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Coaching Psychology Techniques section

Motivational Interviewing techniques: The typical day

Abstract

This article is the third in the techniques series which are drawn from the motivational interviewing approach. In the previous papers, I summarized briefly the principles of Motivational interviewing (Passmore, 2011a) and in the techniques section offered a perspective on the application of reflective listening (Passmore 2011b) and 'the balance sheet technique (Passmore, 2011c). In this paper, I will briefly review a technique called 'a Typical Day'. Typical Day is useful technique or more rightly an exercise, which is used at the start of a coaching conversation to encourage the coachee to talk about the key issue. It offers the coach the opportunity to demonstrate listening and empathy while also gaining a detailed understanding of the issue.

Introduction

The 'typical day' exercise is a good way to start a coaching session and can follow on from the initial contracting and goal setting segment of the session which might dominate the first 5 to 10 minutes of the conversation. While this is a technique grounded in Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2002), it is also a technique which can be used more widely in life coaching and for some organisational coaching conversations.

The technique offers the opportunity to the coach to demonstrate what coaching is all about and to get the coachee talking. The coach can use the technique to demonstrate that they are a good, non-judgmental listener who really wants to understand. The coachee gets to talk about something they feel very comfortable with and know something about. Overall the technique builds empathy and rapport and increases the coachee's commitment to the process.

MI Principles

As noted earlier (Passmore, 2011a) motivational interviewing is a set of principles as opposed to a set of techniques. The key aspect is to keep to the core principles rather than mechanically follow this or other MI techniques. When the technique is deployed well by the coach, the typical day exercise will have given the person a chance to talk naturally and comfortably for a several minutes about something they know well and to build the relationship with the coachee, thus providing a platform for further work later in the session or in future sessions.

The technique

The coach may introduce the technique or exercise by saying:

'perhaps you could help me get a better understanding how your average day goes– starting from when you get up in the morning until when you go to bed? Would that be okay? How does your day start?

In response to this question some coachee's will rush ahead and focus on the issue which they wish to discuss, for example stress and work-life balance. They may say: *'well nothing really happens until ...'*. My suggestion is to slow these coachees down by asking them to tell you a little but more about how the day starts. Other coachee's may take several minutes telling you about their thoughts even before they get out of bed. Good coaches will direct attention and manage the process through intervening, speeding up the slow coachee's and helping those who are racing ahead to take the day in a step by step order.

During the description of their day coachee's will frequently use both 'sustain talk' (e.g. *'I just can't start stand the place, the bureaucracy drives me wild'*) and 'change talk' (e.g. *'I used to work in the private sector and had an enjoyable time working there'*). These will spontaneously emerge during the exercise without coach direction. Such responses provide the opportunity to 'go with the flow' while trying to develop more change talk by asking the coachee to elaborate. A further useful intervention from the coach is to make affirming statements or to reflect back what is being heard.

In using the technique in a MI spirit, the coach should try to avoid too many 'assessment' questions like *'on a scale of 1-10, just how stressed do you feel at that point of the day?'* Such interventions may have the affect of making the person feel judged or rated and may lead to them being less open later in the session.

The overall aim is to encourage the coachee to start talking and continue talking from an evidence based perspective about their day and how the issue which they wish to focus on manifests itself within their day (Anstiss & Passmore, In Press). By directing attention through questions the coach gains a deep insight into the life of the coachee and a good sense of their current situation.

Towards the end of the exercise it will be helpful for the coachee if the coach summarises the key points which have emerged. This can demonstrate to the coachee they have been really listened to, as well as offering a chance to hear back and to further reflect on, what they have been saying.

Conclusion

The technique offers a useful intervention for coaches using MI helping them start the coaching conversation, establish rapport, demonstrate empathy through active listening and offering an insight into the coachee's issue.

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