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Coaching psychology: Applying an integrated approach in education

Abstract

Executive coaching has become a popular leadership development tool over the past decade. To be effective coaches need to reflect on the lessons from counselling research from the past four decades and on the emerging coaching research to develop coaching models which are evidenced based.

Key words

Executive coaching; Integrative coaching, coaching research, coaching in education, coaching psychology.

The emergence of coaching

Coaching has emerged over the past five years as a significant personal development option for leaders. It ranks alongside leadership programmes, action learning and professional mentoring. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2005) suggest 88% of organisations now use coaching in some form, with 74% reporting that their use of coaching increased over the previous 12 months.

This article explores the emerging research evidence in coaching and research evidence from counselling to illustrate an evidence based model. Secondly the article describes the application of this model within the context of UK education, and notes the impact of coaching in educational settings.

Coaching models

Coaching research is still in its infancy. There have been few published studies on the impact of coaching (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001), although this is beginning to change. The result is that coaching practice has developed along two separate paths. A review of the shelves in most bookshops suggests that the popular coaching models available to coaches owe more to the experience of coaches than to evidence based practice. The models offered by popular writers, draw on personal experiences as managers (Whitmore, 2002; Caplan 2002; Parsloe & Wray, 2000; Starr 2002; Alexander & Renshaw, 2005). They are rooted within the behaviourist tradition, and have a focus on observable behaviours.

The dominant model is GROW (Goal, Reality, Options, Will), developed by Alexander (Alexander & Renshaw, 2005) but popularised by Whitmore (Whitmore, 2002) in the 1990's. The GROW coaching model used by most coaches is a simple problem solving approach, which focuses exclusively on the behaviour of the coachee. A goggle search of the term, GROW, generates nearly 10 million listing for the term (10 June 2006); GROW coaching. The popularity of the approach is based on the dominance on behaviourist thinking within organizations (Passmore, 2003). This has been further by management training institutions promoting courses (ILM, 2005) which themselves are also almost exclusively behaviourist based. UK public services appear to be perpetuating this tradition with a strong focus on behavioural based approaches. The education sectors recently published coaching model advocates a strong behavioural focus to coaching (Creasy & Paterson, 2005). For managers using coaching as a management style a behavioural model is arguably the most appropriate (Passmore, 2005). However, such an approach ignores aspects of cognition, the unconscious and systemic features, which play an important aspect in shaping and influencing the performance of leaders. In a school context while the head may use coaching as a management style, to coach the head only using this technique as a psychologist is to so using only half the evidence of what we understand works in helping people to change and develop.

In the wider environment outside of the management and public services literature, coaching practice is more diverse. The American Psychological Society journals have encouraged the development of practice through encouraging links to be built with counselling research. This has seen the development of REBT (Rational-emotive behavioural therapy) coaching (Sherin & Caiger, 2004), psychodynamic coaching (Rotenberg, 2000; Kilburg, 2004), and through other publications solution focused coaching (Grant & Cavanagh, 2002) and cognitive coaching (Neenan & Dryden, 2001). These approaches have drawn upon cognitive psychology and the ideas of the dynamic unconscious to work at a deeper level

with the coachee. The potential weakness of these approaches is that they are derived from research and practice from within the therapeutic tradition. While coaching is concerned with working with functional individuals, therapy has traditionally focused on working with varying levels of dysfunction or distress.

This focus on counselling practice partly reflects the backgrounds of many coaches moving from therapy to coaching, but also a basic lack of coaching research. A review of executive coaching literature (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001) found only seven evidence based studies assessing the impact of coaching on organisation leaders. A parallel review of the literature (Grant, 2004) revealed a similar lack of studies. This lack of research in coaching contrasts with the history of research in therapy over the last four years. The evidence from therapy (Hill & Corbett, 1993) suggests a number of key messages which coaching can learn.

Firstly, evidence suggests that therapy can have positive impact on clients well being. Significant numbers of studies have demonstrated the impact of therapy. While these studies seem to differ in the exact amount of the impact, the common message is clear. Some research has been undertaken at a meta-level comparing results and this suggests that the average client being 80% better off than the untreated client (Smith, Glass & Miller, 1980).

Second, the skills of the therapist are more important than the expressed theoretical position of the therapist. (Luborsky, Singer, & Luborsky, 1975). It has been argued that the result is that, to quote Alice in Wonderland, 'all should have prizes'. In other words, which ever method is used seems to produce an effect. The result of this evidence in therapy has been a movement towards integration, and away from single models (Smith, 1982). These lessons from therapy however have yet to influence executive coaching practice.

So, in one camp the tradition largely remains reviewing therapeutic models and applying these to leadership coaching. In the second camp there is a desire to apply behaviourist models which fit with existing management thinking. A third position is possible, which seeks to bring these positions together, and to build a model which is based on our developing understanding from coaching research and from an understanding of counselling research.

Over the past two years a series of research studies have been published (Cavanagh, Grant, & Kemp 2005; Stoeber & Grant, 2006), with a host of unpublished studies being conducted in the UK and USA. This work is contributing to the evidence base for executive coaching. The evidence is building that coaching contributes to improved performance (Dawdy, 2004; Bush, 2005; Luebbe, 2005), that both behavioural and cognitive coaching approaches have positive effects (Grant, 2003) and that specific coaches have clear views about what they value from the coaching relationship (Passmore, 2006a). Clearly more work needs to be done to develop the understanding we have about the effect of coaching, in the way we have for counselling. However, it appears as if the findings from counselling are being mirrored in coaching. Most important of these, are that coaching has a positive effect, that what matters is the skills of the coach rather than the model and the use of an eclectic or integrated model has a strong attraction for coaches.

The integrative model was developed from research with executives (Passmore, 2006b). It blends six streams (Passmore, in press) which the coach can work within. The multiple

layers of the model make it simple enough for the manager-coach to use the first part of the model (stream 1-3) without psychological training. At the second level the model can be used by those with counselling or coaching training to work at the cognitive level (stream 4 and 6), and for those with specialist training the advanced aspects of the model such as working with the unconscious brings an added dimension (stream 5). The following section reviews the model, before moving to apply the model to a case study.

The Integrative Coaching Model

The first stream and second stream focus on the relationship with the coachee. Evidence suggests that without an effective relationship between the coach and coachee, based on mutual respect and trust, work cannot begin. Once established the work of maintaining the relationship continues through the coaching experience. The coach needs to continue to pay attention to interactions with their coachee, adjusting and adapting their behaviour appropriately and using the transference aspects of the relationship as a level to support change.

The following three streams is where the focus of change occurs. These streams echo Schein's work (1985) on organization culture.

Stream 3 (Behavioral Focus) is at the core of all executive coaching: behavioral change. The aim is to support behavioral change and to achieve this through deepening the coachee's problem solving and planning skills. This stream can be used by the manager after minimal training.

Stream 4 (Conscious Cognition) draws upon cognitive behavioral coaching interventions. The aim of the work in this stream is to deepen the coachee's understanding of the relationship between their thoughts and their behavior. This stream is for the psychologically trained or accredited coach.

Stream 5 (Unconscious Cognition) focuses on the cognitive processes which are outside of conscious awareness of the coachee. The aim of the coach in this stream is to deepen the self awareness of the coachee by bringing into conscious awareness aspects of thought and motivation that inhibit their effective behavioral performance. This stream draws upon the psychodynamic tradition, but can also use techniques from psychological specialist approaches including motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2002; Passmore & Tinwell, In Press) and EMDR (Shapiro, 1998). This stream is for the specialist coach, who has additional specialist training in the technique which they are using.

A sixth stream (Systemic) surrounds the model. It is the cultural context in which both coach and coachee operate. The coach will consciously hold an awareness of the boundaries and codes which this stream imposes, which may be ethical, legislative or organizational, and will reflect these throughout their work. This stream complements the other three and is most effectively used alongside the other five.

While working in each of these streams, the coach should maintain in his or her mind the overall goal of helping the coachee enhance his performance.

Application through a case study

Mike is a school head. He successfully completed the National College for School Leadership programme while a deputy and had 12 years teaching and management experience within school settings. He successfully secured a headship appointment on his first application but was concerned about the transition phase of his first year in post, which led to the request for coaching.

Mike and I meet over the course of nine months, in an informal arrangement, which could be described as coaching on-demand. Meetings typically were 1-2 hours and took place off site and outside the school day. The starting point for our work was to establish a working coaching relationship. This was achieved gradually through providing Mike with opportunities to talk about his work challenges, using open questions and positive affirming statements. As the relationship developed the need for the affirmation diminished, and a shift was possible towards greater challenge and encouraging deeper reflection.

During this phase of the relationship I returned to the goals which Mike had set and encouraged a more explicit statement of these in terms which could be measured at the conclusion of the coaching relationship. The key goal was to assist the school moving towards a position of being 'Outstanding' as assessed through independent assessment.

While bound within the context of the English education system, which meant we needed to work with both stream 6 systemic and stream 3 behavioural, the real challenge was elsewhere.

Like many senior managers, rising to the exposed position of head, Mike faced the challenge of personal confidence. For some this can be conceptualised as the Impostor Syndrome; a fear that someone will find out that they have been over promoted and are not capable of being the chief executive or head teacher. For Mike the issue was based on irrational thoughts about his ability to successfully lead his school towards the goal he shared with his governors of building an 'outstanding' school. This resulted in heightened anxiety and procrastination. Using stream 4 (conscious cognition) we worked to explore the activating events which triggered these irrational thoughts. We explored the consequences of the events, which included feeling sick during difficult events, and tiredness. Once established we explored the mediating beliefs, and sought to dispute these based on the evidence of actual experiences during the past 12 years working in schools.

Work was also done within stream 6 (systemic), to explore the expectations of others within the education authority, and how this played itself out in the staff room and in governors meetings.

At the end of the first year, a review identified some positive outcomes from the relationship. Mike felt more confidence in his role. He understood the relationship between his beliefs and emotions and behaviour. He was able to employ a series of techniques to manage the process, coping with the demands of the job through reframing and using evidence based thinking to challenge irrational fears. He was more focused on the goal of moving his school towards its target of being 'Outstanding' and was behaviourally more skilled in working with stakeholders, such as local residents and education authority representatives. Most importantly Mike recognised the role he played within a wider

system, and that his behaviour and that of others, particularly at the education authority, was often driven by legislative and organisational demands which played themselves out in their relationships with him as a school head.

The impact of the work however was not limited to Mike. The shift in education towards a coaching style of leadership provided the opportunity for Mike to deploy some of the techniques he was using. We explored the way we had jointly work to build a relationship, the important of affirming others behaviour and of creating mutual respect. We also talked through a model which Mike could use as a way of working with his staff, based on the heart of coaching model (Passmore, 2005). This idea was to promote coaching as a way of working within the school, to build a learning organisation, where the dominant style was Socratic rather than didactic; using questions to teach rather than answers.

Case studies often end with the positive. However, on reflection we could have made changes in the relationship which could have enhanced what we did. Firstly starting after the appointment was not ideal. For both coach and coachee, a start in August rather than October may have helped Mike through the first half term; possibly the most stressful period. Secondly, the recognition of the potential of coaching for challenging the school's culture came as an unintended consequence, rather than a planned part of the process. For Mike it may have been more useful to understand the coaching model for use with his staff during the first term rather than during the third term. Finally, while as a coach I had an outline understanding of education at the start, sector knowledge makes a difference, so selecting a coach with previous experience of working in the sector helps.

Conclusion

The new coaching model for school leadership (Creasy & Patterson, 2005) suggests a focus on behaviour coaching. The evidence from counselling and coaching research suggest that integrating behavioural with other interventions should be the direction of travel. When applying such an approach it can yield benefits not only in behavioural performance but in confidence and in supporting a shift in culture within the learning environment.

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