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Coaching Psychology

Motivational Interviewing: Reflecting on ethical decisions in MI

Abstract

This article is the seventh and final one in this series for TCP, which is drawn from the Motivational Interviewing (MI) approach. In the previous papers I have summarized briefly the principles of Motivational Interviewing (Passmore, 2011a). In five further papers for the techniques section I have offered a perspective on the application of 'Reflective listening' (Passmore 2011b), the 'Balance Sheet' technique (Passmore, 2011c), a 'Typical day' (Passmore, 2012a), 'Recognizing change talk' (Passmore 2012b) and 'Agenda Mapping' (Passmore, 2013). In this paper I will briefly return to reflecting on the MI process and specifically the question of ethics within the approach as we draw this series to a close.

Key words

Motivational interviewing, Coaching ethics, BPS ethical code, ethical guidelines, coaching supervision.

Introduction

In previous articles I have explored techniques from MI, which could be used by coaching psychologists within their own practice. Some may argue that these techniques, such as recognising and working with change talk require a high level of sophistication in the skills of the coaching psychologist. This is true, but a number of concepts share strong similarities with traditional coaching, such as Agenda Setting. What makes MI distinctive is that it offers a fresh way to conceptualise these approaches through a systemised approach, which is grounded in extensive research. It is this aspect which in my view makes MI an obvious model for coaching psychologists to turn to, and enables them to differentiate themselves from other coaching practitioners offering interventions which are less informed by research, such as NLP.

One aspect of MI that draws frequent discussion is the ethical perspective of MI, given its desire to evoke intrinsic motivation for change that may initially be counter to the current behaviour or attitudes of the individual. As a result some practitioners have considered this aspect of MI to be manipulative or unethical.

The core of MI practice

As previous readers of some of the earlier and more research focused work will be aware (see Anstiss & Passmore, 2011; Anstiss & Passmore, 2013 or Miller & Rollnick, 2013, for a fuller discussion of the research literature) Motivational Interviewing has its roots in the work of counselling and specifically addiction counselling for drug and alcohol. Much of the research is based within these domains, where MI has built a strong evidence base with over 200 Randomised Controlled Trials (see for example Groeneveld, et al, 2008) and eighteen meta-analyses studies (see for example Lundahl et al., 2010). More recently MI has been broadening its application as a methodology for supporting behavioural change in cases where clients are ambivalent about making future changes. MI for example is now being used to promote oral health practice (Almomani, et al., 2009), educate diabetes patients (Bowen et al., 2002) and managing children's television viewing (Taveras, et al., 2011). The evidence from each of these areas confirms MI as a highly effective methodology for supporting behavioural change.

Extending MI to the work arena

A growing number of coaching psychologists too have seen the value of MI as an intervention which can play a valuable role in the workplace. These practitioners have been using MI to explore options and develop motivation for change, particularly in individuals who feel stuck. We (Tim Anstiss and myself) have been using the intervention to explore career change, to assist individuals and organisations during periods of conflict, as well as using MI to help support organisational change. We have also been teaching practitioners MI skills to help them apply these tools with patients and when working with colleagues.

One question which emerges both as we critically reflect on our own application of MI in supervision and which also emerges as a common question during teaching MI, is the issue of ethics. Is it ethical to use MI if people's goals are different from the coach? Is MI ethical given the role of the coach is to evoke intrinsic motivation? I believe the answer to the use of MI is yes, but only where the coaching psychologist carefully navigates a route in the best interests of the client or clients. It is this final distinction which is particularly challenging for workplace coaches using MI given the nature of multiple client's within organisational settings and the difficult of clearly identifying what is actually best for others.

Ethical guidance from MI counselling

Counselling psychologist's practice is rightfully underpinned by ethics. This is supported by the British Psychological Society's (BPS) own ethical code (BPS, 2009), by ethical decision making models (such as Carroll, 1996) and guided through counselling supervision where ethical dilemmas can be discussed with a supervisor.

Miller and Rollnick (2013) too recognised that the MI processes could benefit from guidance. The authors suggest that the ethical question needs to be asked of each of the processes within MI. Good listening, which includes tools such as reflective listening (Passmore, 2011b) they suggest is unlikely to do harm and in fact by itself may promote positive change. Focusing, which includes techniques such as Agenda Setting (Passmore, 2013), they note, involves the ethical guidance to review and establish goals. Evoking is also uncontroversial, they suggest, if the client has brought the

goal. However the authors note that “ethical considerations arise when client and counsellor aspirations differ” (p129). Finally they argue that the planning stage presupposes a readiness to move forward and thus ethical considerations are less prevalent.

To help guide therapists in their reflections Miller and Rollnick have set out ethical guidance for the use of MI in clinical settings (see Table 1).

Table 1: Some ethical guidance for the practice of MI

The use of MI component processes is inappropriate when:

1. Available evidence indicates that doing so would be ineffective or harmful to clients.
2. Clients experience (or appear to experience) discomfort
3. Where client and counsellor perceived best interests differ
4. When the counsellor’s personal investment in achieving an outcome are high conflicts with the client’s own perceived best interests.
5. When coercive power is combined with the personal investment of the counsellor.

(adapted from Miller and Rollnick, 2013)

Ethical guidance for MI coaching

For coaching psychologists these ethical guidelines are both helpful but also require further consideration. One particular distinctive aspect of working in organisational settings is the issue of working with or to multiple clients. Most workplace coaching involves a commissioning manager, in the form of the line manager, an HR manager or chief executive, as well as the ‘client’; the individual who is being referred for coaching. This ‘multiple client’ issue requires the coaching psychologist to consider the needs of all the clients involved and to act ethically towards all parties; the individual and the representatives of the organisation. One way that most psychologists try to manage this is through operating transparently in their dealings with both parties. For example this might involve meeting both parties at an initial commissioning meeting and at a review meeting at the close of the relationship where there is an open discussion about the desired outcomes sought by both parties.

When coaching is focused on supporting managers in transitioning to new roles, preparing for or engaging in career development, in skills development or general reflective / sounding board conversations these tri-partite conversations are relatively simple and straightforward. The coaching psychologist can play the role of co-ordinator, encouraging both parties to set out their goals for the coaching relationship, which from experience are usually very similar. However, from my own experience in working on issues involving conflicts between the chief executive and a fellow director or in performance issues where the next step is potentially disciplinary action, such tri-partite conversations are often tense and guarded. The commissioning manager may need to communicate openly their concerns. During the tri-partite meeting the coach needs to listen to what is being said and what is unsaid, as well as to encourage the organisational client to fully and openly state their position. They also need to encourage the coachee to be equally transparent about their own position and their aspiration for the coaching relationship.

As a result Miller and Rollnick’s table may benefit from adaption to the context of workplace coaching (Table 2).

Table 2: Ethical guidance for the practice of MI in the workplace

The use of MI component processes is inappropriate when:

1. Available evidence indicates that doing so would be ineffective or harmful to the coachee or have a detrimental impact on the organisation's reputation.
2. The coachee demonstrates continuing discomfort with the process, which the coach perceives to be beyond what the coachee can contain.
3. Where the understanding of the coachee and the organisational client differ as to the reasons for the coaching (for example where a decision has already been made by the organisation to dismiss the coachee, and coaching is being used to make the decision more acceptable for an Employment Tribunal or for internal consumption).
4. When the coach is more concerned about delivering an outcome for the organisational client or for the coachee than in balancing these interests in an open and honest way.
5. When coercive power is used to achieve an outcome for one or either party (organisational client or coachee).
6. The coachee does not wish to engage in coaching.

Several of these aspects may be worth briefing discussing. For example given the multiple client nature of coaching within organisations, consideration needs to be given to the needs of the individual as well as the organisation. Rarely in such circumstances can organisations come to physical harm, more frequently organisations are concerned about their reputation, which can itself be valued in millions. A second example where the framework is further developed is in point 2. in this item we have recognised that in coaching (certainly for senior managers) high challenge is often a key element (see for example Jones & Spooner, 2006). Thus one important aspect in coaching senior managers is to finely balance the level of challenge with that of empathy / support. An analogy is that of sailing a boat; the greatest speeds (gains) are achieved when the boat is sailing at full tilt, however a single degree more and the boat can capsize.

For personal experience the central and most common issue that requires sensitive and direct management is the initial organisational client brief. This can be particularly difficult when the private pre-assignment briefing vary from what the organisational client communicates in the room in front of the coachee. Here the coach needs to act, without embarrassing the organisational client, to ensure that the coachee fully understands the organisational client's perception of the issue rather than hearing a more 'socially acceptable' version. Where openness cannot be achieved the coach is potentially placed in the situation of needing to deliver the news, and thus effectively act as the organisational management representative. In such cases I would advocate the coach should withdraw from the process until a shared understanding is achieved between the three parties as to the purpose of the coaching.

Finally, as in counselling, supervision can play a useful role to offer a space to explore and reflect on some of the ethical dilemmas that MI coaches work with. Rarely are these ethical questions clear-cut. Instead the issue ebbs and flows as information emerges about a complex situation. As a result

the coaches' own emotional responses and feelings are also likely to change and evolve during the process. Having an appreciation of these emotional responses, as well as a space to talk through actions and potential next steps is useful, if not essential in complex coaching cases, for the coaching psychologist in managing these ethical dilemmas.

Conclusion

MI is one of the most useful and evidence informed methodologies for stimulating and supporting behaviour change. Miller and Rollnick's contribution of MI is a significant addition to the coaching psychology field and should be recognised as such, given the wealth of research used to develop the approach over the past two decades. MI however needs to be managed ethically in its application with vulnerable clients, as well as in its application with workplace coachees and their organisational client's. The responsibility to achieving this balance and manage these potential divergent issues rests with the coaching psychologist.

I hope this series, along with the original work and our attempts to translate the approach to the areas of work will help to establish MI as a key tool among the armoury of coaching psychologists.

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