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Coaching Psychology Techniques section

Motivational Interviewing techniques: Recognising change talk

Abstract

This article is the fourth in a series for TCP which is drawn from the motivational interviewing approach. In the previous papers in the journal, I have summarized briefly the principles of Motivational Interviewing (Passmore, 2011a) and offered a perspective on the application of 'reflective listening' (Passmore 2011b), 'the balance sheet technique' (Passmore, 2011c) and a 'Typical day' (Passmore, 2012). In this paper, I will briefly review a 'technique' which is at the centre of effective use of MI, 'recognizing change talk' (previously known as 'self motivating statements'). The ability to recognize the type of change talk used by clients is a key skill of the MI practitioner and its content can usefully inform the practice of coaching psychologists.

Introduction

Recognising the relationship between the words being used by clients and what this indicates, in terms of the inner statement, is an important aspect of MI. Research indicates there is a strong relationship between client words and client deeds (for a fuller discussion of this see Anstiss & Passmore, 2013).

In previous articles I have explored basic techniques from MI, but ones which could be used by coaching psychologists within their own practice. Some may argue that these techniques, such as decisional balance (balance sheet) are not unique to MI. However, recognising, categorising and using this categorisation to inform the next intervention is a distinctive feature of MI. While many coaching psychologists may acknowledge that their interventions are informed by their coachee's previous statement, MI offers a way to categorise the coachee's statements and encourages the coach to listen for changes in the language used by the coachee particularly around goal commitment and goal mobilisation.

MI Principles

As noted earlier (Passmore, 2011a; Anstiss & Passmore, 2011) motivational interviewing is a set of principles as opposed to a set of techniques. The key aspect of MI is to keep to the core principles rather than mechanically follow this or another technique. When the MI principles are followed by the coach, Miller & Rollnick (2011) argue, an effective relationship will be built with the coachee. Further, the coach is making effective use of the OARS (open questions, affirming statements, reflections and summarises) as part of this relationship building and in doing so are helping the coachee to explore their issue. The coachee will be talking openly about their issue and the challenges they face in making a change and the coach will be actively and empathetically listening to the content of what is being said and unsaid by the coachee.

As the relationship develops, the coach should pay particularly close attention to change talk. Sometimes people believe that because we suggest we may do things, we will do them. As an example, I recently attended a coach training course as an external observer. The course trainer was a highly experienced coach. The trainer offered to demonstrate a technique, which was drawn from NLP. The trainer asked for a volunteer from the group. She then coached the volunteer for around 10 minutes in a demonstration session. The coach concluded by encouraging the coachee to set a plan. The coachee was reluctant but after several questions they offered a possible action. Having got a plan the trainer was delighted with the outcome and suggested to the group that the session had demonstrated the power of the coaching technique. Sadly, what was missed was the detailed phrasing of the commitment, and the body language of the coachee, as they gave their commitment. What the coachee offered was preparatory change talk. The coachee's statements revealed recognition of the need to change and a wish to change. However, what was missing was a specific commitment that they would change. There is a danger for all of us, that unless we listen closely to what the coachee actually says, we can interpret desire as intention.

The technique

So what are we looking for in the words and phrases used by the coachee?

Miller & Rollnick (2002, 2011) have suggested that change talk is like a hill. It comes in two parts; the uphill and downhill of change. The uphill side of the equitation is the preparatory change talk. This is most likely to occur during the contemplation phase. The person is thinking about change and is weighing up whether change is really for them. In many cases the person is well aware of the advantages of making the change, but balanced against this are a series of barriers which have blocked their path to successfully making the change. It is this aspect which has created the ambivalence to making the change.

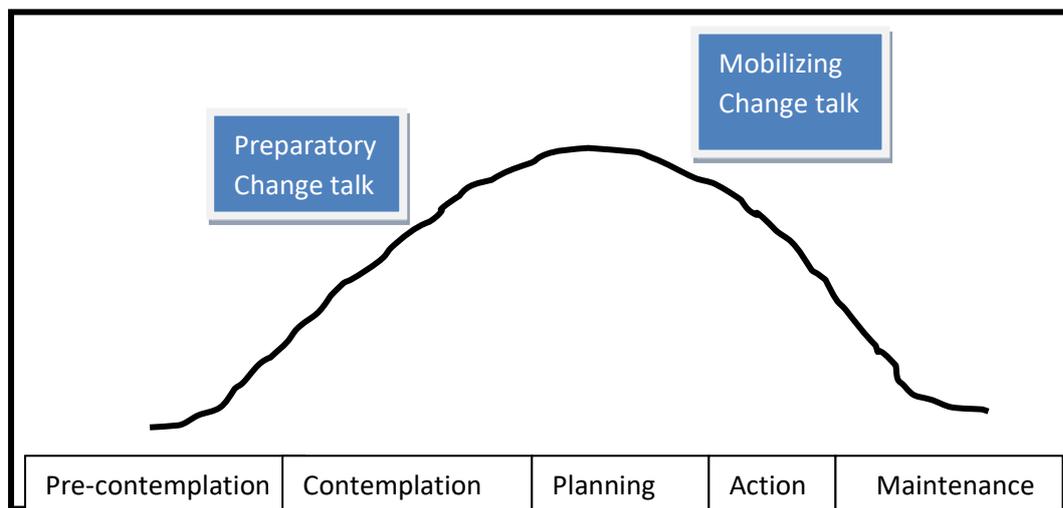


Figure 1: Transpersonal model of change and Change talk phases

During this phase the coach needs to listen for what Miller and Rollnick (2011) have labelled DARN's. It is these statements which reveal an interest and consideration of change, but which lack a specific commitment to make the change. Such statements might express the individual's personal desires about making a change, the ability to make the change, their reasons for making the change and the need to change. Examples of these are summarised in Figure 2.

<p>Desire: <i>"I really want to do Y"</i></p> <p>Ability: <i>"I think I could do Y if I really wanted to"</i></p> <p>Reason: <i>"if they did X, then I think that would be enough and I would then do Y"</i></p> <p>Need: <i>"I really need to do Y, or .. will happen"</i></p>

Figure 2: Examples of DARN statements

In general terms the coach should look out for statements which are conditional or hypothetical. These statements express desires (need to and want to), they may express ability (I can or I could), they express reasons for making the change and they may also express the need to make the change and the consequences of failing to do so. However, while such statements reveal the coachee has shifted from the pre-contemplation to contemplation phase of the stages of change model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983) there is no expressed commitment to make the change, or a specific plan as to how the change is going to be made, particularly how barriers and hurdles which have held the individual back will be overcome.

At this stage the role of the coach is to encourage this preparatory talk and continue to explore the ambivalence to change. The coach may use techniques such as the decisional balance sheet to explore the advantages or disadvantages of different choices, they may help the coachee think through the skills needed to make a change or the barriers which have got in the way before.

As this happens and the coach maintains effective listening and interventions, the coachee language is likely to change. In place of DARN statements will emerge what Miller and Rollnick (2011) have labelled CAT statements. These statements are likely to reflect a change in the coachee from commitment to mobilisation; from *'I want to'* to *'I will'*. Figure 3 provides examples of the three types of CAT statements which the coach should be looking for.

Commitment: *'...next week I will do Y'*

Action: *'I am really keen this time to make a success of it, I have thought about what went wrong last time and its going to be different on Tuesday'*

Taking steps: *...'in advance of next Tuesday, have already done X. This will mean that when the meeting comes on Tuesday Y should be much easier this time'*

Figure 3: Examples of CAT statements

As Figure 3 shows commitment statements are concerned with intentions and promises. The coachee makes an unambiguous statement expressing their plans for the future. Key words to look for as examples are 'will', 'promise' or 'guarantee'. Action statements reflect the individual's state of being willing, ready and prepared to act. Finally, at the mobilisation stage, the coachee may express statements reflecting their preparatory actions towards the goal.

Conclusion

Listening closely to the spoken and unspoken communications of the coachee is a central competence for coaching psychologists. What MI adds is the detail of what the coach should be listening for and by using this information to inform the next steps of the process, supporting the coachee to move from contemplation to action. Miller and Rollnick's DARN and CAT statements offer a handy heuristic to help the coaching psychologist in their practice of using a highly effective evidenced based model.

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