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Coaching Psychology Techniques Section

Motivational Interviewing - Balance sheet technique

Abstract

This article is the second paper for the techniques section drawing on the application of motivational interviewing within coaching. In the last issue of TCP I summarized briefly the principles of Motivational interviewing (Passmore, 2011a) and offered one technique - reflective listening (Passmore 2011b). In this paper, I will briefly review a technique called decisional balance or 'the balance sheet'.

Behaviour change

Making a change is hard for most of us. People often have views which both promote change and which get in their way. They see the potential advantages of changing, but also the advantages of their current behaviour. This type of thinking, arguing both sides of the argument for and against change, can lead to ambivalence. Ultimately this can lead to the coachee becoming stuck and being unable to make a change. This is natural, but for change to happen the coachee needs to overcome this log-jam of ambivalence and develop the motivation to make a change.

MI is a sophisticated approach to behaviour change which is suited to skilled practitioners such as coaching psychologists (Passmore & Whybrow, 2007). In using the approach, the key task for the MI coach is to help their coachee explore and understand the coachee's own ambivalence – reluctance to change. By talking things through, the coachee has the opportunity to hear their thought processes aloud and to explore these from multiple perspectives with the aid of a coach.

The technique explained

The balance sheet technique, also known as 'decisional balance (Miller & Rollnick, 2002) helps people think through their ambivalence in an open and systematic way. It helps the coachee to deepen their self-understanding and reflect on their own behaviour. As a result of the exercise the person's perceived importance for changing (or confidence about changing) is likely to increase and alongside this their motivation and readiness to change may also increase.

For the coach, the technique provides another opportunity to demonstrate good quality non-judgemental listening and to use the O.A.R.S (open questions, active listening, reflection and summary) discussed in previous papers, to understand the coachee, to roll with resistance (as opposed to offering arguments for change) and to notice and elicit change talk which comes directly from the coachee (these concepts are further explored in Anstiss & Passmore, 2011).

The technique works best with a sheet of paper (I have also used a flip chart or wipe board when these have been available – but be aware of removing the results at the end of the session to prevent others from reading the notes you have left behind). Divide the sheet into two main columns and two sub-columns (see Figure 1).

Using the responses from the coachee recorded on the balance sheet, the coach can direct the focus of the coachee to start talking about the current benefits of the behaviour, which they may want to change, through an open question such as *'tell me a little more about how X can be exciting?'* Such

behaviours are often maintained as the coachee derives some pleasure or positive affect from them. By starting with positives this reduces the chances of defensiveness from the coachee and the perception that the coach has a fixed agenda to make the coachee change their behaviour. In most applications of MI in coaching, I would suggest the role is not leading the coachee towards selecting a specific behaviour (although MI is often used in clinical settings in this way to address offending or serious drug misuse behaviours) (Passmore, 2007).

The coach may specifically target aspects to encourage the coachee to talk more about the positive aspects of the desired behaviour. The coach may do this through directing attention to this aspect through a further question or by asking the coachee to give an example. Alternatively, the coach may ask the coachee to talk about the feelings they have when they have made progress towards this new behavioural goal or when engaging in the desired behaviour.

As the coachee talks about each point in turn, the coach should invite the coachee to summarise the point in 3 or 4 words on the decision balance sheet. I have found it works best when the coachee writes down the points rather than the coach doing this.

Depending on the individual and their state, some coachees jump from one point to another and start talking about ‘disadvantages’ when they were asked about advantages of making a change, or vice versa. This is not a reflection of the coach, but a reflection of the coachee giving voice to their ambivalence and is natural and common. The coach may reflect back to let them know you have heard and at the end of the point may direct attention back to the side of the equation which was the original focus of the question, by saying something like *‘well, we’re going to talk about the disadvantages in a minute. But are there any other possible benefits to you?’*

As a result of these interventions change talk often emerges from the coachee. Coachees’ may say something like *‘I’d really like to be home on time to put the children to bed’*, reflecting their desire to make a change to the time consuming nature of their role and the desire to break the pattern of behaviour.

The exercise can be completed more quickly, if time is a challenge. This can be done by just using two boxes as opposed to four columns. These two columns can be summarised under the heading: *‘good things’* and *‘less good things’*. By using a two as opposed to four column approach repetition is avoided with items being repeated by the client in the disadvantages of one side of the balance sheet as well as the advantages of the other side of the other side. I have found however, that on occasions, coachee’s can miss items, when two rather than four columns are used.

At the end of the exercise the coachee has a sheet which they have completed which they can take away. The coach might ask them to spend some further time reflecting on this before the next session. Rather than leaving this free form, this works best when attention is directed towards the focus of change.

Figure 1: Coaching for change Balance Sheet

Benefits of activity	Costs of activity	Benefits of change	Costs of change

(adapted from Miller & Rollnick, 2002)

Conclusion

The decisional balance or balance sheet technique within MI can be used within other coaching models and is a simple but useful technique for coachees' to explore the consequences of their behaviour, to more fully understand the impact on their self and others and take personal responsibility for the consequences based on an informed choice about their behaviour.

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