

Let's sculpt it! Experiencing the role of context in coaching

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Let's Sculpt it! Experiencing the Role of Context in Coaching

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CONTEXT IN COACHING

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Let's Sculpt it!

Experiencing the Role of Context in Coaching

Abstract

This exercise aims to familiarize students with the under-discussed topic of the role of context in coaching through a physical activity. It consists of a Group Sculpture – a combination of Socio-drama, Systemic Constellation, and Social Presencing Theater – drawing from a coaching case of an ethical dilemma, using the placement and arrangement of participants to represent the stakeholders and context (economic, legal, sociological, etc.). The visual and embodied representation aims to raise awareness and develop understanding of the invisible, but often felt contextual factors at play in coaching, to generate reflection about their influence, and to offer insights on how to identify and embrace them. This activity is primarily aimed for coaching educators and supervisors, but a slightly adapted version could expand its benefits to a more general audience of managers and leaders.

Keywords: coaching; systems theory; complexity; executive education; management consulting; reflexivity; transformative learning; experiential exercises

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Let's Sculpt it!

Experiencing the Role of Context in Coaching

When educating coaching participants on the critical factors of a successful coaching intervention, most programs restrict their scope to the issues pertaining to the dyad formed by the coach and the recipient of the coaching service, i.e. the coachee. Topics typically range from the coach's attitudes, methods, and tools to build effective rapport with the coachee, to the factors supportive of coachee's engagement in the process (Rogers, 2012). What often gets overlooked and unattended in this predominately humanistic view (Du Toit & Sims, 2010) are the multiple stakeholders involved, and the role of the context in which coaching takes place (Western, 2012). Rather, such elements are treated as abstract, static and given entities. The resulting naturalization of contexts overrides their dynamic role, running the risk of not only diminishing the effectiveness of the coaching intervention, but also of leading to incorrect problem identification and formulation. Indeed, problems framed as "people issues" to be "solved" with a coach often reveal a neglect of root causes (Tobias, 1996), with potential phenomenon of scapegoating, or even manipulation and coercive control (Du Toit & Sims, 2010; Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2018).

Against this backdrop, this experiential physical activity aims to familiarize students with the importance and multiple influences of context in coaching. What we refer to as context in coaching encompasses the broader system – beyond the coaching dyad – including the people, the multiple stakeholders, the team, the organization and its culture, explicit and implicit norms and values, the professional coaching associations, and the broader cultural, economic, sociological and political environment (see the Theoretical foundation section below for further developments).

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3 The learning method is experiential – through the physical activity of a Group Sculpture.
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5 Drawing from a coaching case of an ethical dilemma experienced by a coach, this exercise
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7 consists in using the placement and arrangement of participants to represent the stakeholders and
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9 contextual factors present.
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12 Group Sculptures are a mixture of principles and practices from Socio-drama (Sternberg
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14 & Garcia, 2000), Systemic Constellation (Cohen, 2005), and Social Presencing Theater
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16 (Presencing Institute, n.d.) with a focus on the spatial configuration of actors in the system. The
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18 physical and spatial elements of sculptures include: placing (localization), facing (orientation),
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20 spacing (distance), level, and posture. Group Sculptures, or some variant, have been used in
21
22 therapeutic, educational and organizational settings to make visible and explicit the felt sense of
23
24 the relational dynamics of families and groups. We introduce them in the specific context of
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26 coaching education to make visible the dynamics of a systemic entanglement of different actors
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28 involved in a coaching engagement, and to explore new possibilities in the future, in physical,
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30 spatial, somatic and affective ways.
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36 Such embodied learning presents several characteristics and advantages. It is one strand
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38 of a multi-strand whole person approach to learning that engages various dimensions of
39
40 experience or intelligences, through an experiential embodied learning cycle – from experience
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42 to reflection, meaning-making and action (Gardner, 2005; Heron, 2000; Taylor 2016). The felt
43
44 evocative experience from which to reflect and develop actionable insights supports a direct
45
46 empathic experience of context in play that facilitates remembering and recalling in future
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48 coaching events.
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52 In the Group Sculpture, we represent the case in its current form, and then allow some
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54 kind of future possibility to emerge, upon which we then reflect – seeking possible insights. The
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activity is primarily aimed at coaching educators and supervisors, but a slightly adapted version could expand its benefits to a more general audience of managers and leaders (see Appendix A).

Theoretical Foundation

Arguing that coaching theory is, itself, in need of a meta-theoretical framework to help position it, Garvey, Stokes and Megginson (2018) call for a heuristic - rather than a comprehensive model of practice - likely to support reflexivity and critical thinking on practice. Central to this heuristic is the concept of context. Indeed, context (economic, technological, legal, sociological, political) appears key to mitigate and understand the influence of the core disciplines or lenses of coaching- Psychology, Sociology and Philosophy.

For example, the influence of the access to technologies on the nature, depth and frequency of interactions between coaches and their clients represents the technological context. The formality and specificity of contracting between coach and client is part of the legal context, while cultural expectations about what constitute appropriate personal boundaries between coaches and coachees represent the cultural context. Figure 1 provides further details. It is important to recognize the context as an additional actor or set of actors to raise awareness on their roles in driving behavior and outcomes.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Learning Objectives

By completing this exercise, students should be able to:

- Develop understanding of the under-discussed role of context in coaching through embodied learning (physical experimentation)

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- Acquire conceptual tools to analyze the role of context in coaching
- Transform external elements – which are either overlooked or experimented as obstacles – into dynamic supports and levers of a coaching intervention
- Increase the impact of coaching interventions by leveraging context in coaching

Instructions for Running the Exercise**Overview**

This exercise consists in a Group Sculpture experiential activity where the placement and arrangements of participants allows for the visual and embodied representation of the stakeholders and contextual factors. It uses the case study “White Horse Coaching” (See Appendix B) depicting the ethical conflict of Brigitte, torn between satisfying the pressing request of a director for speedy results on the part of the coachee, and Brigitte’s natural reaction to protect this employee who seems victim of a hostile work environment.

The Group Sculpture follows a sequence of 60-80 minutes composed of an introduction, case reading, sculpture forming, debriefing with theoretical articulation, and wrap-up.

Logistics

Preparation. While no specific preparation is required from students, they can read the case study (Appendix B) in advance. The instructor should have read the case prior to the session and be familiar with the steps.

Group size. Ideal group size is 20-25. About 8 people will be directly involved in the Group Sculpture, the other being observers. For larger groups, please refer to variations displayed in Appendix A.

Suggested timing. We suggest using this activity in a 60-80-minute session, with 5 minutes for introduction, 10 minutes for case reading, 30 minutes for the actual Group Sculpture

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performance, 20-40 minutes for debriefing with observers and actors, and 5 minutes for wrap-up (See Appendix C combining timing and step-by-step instructions, as presented next).

Step-by-Step Instructions

Steps 1 and 2. After introducing the rationale for the experiential activity (step 1), ask students to read the case study “White Horse Coaching” (see Appendix B) (step 2), which exposes a situation that will be the basis for the Group Sculpture activity.

Step 3. Provide a short overview of the principles and intentions of Group Sculpture as presented in the introduction. Then we suggest one or more short warm-up activities (See Appendix D) to prepare participants who might be unfamiliar with Group Sculptures.

Next, get volunteers to represent the actors in the system present in the case (As displayed in Appendix E, we suggest 8 actors). Then provide the following instructions step by step as the actors -each representing a stakeholder and/or context factor in the case- perform the Group Sculpture activity:

- a) Silently and without explanation for now, assume a place and position in the room.
One after the other, choose where in the space allocated for the sculpture you want to be, which direction you want to face, which level to take, how close or far you stand from one another, and which body posture to take. Each of these elements exemplifies people’s own sense of how their particular presence informs and influences the system described in the case;
- b) Once all actors have entered the sculpture, take some time to rearrange yourselves in a configuration, which as an ensemble will make visible your intuitive perception of the current dynamics present in the case;
- c) Share a word or phrase of what it feels like to be part of the sculpture;

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3 d) Then the sculpture as an ensemble should reflect and express its envisioned future,
4 responding to the question, “what wants to come?” Physically move into the
5 envisioned and aspired future possibility, repeating a – c.
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10 After 15 minutes, ask actors to leave the sculpture.
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13 **Step 4.** Open the floor for discussion. Involve actors and observers to reflect and discuss
14 any insights into the case, especially as they pertain to the identification and role of contextual
15 factors in coaching. It is recommended that the reflection and discussions begin with description
16 – what one saw or felt, and the accompanying interpretation and meaning making. By identifying
17 observed actions and felt experience, it opens up more possibilities for multiple interpretations
18 and meanings present in the room. Garvey et al.’s model (2018) of contextual factors (see the
19 Debriefing of the Exercise section below) can be used as a framework for generating a range of
20 possible interpretations that link the information in the sculpture with one’s own experience and
21 practice.
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34 **Step 5.** Wrap-up. Reinforce the learning objectives, sum up the importance of context, ask
35 for final questions, etc.
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38 Debriefing of the Exercise

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40 The debrief should primarily aimed to allow participants to name and differentiate
41 between different sorts of contextual influencers. We suggest using the model developed by
42 Garvey et al. (2018, p. 305) to identify the source of different contextual sources as well as the
43 many lenses (Sociological, Philosophical, Psychological) informing practice (See Figure 2).
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49 **[Insert Figure 2 about here]**
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3 Let's start with the *Economic context*. In the sculpture, it may have been personified by
4 the person being the Organization in terms of its current performance in the external market in
5 which it operates. An adverse economic context may be influencing the boss, Will to push the
6 coach, Brigitte, to deal with Bob, the coachee, more quickly. In terms of helping people raise
7 their awareness of its impact, the stance of that person might signify something about how
8 difficult or benign the current market context might be.
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12 The *Legal context* can play a role in Brigitte's adherence to a specific code of ethics or
13 loyalty to a professional body.
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17 The *Sociological context* refers to the social and organizational norms at play, and that
18 might for example inform what "effective leadership" looks like, as well as what "successful
19 coaching" "should" be. There could be an assumption that "being swamped in detail" is not good
20 leadership, but rather is associated to management.
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24 Assuming that the audience is large enough, it may be useful to invite groups of
25 participants to take one of the *three lenses* (Psychological, Philosophical and Sociological) each
26 and interpret the sculpture through these.
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30 For example, applying the *Psychological lens* encourages focus of the impact of context
31 on the dyad itself and the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995) between coach and coachee.
32 It can also allow discussions on Will's transference with Brigitte and Bob, and their counter-
33 transference.
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37 A *Philosophical lens* draws attention to how the context influences personal and
38 organizational values and ethics. It also encourages discussion on the different and competing
39 models of ethics informing decisions in this coaching situation.
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CONTEXT IN COACHING

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3 A *Sociological lens* will favor discussions about power and vested interest for example.
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5 Thus, it is often accepted in organizations that a subordinate like Bob should not challenge Will
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7 given their hierarchical relationships. Also what are Brigitte’s interests in the success of the
8
9 intervention, and the effective “transformation” of Bob?
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12 Ultimately, it is important that participants understand the reciprocal nature of context
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14 (see the double direction arrows). In the White Horse Case, it can be argued that context both
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16 constitutes the case and is constituted by the case. For example, the political context and policy
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18 in which the organization is located contributes to the political climate within the organization
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20 but, at the same time, the political climate in the organization has an influence on the external
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22 political context. Also make sure to debate the dynamic nature of the sculpture, particularly using
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24 the criteria the participants chose as relevant to the future they envisioned. By this token, a
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26 parallel can be drawn with the dynamic and iterative nature of context itself.
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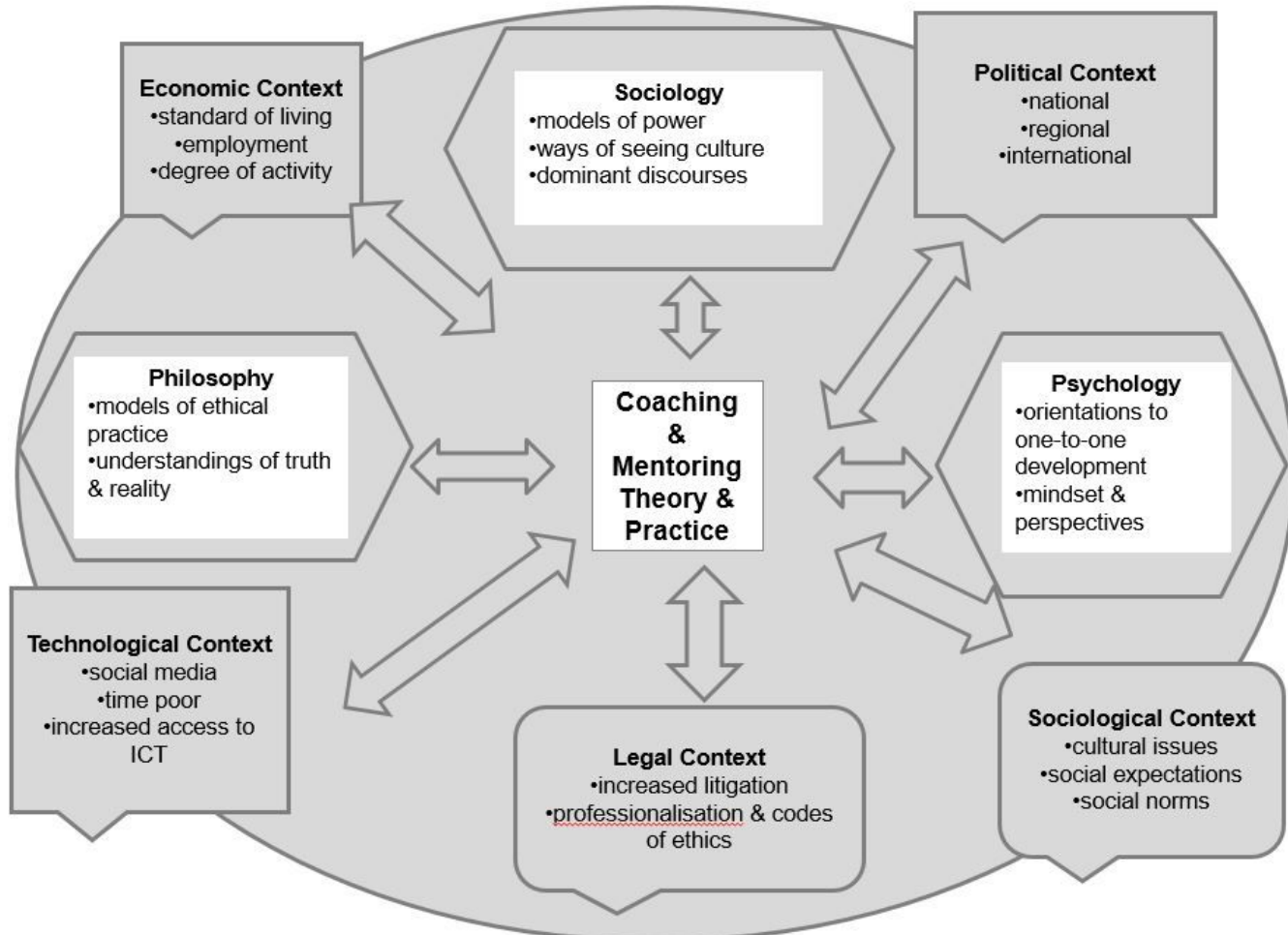
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Figure 1

The influence of contexts and lenses in coaching

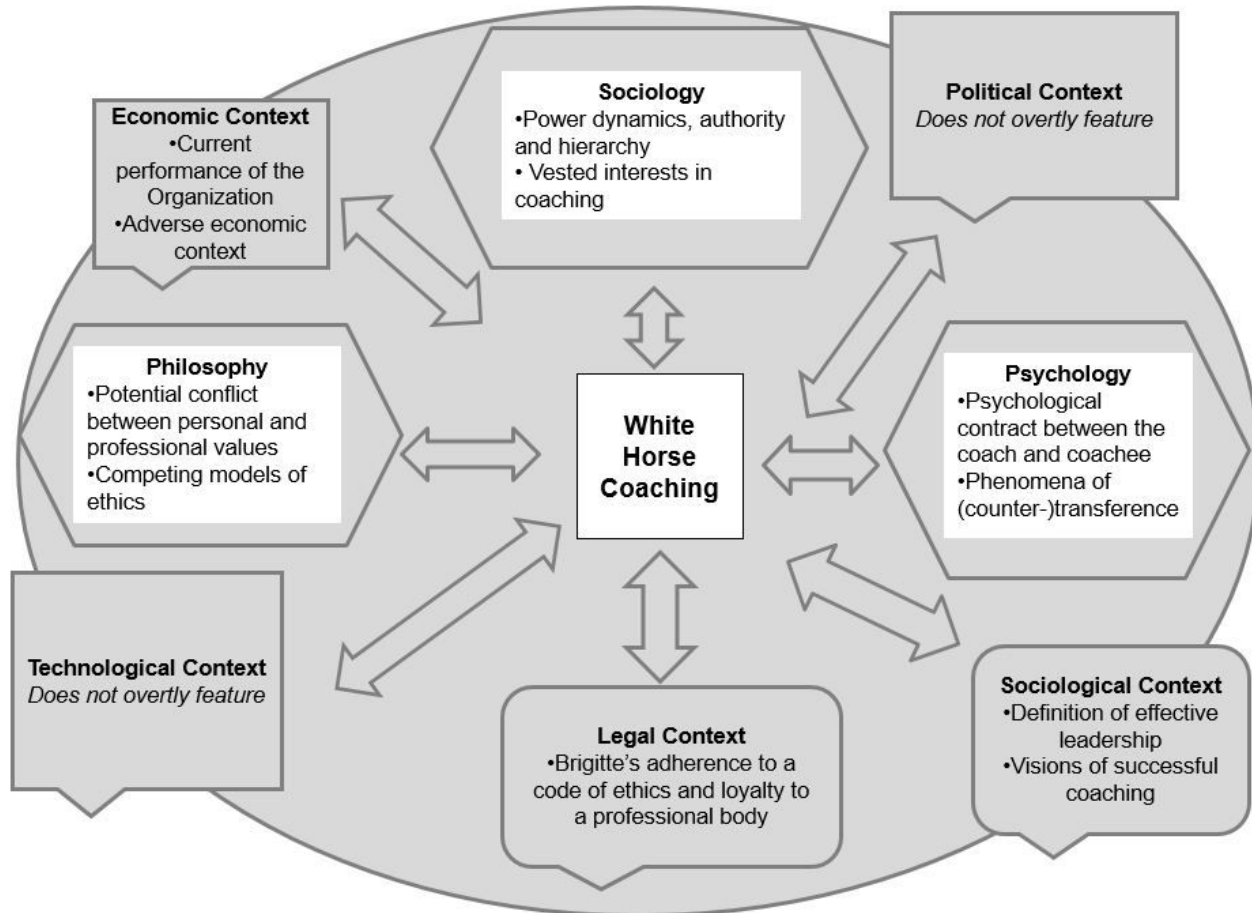


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Figure 2

The influence of contexts and lenses in coaching – applied to the White Horse Coaching Case



Appendix A

Variations of the Exercise

Group size. If the audience is larger, it might be possible to form 2 or more sculptures simultaneously. Additionally, it may be useful to assign groups of people to all eight of the lenses and contextual influencers of Garvey et al.'s model so that each can be fully represented in a plenary discussion. Finally, participants may wish to identify additional characters through which they can engage in the sculpture – there may need to be a negotiation about which of these to include if space and time are limited.

Origin of case study. Another alternative is to use the coaching case of one of the participants, in a supervision perspective. As such, besides illustrating the role of the context for the whole audience, the activity will also help the participant bringing the case to embrace new perspectives and to find new ways of addressing it. This alternative implies that the participants already have sufficient coaching practice, and the instructor ensures that the proposed case includes sufficient stakeholders and components, the identity and sensitive details of the coaching participants and client organization remain confidential.

Audiences. While initially developed within coaching education, this exercise can be adapted to a broader management educational audience. Indeed, beyond coaching, several scholars have argued that context often gets overlooked in the broader fields of leadership development, change (Pettigrew, 1985; 2012), ethics (Treviño, 1986) organizational behavior (Johns, 2006), or organization theory (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2012). For Johns (2006: 389), it “is not that context is never studied. Rather, it is that *its influence is often unrecognized or underappreciated*”¹. For example, in the case of ethics education, Tomlinson (2009) advocates an interactionist approach, citing the interplay between personal and situational factors.

¹ In italics in the original text

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Therefore, to introduce management phenomena into their organizational contexts, instructors can adapt the original setting and actors of this exercise.

Settings can range from interactions with clients, job interviews, annual reviews, mergers and acquisitions, etc. Now regarding the actors, for the specific context of organizational behavior, if we build on Johns' distinction between *omnibus* and *discrete* contexts, actors can range from the *who* (occupation), *where* (location), *when* (time), and *why* (location) of the situation -omnibus context-, to the specific situational variables - discrete context- that influence behavior directly or moderate relationships between variables (e.g. *task context*, *social context*, and *physical context*). In ethics education, actors representing context can range from *organizational culture*, *referent others*, *obedience to authority*, *code of ethical conduct*, *reference others*, *time pressure*, *scarcity of resources*, *competition*, *role conflict*, etc. (Tomlinson, 2009). In terms of the change domain, actors can embody the *current and desired situation*, *external and internal forces for change*, *forces for status-quo*.

The table below synthesizes examples of actors representing context in the aforementioned topics. And we encourage instructors to extend this exercise to even more topics.

Topics	Examples of Actors
Organizational behavior	Omnibus context (Johns, 1986) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who (occupation) • Where (location) • When (time) • Why (location) Discrete context (Johns, 1986)

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task context (autonomy, uncertainty, resources, etc.) • Social context (social identity, social structures, etc.) • Physical context (temperature, light, décor, etc.)
Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational culture • Referent others • Obedience to authority • Code of ethical conduct • Time pressure • Scarcity of resources • Competition • Role conflict <p>(Tomlinson, 2009)</p>
Change	<p>Current situation</p> <p>Desired situation</p> <p>External forces for change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Globalization • Workforce diversity • Technological change • Ethics and CSR

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Internal forces for change <p>Internal forces for Change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Declining effectiveness• Crisis (strikes, walkouts, etc.)• Change in employee expectations• Degraded work climate <p>Forces for status quo</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fear of the unknown• Fear of loss• Fear of failure• Personality• Assumptions and values• Politics
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Appendix B

“White Horse Coaching” Case

This case is derived from empirical research material that the case’s authors collected. It exposes the ethical dilemma of a coach into 4 stages. Quoted text refer to verbatim from the original interview.

Stage 1. Setting

Brigitte has been an executive coach for about 15 years, working with individuals and teams in different companies.

One day, Will, the assistant director of a Small and Medium Enterprise, asks her whether she could coach one of their managers, let’s call him Bob. Will’s project for Bob is to help him “move forward” after he had been evicted from the board of directors, and work on his “relational skills deficiencies” and tendency to “get swamped in details.”

Bob is in fact happy to benefit from a coach after this “eviction” from the board, which he perceives as unfair; he makes a special request to Brigitte though: to start the coaching with “360-degree feedback” as he thinks the positive results of this assessment will show, to himself and the coach his value to the company.

Reflecting later on this situation, Brigitte shared that she should have been more careful right from the beginning: “I had already worked with Will a while ago. I should have known and been more suspicious right from the beginning: he is a very impatient type of person...who has a tendency to manipulate people. However, I told myself that he must have evolved...and actually his request regarding the coaching intervention for his employee was rather straightforward.”

Stage 2. First Issues: A Damocles Sword Above My Head

Three months after the start of the coaching intervention, Will calls Brigitte and

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3 complains about Bob's "slow progress". Will says: "Bob continues to get swamped in details, he
4 is totally 'psychorigid,' and on top of that, openly contradicts my decisions...I know that you do
5 not have a magic wand, but if Bob could change more quickly." Pressured by Will, Brigitte
6 experiences the situation as "very uncomfortable," and "definitely painful." She is "furious" at
7 the assistant director who "is implicitly threatening [her]." Brigitte is torn and perceives a
8 "Damocles sword above [her] head." On one hand, Brigitte wants to satisfy the sponsor and
9 honor the contract, and on the other, she feels the director's requests cross the line, do not respect
10 the coachee's rhythm of evolution, and she naturally wants to protect the coachee.
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Stage 3. Further Issues: Rescued by the White Horse?

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24 A few weeks later, Will asks Brigitte to use the coaching intermediary report session as a
25 time to expose his grievance. She refuses because she says that it would transform the nature of
26 coaching into an evaluation mission. Instead, she advises Will to talk directly to Bob. But
27 Brigitte is in shock. She initially thought she has misheard the request; she cannot believe she is
28 asked to do this. She is "scared" to embark in this manipulation demonstrated by Will. Thus she
29 is angry at Will, for all the pressure he is putting on her shoulders, for this "gun he is holding to
30 her head", threatening to shoot if Bob does not move forward fast enough. And she feels that she
31 is betraying Bob, having access to information that he does not have. Thus, she would like to
32 help him, and opens his eyes on what's happening in the organization, on the detrimental
33 relational system that is taking place. But even if her natural reaction is to protect him, she
34 cannot "wear Zorro's cape and save him". After a while, she is reasoning with herself, telling
35 herself that: "It is also [her] job not to stay stuck in this mess, in this split, and to help the
36 organization move forward". But she feels that there is also something happening between "her
37 and herself". It is as if "ethics had come to test [her]: We'll see what you are capable of,
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Sweetie”. Brigitte was scared, scared not to be courageous enough to do “something good,” and running the risk of accepting doing something unethical just to keep positive relationships with Will, and his company. She was horrified at the idea that she would not have sufficient courage. She mentioned experiencing “a kind of uneasiness, hard to describe... something like: Oh! If I could not be here! If only I could disappear! If only I could get out of where they try to put me. Something very unpleasant, close to disgust”. And she blames herself thinking: “On such an issue, a “real ‘good’ coach” would not entrap himself. He would be magnificent, irreproachable; He would get on his white horse, dressed up in virtue, and all that goes with it. He would do amazing things, and not get stuck in such crappy situations.” Brigitte confesses a tendency to disqualify herself: “You’re rubbish! Why is this all so messed up?”. And she adds: “It would be so much better and easier to get out of the situation with panache”.

In the end, Brigitte clearly expresses her disapproval to Will– she states that she wants to stay within the definition of coaching and the boundaries of the contract, and she thus departs from his demands. Then, the coaching intervention continues for a few months and requires a “considerable amount of energy” from Brigitte, who feels “discouraged, tired, and weary.” Eventually, at the end of the contract, Brigitte decides that she will not work with this director and his company anymore, which, from a business perspective, “represents a significant economic loss.” She concludes saying that “it was very hard to keep the right distance all along the process”.

Stage 4. Ending

When the conflict is over, to cope with the discomfort and lassitude generated by the ethical conflict, Brigitte looks into “artistic practices”: “I am taking painting and sculpture classes. I seek refuge in activities that are closer to sensations, and that make me look at the

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3 world differently. They restore a balance.” She insists: she even sees a “strong coherence”
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5 between this artistic job and the nature of her activity – offering an alternative outlook on the
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7 daily business.
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10 She further comments on the situation saying that what sustained her action was “a
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12 certain way of looking at her job, a certain representation of her job” derived from her educators,
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14 her theoretical frameworks, and her peers. She said: “I did not feel alone, in suspension in air
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16 with my ethical problem. I could rely on a profession, and colleagues who also rely on certain
17
18 ways of doing coaching”. And she adds: “There is also something more intimate and profound,
19
20 that has to do with values. That somehow I was telling myself that I could be manipulated and
21
22 instrumentalized for something... that in the end would be detrimental to someone else. That was
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24 heavy for me... To hurt someone and on top of that, getting paid to do it. That’s more than I can
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26 stand!”.
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CONTEXT IN COACHING

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Appendix C

Outline and Suggested Timeline

Step 1	Introduction to activity (rationale, objectives)	5 min
Step 2	“White Horse Coaching” case reading (this can also be done before class as an assigned reading) (See case in Appendix B)	10 min
Step 3	<p>Group Sculpture activity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share principles and intentions of Group Sculpture • Do a short warm-up (see suggestions in Appendix D) • Read instructions • Get 8 volunteers to do the Group Sculpture (see roles in Appendix E) • Restate the instructions • Have actors perform the sculpture 	30 min
Step 4	Debriefing with observers and actors	20-40 min
Step 5	Wrap-Up	5 min
Total		60-80 min

Appendix D

Preparing Participants for the Group Sculpture Activity

Given that the Group Sculpture Activity may be new to participants, some preparation is in order.

We suggest the instructor begin with some reflective questions about the role and potential influence of the organizational context, such as other stakeholders, in the dyadic coaching process. Asking participants to reflect on their own coaching experience either as a coach or coachee, possible questions could include:

- What are some of the variables of the organizational context, such as various stakeholders, which are in play?
- In what ways have these variables factored into your understanding of the focus, outcomes, and situation, as well as possible pathways of exploration and action?
- Describe instances when these contextual variables or factors were included and what happened as a result.
- Describe instances when these contextual variables or factors were not included and their implications.

Next, we suggest taking a little time practicing how to sense the relational and social dynamics using the body, both somatically (physical sensations taking place in the body, i.e. increased tension, quickening pulse), and kinesthetically (the position and movement of the body in space), which are central to the Group Sculpture Activity.

CONTEXT IN COACHING

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To explore the *somatic sense*, the instructor might ask:

- When you think of a challenging interpersonal interaction, how and where do you feel it in your body?
- Think of an enriching interpersonal interaction, how and where do you feel it in your body?

To explore the *kinesthetic sense*, the instructor can say:

- Recall the challenging feeling and let it take a shape in the body.
- Invite that particular feeling to come alive by letting it take a particular shape in the body.

What kind of shape does the spine take, what about the head, arms, and legs? Really exaggerate the shape so it becomes really vivid. Share a word or phrase that expresses the feeling of this shape. After a 1 or 2 minutes, ask participants to return to a neutral posture.

Then repeat the same warm-up activity recalling the enriching interpersonal experience.

After one or two minutes, ask participants to move back and forth between body shapes. After two or three minutes of this exploration, ask for reflections from the participants so that they can express any challenges, insights or questions they have. Make the link between this experience of sensing into the body for certain feelings and letting those feelings take a shape in the body to the Group Sculpture Activity, in which volunteers are asked to take a shape reflective of their felt response to their particular contextual role or factor, *as well as their felt response to other actors in the sculpture.*

CONTEXT IN COACHING

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Appendix E

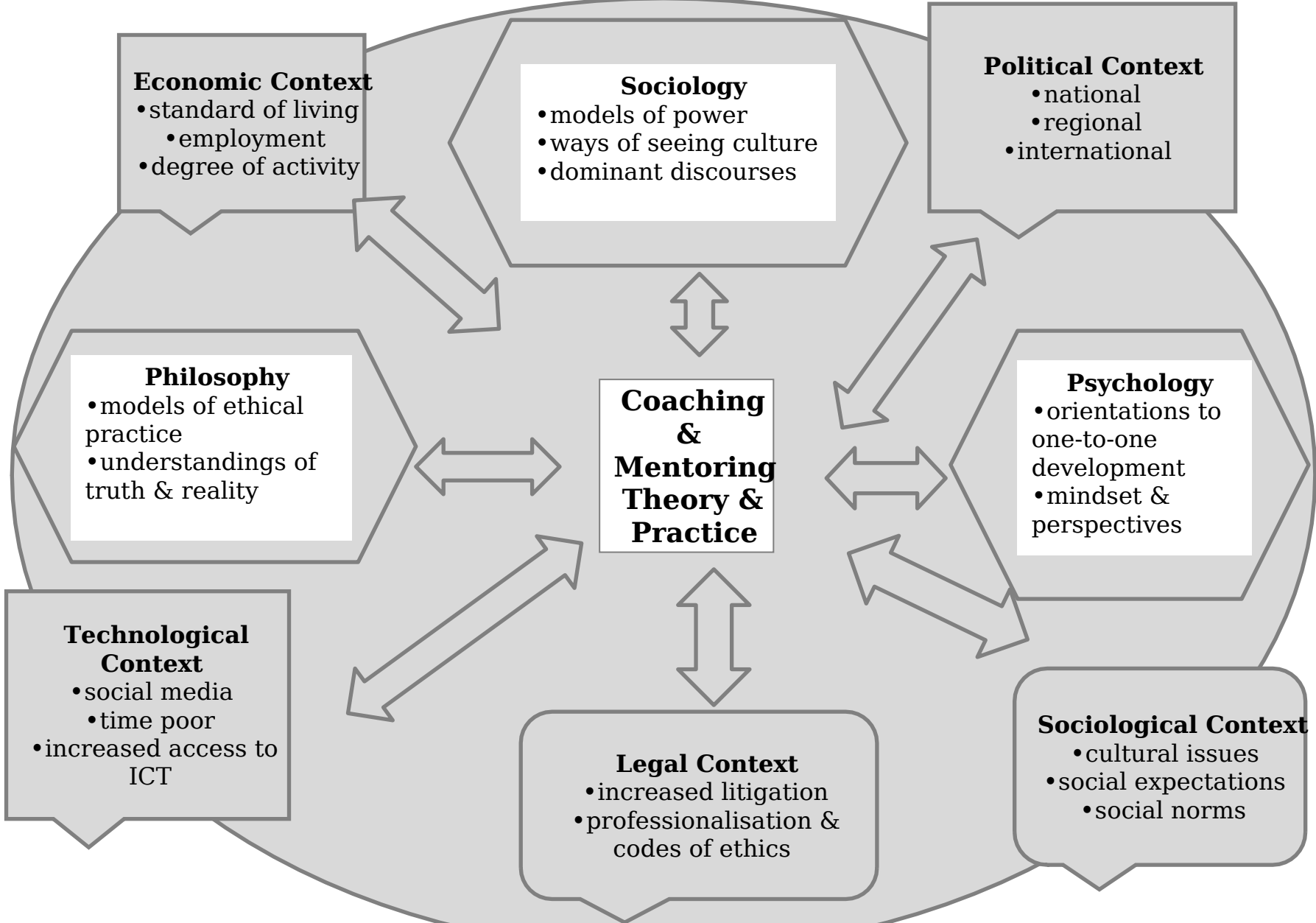
8 suggested actors of the Case

We have identified the following 8 actors from the case. You might ask participants if they have identified others (such as the code of ethics, etc.), and then they can be part of the sculpture.

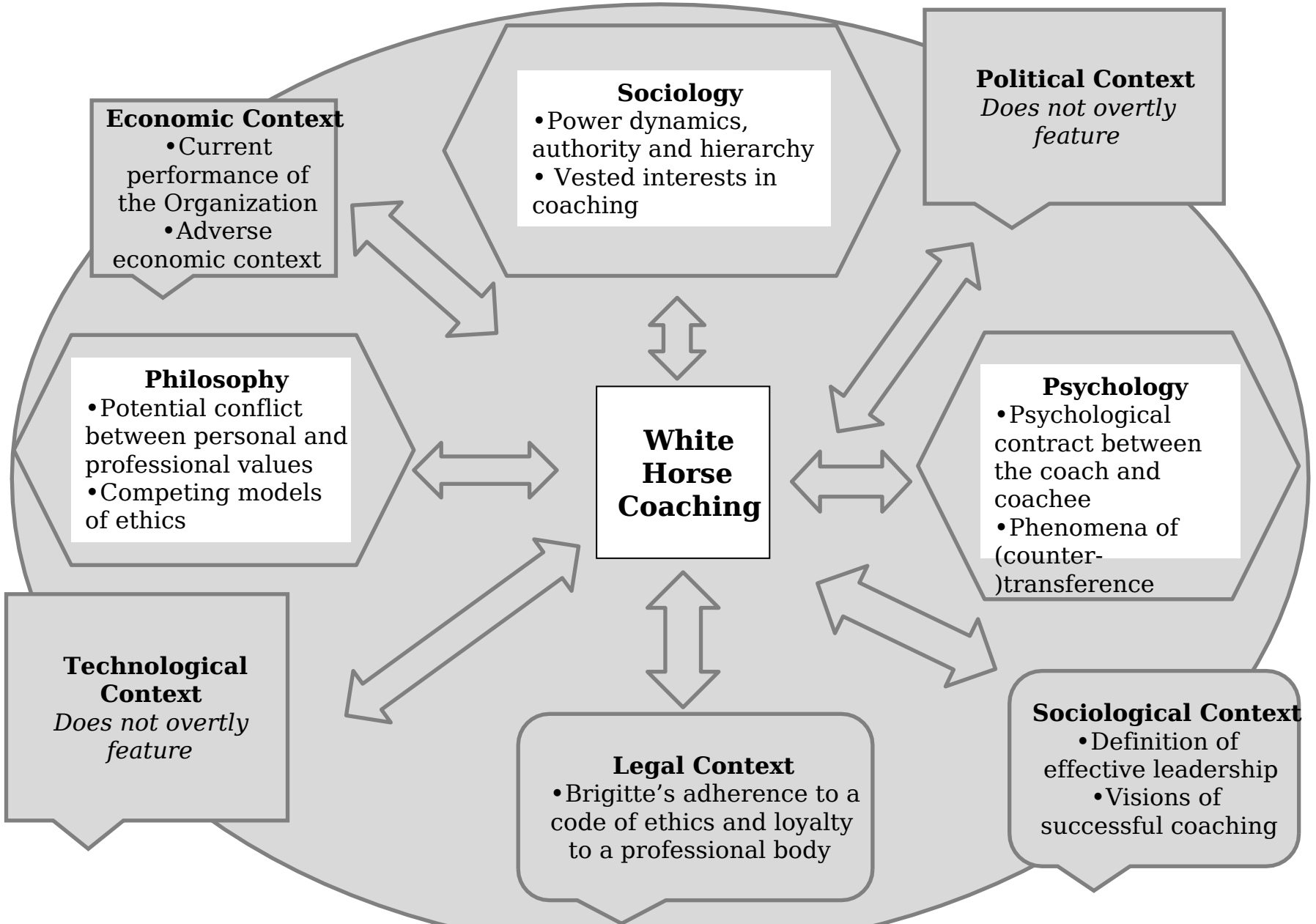
1. Brigitte - the stuck coach
2. Brigitte - the good coach
3. Will - the sponsor
4. Bob - the client
5. The Organization
6. The Board
7. Damocles - the sword-bearer
8. The Coaching Profession

Note that if you adapt this exercise to topics other than coaching (such as ethics, change, or more largely organizational behavior), you can refer to Appendix A for a list of suggested actors.

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