



GRAB YOUR SURFBOARDS: THE 'NEW NORMAL' WILL BE ONE WILD RIDE

The landscape for coaches and supervisors is shifting – again. How will practitioners adapt? **Carol Whitaker** and **Kerstin Potter** unpack insights from their latest survey, including a deeper dive into the current dilemma facing middle managers.

NEW YEAR, NEW CHALLENGES

Back in early 2022, we put out our first survey¹ of coaches and supervisors to explore how the pandemic was impacting the profession². The day before that survey closed, the invasion of Ukraine began, throwing the world into turmoil once again.

How did coaches and their clients feel about the effects of this war, galloping inflation, and a climate of uncertainty and fear? In the space of one year, which challenges remained, and which had changed? We ran a second survey early in 2023³ to find out.

The global uncertainty escalated significantly due to the war in the Gaza Strip, which commenced in October 2023. In light of these

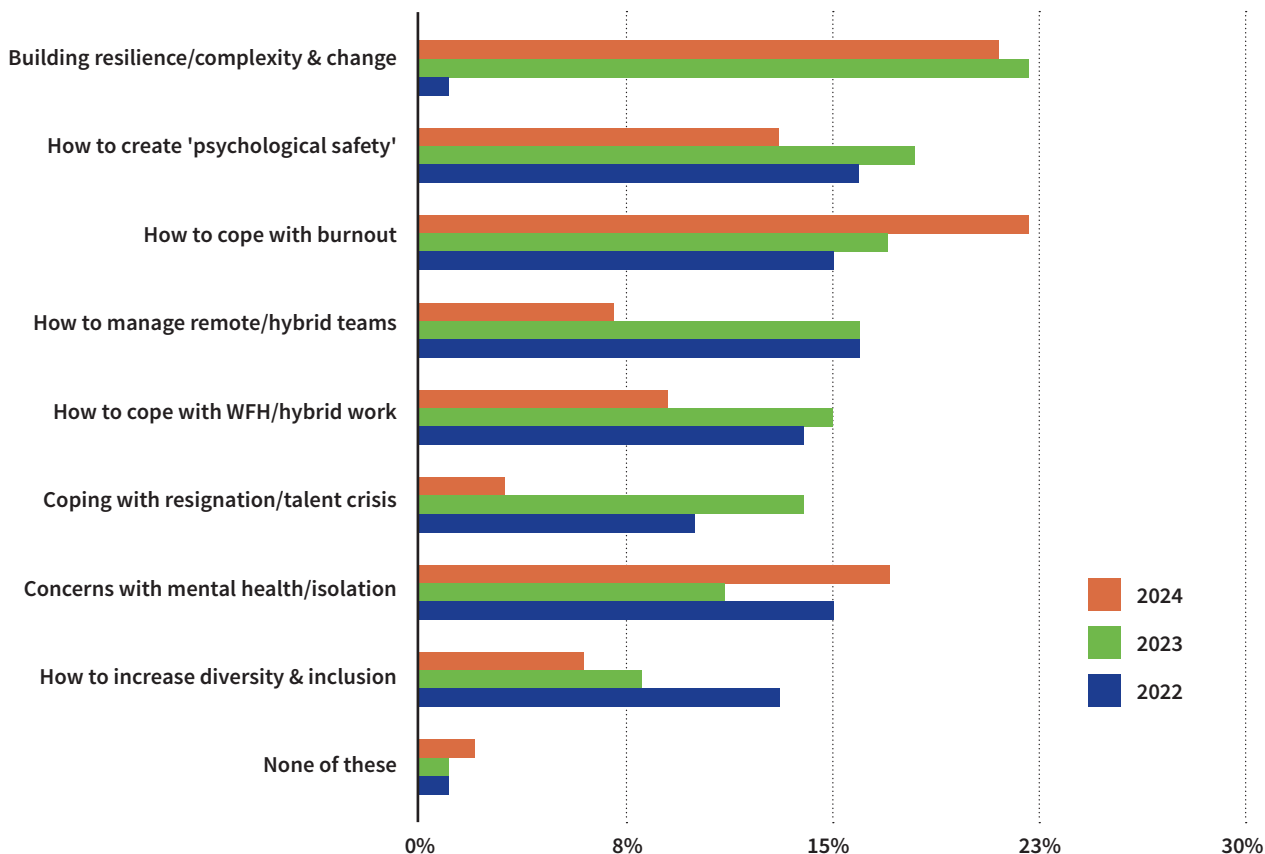
circumstances, we opted to conduct a third survey in January 2024⁴ to investigate further.

TOP CHALLENGES FOR COACHING CLIENTS

Remote working was just the beginning.

Issues around trauma, and mental health are still burning in 2024. But our latest survey sheds light on several other vital concerns that have kept clients awake at night.

See Figure 1 opposite

Figure 1: Issues faced by clients 2024 compared to 2023 & 2022

DEVELOPING FINANCIAL AND MENTAL RESILIENCE

Topping the list include worries about rising costs of living and how to build resilience in a world of rapid change. Inflation, coupled with less job security (large companies are laying off people in their thousands), together with catastrophic natural disasters linked to climate change – it is not surprising these are leading to concerns about burnout, resilience and mental health.

COPING WITH THE QUIET QUITTER

An expression that gained traction in 2022 was 'quiet quitters': the disengaged employees who stay in their roles doing just the bare minimum to fulfil their contractual obligations, with no motivation to go above and beyond for their boss, team, or employer. Coping with quiet quitters ranked as the third-highest client issue and was introduced as a new item in last year's survey. In our latest survey, the prevalence of coping with these quiet quitters has decreased from 20% to 15% of reported issues.

MIDDLE MANAGERS IN THE HYBRID HOT SEAT!

Since returning to work after the lockdown, the divide between top management and employees has become awkwardly apparent. Many employees feel that a hybrid way of working is best for them, their families, and their productivity.

Top management, however, is increasingly demanding a total return to the office. Why? In part, due to insecurity – are those 'home workers' really working or just walking the dog? Also, they have spent millions on sleek office buildings in city centres.

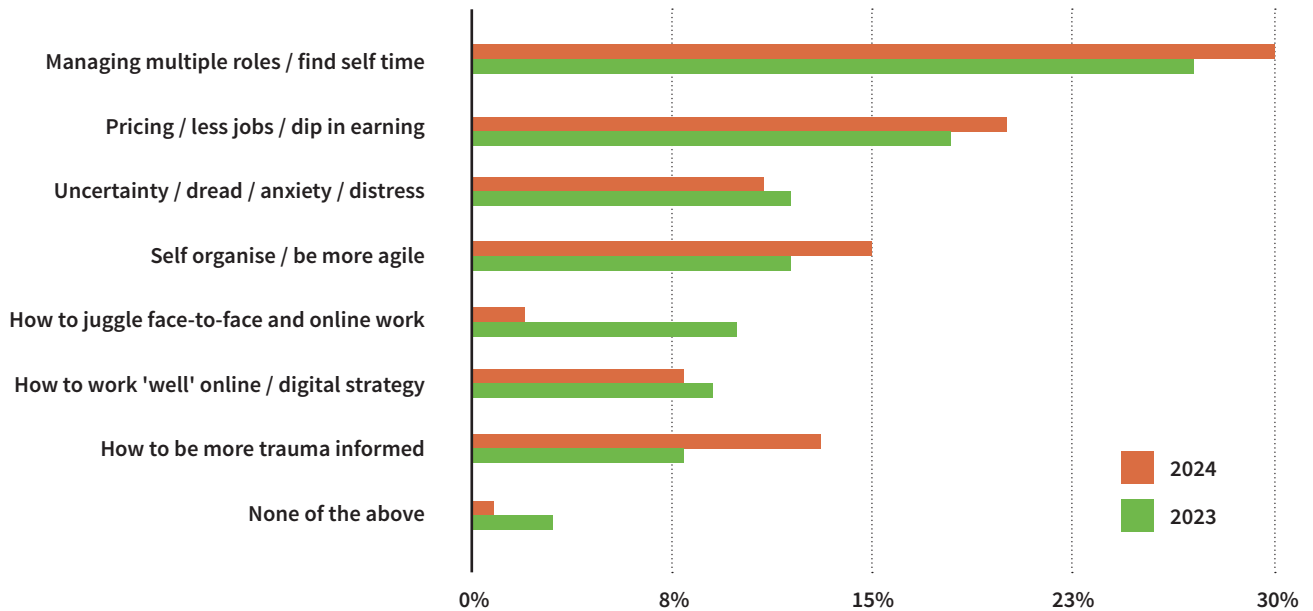
The consequence is that the much-maligned middle managers find themselves in the hot seat. For years, there have been questions concerning the value of middle managers – are they just paper pushers that hinder work more than help it happen? We now see articles appear, like McKinsey's *'Investing in middle managers pays off—literally'*,⁵ arguing that middle managers are the glue that keeps companies together.

On the one hand, top management is expecting them to persuade employees back into the office. On the other, employees are relying on them to plead their case with top management. You can see their dilemma.

'Middle managers in the hot seat' was a new item that appeared in our 2022 survey and was an issue for nearly 15% of our respondents. This increased to 20% in our latest survey.

TOP CHALLENGES FOR COACHES

Figure 2: Issues faced by practitioners 2024 compared to 2023



TOO MANY HATS, TOO LITTLE TIME

The top issue for coaches is clear: it's challenging to manage multiple roles and also find time for themselves and their development. According to our surveys, coaches overwhelmingly (over 50%) have several more roles in addition to their coaching role – they are also facilitators, supervisors, mentors, counsellors, therapists, consultants, trainers, HR directors, and psychologists.

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Is this out of financial necessity? Or because coaches are curious and like variety? That's for another survey to find out!

NAVIGATING THE NEW WORLD

Other top issues include **pricing**, **uncertainty**, **building agility**, and **digital strategy**. This result was backed up by a poll of the 123 attendees of a webinar in July 2023 where the same issues came out on top.⁶

WILL AI STEAL OUR JOBS?

An additional source of worry for both coaches and clients is the rapid advancement of generative AI. Giant steps have been made, even in the last year, toward developing more complex systems, surprising even AI specialists with the speed of change.

What will this mean for jobs – from lawyers to authors and many others in between? Coaches and supervisors are also feeling nervous. Will coaches be replaced by chatbots? Are we moving towards the much-anticipated democratisation of coaching, allowing more and more people access to coaching with AI coaches? Or are we levelling down and destroying quality in the name of quantity?

Already, during lockdown, established coaches were complaining that the market was inundated with new coaches with little training, even less experience, and no support from supervision or peer groups. This trend has continued. How will buyers of coaching be able to choose in such a crowded and rapidly-changing supply market?

UNLOCKING THE MIDDLE MANAGEMENT DILEMMA – WITH METAPHORS

We, along with some of the coaches who completed our 2023 survey, wanted to explore further the current situation of middle managers and how coaches can help. So, we set up a small interest group to develop the theme.

The group's goal was to co-create and co-develop our ideas, and to do so, we used a visual metaphor methodology⁷, Lephorus®. We were in different countries, and most of us had never met before, so using images online helped to quickly start a deep conversation. Ideas can be exchanged and explored without judgement, encouraging participants to listen to each other, collaborate, and contribute freely.

USING LEPHORUS® TO SPARK EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS

The methodology consists of using carefully selected families of images to answer a series of questions, like 'Is there an image that to you looks like the current situation of middle managers?'. Each participant selects an image in silence. One at a time, they explain to the others the meaning they see in the image, giving an opportunity for everyone to be heard and for questions to be asked.

Usually, the group agrees on a small number of images to represent the answer to the question. There are follow-up questions about desired outcomes, and a chart is constructed representing the 'here and now', the 'to be', and possible routes from now to the future.

In our case, the 'now' was represented by the following abstract images:



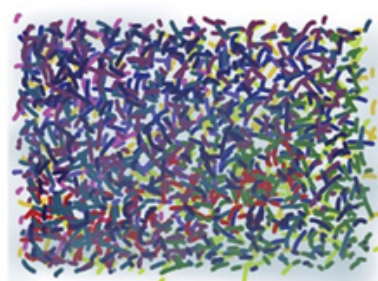
09
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05
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The corresponding words were: 'People are searching for something, and they are not sure what. Self-management versus loss of control'

The second question was: 'How does the manager get to a better place?'



16
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12
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The group chose these two images and described them as: 'Get the human back. Play, have fun, be clear, and purposeful. In this situation, the wave is there, you go with it, and you don't waste time fighting it. Surf it. Initially, there can be a lack of control, but it can lead to self-management.'

RIDING WITH THE SURFING METAPHOR

We realised that we had created the metaphor of a surfer. The whole group felt very comfortable with it, and we agreed to delve deeper into it in subsequent meetings: What does it mean to be a surfing instructor or trainer? How do you build a surfboard that suits you? What type of support is necessary? How do you identify different types of waves? Do you need a wetsuit?

Our last question during this session was: 'What can coaches do?'. The group answered with the following images and comments:



08
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11
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'Help and teach people to make their own surfboard, learn to ride the wave and to cope with serial waves. We need to re-evaluate the fundamentals. Nothing new needs to be invented. Image number 8 is uncomfortable but keeps you alert. You must sit up. Number 11 is like a throne. Everyone should have some feeling of strength and firmness.'

Help and teach people to make their own surfboard, learn to ride the wave and to cope with serial waves

KEEP MOVING FORWARDS

The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have significantly changed life for many, and we are in a period of adjustment to the new normal. The threats are real: war, climate change, rising costs

of living, and advances in technology. Coaches and their clients are grappling with similar problems. However, with change comes the opportunity for improvements, new approaches, and redesigns – like our group has begun to explore. We would love to know your views and if you want to share your thoughts please email me at kerstinpotter@visualmetaphorsatwork.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Carol Whitaker has experience at Board level, various NED roles, an MBA, and an early career in HR. She specialises in Executive Coaching, Team/ Group Coaching and facilitation, Coaching Supervision, and Mentoring Entrepreneurs. As an Associate Lecturer with Oxford Brookes University, she provides coaching supervision for Students doing their MA in Coaching and Mentoring, ILM7 Executive Coaching PG Cert, and internal coaching programmes. She has co-authored five-star-rated books: 'Coaching Supervision: A Practical Guide for Supervisees' and 'Peer Supervision in Coaching & Mentoring: A Versatile Guide for Reflective Practice'. Both were published by Routledge.

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Dr. Kerstin Potter is a scientist by training. She spent over thirty years in marketing, sales and general management in pharmaceuticals, food, high technology, professional services, and higher business education across Europe and the Middle East.

Since 2012 she has worked with and developed the visual metaphor methodology Lephorus® and her company, Visual Metaphors at Work®.

She is a certified executive coach from HEC, Paris, and a certified NED. She is a member of EMCC Sweden, and a mentor for Eget Företag, Sweden. She sits on the editorial board of the EMCC research journal.

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- 1 Practitioner Survey Report 2022 – download at <https://forms.gle/Xuy9rgMzZkK1GjbD6>
- 2 <https://www.coaching-at-work.com/2022/08/31/evolve-to-survive/>
- 3 Practitioner Survey Report 2023 - <https://forms.gle/2gx9etTxPMcoMzEK8>
- 4 Practitioner Survey Report 2024 - <https://forms.gle/KTXPaw6ABHrGQ9Xe8>
- 5 <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/investing-in-middle-managers-pays-off-literally?cid=eml-web>
- 6 <https://vimeo.com/843162672>
- 7 <https://www.visualmetaphorsatwork.com/>