts. Based on theme 2, such training should extend beyond technical content to address questions of professional identity and positioning in relation to AI. Explicit guidance from professional bodies on where this boundary lies in AI-specific coaching contexts would also help coaches navigate the tension between coaching and consulting with greater confidence and consistency.

Finally, theme 4 positions executive coaching as a leadership development intervention that is structurally well-suited to the demands of the AI age. On the surface, AI demands increasingly technical and analytical functions. What remains distinctively human across organizational contexts are empathy, relational attunement, presence and the ability to create clarity within complexity. In practice, coaches both model and foster the behaviors that AI-disrupted leaders most urgently need to develop, therefore it should be considered as an appropriate development tool by organizational stakeholders.

Conclusion

This qualitative, interpretivist study addressed the following research question: *"How do executive coaches experience and navigate AI-related leadership challenges?"* It responds to a specific gap in the literature: while existing research treats AI predominantly as a delivery mechanism for coaching, the coaches' perspective inside AI-related leadership conversations remained empirically underexamined. Eleven executive coaches were interviewed, and their answers were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive TA.

Coaches described AI-related leadership challenges as producing a distinctively intense affective landscape. In response, coaches navigate a professional identity dilemma between non-directive and directive positioning, resolved differently across a spectrum shaped by how deeply AI has been integrated into their self-concept. Regardless of where they stand on that spectrum, their common goal is restoring leaders' sense of agency, drawing on empathy and presence as the irreducible human core of coaching. Coaches were further found to process AI disruption in parallel with their coachees, with biographical readiness and domain proximity functioning as key personal resources.

These five themes collectively advance the understanding of coaching in AI contexts as a shared sensemaking and identity negotiation process. This study thereby extends existing theoretical coaching frameworks, particularly around sensemaking, professional identity, and the coaching-consulting boundary. Additionally, it raises the need for updated coaching training that explicitly addresses AI literacy and professional identity. Furthermore, it illustrates the potential of executive coaching as a leadership development tool in AI-disrupted organizations, which may be directly relevant to organizational stakeholders, such as HR departments. These findings should be interpreted in the light of the study's key limitations: sample constitution, the single-coder design, researchers' role in the coaching industry and the time-bound nature of the data. Further research is needed to extend and test these findings across broader and more diverse samples.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the thesis preparation process

During the preparation of this thesis, the author used Claude AI (Sonnet 4.6) to proofread sections of the manuscript and check the logical coherence of the arguments. It was further used to visualize the findings of theme 2 in Figure 2. After using this tool, the author critically reviewed, edited, and revised the content as necessary and takes full responsibility for the content of the thesis.

Appendix

Interview Guide

Professional Background

1. Could you briefly describe your professional background and your experience as an executive coach?
    a. How long have you been coaching for?
    b. What types of leaders do you typically work with?
    c. In what kinds of industries or organizational contexts?
    d. How would you describe your coaching approach and philosophy?

Emergence of AI in Coaching Practice

2. In your coaching practice, how did challenges related to AI and technological change come up and could you describe how they appear?
    a. How frequently would you say this happens?
    b. In what kinds of contexts do they tend to arise?
3. In your own words, what makes a leadership challenge AI related?
    a. In what kind of leadership contexts do they tend to appear?
    b. How do these issues typically enter the coaching conversation?

Case-Based Exploration

4. I would like you to think of one concrete coaching case in which AI-related issues played a central role. Can you describe the situation in detail?
    a. What was the leader's role and context?
    b. What exactly was the AI-related issue?
    c. How did it first come up in coaching?
    d. What made this case challenging from your perspective as a coach?

    e. What was difficult about that situation?
    f. What did you feel during the process?
5. How did you as a coach interpret the coaching objective?
    a. What did you see as the core issue?
    b. What made you see it that way?
6. How did you navigate the situation in your coaching work?
    a. What kind of questions did you ask?
    b. What interventions or approaches did you use?
    c. Which experiences, prior knowledge or expertise did you rely on?
7. Looking back, how would you evaluate how that case unfolded?
    a. What seemed helpful?
    b. What aspects felt difficult or uncertain?
    c. Would you approach it differently today?

Patterns Across Cases

8. If you think about your past coaching cases, have you notices recurring themes and issues related to AI?
    a. How do these cases typically show up in coaching?
    b. What are typical leader concerns?
    c. Common misunderstanding?
9. Have AI-related challenges required you to adapt your coaching approach in any way?
    a. New competencies?
    b. New knowledge?
    c. Different types of questions?
    d. Greater emphasis on certain leadership capabilities?
10. Which differences do you see between AI-related challenges and other types of change-related leadership challenges?
    a. In what ways are they similar and in what way are they different?

Role Perception and Professional Positioning

11. How do you understand your role as a coach when leaders face AI-related transformation?
12. Do you feel sufficiently equipped to work with AI-related leadership challenges?

a. Where do you feel uncertainty?
b. What helps you?

Reflection

13. In your opinion, how might AI-related developments influence executive coaching in the coming years?
14. Is there anything important about AI-related leadership challenges in coaching that we have not yet discussed?