

Interview TrustTalk podcast with Reinhard Stelter

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Voice-Over: Welcome to TrustTalk. Our guest today is Reinhard Stelter, Professor of Sports and Coaching Psychology at the University of Copenhagen and an accredited coaching psychologist. He talks about his move from performance-oriented sports psychology towards developing coaching as a transformational dialogue where trust is the foundational premise. The focus is on developmental issues, where clients or dialogue partners struggle with themselves or specific challenges they are faced with. The perspective of dialogue coaching can be described as fellow human companionship. Dialogue guides, a professional coach or colleague or a friend, support their dialogue partner by including themselves in the dialogue as a collaborative and co-reflecting partner. Your host today, Severin de Wit.

Podcast Host: Reinhard. Welcome to TrustTalk. Today's subject is Trusted Coaching, an area of research you have been active for in the last few years. You have a PhD in psychology. What brought you to focus your research on coaching?

Reinhard Stelter: It was actually I'm originally working mainly in sport psychology and a bit more than 20 years ago I wrote a Handbook of Sport Psychology for the Danish psychological publisher, and the director of the publishing house asked me whether I could write a book which was more applied. I think he thought in the first place about mental training or something like this, and this was not really the field I was interested in. And I also have a background in psychotherapy, so I came back and then I wrote a book on coaching, which actually was the first Danish publication in coaching, and it became very successful. And I think in that sense coincidences brought me into coaching, although of course I had a basic interest in dialogue from the beginning, also because of my background in psychotherapy.

Podcast Host: Yeah, we're going to talk about dialogue a little later. As the podcast concentrates on trust, what is the most important trust perspective in coaching?

Reinhard Stelter: Trust is a very important topic in many domains, and I think what we lack in our society, in our late modern or postmodern society, is actually to have possibilities to go in-depth with another person. Social media are very superficial. A lot of talks in everyday life are very superficial. And what we really need is trustful relationships, because these relationships are the ones who are able to develop us. And in that sense, coaching could be a space where you could develop a trustful relationship to another person or to a group of people. And in that sense, also to grow as a human being.

Podcast Host: When preparing for this interview, I came across a term in coaching and it says "Transformative Dialogue". And you mentioned dialogue just a few minutes ago. What are the ideas behind this?

Reinhard Stelter: It's a term I actually prefer a transformative dialogue or transformational dialogue as something which describes coaching in my way of working with coaching. The aspect of transformation means that we always develop ourselves during our lifetime. I think sometimes we are challenged by specific situations which makes it necessary to really develop even further and further develop our self-identity. And in that sense, dialogue with another person who is educated and schooled in leading dialogues is an important way in this transformational process, which we always need to be involved in and to be able to grow.

Podcast Host: So what are in coaching relationship, the most important elements then?

Reinhard Stelter: I think one of the elements is what I would call relational attunement. So it's really something where you tune into another person and this is the basis for developing trust, that you meet the person, the other, your dialogue partner, in a relationship where there is a possibility for the other to reflect on something, to feel a fundamental acceptance for everything the dialogue guide meets in the other. Also, I'm inspired by a term from John Shotter, a communication research and practitioner who used the term "Witness Thinking" or "Witness Talk". So and this way of relating to another person is actually the foundation for developing trust.

Podcast Host: You mean "witness", not like in "the witness" but with a th.

Reinhard Stelter: Yeah, with th, as a closer relationship, because I'm also influenced by narrative thinking and there we also use this being a "whitness" for the other. So and this is actually another element, that you relate to something the other says, which might somehow also have an importance for you. And in that sense, there is this co-reflective process.

Podcast Host: Last year, you wrote an article in a book called "WeCoach!" called, "Being a Resonating Coaching Partner". I guess that's a little bit of follow-up of what you just said, right, to resonate with somebody.

Reinhard Stelter: Yeah. I used actually the term resonance to describe something. I mean, imagine a violin or a guitar. I mean, the sound from the strings comes actually from this resonating body. And we as a dialogue guide, the coach, are actually able to be giving resonance to something and really see something also through our eyes. It was actually quite an experience for me because I used in "The Art of Dialogue", in coaching, I used the term "resonance". And later on I noticed that a German sociologist by the name of Hartmut Rosa has actually published a book which has the title "Resonance". It's translated to English also in 2019. And I mean, he approaches actually that we live in a society of growing acceleration. He describes it in the way that if acceleration is the problem in many fields, technologically, individually and in social processes, if acceleration is the problem, resonance might be the solution. And he hasn't really focused very much on dialogue. But I use this term resonance to really show how we in this process of resonating with another person, can develop trust, can develop growth in our relationship, in that sense. So from this perspective of resonance, the term is also very fundamental for leading a good and trustful, or building a good and trustful relationship.

Podcast Host: I wanted to come back to what you just said about acceleration. I'm not quite sure whether I understand what acceleration, I mean, I could see acceleration in technology, but what is acceleration in interrelationships in relationship with each other?

Reinhard Stelter: Everything goes faster. That was his perspective. I mean, 30 years ago, we had maybe one or two television programs. Now we have maybe 100. And we can use other media to get access to firms and information and the processes, our life becomes accelerated, faster. In German, the term is "beschleunigung", so everything is really faster. And also our personal lives, we have more relationships, we have virtual relationships. 50 years ago we had just local friends

and neighbors. Now we have maybe thousands of friends or contacts through social media. So in this process, everything becomes also more superficial. And in that sense, trustful dialogues are so important to really develop because we need some spaces where we can also face challenges, face problems in our life situation and meeting an open mind from another person that helps us to really develop. And in that sense, trust is the foundation.

Podcast Host: It sounds like a simple truth. Coaches have to win the trust of those around them to lead effectively. What are the psychological traits to achieve that?

Reinhard Stelter: From my perspective, and this is also something maybe new, but I've tried to develop coaching further. In the old tradition of coaching, I was a neutral person as a coach, and I think what is important for me is that we develop ourselves as a dialogical guide or coach. Dialogues can happen in very many situations, not just in coaching, but we can be inspired by dialogical coaching so that we really work towards being a fellow human companion in the dialogue. And this companionship is actually what builds trust, that the other can see that we are not perfect, although we have a professional role and this fellow human companionship is actually something which makes our coaching partner, our dialogue partner, more open for reflections that we also try to as a dialogue guide or coach, that we include ourselves in the reflective process so that it becomes somehow a collaborative process or a co-reflective process that I include myself in that sense that I say, you just talked about this and this, and this reminds me of a situation where I've been in and I've tried to unfold something and I do this to be a servant for the other. This is important. I do not include myself as a dialogue guide to just tell something about my life. I do it with the intention to support the other, and this is also something which really develops trust in specific abilities also in the other. The other really starts to believe in him or herself more through that fellow human companionship.

Podcast Host: Earlier, you talked about elevating coaching and coaching psychology to your new or to a new professional level. Maybe talk a little bit more about that because bringing it to a new level means that the current level may not work very well in an accelerated society.

Reinhard Stelter: Yes, as you mentioned, I have written a book, "A Guide to Third Generation Coaching". And I think this third generation is a further development. And of course, I use all generations, but the first generation is more about that I have specific goals which I want to focus

on, and I needed a dialogue guide or coach to help me with this. In this perspective, the coach is fully neutral and is a servant for the other and tries to develop maybe minor goals on the path and really helps the other to focus and learn to really become clear about what he or she wants. The second generation in coaching is already quite more advanced in the way we use our questions, so we try to help the other to a shift of perspective so we imagine other people, so we talk about circular questions. So imagine that you are another person. How would you see your situation from this person's perspective, you can see that it's already more advanced way of asking questions, but it's still a position where the dialogue guide is fairly neutral. In third generation coaching as I described already, I use a strategy where I include myself more actively in the dialogue, and I would say this is the basis for building a more trustful relationship that I include myself in the reflective process and also bring myself in a like minded position.

Podcast Host: If I may summarize, the coaching you describe is a structured dialogue about the challenges and the goals of a person. And I understand the idea to be that the dialogue partner who seeks support needs to trust you, the coach, and follows the dialogue guide, right. And the guide is then the coach, a coworker, a supervisor or a friend. Is that a fair summary?

Reinhard Stelter: Yeah, that's a good summary. And I really also would like to enlarge the perspective of coaching in this. When I talk about transformational dialogues, I think we can, as friends, as leaders, as colleagues in organization, also fulfill the role of a transformative dialogue partner. So in that sense, it's not necessarily bound to a situation where you go to a professional person, you can have it with your spouse, you can have it with friends and colleagues. What is important is really to be aware of not imposing anything onto the other, because the starting point for a trustful relationship is to be acceptant, to accept the other person, to be in a state of acceptance of the other. We could talk about suspension here so that we do not try to argue, but we really try to take the position of the other and really try to work from this basis and not helping the other to be convinced about something.

Podcast Host: A well-known name if you talk about dialogue is David Bohm, coming from a completely different field of science because he was a quantum physicist, he understood dialogue as something qualitatively different from conversation, from a discussion and debate so much that he referred to it with the Capital D. So the dialogue with a capital D, do you feel the same way?

Reinhard Stelter: Yes. I mean, in some sense, maybe David Bohm, it goes actually back to the mid-eighties where he tried to have collegial, reflective processes, I would talk about it. I actually read about David Bohm in a later book, which was published by William Isaacs. The book is called "Dialogue and Art of Thinking Together". William Isaacs describes actually when he was a young scholar, he was actually working together or was invited to these conversations. I think how David Bohm was interested what he was interested in was really to go from this material world to a more spiritual perspective. They found out that suspension was actually the basis, and this is a different position than, for example, the position of defend. If you defend your position, then it will not become a trustful relationship. Then you are put into another position. And I think as a transformative dialogue guide, you need to suspend your own position and you don't impose the other. So suspension means that you listen without resistance and that you somehow identify yourself with the position of the other. And this leads to reflective dialogues as a difference to skilful conversations, for example. And then finally it becomes what they called a generative dialogue. And a generative dialogue is really that you try to focus on new possibilities, new insights, and it's a kind of collective flow, how William Issacs describes this. I think this perspective is really something which coaches should take with them. This position, which goes back to the eighties and which I tried to revive in some sense. And you could talk about trustful relationships or trustful dialogues as generative dialogues, fruitful dialogues so that you develop something in a process of togetherness, of collaboration.

Podcast Host: Maybe I should flatten it a little bit, because as an interviewer, an amateur interviewer, my purpose is to listen and to let somebody glow in his or her profession so that our listeners can learn while listening from the experts on the role of trust. Now I come to my question. When I think of a coach, I think of somebody that I'm going to, to learn. And of course, I would appreciate if the coach is listening to my needs. But on the other hand, I also would like to see it more than just a dialogue, because there is not much for me to say. I want to hear something. What he or she, my coach is actually teaching me.

Reinhard Stelter: The coach is not the teacher or instructor. The coach is a listening partner. And the idea is that you as a dialogue guide or coach, bring yourself in the position that you are reflecting on something and you build on further. I mean, it's this process and this is actually described by David Bohm and William Issacs that a generative dialogue is something, you know,

it's this table tennis play that it goes forward and backwards and you develop some strategies and some kind of understanding in the process of this forward and backward. So the coach is not an expert. We are both experts. The coach is an expert in leading a dialogue, but the coachee or the dialogue partner is expert in his or her own life. And we can't take this from this person, from our dialogue partner, because they have to lead their life on their premises. And we cannot teach them, we can help them to reflect on things from new perspectives. When we tell stories about our life situation, we exclude some kind of specific events which might have a different position if we include them. If we, for example, take a starting point that a client comes to me and says, oh, I have a terrible life situation, it goes only like this and this. In this narrative description, this person only picks events where this plot of having a bad life situation is supported. But I can include, I can open up for other events so I can, for example, ask my dialogue partner, can you remember a situation when you last have felt a kind of success or kind of happiness? And suddenly I open up for a different narrative. And this is my way of supporting the other.

Podcast Host: I understand. Yeah, I understand. Thank you for that. And, you know, maybe it also shed some light about the misunderstanding, where we started when we first had contact prior to this interview, I approached you, you remember, because I wanted to make a podcast specifically on sports coaching and because I saw in your academic title in your university that you had sports coaching. And with sports coaching, I really had the thought, I mean, I can't see a coach of a soccer or a football team to be in a dialogue with his players. Maybe he is at some point in time, but what I expect him to be is to lead the player to a better performance so he gives them something. Hence my question that I just raised, maybe my traditional view on what a coach actually is, and it looks more like a one-way street in my definition. And I learned now from you that it's not a one-way street. It's actually a two-way street.

Reinhard Stelter: I mean, if you think about a soccer coach, of course, when they are on the side, I mean, they can't have a dialogue. But what is really actually becoming more important and I think there are some good coaches take Jurgen Klopp for example, the German coach for Liverpool. He has a lot of individual conversations with each player. I mean they have to argue for why is a player not playing from the beginning? A good coach has to explain this. These players are very expensive and they get frustrated if they are not playing and I think a good coach has to really work and develop a player also on a more dialogical perspective. When I speak about sports psychology, there are other areas in sport psychology where we have to help people to change

their lifestyle because they are having an unhealthy lifestyle and they struggle with themselves, they struggle with their weight, they struggle with going up the stairs and things like this. So there are other areas also in sports psychology where we actually need this more coaching psychological approach to help people to grow.

Podcast Host: Reinhard, thank you very much for this, I wanted to say interview, but maybe I should say dialogue. Thank you very much for your insights. One of the very quick questions I used to ask this question to everybody I interview. What, in your view, are the challenges for any coach in the next, let's say, 5 to 10 years?

Reinhard Stelter: I think the challenges are that we really are getting too few possibilities to really meet the other person. Because we are much more on this self-presentation mode through social media. We want to express or show ourselves from the best perspective, and to be vulnerable is actually the place where we can develop. And I think there is the big challenge in our society at the moment that we really take a step back and be vulnerable and find a person where we can have a trustful relationship.

Podcast Host: Reinhard, thank you very much for this interview. I wish you good luck with your further work as a professor in Copenhagen, and I hope we meet in the future again to talk about this subject.

Reinhard Stelter: Yes. Thank you for inviting me.

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