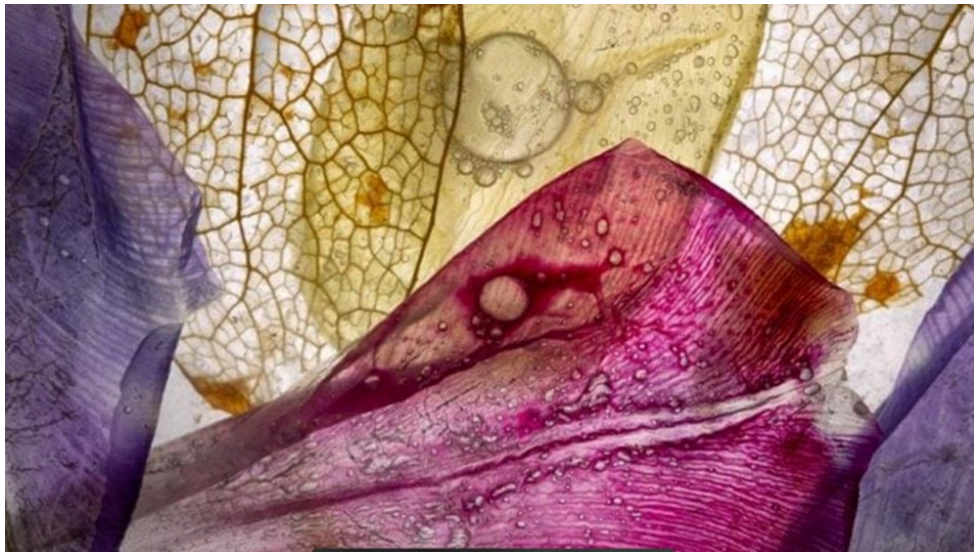


From the Skill Set to the Coach's Self: A Paradigm Shift



ABSTRACT

The debate about the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in coaching primarily focuses on how technology can optimize and scale the coach's technical skills, including asking questions, analyzing conversational patterns, and writing reports.

This article proposes a radical shift in perspective: the actual transformative value of AI lies not in automating "doing," but in enhancing the coach's "being." Through analysis of the ReflectAI project, a cognitive partner based on generative AI, we explore how technology can become a strategically in cultivating awareness, presence, and reflective capacity.

ReflectAI does not replace the coach, but acts as a metacognitive mirror that helps them maintain their Self, understood as their primary working tool. This marks a fundamental shift: from an emphasis on the skill set to a focus on the coach's Self. This evolution redefines the meaning of professionalism, the practice of continuous development, and the very ethics of coaching psychology, shifting the focus from mere operational efficiency to the quality of the human presence in the coaching relationship.

INTRODUCTION

This series of articles aims to disseminate and broaden the scientific and professional debate.



On the use of generative artificial intelligence as a cognitive partner in coaching.

Our in-depth study aims to improve, deepen, and enrich the quality of the coaching relationship and the coach's professionalism, offering theoretical, practical, and ethical insights for a conscious and transformative use of AI.

The integration of AI into coaching is often viewed through a functional lens: how can technology enhance coaching by making it more efficient, scalable, or data-driven? While valid, these questions risk confining AI's potential to a merely operational role, an "Operational Partner" that optimizes workflows but leaves the core of professional practice intact.

Our initiative, however, stems from the desire to explore a different paradigm: that of AI as a "Cognitive Partner," an ally in developing a coach's most crucial and distinctive skill —self-awareness.

This initiative was born from the analysis of several contributions that emerged:

- in the internal discussion between us researchers and coaching psychology professionals, where the need to overcome the "man vs. machine" dichotomy emerged;
- in the critical reworking of scientific sources and professional testimonies, which highlights how the focus solely on the coach's skills simplifies the complexity of the coaching relationship and the complexity arising from the uniqueness of each coachee;
- in the dialogue with generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, which allowed us to test their limits and potential;

- in the specific use of ReflectAI, our prototype AI agent for meta-reflection, which provided concrete data and experiences on which to base our analysis.

The SCP Italy Coaching & AI team aims to create a series of informative articles that contribute to the debate within the Italian and international network on AI in coaching, also in view of the upcoming 4th ISCP Italy Research Hub Symposium – 14th International Congress of Coaching Psychology, 2025. We aim to support the dissemination and validation of innovative coaching tools, such as ReflectAI. We want to demonstrate that the most fertile question is not "Will AI replace us?", but "How can we use AI to become more aware and effective coaches?"

STATE OF THE ART: AI AS AN ENHANCEMENT OF "DOING"

The current landscape of AI applications in coaching focuses predominantly on performance optimization and operational efficiency. AI-based tools Generative techniques are used to support the coach in three crucial phases of the process:

1. **Session Preparation:** AI acts as a research assistant, generating powerful model-based questions (e.g., GROW), creating draft session plans, and summarizing relevant information about the coachee's context.
2. **Post-Session Analysis:** Conversation intelligence platforms transcribe and analyze recordings, identifying recurring themes, linguistic patterns, sentiment, and even compliance with competency rubrics (e.g., ICF). This provides the coach with "objective" feedback on their performance.

3. **Follow-up and Ongoing Support:** Chatbots and virtual assistants are used to send summaries, reminders, and motivational nudges between sessions, ensuring ongoing support for the coachee.

These applications fall within the "Augmented Coach" paradigm, in which technology acts as a "co-pilot" managing analytical and repetitive tasks. While undoubtedly useful, these tools focus almost exclusively on the coach's "doing": on actions, techniques, and observable behaviors.

They measure speaking time, analyze the words used, and verify the application of a model. This approach, however, has an intrinsic limitation: it risks reducing the coach's professionalism to a set of measurable technical skills, neglecting the fundamental dimension of relationship and presence.

THE PARADIGM SHIFT: FROM "DOING" TO "BEING"

The actual effectiveness of coaching lies not only in what the coach does, but in who the coach is in their interaction with the coachee. The ability to create a space of psychological safety, to grasp the unsaid, and to utilize one's intuition are qualities that transcend mere technique application. These qualities emerge from the coach's "Self," which becomes the primary and most valuable tool of coaching. Professionalism, in this perspective, is no longer simply a matter of possessing a set of skills, but involves ongoing work in understanding, nurturing, and maintaining one's Self.

This is where our ReflectAI project comes in, proposing a third approach to AI integration that goes beyond both the "AI-Led" (coach replacement) and "AI-Enabled" (coach operational assistant) models. In this new paradigm, AI becomes a Cognitive Partner whose purpose is not to "relieve" the coach of a task, but to stimulate and deepen their capacity for critical thinking and reflexivity.

Through reflective practice, coaches develop an awareness of their own thoughts, emotions, and actions during coaching sessions. As authors such as Schön, Kolb, and Mezirow theorize, it is through reflection-on-action that experience transforms into deep learning and a potential shift in one's frame of reference. ReflectAI was designed precisely to catalyze this process.

REFLECTAI: A METACOGNITIVE MIRROR FOR THE COACH'S SELF

ReflectAI is an autonomous conversational chatbot, based on generative AI and trained on the principles of Coaching Psychology. At the end of a session, the coach initiates a dialogue with the bot, which guides them through a structured reflection on the session experience. Unlike automatic analysis tools, ReflectAI does not provide an "objective" report, but asks open-ended questions that stimulate the coach's metacognition about their work and, above all, their internal experiences.

Its operation facilitates constant training in critical thinking on multiple levels:

- **Distance from the event:** the dialogue with the AI leads the coach to verbalize the experience, creating a critical distance that

allows it to be observed from new perspectives.

- **Internal dialogue:** the bot's questions ("What emotion did you feel at that moment?", "What assumption of yours might have guided that question?", "What did you notice in your body when the coachee said...?") make explicit and structure the coach's internal dialogue.
- **Recognition of emotions:** the interaction encourages naming and exploring the role of one's feelings during the session, recognizing them as valuable data and not as interference.
- **Recognizing the role of others:** The bot helps us reflect on the relational and systemic dynamics at play.

From our initial experiments, it became clear that interacting with ReflectAI provides a "safe" space, perceived as non-judgmental, which encourages coaches to share their doubts and vulnerabilities more openly than in traditional supervision. This process goes beyond an analysis of skills practiced, but initiates an exploration of the Self. It helps the coach recognize their own biases, understand their emotional resonances, and become more aware of what happens in the coaching relationship and the impact of their behaviors on the relationship with the coachee.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALISM AND ETHICS

The adoption of a cognitive partner like ReflectAI shifts the focus of professional development to a more personalized approach. Growth is no longer seen simply as the acquisition of new techniques or the adherence to a competency model, but as a constant commitment to reflective practice to refine the primary tool of the coach's work: their

Self. This positions coaching practice at the highest level, that of "Presence-Based Coaching," where the irreplaceable value lies in the quality of the human connection.

This paradigm shift also has profound ethical implications. The coach's responsibility expands. It's no longer just a matter of ensuring the privacy of the coachee's data when using technological tools; the ethical responsibility of "maintaining" one's Self in an optimal state for practice becomes crucial. Reflective practice, supported by AI, thus becomes a deontological duty, an essential activity for ensuring the client achieves the highest possible level of awareness and effectiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

Generative AI is undoubtedly transforming coaching as well. However, limiting its application to task automation and skill analysis means missing out on its most revolutionary potential. The ReflectAI project demonstrates that AI can be much more than an efficient assistant; it can become a partner on a coach's most important journey —the journey within.

The shift from a focus on the coach's skill set to a focus on the coach's Self is not just a theoretical evolution. Still, a necessary paradigm shift to preserve and enhance the profoundly human core of our profession in the digital age. AI will not replace us, but will challenge us to become more human, more present, and more aware. And, on this journey, it could be our most unexpected and powerful ally.

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