

# AI as a reflexive mirror: The coach's superpower



## ABSTRACT

The integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) into coaching can be understood not as an attempt to replace the human professional or as a marginal operational support, but as the introduction of a reflexive mirror capable of enhancing the coach's metacognition and awareness.

The ReflectAI project was born from this perspective: a cognitive partner designed to stimulate the coach's critical thinking, linguistic precision, and internal dialogue in the post-session analysis phase.

This article explores three main approaches to integrating AI (AI-Led, AI-Enabled, and AI as a Cognitive Partner) in coaching, proposing the "AI

as a reflexive mirror" perspective. In this paradigm, technology neither reduces nor automates human faculties; instead, it amplifies them, enriching the quality of reflective practice and, consequently, the coaching relationship.

## INTRODUCTION

The goal of this series of articles is 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 analysis 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 digital age necessitates a reevaluation of the tools that support human development, and



generative AI represents a promising yet complex frontier.

This initiative stems from a multifactorial analysis that integrates several emerging contributions:

- in the internal discussion between researchers and professionals of coaching psychology, committed to combining scientific rigor and practical application;
- in the collection and critical re-elaboration of national and international academic sources, as well as professional testimonies, which outline the state of the art and future trajectories of the sector;
- in heuristic dialogue with advanced language models such as ChatGPT, used not as sources of truth, but as tools to test hypotheses and refine thinking;
- In the experimental use of ReflectAI, a conversational agent explicitly developed for coach meta-reflection.

SCP Italy Coaching & AI research team's goal is to launch a series of scientific and popular contributions that will fuel the debate within the Italian and international network on AI in coaching. This exploration is also in preparation for the upcoming 4th ISCP Italy. Research Hub Symposium – 14th International Congress of Coaching Psychology, 2025, with the ambition of supporting the diffusion and validation of innovative coaching tools such as ReflectAI.

## THREE PARADIGMS FOR AI IN COACHING

The debate on the impact of AI on coaching has moved beyond its initial phase, characterized by a dichotomous vision between the complete

replacement of the coach and the total rejection of the technology. Today, a continuum of integration emerges that can be divided into three distinct paradigms:

**1. AI-Led Coaching:** In this model, an artificial intelligence system (usually a chatbot or avatar) directly takes on the role of coach. The interaction occurs autonomously, without human intervention. These solutions are used in microcoaching or habit development, but they represent a substitute for the coaching relationship, effective for structured tasks but lacking the human depth and nuance.

**2. AI-Enabled Coaching:** This paradigm sees AI acting as an "operational partner" or intelligent assistant. It automates administrative tasks (scheduling, follow-up), analytical tasks (session transcription and summary), and information retrieval. In this model, AI frees up the coach's cognitive resources, allowing them to focus on the uniquely human aspects of the relationship: listening, working alliance, empathy, intuition, and presence. While highly useful, this approach risks confining AI to an ancillary role as an operational assistant.

**3. AI as a Cognitive Partner:** This third approach, which forms the foundation of the ReflectAI project, represents a paradigm shift. AI is no longer just an operational tool, but a dialogic partner whose purpose is to enhance higher human functions. Instead of "relieving" the coach of operational tasks, AI "stimulates" them on a metacognitive level. Its contribution is not aimed at process efficiency, but at enriching the quality of the coach's thinking.



It is in this third way that the most transformative potential lies: using the machine not to do things for us, but to help us think better.

## REFLECTAI: FROM REFLECTIVE PRACTICE TO COGNITIVE PARTNER

Reflective practice is universally recognized as a key skill for a coach's effectiveness and professional development (Kovacs & Corrie, 2017). Reflective practice, activated after an action, is conceptualized by Donald Schön (1983) as reflection-on-action. It consists of the ability to critically review one's experience to draw lessons and improve future practice. Traditionally, this process has been and continues to be supported by tools such as journaling, supervision, or peer discussion.

The ReflectAI project was born to digitize and enhance this process, transforming it into a structured dialogue with a conversational agent.

Developed by the ISCP Italy Research Hub, ReflectAI is a chatbot based on generative AI (GPT-4) and integrated into Telegram, designed to guide the coach through a structured path of meta-reflection after each session.

Its operation is not prescriptive, but maieutic. Through a series of targeted questions, based on the principles of Coaching Psychology, ReflectAI invites the coach to:

- **Taking distance from the event:** separating the observation of facts from subjective interpretation.

- **Intensify internal dialogue:** articulate thoughts and hypotheses that would otherwise remain implicit
- **Recognizing the role of emotions:** exploring one's own emotional experiences and those perceived in the coachee as a source of valuable data.
- **Considering the role of others and the system:** broadening the perspective beyond the coach-coachee dyad.

In this way, ReflectAI does not simply record or summarize, but acts as a catalyst for critical thinking, shifting the focus from operational efficiency to reflective depth.

## THE COACH'S SUPERPOWER: BEYOND EFFICIENCY, TOWARDS AWARENESS

ReflectAI's "Cognitive Partner" vision is clearly distinct from purely operational models. If an AI-enabled coach measures its success by the time it saves the coach, an AI-as-cognitive-partner measures it by the quality of the insights it generates.

Initial quantitative and qualitative analyses conducted on the project indicate significant trends in this direction. The data show that, with continued use of ReflectAI, coaches tend to increase the length and complexity of their written reflections. This suggests greater effort in articulating thought and greater linguistic precision, key elements for effective metacognition.

Qualitatively, coaches report feeling part of a "safe space," where the absence of human judgment allows for more honest sharing of

doubts and uncertainties. Paradoxically, the dialogue with ReflectAI seems to foster contact with one's own vulnerabilities and, consequently, deeper learning.

This approach shifts the value paradigm: the "superpower" afforded by AI is not speed, but depth. The coach is not someone who accomplishes more in less time, but someone who, thanks to the partnership with AI, gains a deeper understanding of their own actions and their professional self.

## FUTURE PROSPECTS AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

The ReflectAI project is in an exploratory phase, but it opens the door to promising future developments. ReflectAI Coachee is currently in the design phase, with a version specifically designed for coachees to help them consolidate their learning between sessions. A further step will be to scientifically validate the tool's effectiveness through a comparative study with a control group using traditional supervision methods.

This new paradigm also raises critical ethical questions. An inherent risk of AI-led models is "algorithmic bias," which can lead to standardized and culturally insensitive advice. The Cognitive Partner model inherently mitigates this risk: ReflectAI doesn't offer solutions or advice, but instead asks questions. Responsibility for thinking and decision-making remains firmly in the hands of the professional coach, who is empowered to recognize and deconstruct their own biases, rather than being subjected to new ones by the machine.

## CONCLUSIONS

Artificial intelligence is not a monolithic force, but a multifaceted tool whose impact depends on the vision that guides its application. If confined to an operational role, it risks dehumanizing coaching, turning it into an efficient but sterile process. However, if, as in the case of ReflectAI, it is conceived as a cognitive partner, it has the potential to catalyze an evolution of the profession.

The real challenge is no longer technological, but epistemological and cultural in nature. The crucial question is not "Will AI replace us?", but "How can we collaborate with AI to become more aware, reflective, and ultimately, more human coaches?" The paradigm of the Reflective Mirror as a Coach's superpower, understood as a professional whose critical thinking is amplified by an artificial partner, offers a powerful and generative answer to this question, charting a course for the future of coaching in the digital age.

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