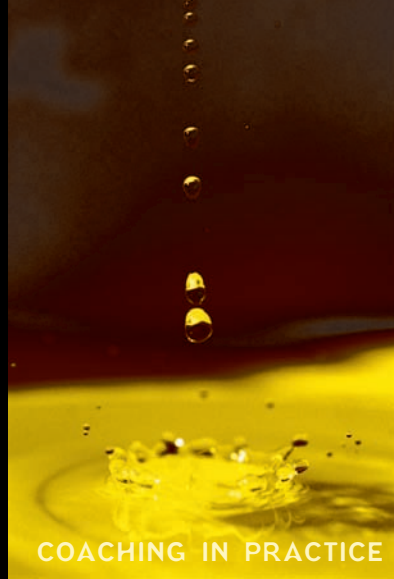


Series Editor: Jenny Rogers



# Coaching Positively

Lessons for Coaches from  
Positive Psychology

Matt Driver

# Coaching Positively

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Lessons for coaches from  
positive psychology

*Matt Driver*



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# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vi
<i>Series Editor's Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction: Positive Psychology and Coaching	1
<b>1</b> Strengths-based Positive Coaching	12
<b>2</b> Mindset: Positive Motivation in Coaching	28
<b>3</b> Resilience	45
<b>4</b> Coaching Leaders and Managers	57
<b>5</b> Leaders as Coaches	72
<b>6</b> Goal Power: Giving Your Coaching a Good Kick-off	79
<b>7</b> The Wider Implications of Positive Psychology in Coaching	95
<b>8</b> Being a Positive Coach	105
<b>9</b> Positive Emotion and Techniques	115
<b>10</b> Positive Themes and Coaching	122
<b>11</b> Positive Tips and Techniques	131
<i>Bibliography</i>	142
<i>Index</i>	146

# Preface

In this book, I present a range of research and experience under the broad heading of 'positive psychology' which is giving a new stimulus to the world of coaching. When this positive approach is used, I believe not only do individuals benefit but also their organizations and society benefit too. What could be more positive for society than people who know and value their strengths and whose strengths are noted and valued? Or organizations who value these people? Or people who have a mindset which leads them to grow and develop throughout their lives and to encourage others – their clients, their staff, even their children – to do the same? Or people who actively seek out positive emotion and trigger it in others through their careful words of acknowledgement and respect? Or who seek genuine and lasting happiness for themselves and others? Certainly, positive psychology has much to teach us. This book shows you how to harness the power of positive psychology in coaching.

## Who will use this book?

I have written this book for coaches of all levels who want to know something about new developments in positive psychology and how to use them in their coaching practice. Most of my work and therefore the examples I use are set in a work context. However, this does not limit the ideas and applicability of them elsewhere. Many colleagues tell me they have used coaching skills in a range of situations – sometimes unexpected places: parents with their children; doctors with their patients; teachers with students. So I hope you will make your own connections into the areas which are important to you.

I have called this book *Coaching Positively* for many reasons. Above all coaching is a positive practice which focuses on building people's resourcefulness and positive beliefs about themselves. Second, recent research under the positive psychology umbrella supports and builds upon much current coaching practice and also refines it. Third, related positive developments in other fields such as psychotherapy, economics, sociology and spirituality give similar messages. In reality, just as a coach sees their client as whole person and not just a working persona, so these disciplines overlap and are interconnected.

## **Methodology used**

In order to research this book, I consulted many academic articles and books on positive psychology. I also conducted interviews with a panel of experienced coaches, trainee coaches and coaching clients. I have worked with many hundreds of coaches over the past 15 years and I selected a small but diverse group of them to provide me with their thoughts, ideas and experiences of coaching as I wrote this book. To protect the anonymity of their clients, I will not name most of them in the book. However, they include men and women, people from many different backgrounds and career paths and with experience in practically every public and private sector. I shall refer to this panel from time to time and some of the case studies you will read have been contributed by them. I am greatly indebted to all of them.

I have also spoken to many hundreds of coachees, whom I shall mostly refer to as clients, seeking to understand the impact on them of the approaches, tools and techniques their coaches use. It is easy for us as coaches to talk among ourselves and share experiences. But it is our clients who are on the receiving end and it is important to bring their thoughts and reactions to bear on our exploration of positive coaching.

This research has demonstrated clearly that positive psychology has something to contribute to almost every aspect of coaching.

## **Main themes of positive coaching**

Six of the core themes of positive psychology are highly relevant to coaching. These six themes are the foundation of the coaching positively approach described in this book. The six themes are:

- 1 Strengths
- 2 Mindset
- 3 Resilience
- 4 Positive emotions
- 5 Relationships
- 6 Personal growth

Some of these themes have a dedicated chapter (Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4) but these six themes are cross-cutting throughout the book. You may not wish to read the book completely from beginning to end, but only dip in and read what is relevant to your particular situation.



## **Aim of this book**

I have worked with many people who have found that positive coaching helps them turn their aspirations and ideas into action. I have seen the good become great through it. However, I have also met many people who feel bored, frustrated and trapped by their present lives:

- Some live in denial and dream of a 'golden' past or what might have been.
- Some live in the vague hope of some future rescue – perhaps by getting a redundancy package.
- Some live in a state of hopelessness and negativity, blaming others for their plight and without any hope of change.

I have seen that for them positive coaching can enable them to live more fully and more successfully in the reality of the present moment and allow them to find growth and success for themselves, whatever life throws at them.

Positive coaching is for those stuck in a rut and the unhappy as well as for the dynamic and the successful. It can help a person fully accept the reality that they are in the wrong job or that they are being unrealistic or looking in the wrong places for satisfaction. It can help people find motivation and energy to liberate themselves from boredom or frustration. It can help a high performer achieve the outstanding.

By grounding the dreamer and giving the pessimist wings, coaching can be the key to open the door to a better future. The aim of this book is to help you find that better future by using positive psychology in your coaching.

## **Series Editor's Preface**

Every now and again a major new idea comes along in a professional discipline. In human psychology this new idea was about 'being positive'. Early exponents of Positive Psychology, such as Dr Martin Seligman, pointed out that psychologists had spent the best part of a century glooming over what was dysfunctional, and labouring to find the best labels for all the mental problems that beset us and had somehow overlooked the idea that it might be beneficial to look at what was going right. Since then innumerable research studies have established the difference it can make to start from the positive rather than picking away at what is going wrong.

In a sense coaches have always embraced this idea: for instance, the whole basis of goal-setting in coaching is about focusing on what you want to be different and better rather than dwelling on the misery of the problem. Enthusiasts for Neuro-Linguistic Programming have also helped us see that the language you use is critical to how resourceful you feel in relation to whatever the issue is.

But while coaches have known that being positive is important, we have not always known exactly what the relevant research is or how we can apply the findings to our coaching practice as academics are not specially renowned for their ability to work out practical applications – and why should they be? This is the territory that Matt Driver tackles in this book. Which ideas from Positive Psychology are most useful? How can we adapt them? How, exactly will clients benefit from them? What differences could it make when working with leaders? Why does it matter so much for the coach-client relationship, and indeed for coaches themselves? Matt is a coach with many years of experience and who brings bounce and chutzpah to everything he does. I recommend you find out how this book could do the same for you – and your clients.



# **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my wife Margaret, my children, Monica, Joe and Chris, my colleagues, Phil, Sandra and Anne, at Management Futures, my friend, Mike, at Integrity Matters and my mentor and series editor, Jenny Rogers.

Like the best coaches, you believed I could finish this even when I didn't.



# **Introduction**

## **Positive Psychology and Coaching**

### **What is positive psychology?**

Positive psychology is the umbrella name given to a field of research and applied psychology which has emerged strongly over the past 10 years, although its roots go back much further. Essentially, positive psychology is about what works rather than what doesn't. As Martin Seligman, one of its founders, points out (Seligman 2003), the earlier focus for most psychological research and much practice was about how we can understand people when things go wrong (for example, when a person experiences depression). The focus of positive psychology, by contrast, is on what conditions and experiences make for well-being and happiness. So the question is, 'How can I be well and happy?' rather than 'What can I do now I am unwell or depressed?'

Alex Linley, another pioneer in the field, who leads the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology, defines positive psychology as: 'An approach to psychology which aims to use scientific psychological research to enhance the well being of individuals and communities' (Linley 2008). It seems very clear therefore that positive psychology can be linked to a number of themes which lie at the heart of top quality coaching. The main ones are a focus on:

- what works, rather than what does not work;
- success and how to achieve it rather than how to avoid failure;
- goals and desired outcomes rather than on problems;
- strengths rather than weaknesses;
- the development of positive emotions, resilience and mindset rather than handling negativity and poor coping;
- developing positive relationships rather than sorting them out once they have gone wrong.

These areas are all addressed in this book as I believe they are fundamental to excellent coaching – and to life more generally.

## 2 INTRODUCTION

### Why positive psychology is important

Positive psychology is important for a number of reasons. Understanding how to help people perform at their best has never been more important than today. Governments have been interested for some years in the economic benefits of well-being; politicians are interested in the potential health benefits (and therefore the knock-on cost savings) of a happy and healthy population.

Psychologists like Martin Seligman and Ed Diener (2009) have argued strongly that it is time to stop analysing and researching *dis-ease* and instead focus on how people can be well. They and others have supported this by substantial research which suggests that happy people live longer, earn more and rise to more senior positions.

They also claim that what makes the difference is having:

- good friends;
- an optimistic outlook;
- a religious faith.

Interestingly, economic factors seem to be important only up to a certain minimum level.

### Links to other areas of development

Positive psychology can have an impact on other disciplines and areas of expertise. Many positive psychology practitioners and organizations have indeed seen their mission as contributing to human development in the widest sense, precisely by conducting usable high-quality research and applying it. The Centre for Applied Positive Psychology, for example, has set up a 'Strengths Project' through which it seeks to build strengths among communities in the developing world, and is working on the National Talent Bank in the UK to promote well-being during the recession by using the skills and talents freed up by it.

David Halpern, a political scientist shows that human beings are 'hard wired' to trust others and that close relationships are connected to individual and social well-being (Halpern 2005). He suggests that through facilitating these relationships, nations can build social capital which has an impact on well-being at national level.

Again in the political world, the UK government has appointed a 'happiness tsar' whose role is to foster initiatives for well-being at all ages. Politicians are interested in happiness because it appears to predict performance at individual and, by implication, national level.

Workplaces are now being regularly measured for 'happiness' and governments are taking an interest in these scores. A February 2010 survey found that Costa Rica was the happiest country in which to live. This in itself is unusual for a developing country, but additionally it has high life expectancy and is the third 'greenest' country too. Although happiness is entirely subjective and self-reported in most research, the link between the happiness experienced by individuals and societies and factors such as life expectancy is important and is substantiated by research.

Themes of positive psychology are present in other recent social science thinking (for example, interdependence) and in recent spiritual movements in East and West which foster positivity (moving away from guilt to growth), building relationships and independence.

In the workplace, there is also a role for positive psychology. Traditional people development in organizations has tended to be in two main areas:

- The teaching of what seems to work in practice, usually based on a tutor's own experience or preferences, for example, a lot of in-company management development programmes cover people skills, time management, motivating staff, etc. These programmes can be useful for teaching skills, if the skills are the ones needed by participants. They tend to have a practical hands-on approach. However, their real impact on managerial behaviour is often untested and the ideas proposed often lack rigour in themselves and frequently there is little or no proper evidence that they work.
- Academically focussed MBA and other shorter programmes which are mostly theoretical in content and have relatively little 'how to' content. These programmes can be good for developing ideas and thinking but not for practice. For example, learning a history of motivation theory and comparing and contrasting the various theories mostly does not leave a participant able to actually motivate people. Workshops on the principles of performance management generally leave participants able to talk about, but not manage the performance of their staff.

Other contributions to personal development inside and outside organizations have come from the tools and techniques of psychotherapy and counselling, such as transactional analysis and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). While these methodologies have often been rigorously practised by the therapists, there has for the most part been little generalizable research into them as organizational interventions that shows clearly what works and what doesn't. Because coaching has borrowed many of its tools and techniques from psychotherapy, it has come under fire for the same reasons. Again, organizations and individuals who invest time and money in coaching and coaching training for



## 4 INTRODUCTION

managers and professionals increasingly look for reassurance that what is being done is rigorous and has a solid basis in research and practice. It is therefore becoming increasingly important for coaches and coaching organizations to be able to justify their approaches and methodologies.

Positive psychology makes a significant contribution to this intersection of needs and traditions. Unlike much therapy and other development it is based on quality research conducted by academics. Thus it helps to address the need for justification and investment. At the same time it also focuses on application – on what works – which has often been lacking in MBAs and other academic programmes.

### **Main themes of positive psychology**

Positive psychology has something to contribute to almost every aspect of coaching as most of the core themes of positive psychology are highly relevant for coaching. Here are these themes and how they can be used in coaching:

- 1 *Strengths*: Strengths is a major focus in positive psychology (see Chapter 1). There is now good evidence that focussing on what we are naturally good at produces better results than constant attention to what we don't do well. This presents a radical challenge to many coaches and to the coachees too. Often people are forced to come to coaching to comply with some development needs assessment or a personal development plan. So often the focus has been on getting the low scores up rather than leveraging the high ones still further. An approach based on developing strengths has been shown to deliver improved individual and organizational performance. I worked recently with a senior professional in local government. He was weighed down by the prospect of a reorganization giving him significant staff management responsibility. By his own account, he was not good at this and it drained him totally. Through coaching he identified other options and then approached his employer asking to be allocated to a different role which would play to his strengths in strategy development and wider influence, but where there were only two other fellow professionals to manage.
- 2 *Positive emotions*: Coaches know from experience that when a client is stuck or not making the progress they hoped for, then there is almost always some emotion that is getting in the way. Recent research suggests ways of helping a client shift to a more positive emotional state more frequently, thus opening up their resourcefulness and scope for action. A client asked me to work with his daughter who was finding it hard to find a job after university and was in low spirits.

By tuning into positive feelings associated with past and present successes, she was able to overcome her fear of 'selling myself', looking at it instead as a challenge. She found a job within three months.

- 3 *Resilience*: The ability to cope with pressure and tough situations that have not been faced before is vital (see Chapter 3). I coached a finance director who was not finding a job in a major company reorganization. He needed to 'keep going' and keep positive. By eating more healthily and taking more exercise, he kept his energy and focus up until he found the right job. Another emerging area of coaching is the 'First hundred days'. This is of increasing importance as managers are expected to make a fast impact in new roles and need to cope with the pressures of learning as well as delivering.
- 4 *Mindset*: When our clients face difficult moments in their personal or working lives – perhaps criticism or a disappointment – it is vital that a coach can help them gain useful insight into those situations and, where appropriate, re-frame their attributions and assumptions about what is happening (see Chapter 2). A colleague of mine worked with a chief executive who had been made redundant in a very abrupt manner. It was important to help that client create useful meanings in the situation – moving from 'I am a failure' to 'I was not cut out for that job and can now look to find something much better.'
- 5 *Relationships*: The quality of the relationship established between coach and coachee is key to the learning which emerges. I have seen many times that at the point of real trust, a client can begin to talk about the deep issues facing them.
- 6 *Personal growth*: the coachee's growth is at the heart of the coaching relationship but what about the personal growth of the coach? Positive psychology is not just about doing things to or for others, it offers useful ideas for our own personal development as coaches. I have found it very helpful to look at my own innate strengths and consider how I could bring them more into play in my coaching. Being the 'real me' makes my work more authentic and indeed facilitates trust and openness.

These six themes will form the core of the book and will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.

## **Some key players in positive psychology**

Most of the coaches I know and work with see learning as a never-ending journey. In my case, this has meant undertaking some form of study or research for most of my life. So I have met many academics, lecturers and

## 6 INTRODUCTION

researchers over the years but I have rarely been as impressed as I have with the positive psychologists. They manage to bring together sound research, accessibility and application in a way that is unusual. Some of the names to look out for in positive psychology who appear in this book are:

- *Martin Seligman*: a former world authority on depression who ‘turned positive’ and has written some seminal books in the field. *Authentic Happiness* is worth reading and his website of the same name is also a great source of information.
- *Alex Linley*: heads up the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP) in the UK. He is an expert on strengths – spotting them and building them. See his book *Average to A+* for more information. Also see the CAPP website.
- *Carol Dweck*: who has brought radical new thinking to our understanding of mindset and the notion of ‘talent’.
- *Barbara Fredrickson*: who has researched the importance of positive emotional experiences in life and in work.
- *Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*: an expert on the psychological state of ‘flow’ which underpins excellent performance.
- *Ed Diener*: one of the most prolific academics in this field.
- *Robert Biswas-Diener*: another key player at CAPP with an interest in coaching and international development.

### Criticisms of positive psychology

However, there has also been some recent criticism of positive psychology. It suggests that we have been sold an impossible dream by advocates of ‘ra-ra’ happiness and purveyors of Pollyanna unrealism. Critics object to alleged assertions that people should be happy all the time and that we should strive to be happy every moment of every day. At times critics have confused true positive psychology with the 1960s ‘smile and be happy’ school of personal development which went out of fashion two decades ago.

This criticism does a major disservice to the significant amount of valuable research done under the positive psychology umbrella. It also does a disservice to the claimants who appear to have seen the opportunity to make money by writing a book debunking something which was not there in the first place. There is, for example, positive psychology research that suggests that too high a level of intense happiness in fact has a negative effect on health.

A fairer criticism of positive psychology is that it has focussed more on the individual than on the social context in which he or she operates. Can we really speak of choices or increased well-being when a person works in awful

conditions for low wages in a job they hate? This individual/context criticism has in fact been levelled at psychology as a whole, for example, child development research has not always paid attention to the social or family context in which the child grows up, focussing rather on individual characteristics and strategies.

Nonetheless, psychologists have observed for a very long time that two people in the same context will often respond and develop very differently. During the Second World War Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist, was imprisoned in the Auschwitz concentration camp. During his imprisonment there, he observed people closely as they came and went. He noticed that it was certain individual psychological beliefs and attitudes which distinguished those who successfully endured imprisonment from those who, subject to the very same hardship and abuse, gave up and died earlier than they otherwise might have. In particular, he observed that those who survived longer tended to retain some sense of choice about how they thought and behaved, whatever the guards did to them. This meant that they were less likely to just give up and that they managed their reactions better when provoked, therefore eliciting less violent responses in return.

Nonetheless, psychological research has shown that the social context often does have a high-level impact on people. So, for example, in an organization, authoritarian leadership styles tend to produce higher sickness and absenteeism levels, but a significant number of people cope very well in these circumstances too. So the context cannot be ignored, but it is the individual in the end who chooses how they respond to that context.

While no one can suggest that individuals always have 100% choice about how they are and what they do, it is my contention, and that of most coaches I know, that some degree of personal choice is almost always possible even in the toughest situations. Thus a key role of the coach is to help a client to find choice where they saw none before. So, for example, the person who brings along an issue about someone else such as 'My boss does not listen' can be helped to look within rather than without and to find capacity to be able to choose how to respond to that boss and to own their response rather than reacting at an instinctive or learned level. Annette Prehn (2008) has an interesting take on this. She suggests that because of the wiring of the brain, what the coach is actually doing here is helping the client build a delay between a stimulus and a habitual response so that they can insert additional brain functions like thought and choice – in other words, the coach is helping their client to learn to choose their response to situations rather than be driven by automatic patterns or habits.

Another way of expressing this is that part of the coach's role is to keep the client 'at cause' which means seeing themselves as part of everything that happens to them and around them rather than 'at effect' where they act as the recipients and victims of what goes on.

### How positive psychology can help coaches

My work as a coach and tutor to trainee coaches has confirmed three particular areas of importance where positive psychology can help coaches. These are: (1) relationship; (2) autonomy; and (3) achievement.

#### The importance of relationship

At a first coaching meeting, having done some of the introductions and found out a little about my new client, a director in a hi-tech manufacturing firm, I asked him what, if anything, he wanted to know about me. After some thought, he asked me: 'And what do *you* [as a coach] get from coaching?' It put me on the spot because it was so well phrased, so obvious, but so challenging.

Avoiding the temptation to say something clever like 'Hey, it's me who asks the questions around here', I thought for a moment and I answered that coaching for me was a privilege and that I learned an enormous amount about myself, about people and about organizations from each client I worked with.

In contrast, while attending another workshop for professionals in a range of 'helping' disciplines, I was shocked to hear the presenter say that he 'hired his brain out' to his clients for agreed amounts of time and money. What struck me was his presumed lack of mutuality – the belief that coaching was a one-way street in which the relationship between the two parties was unimportant.

I wanted to write this book because I believe that the relationship between coach and coachee is at the heart of useful coaching. If we look at child development, children's learning and growth happen within contexts of relationships at home, at school and at play. Where these contexts are inadequate or dysfunctional, not only does their intellectual learning suffer, but their physical and psychological well-being often suffer too. There is something in a healthy learning environment beyond pure functionality and methodology and 'doing to' people. What makes the difference is the quality of interaction, trust and challenge established. If it is so for children, it must be so for all of us.

The findings of recent psychological research support this view. Research into counselling and psychotherapy suggests that the relationship between client and therapist is one of the key factors which make a consistent and significant difference to the end results. Since coaching derives much of its technique and practice from counselling and psychotherapy, it is reasonable to assume that, here too, the relationship is crucial. This is confirmed by the experience of many hundreds of coaches and clients I have worked with.

### **The importance of autonomy**

I work in many organizations where people feel downtrodden and controlled. They often count the days until retirement or are hanging on for redundancy hoping for a ticket to freedom. Clearly their motivation is low and their performance, while often adequate, falls far short of what they are capable of.

Above all, their sense of being in control of their working lives is low and they often slide into a state where they have stopped thinking for themselves and just wait to be told what to do. They are full of assumptions about what won't work and why they are helpless. The senior managers who supervise these people will often lament that they cannot get them to take responsibility or be interested in developing themselves: 'They just want to come to work, do their job and earn enough money to pay the bills.'

This disconnect has concerned me for many years and, although exacerbated by economic downturns, is by no means limited to the bad times. It seems to me that it should be a human right to experience fulfilment at work. After all, most adults in most developed nations spend a significant proportion of their lives in paid employment.

Having said this, I have been struck by meeting another category of people for whom work is great fun and who can't get enough of it. I don't mean here the disorganized presenteeists, but rather others who can manage a high workload, enjoy it and feel energized by it. Typically too they combine it with an active life outside work, in fact, for many of them, there are no real boundaries between work and the rest of their lives.

And while the downtrodden at least tend to attribute the difference to circumstances such as the kind of organizations and the prevailing senior managerial style, that is not my conclusion, nor that of much psychological research. While organizational and senior behavioural differences cannot be ignored, the real differences lie in the mindset and behaviours the individual concerned bring to their work.

The difference between these two groups of people is hugely important today and I believe that in it lie some important messages for society, for study – and of course for coaches. There is much evidence that a sense of self-direction and autonomy is important for human beings and society. It tends to lead to greater life satisfaction and higher work performance. I will say a lot more about this later.

### **The importance of achievement**

A leading management consultant I know had a chief executive client who bemoaned the poor performance and lack of commitment among his staff. The consultant did some informal interviews with staff and reported back to the CEO: 'You have some of the brightest, most committed and innovative

## 10 INTRODUCTION

people I have ever met working for this organization. The problem is that they hang it all up on a peg as they walk through the front gate.'

In contrast, I was coaching a young woman in a training job. She was good at the job but felt stuck. She was neither enjoying the work nor gaining any development from it. I discovered that outside of work she was a talented traditional folk musician and played regular concerts as well as writing her own music. The switch in energy as she started to talk about her music was striking. A question came to me from somewhere: 'How could you bring more of your music to your work?' It sounded ridiculous at first, but it engaged her attention. Now she has her own business using music to help develop people of all ages from children to chief executives.

So how come so many people don't bring their whole selves to work? If they leave their talents for organizing, presenting, caring, even music, at the gate, how will they ever achieve what they could? How will they ever feel competent? Here there is a great challenge for leaders and managers at all levels in creating the climate in which people can flourish. Coaching can be a powerful way of helping a person get in touch with their real talents and bring them more prominently into their lives.

I have noticed that behind most of the issues brought to a coach, one or more of these key areas are present. And I have seen coaches help people to make real, significant changes in their lives in these categories. To help you reflect on this, consider your own experience of development. Here is an activity to try which you could also use with your clients. I am indebted to my colleague Sandra Grealy for the original idea.

### **Activity**

Think of two or three people you have known who have had a significant positive impact on you in your career or life. Consider how it was or is that they had such a big impact. List what specifically they did or do. Consider how the characteristics identified need to apply to any positive coach.

I have used this exercise with many clients and essentially their responses fall into three categories:

- a strong personal connection with me;
- allowing me to take the lead and choose for myself;
- seeing potential in me beyond what even I was aware of.

These categories are supported by positive psychology research which shows consistently that human beings have basic needs for:

- being able to do things for themselves;
- developing competence and achievement;
- experiencing strong, supportive mutual relationships.

So building on these three areas of importance, we can say that they also exemplify an attitude which the coach needs to bring to the heart of positive coaching practice:

- The coachee is an independent and autonomous person and part of the coach's role is to foster and encourage independent and autonomous thinking and action.
- A key purpose in coaching is to build capability (however the coachee defines it). If there is no movement forward, no development of the coachee's innate talent, then they will not experience increased competence.
- The relationship built is fundamental and goes well beyond the sometimes functional and superficial 'rapport' and 'mirroring' often propagated in textbooks.

In my experience, coaches who do not follow these tenets underachieve. They do not enable the results their clients are capable of. Typically clients get stuck at superficial levels of insight and progress. They end up focussing on 'this week's problem' rather than on transforming themselves and making significant changes.

It is easy, for example, for a coach to feel a need to exhibit competence – to look as though they know something about the matter in hand and that they have some expertise to convey. Again, the coach may worry because the client seems not to be making as much progress as expected and they feel responsible, needing to be seen to help their client make visible progress. And I have also met trainee coaches who have been told to 'match' or 'mirror' their client's posture and find themselves worrying more about whether they are matching posture than about giving the client their full attention!

I will say more later on about why the positive psychology approach works, but research over the past decade has confirmed for me some intuitive beliefs about coaching and has challenged me at times to avoid the easy traps into which we can all fall.



# 1 Strengths-based Positive Coaching

## Introduction to strengths

One of the biggest breakthroughs in both psychology and managerial and leadership thinking over the past decade has been in the area of strengths. Put simply, the strengths approach says that when it comes to developing people, there is more to be gained by building on their existing strengths than on trying to make good their weaknesses. This is a powerful and challenging message for all coaches and anyone interested in developing themselves and others. This chapter will look at how a coach can use the strengths approach.

The idea of working with strengths sounds simple but is often difficult in practice. For most of my 20 years' involvement in leadership and management development, the focus has been on making good weaknesses, on plugging gaps, and on seeing weak areas as the key areas for development. It often seemed intellectually the right thing to do and for some years I would sit doggedly with clients helping them to work out how to get better at some area or areas of perceived under-performance. So often I noticed a drop-off in energy and motivation as my client acquired and resignedly agreed to an objective aimed at making good an area of weakness. Not only did motivation drop, but most often the objectives were not achieved.

This is not surprising if one takes the view that a person's weaknesses in fact make them who they are – just as their strengths do. Weaknesses are part of a person's make-up and it may be unrealistic to expect them to fully overcome a weakness that has always been part of them, still less to turn it into a strength.

The historical focus on weaknesses may partly explain why so many people are unhappy in their work. For the coach, it may also account for why there are so many clients who 'wake up' in mid-life and realize they have worked very hard for many years in a job that they hate.

Like many coaches and development professionals, when I came across the strengths approach, I felt instinctively drawn towards it. I felt liberated as I began to focus on what works and motivates rather than what does not. I experienced this liberation in my clients and in myself. To illustrate the power of strengths, try this exercise in considering real issues from the two perspectives of strength and deficit.

*Exercise 1.1***A. Take a deficit focus**

- 1 Think about an aspect of your work that you find burdensome and struggle to do well.
- 2 Formulate a 12-month goal for yourself to bring your performance in this area to an adequate level.
- 3 Notice how you are feeling.

**B. Take a strengths focus**

- 1 Think about an aspect of your work that you enjoy and are good at.
- 2 Formulate a 12-month goal to develop your competence in that area still further.
- 3 Notice how you are feeling.

It is likely that you felt much more positive considering your strength and how you could develop it than you did about making up for your weakness. In fact, working to our strengths feels better and is far more motivating than working with weaknesses. It is important for any coach to realize this.

Many people are unhappy and unfulfilled in their work. This is sad because they spend so much of their life there. I do believe that part of my role is to help them be happier and more fulfilled. It is not my responsibility, but it is my role. There are now some well-proven methods available to help clients develop greater well-being and personal growth at work, including the identification and use of strengths. There is a pragmatic basis too for this idealism, because happier, more fulfilled people in fact perform better in their jobs or find better jobs to perform in. So they benefit, their employers and clients benefit, and society benefits.

This may seem a big claim for a strengths approach, but it is important to think big. I am impressed by the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology who have a 'Strengthening the world' project in Calcutta. They have found through substantial research and in practice that working with strengths can bring powerful changes including greater happiness, confidence, energy and resilience as well as less stress (Linley et al. 2010). Every time I come back to research of this kind, I am once again impressed by the power of the argument made, and exasperated at how slowly the findings are being adopted by individuals and organizations.

## **Key figures in the research on strengths**

The key figures in the research on strengths are:

## 14 STRENGTHS-BASED POSITIVE COACHING

- Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton
- Martin Seligman
- Alex Linley and the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP).

We will now discuss their theories and their work and how these have been used in positive coaching.

### Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton

Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton had a long association with the Gallup organization. From their research, they developed a list of personal strengths against which a person can be measured. Their work is significant because it begins to distinguish between innate strengths and skills which have been developed. This approach is helpful for a coach because it enables us to move clients beyond limited thinking based on current roles and skills which they may do well, but from which they gain little enjoyment or fulfilment.

Their questionnaire is called the Strengths Finder.

#### *Example 1.1*

Armin is an excellent coach and management consultant. In the past, he trained as an accountant and was very successful, rising to board level. However, for Armin, 'board' was synonymous with 'bored' – he became an excellent finance director but was unfulfilled and drained by his work. After a couple of sessions with a new coach who helped him identify his strengths, he resigned and enrolled for a coaching qualification. He says he would never have done this by himself.

### Martin Seligman

Martin Seligman was a world authority on depression and, at a point in his academic career when many people are coasting downhill to retirement, he decided to switch his focus to people when they function well, rather than when they don't. His work, leadership and energy have become fundamental in the development of the positive psychology school.

Seligman was the force behind the development of another analysis of strengths – the one based on values which are held to be of importance in most world cultures. It is helpful for coaches and consultants who work across national, ethnic and cultural boundaries, where wider applicability of findings in one country cannot always be guaranteed. It is also useful because it connects personal values to what a person actually does. When values and action are aligned, when a person acts in accordance with what they really

believe and value, then they are happier and more successful. The problem for coaches is that many of our clients don't believe this, and a lot of them could not articulate their real values if they were asked: 'What are your values?' Typically they will give a 'right' or very safe response such as 'truth' or 'integrity' which is not much use for real alignment. Having a framework of this kind enables the coach to get to the client's real values and strengths and therefore to help them perform better.

To most coaches, these findings seem blindingly obvious, but I believe that it is of great importance to have the blindingly obvious tested at times. Many coaches get by using techniques and tools which have no objective validity other than a self-professed assertion that 'they work for me'. Since coaching commissioners and clients are increasingly asking for evidence that coaching works and that it is based on rather more than one individual's experience, this kind of assertion is no longer good enough. Today's coach needs to know about research into important areas such as happiness, motivation and strengths and to be familiar with the models or questionnaires which have arisen from that research.

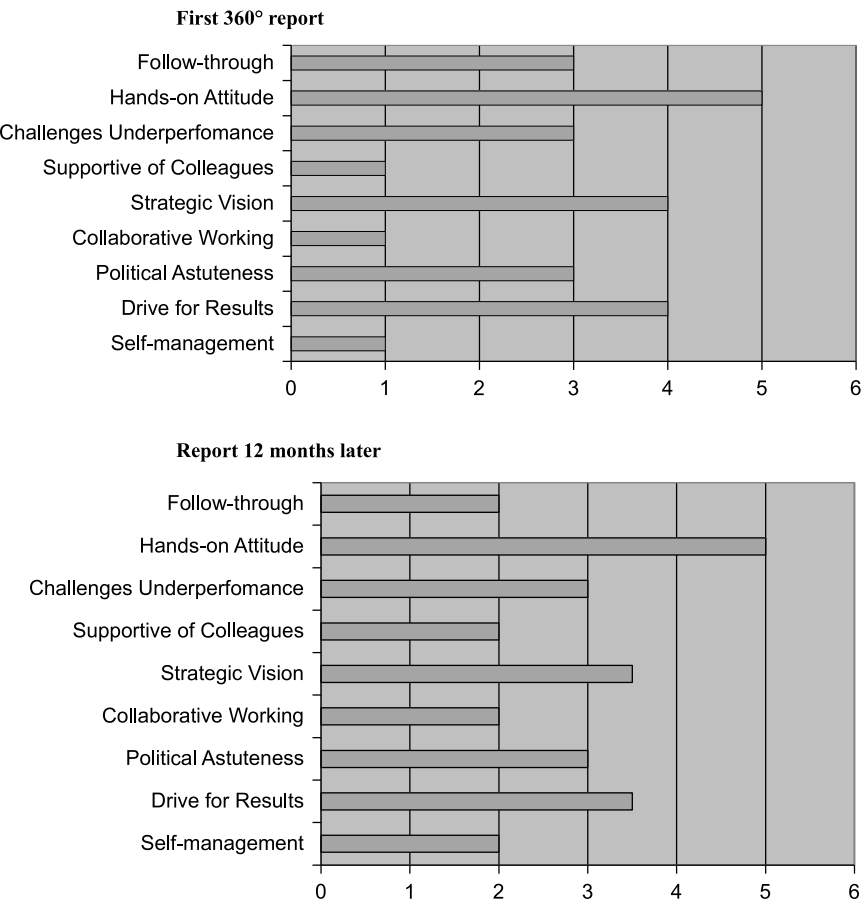
The questionnaire Seligman has developed is called Values in Action (VIA).

### **Alex Linley and the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP)**

In his landmark book *Average to A+* (Linley 2008), Alex Linley talks of the 'culture of mediocrity' that is the result of traditional approaches to leadership development, particularly in the use of the process of 360° feedback. The typical 360° feedback process involves a manager asking their boss, their peers and their subordinates (sometimes other groups like clients too) to score him/her on a range of alleged competencies for the job or the organization. They are subsequently presented with a colourful bar chart recording scores for each group against each competency. Linley notes that when considering the result of such inventories, most subjects and their coaches or managers tend to take the higher scores for granted and focus their time and energy on the lower scoring items. They then prioritize these in the resulting 'personal development plan'. The effect of this, say, a year later, is that lower scores may rise a little and the stronger scores will tend to drop because effort is going elsewhere. The result is an attenuation of scores, with the scores tending to move towards a mid-point. This pattern is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

I have to confess that I have worked with 360° assessments for many years, and developed several of my own. I had always felt uncomfortable about using them, because I did not feel they were really getting to the heart of a person's best performance and they rarely enthused people. It was common, for example, that an individual would discount the areas in which they scored well but react strongly to the lower scores, seeing them as personal

16 STRENGTHS-BASED POSITIVE COACHING



**Figure 1.1** 360° feedback at two points in time

criticism rather than useful information. Inevitably we focussed on those lower scores. Linley has helped me to understand what was going on and how, by focussing on weaknesses, a person puts energy into something that de-energizes them and which they are unlikely to perform at more than an adequate level. At the same time, they take their attention and energy away from what they do well and are motivated by.

This is the wrong way to address the problem. Better to pay some attention to low scoring areas that could be problematic if not addressed, but focus more on a person's strengths and how even the higher scores might be increased. *Focus on strengths not weaknesses is the key.* In fact, Linley's research strongly indicates that a focus on strengths leads to higher performance for

the coachee. How much more engaging, motivating and successful it is to identify strengths and then build on them.

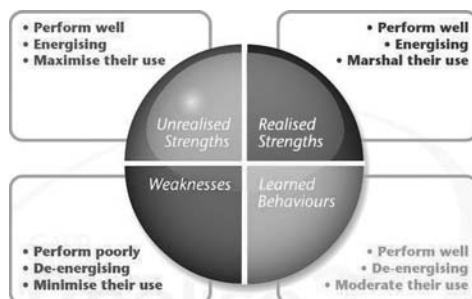
### *Exercise 1.2*

Think of something you love doing, ideally something that you are naturally good at and which people have always noted about you. That is probably a strength. Now think of two or three ways in which you could make that strength even stronger. How does that feel? Notice the motivational power here. Notice too, perhaps, if you had some resistance to identifying the strength or to actually working on it. Where does that come from? How can you reduce the impact of this resistance?

In 2009, Linley and his colleagues at the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP) published another strengths questionnaire, the 'Realise 2' (see Figure 1.2). This is not just 'more of the same', but is more comprehensive, and more useful for coaching purposes, because it seeks to distinguish between true strengths and learned skills. The definition of a 'strength' is therefore fundamental here. This is what Linley says a strength is:

It is a pre-existing capacity that already exists within us. It is something that comes naturally. Using a strength feels authentic. It is energizing to use a strength. Weaknesses, in contrast, often drain us.

So a crucial factor is that, when we use a true strength, we feel energized. As a coach, part of our role is to notice when what is portrayed as a strength is accompanied by the energy or not. Typically this energy will be shown by a shift to more positive, upright, centred body language, by looking up rather than down, a stronger, more consistent tone and more energy in the voice and the body of the client.



**Figure 1.2** Realise 2

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### *Exercise 1.3*

When you are next coaching a person, perhaps on a career matter or a choice they need to make, get them to talk to you about a success or how well they are doing a particular task or role. Observe their energy as they speak and feed this back.

Work with them to identify whether this is a true strength or merely something they have learned to do well.

So the CAPP research provides much more than a definition or one simple list of strengths. In fact, it sorts a person's responses into four categories:

- 1 strengths which the person is using;
- 2 strengths which they are under-using;
- 3 learned behaviours – things they do well but which do not energize them;
- 4 weaknesses.

I have noticed that for many people the results here can be challenging.

### *Example 1.2*

The Realise 2 report for Michelle suggested that 'empathy' was a learned behaviour for her. Michelle was rather surprised and said that friends and colleagues always said what a nice person she was – kind, helpful, friendly. She could not see how this empathy could be learned. Nonetheless on further discussion, it became clear that, coming from a highly technical, operational background, Michelle had had to learn empathy to be a successful manager – and she had worked very hard on it. What then emerged was that, at times, she could overdo the empathy (perhaps because it had not come naturally) and fail to play to her real strengths in planning and strategy development. At times, in fact, the overdone empathy was sometimes received a bit like 'painting by numbers' – it seemed false, although it was genuinely intended. Michelle has now strengthened her contributions to business meetings, behaving more assertively, and her stock has risen considerably.

This is not a recipe for 'anything goes as long as it's a strength'. Areas of weakness can be strategically important, for example, a weakness in planning might become a fatal flaw in many jobs and it does need to be addressed. But, for the coach, it is important to know that we are at our best and our most authentic when we major on our strengths.

## Working with strengths

There are several strengths inventories you can ask your clients to complete. I have seen that the best coaches and indeed the best trainers in psychometric and other instruments have a deep personal understanding of what they take their clients through. To really understand any of these questionnaires, you need to have completed them yourself, to have worked on digesting the results and to have taken action as a result. I know several ‘development professionals’, who claim to coach too, and who peddle questionnaires of all kinds without having really thought through what they really mean or how a person can actually use them. If you are familiar with the Myers Briggs Type Indicator © or other potentially insightful questionnaires, you may, like me, have experienced the overly short session with a superficial explanation, insufficient time for digestion and poor answers to valid questions. This tends to leave a person thinking ‘interesting ... but so what?’ To use questionnaires well as a coach, you need to be able to explore them in depth with your client and therefore you need an in-depth understanding of them yourself.

Of course, inventories are not the only way to get at strengths. There are a number of ways to draw them out, here are some of the best known:

At My Best  
360° assessment  
Lateral thinking

### *Exercise 1.4 At My Best*

A version of the well-known ‘Peak Experience’ exercise, this is a simple but highly motivating exercise used by many coaches.

- 1 Invite the coachee to identify two or three occasions when they have been at their best. The occasions can be of any duration from a few minutes to a year. It is important that being ‘at your best’ is meaningful to the coachee, not an attempt to impress or conform to what others think. Neither is it a comparison with others – one person I did this with talked about learning to ride a bike, aged 43. For them, this represented courage, perseverance and a commitment to learning – and the fact that many people learn to ride before they start school was irrelevant.
- 2 Get them to talk about the experience, re-living it as vividly as possible as they go.
- 3 Note down every example of a possible strength they display as they talk.
- 4 After they have talked about the events, invite them to consider the list you have noted down and to hone it into four or five areas of strength which characterize them at their best.



## 20 STRENGTHS-BASED POSITIVE COACHING

Because of the privileged nature of the coaching conversation, you will probably also become aware of strengths the coachee displays just in talking to you about their issues. You can feed these back to the coachee for their consideration. This exercise generally leaves the coachee feeling very positive, in fact, for many coachees, just acknowledging their own strengths can be an inspiring and motivating step.

### *Example 1.3*

I was coaching a teacher working on a higher degree and getting rather bogged down. Her focus was entirely on the problems and blocks she faced and she was beginning to feel she was 'not cut out for this'. At one point she began to talk about how she had set up special sessions for some of her less able students. Suddenly she came alive, her face took on more colour, she sat upright and smiled – and she talked quickly and articulately about what she was doing. I fed back to her what I had noticed and she realized then just how important that aspect of teaching was for her and she was able to accept that she had real strengths in empathy and a strong sense of justice. This re-motivated her to finish the study because she could now bring these strengths and values more prominently into her research.

Another way to get at strengths is through 360° feedback. Although I have highlighted the potential for inadvertently focussing on weaknesses, these surveys can be used positively to identify and build strengths. There is of course a danger that you will tend to get the cerebral responses (the 'right answer') which could include learned skills rather than true strengths. Spotting the energy then is crucial to distinguishing real strengths from learned behaviours. Whether the coach uses feedback, inventories or conversation, they do then need to move the learning forward to next steps.

### **Lateral thinking**

While a coach may be taking a positive approach and encouraging their clients to do so too, this does not mean they need to drop rigour from the process. Edward de Bono, the lateral thinking guru, stresses (de Bono 1990) that in being creative and indeed in thinking better generally, we need to engage both the left and right sides of our brain. Leaving aside whether this notion is biologically correct or merely an analogy, it is useful to keep in mind that creativity and divergent thinking (often associated with the right side of the brain) need to be channelled by some rules and boundaries (the 'left' side). For this reason I use a structured approach for working with strengths based on the CAPP model. Because strengths coaching and thinking is new to many clients, I have found some structuring to be useful.

## Strengths assessment

Having done a strengths assessment, you can take each area of strengths in turn, starting with the most positive.

### Strengths you are currently using

The main focus here is for the coachee is on maintaining and, where possible, making even greater use of these strengths. Typical questions around these are:

- How are you currently using this strength?
- How useful is it in this organization [work situation]?
- What scope do you have to use it more?
- What specifically can you do to use it more?

### Strengths you currently under-use

These need to be used more if the coachee is to become more effective and fulfilled. They are a major area to focus on in a strengths coaching session. Typical questions may be:

- Which of these strengths are you using at least to some extent? How can you do more of this?
- Taking the ones you use little or not at all, which ones could be used right now or in the near future? What can you do to bring them into play?
- Which ones have least scope for use right now? How could you use them elsewhere?
- How may you be stopping yourself using these strengths?

### Dealing with the learned behaviours

It is not always possible just to stop doing things – the accountant I mentioned earlier could not just ignore the month and year ends while he considered a career change. However, there are key questions that can be raised nonetheless:

- Which of these can you just stop doing?
- Which can you get others to do who do have the relevant strengths?
- If you have to do some of them, how can you spend less time and energy on them? What would be ‘good enough’ here?

## 22 STRENGTHS-BASED POSITIVE COACHING

Above all, the coach needs to discourage the coachee from striving hard to turn one of these into an outstanding strength, because they won't manage to.

### Areas of weakness

The good news is that it's OK to have weaknesses. In fact, I have found that in accepting my own weaknesses, I am better able to accept my own strengths – not easy coming from a traditional English background! It is likely that many of our weaknesses have been with us throughout our lives – and that often the same weaknesses were noted early on by friends, family and teachers. So there's no point striving to be something we are not. The real aim for a coach in this arena is to challenge the client to let go and reduce the need to operate in areas of weakness. This is not about irresponsibility or abdication, but rather to enable the person to become the outstanding performer that is within them. Some useful questions to ask:

- To what extent is this really a core part of your job?
- Who else could do it?
- How can you get it done without doing it yourself?
- What would happen if you stopped doing it?

I have come across many leaders in many sectors who get bogged down with their weaknesses when they don't need to. Here is a personal example:

#### *Example 1.4*

Some while ago I set up my own business. This entailed the usual business processes including making payments and invoicing clients and keeping track of the finances generally. Now I knew from many years experience that I find it difficult to do all of this stuff. I understand it intellectually, but when I have to do it, I do it badly and I feel drained and burdened. I turned to a colleague for some coaching around all this and realized that I was playing to my weaknesses. I quickly found someone who was actually delighted to help me with this, in fact, I was surprised that anyone would be enthusiastic about small business finance. I had become trapped in my own world, striving to do things I was not good at, which drained me, and believing that no-one would actually want to take this on.

So the finances still have to be done but maybe I don't have to do them myself. Herein lies a major lesson for coaches working with senior leaders in organizations – the leader needs to ensure things get done, not do them.

*Example 1.5*

I was coaching the chief executive of an IT company. She consistently struggled to find the time to do the long-term even medium-term strategy, to think about next year and the coming five years, to produce innovation, and so on. What was happening was that she spent far too much time fire-fighting. Although she was an IT project manager by background, a lot of the problems were related to the highly technical aspects of the work they did. She realized that she was spending far too much time trying to understand technology from a very low starting base and unconsciously being drawn into identifying solutions to systems crashes, etc. In fact, she had highly skilled people who could do this much faster and better than she, but who had stopped bothering because she micro-managed everything so tightly. Moving her back to her project management skills, we found that by adopting the role of overall manager – the person who had to ensure delivery of the service, but not the fixer, she was able to re-orientate her time and become the real leader she needed to be.

## **The leadership–performance link**

There is other well-founded evidence which supports a strengths-based approach. For some 40 years, George Litwin and Robert Stringer (1968), Warner Burke (1992), Daniel Goleman (2000) and others have researched the notion of work group climate. Essentially the climate in a workplace is ‘what it feels like to work around here’. A climate can feel cold and rainy or warm and sunny. A more positive climate is experienced when a person receives clarity about their role and job, is set high (but not impossible) performance standards, is given recognition as a person and for what they do, is given accountability for delivering, and feels part of a team. What is particularly important for a coach here is that very consistent research across multiple sectors shows that the more positive the climate is, the more these things are in place, the better the motivation and the better the performance – whether that is measured by profit, turnover, customer satisfaction, innovation, etc. The second key finding is that despite the many excuses we hear from managers for poor performance in their teams, the most important factor by far in building a positive climate is their behaviour as the immediate line manager.

So our clients are generating climates around them whether or not they realize this. It is they above all else who are generating that sense of clarity and high performance, that recognition and teamwork. So what could be more positive and motivating than having your boss get you to focus on and build up your strengths? Being acknowledged for things you are good at and which energize you, and being helped to do more of them and develop them.

## 24 STRENGTHS-BASED POSITIVE COACHING

And for the coach, what could be more important than helping your client to understand better the climate they are creating at present and thus to generate an even more positive climate: it works at a human level, and it generates better performance. This is a major challenge for those many clients who find themselves trapped in micro-managing and fire-fighting. In their desperation to rescue performance, they create a cold, grey climate and, paradoxically, sow the seeds of demotivation and poor performance.

To be clear, this does not imply a focus only on what is good and ignoring what is poor. Setting performance standards and giving clarity can be tough at times. Creating a positive climate is not a soft option – but it is a good business proposition.

### How to use strengths

In an empirical evaluation of positive psychology approaches, Seligman et al. (2005) identified two particular techniques that have been shown to produce lasting results. One is to use signature strengths in new ways and the second is to regularly identify ‘three good things in life’. I have built the first of these into a new coaching technique to work with strengths.

#### *Exercise 1.5*

I have referred to a number of inventories of signature strengths. This is where to find them:

- *Realise 2*, developed by Alex Linley and the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology, available at: <http://www.cappeu.com>.
- *Values in Action (VIA)* developed by Seligman himself and available free on his website: [www.authentichappiness.com](http://www.authentichappiness.com)
- *Strengths Finder* developed by Buckingham and Clifton which is available via a code inside their book *Now Discover your Strengths*.

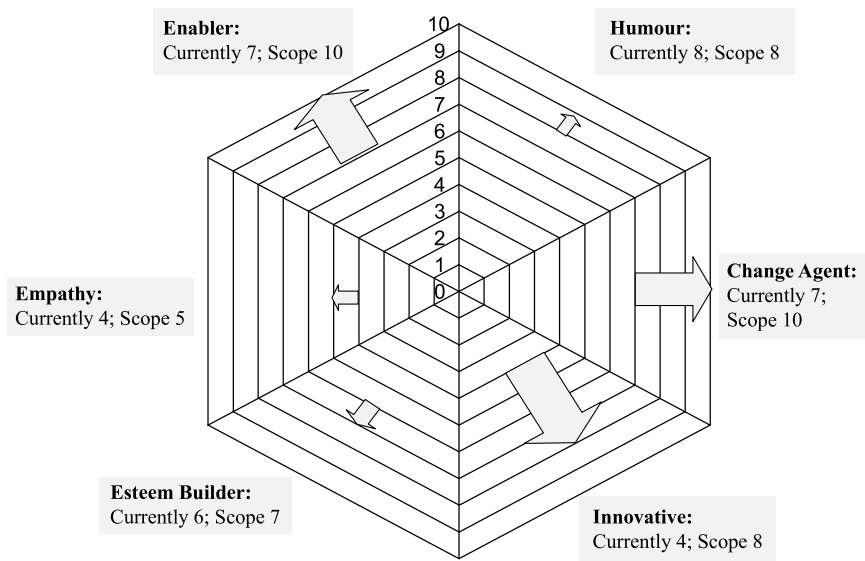
The good thing about these inventories is that they are objective and have been validated and shown to hang together well. Seligman’s in particular has also been developed to avoid cultural bias. In each case, the inventory highlights between four and seven of your top strengths.

Use one of the above questionnaires or, as an alternative or complementary route to strengths finding, use the ‘At My Best’ methodology outlined on p. 19:

- From these, you can help your client to prioritize the list into their top four to six strengths as they see them.

- Then, looking at the work the client currently does, you can use a Strengths Wheel (Figure 1.3) to plot them. Take one segment for each strength and label it. Consider the centre of the wheel to be a score of '0' and the outer rim a score of '10'. Now ask the client to place two marks (ideally different colours) in each segment indicating (1) how far they currently use that strength in their work; and (2) how much scope there is for using that strength at work. The bigger the gap between the current use and the scope, the higher the priority in targeting that strength and the greater the return.
- Invite the client to note the key gaps and to begin to identify ways of making greater use of these priority strengths in their work. The example for a client in Figure 1.3 shows that some strengths offer a greater scope for development than others. These are likely to be the places to start.
- Get the client to commit to using these strengths (or at least one to begin with) in new ways, every day for the coming week. Ask how you can support them and keep them accountable in this.

The 'three good things in life' technique (Seligman et al. 2005) is also useful. It can sound a little simplistic but he has based it on research findings, and I have tried it with a wide range of people to great success. In particular, it is a useful technique when a person is feeling rather low or stuck. You simply ask



**Figure 1.3** A strengths wheel

them to take a moment each evening for the next week (or longer) to write down three things to be grateful for that day. As a precaution, you may invite them not to list things cynically such as, 'I was grateful to get through the day', but to focus on things they did or that happened which were genuinely positive, for example, instead of that cynical response, to say 'I am grateful that I left work on time and got home in time to see my family.'

Seligman et al. have found significant psychological benefits from this exercise including a reduced susceptibility to depression. I have used a verbal version of the technique, asking clients to recount positive experiences for which they are grateful and responding with appreciation in my turn. I notice that at first many clients find it hard to identify good things for which they are grateful, but that they very soon learn to spot them. As the client develops turning their attention to the positive, they experience more regular positive emotion and so break the negative thinking cycle.

## **Criticisms of and concerns about using the strengths approach**

Although the evidence and experience in favour of a strengths approach are powerful indeed, it is important not to discount the potential obstacles in the way for a coach. Many individuals and managers are wedded to the weaknesses approach, somehow feeling that this is the 'real' work to be done.

It seems that many people have a predisposition towards what is negative and this seems to be hard-wired within them. Under pressure, they tend to default to a failure setting. In fact, clichéd assertions like 'there is no failure, only learning', and 'we allow people to make mistakes', are easy to make but very rare in practice. At times of recession and change they tend to disappear completely.

Because people, including our clients, tend to have this propensity for negativity, it is important to be aware of it and to spot it when it rears its ugly head. Some of the ways you may spot it include:

- Statements beginning 'yes but' or 'mind you'.
- Difficulty in stating what they want or setting a goal.
- Recounting the problem when you ask a question about options or what next.
- Moving the eyes from looking up to looking down.
- A sigh.

In these cases, it is useful to bring this shift to the client's attention so that they can begin to spot and handle negative patterns in their thinking. It is of course useful for the coach to do a reality check on actions sometimes,

especially if the action seems rather unrealistic. But as a general rule, a ratio of 3 or more positive emotions to one negative seems to keep the balance (Fredrickson 2010). What is clear is that part of the coach's role is to help the coachee keep in a positive state, focussing much more on strengths than weaknesses.

## **Summary of strengths**

- Strengths are capacities a person has which they are instinctively good at and which energize them when practised.
- There is considerable research showing that a focus on strengths yields better results than a focus on weaknesses.
- We all have an inbuilt negativity bias which a coach can help to overcome by accessing the client's resourcefulness and positive emotions
- A coach works better from a strengths-based, positive mindset in relations to both the client and themselves.
- There is something deeply authentic in a person acknowledging their own strengths and building them more into their life.

## **Conclusion**

This research by Seligman, Linley and others offers robust evidence and learning which is of major importance for coaches. It suggests that we need to focus on people's existing and most natural strengths more than we do on their weaknesses, but that we need to help people manage those weaknesses so that they do not become 'fatal flaws' as Zenger and Folkman (2002) term them. To be outstanding in what they do, our clients need to leverage those core or 'signature' strengths they already have and not waste energy on things they will never be, or want to be, good at. Most of the coaches and clients I know think that is a good idea.



## 2 Mindset

### Positive Motivation in Coaching

You can't be a good mentor without having a growth mindset.

Carol Dweck

#### Introduction

The second main theme in positive psychology is mindset, or growth mindset, and for that to be a success you need to have motivation. We will discuss motivation, over-motivation, self-efficacy and self-esteem in this chapter. How can the coach encourage these positive emotions in the client?

Positive psychology has much to say about motivation. What seems important for the coach is the following:

- 1 The mindset the coach brings to coaching is vital – because it will directly influence the mindset of the coachee.
- 2 The coach can help a coachee be more successful in making changes by strengthening implementation intentions and priming future key situations. In this way, they encourage the client to be more motivated.
- 3 The client needs to choose freely what to address and what to do next.
- 4 The coach can help the client to 'amplify' their positive emotion and turn down the negative – sometimes by actually turning up the switch first.
- 5 The coach can notice, surface and work with faulty or unhelpful attributions so that the client can maximize their resourcefulness and therefore their success.

We will discuss how the coach can do all these with the client:

- 1 Encourage a growth mindset.
- 2 Increase client motivation.
- 3 Reveal clients' attributions that lead them to be less successful.
- 4 Boost clients' self-confidence.
- 5 Direct the client to implement their intentions.

## Mindset

Carol Dweck (2008) has conducted ground-breaking research into the mindsets that drive performance. She has identified two mindsets and found that basically we all have one or the other. Some of us see talents, skills and ability as fixed assets, things we were largely born with and which are mostly fixed in their extent. Essentially, you either have it or you don't. This is called the 'fixed mindset'. Consequently, this mindset sees failure as an indicator of lacking ability or talent.

Other people see everything as flexible. They believe that with the right amount of focus and effort, they can achieve more or less whatever they want. They see things such as intelligence and ability as things to be developed and they see failures therefore as opportunities to learn. This she calls the 'growth mindset'. There is an immediate connection to coaching here. It is not uncommon to meet people who freely use expressions like 'no blame culture' and 'failures are opportunities to learn'. But as we all know, many who say these things do not actually practise them.

It is clear from the research and from the experience of my coaching panel that mindset is enormously powerful and affects motivation, aspiration and achievement. For example, when matched groups of both mindsets have been studied, Dweck found that people with growth mindsets were significantly readier to take on challenging tasks and that they gave up less quickly than those with the fixed mindsets. She explains this by suggesting that if you have a fixed mindset, then tackling anything tricky means potential failure and failure means that you are no longer clever, creative, talented, etc. In contrast, for a person with the growth mindset, failure is just a sign that they need to do something differently – it does not attack their core identity.

In addition, Dweck found that people with fixed mindsets were far more likely to cheat to achieve results. Because their focus was on a specific result rather than on learning *per se*, they would use a range of strategies just to get the result. She likens this to the student who has a good short-term memory and crams for exams: their goal is to pass an exam not primarily to learn.

How is mindset generated? It can be a simple matter of having an attribute praised rather than the effort put in. In several experiments, Dweck put two matched groups through tests and told one group, 'You did well, you must be very clever' and the other group 'You did well, you must have worked hard'. Very quickly and consistently, the 'clever' group reduced their effort and refused to sit harder tests.

The fundamental conclusion for coaches is that it is important to acknowledge the effort a person has put into achieving a good level of performance rather than an aptitude, skill or talent. The coach can contribute to this in the way they acknowledge a client's effort in achieving success

and in helping the client to do the same – for example a manager with their staff.

Mindset can be influenced at organizational or systemic levels too. Scottish Rugby has included this in its approach to training rugby coaches from the most junior levels up. Coaches are taught to praise effort and hard work rather than just performance or still less aptitude. The effect of this has been to attract many more children to the game and it is beginning to influence rugby performance at the top level. By contrast, the UK government's focus on assessment and grading in schools, local authorities and health service organizations has led to a mindset in which achieving a high grading becomes more important than the actual purpose of the organization in question. Thus I have met head teachers who fiddle the students' performance results in the years prior to national assessment so that they can demonstrate greater learning progress (it's called 'value-added' in England but adds no value). And I have met senior health service managers who are required by their chief executives to blame suppliers for their own incompetence because getting a top grading is 'non-negotiable'. The grading comes before learning and before patient care or the well-being of staff.

Sometimes they do achieve their desired gradings. But the problem is that the achievement is not sustainable. Some years ago I worked on a project with a range of UK health organizations and found that those who put all their efforts into this kind of short-term success virtually always undermined success going forward. Those who took a longer-term perspective generally had a growth mindset – they saw everything as an opportunity to learn and improve. They got better long-term results but they had to deal in the short term with a system which fostered the fixed mindset – a tough call. Many of them were helped by coaching professionals to stick to their guns and believe in their way of doing things.

The research is of enormous importance to executive and managerial coaches and how they respond to success and failure by clients. The coaches on my panel tell me that very often they hear trainee coaches offering praise for achievement or for having a good idea (generally defined as one they agree with). The coach will say things like: 'That's a very sensible thing to do' or 'You made a good choice there'. What in fact is happening is that the coach is strengthening a fixed mindset by focussing only on achievement or aptitude. What is more effective and will help to drive performance in future is for the coach to acknowledge the effort, courage, persistence, etc. that the coachee has put into achieving what they have done.

Similarly, our coaching clients often bring issues about building performance in their teams. It is important for the coach to help them unpack how they may actually be impeding performance through the strategies they currently use.

Two recent books have offered evidence supporting Dweck's view. The first is *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell (2008), who shows that most top performers billed as 'supremely talented' have in fact put in many thousands of hours of practice and hard work to reach the point of being 'spotted'. He cites business gurus and sports stars. Another writer, Matthew Syed, in *Bounce* (2010), shows that what counts is focussed practice – not just doing things mindlessly. Often circumstances enable the practice to be done, so equally success is not just open to everyone as things stand. But again the thing that distinguishes Michael Jordan, David Beckham and Mozart from the rest is that they practised for thousands of hours over many years as youngsters.

The issue here is not whether you like these people or what they have achieved, but that they have been labelled as immensely talented, and many of us have taken for granted that some just have it and others just don't. But the evidence contradicts this. There are some empowering and possibly unsettling implications – that with the right amount of work, and playing to your strengths (that give you energy) you could raise your performance significantly in most areas of your life. Positive psychology can help you release and harness that growth mindset and your strengths.

For both coach and coachee, this is fundamental. In her excellent book *Coaching Skills: A Handbook* (2008), Jenny Rogers lists a number of core principles of coaching and the first one is 'The client is resourceful'. It can sound very obvious, but there are some profound truths here, which are now well supported by research. Most people can achieve far more than they realize. Most of our limitations are self-imposed. Setbacks and disappointments can be springboards rather than barriers. Coaches need to have this mindset for themselves. And they need to have it for their clients, which often means seeing beyond their clients' believed limitations. Finally, the coach needs to help the client develop this growth mindset for themselves.

Using a growth mindset fits very well with adopting a strengths-based approach to coaching (see Chapter 1). The unorganized client is unlikely to have 'personal organization' as one of his core strengths. But he may have others which could be marshalled in ways which would help him achieve what he wants. So if he had strengths in building relationships or handling change, he might consider how these might assist him to be organized well enough at least to demonstrate respect for people and to serve his own preference not to get stuck in a rut.

So the coach needs to see beyond the stated problem and look to engage the most resourceful part of the client in achieving the stated goals. You may have seen the *Monty Python* sketch in which a chartered accountant tells a 'vocational guidance counsellor' about his wish to become a lion tamer. The counsellor, however, points out that the psychological profile which has been conducted shows him to be 'an appallingly dull fellow' and therefore ideally suited to accountancy. Matching the person to the job is an old idea, but the

## 32 MINDSET

novelty of the strengths approach is that it gets beyond just 'how we have become' or 'what we are good at' and tunes in to our deepest capabilities and potential.

Another result of the strengths and growths mindset is that the coach may challenge a coachee who is constantly striving to achieve goals that are 'just not them'.

### *Example 2.1*

I worked with a very senior manager in an engineering field who was constantly travelling the world making presentations to groups of fellow professionals or clients. He is a true expert in a field he loves. But he was getting sick the night before every presentation, however small. He is a great guy, a clear introvert, and very convincing one-to-one. But he hates talking to groups. We realized that his company was not getting the best from him by requiring him to make himself sick all the time. By playing to his strengths of expertise and nurturing others, he has now become a happier guy, playing an even more successful role with a few key clients and fellow boffins.

So coaches need to focus on the growth mindset and not focus on the wrong features when dealing with a client. Typical symptoms of *not* focussing on the positive are:

- Not following things up: for example, when a coachee uses a very powerful emotional word or phrase.
- Not challenging: for example, ignoring inconsistencies.
- Not setting goals: taking a broad issue, 'I have this member of staff who is always upsetting people' as a goal.
- Asking 'What can you do about this?' far too early.
- Giving advice: particularly in areas the coach is interested or experienced in.
- Jumping rapidly into familiar (to them) topics like MBTI® or other psychometrics.
- Condoning: 'That would be a very good idea'.

These are all signs that the coach is not in the right place mentally to coach well. Very often what lies behind this is a concern with weaknesses, either their own or their client's. So the coach needs to work on the frame of mind they bring to the coaching session. Even with all the practical skills in the world, coaching will be ineffective if the coach is not thinking as a coach.

It is common for those new to coaching – and even some old hands – to focus far too early on solutions. This is well intentioned and their aim is to help the client achieve results.

*Example 2.2*

I was supervising a coach HR director who said that she felt she did all the right things in her coaching, but always left feeling dissatisfied and wondering whether the coachees were just being polite when they said how useful sessions had been – in fact they often failed to turn up at subsequent appointments. When we listened to one of her coaching sessions, it became clear that from the outset she ‘drove’ the conversation forward, doing far too much of the talking and almost always giving long explanations of why things happened based on the theory of her beloved Myers Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI). As the session went on, the coachees took less and less of a role and became passive and compliant.

This coach was not focussed on her client’s strengths but on displaying her own usefulness and knowledge.

When I work with professionals like doctors, HR directors and engineers who want to learn coaching skills, I find that, for many of them, the difficulty is that all their experience and training have placed them in the ‘expert’ role. In fact, most coaches have begun professional life with some sort of expertise. There is the obvious trap of falling into advice giving or pushing a client too rapidly towards action. But the second order trap is that the coach takes the ‘problem’ as a given. Here is another typical scenario:

*Example 2.3*

The client said he wanted to improve his personal organization (a broad-brush statement that can mean a thousand things). Without probing, the new coach ‘summarized’: ‘OK, so this is a time management issue then.’ The coach then wasted a lot of their joint time helping him to identify strategies to improve his time management. Of course, despite their apparent enthusiasm, the client struggled to identify any next steps or actions. The coach failed to draw out what the real issue was, so the client gained no further insight and the same problem is likely to arise at their next meeting.

Again, the coach is working from the wrong frame of reference. Their model is one of deficit or weakness, taking limitations as givens and therefore working from a fixed view about what is ‘wrong’ or ‘needs fixing’. Positive psychology means turning this perspective on its head and working on what is right and not trying constantly to fix what is wrong.

## Motivation

Motivation is a much misunderstood concept. The popular view seems to be that it defines how positively a person feels about their job. However, this is

an over-simplification which can lead to futile attempts to ‘get people on board’ and to build ‘teams’ where in fact all that is needed is for people to commit more focussed energy to their work. Through my coaching and leadership development work, I have met many people who did not commit much energy because they did not know where to focus it, in other words, they did not know what was expected of them. Sending them on a team building workshop would have been a waste of time. The best definition of motivation I have come across is ‘the willingness to put effort into achieving goals’.

Positive psychology has a lot to say about motivation. Writers like Carol Dweck, Kennon Sheldon and Alex Linley have made some new discoveries about mindset and thinking, and confirmed some things many coaches perhaps already sensed, for example around supporting the autonomy of the client. I like Kennon Sheldon’s definition:

Positive motivation is about helping people rise to be at their best rather than whipping them into production mode.

And if this sounds a little too ‘black and white’, I have to say that I still hear my supervisee coaches driving their clients forward towards action before they have understood anything about the client’s thinking, fear or blocks. Unwittingly, these coaches are indeed ‘whipping’ their clients into doing while it is their ‘being’ selves which need to be engaged.

So motivation is a vital factor in coaching a person at work or anywhere. But motivation is also one of those paradoxical things like creativity and ‘flow’ – once you ask for them, by definition they cannot be produced. The chief executive I once worked with who spent over 45 minutes lecturing his staff about how they needed to be empowered was in reality disempowering them. The coach therefore needs to understand how to create the conditions for motivation rather than feel responsible for creating motivation in a coachee on behalf of a client organization.

#### *Exercise 2.1*

Think of a time you were really strongly motivated and willingly put lots of energy into a task. What were the conditions that helped you be motivated? What did other people do that supported your motivation? What did you do to keep yourself motivated?

It is likely that you were doing something you valued doing and that others helped create the conditions for you to be motivated by enabling you in some way or at least by not getting in your way. From my own experience and that

of many others, I have concluded that for a coachee to be motivated three things need to be in place:

- 1 *The coachee needs to have clear goals.* I have worked with many people who are unclear about their goals whether these are at personal or organizational level. I have met many who are in permanent states of disempowerment because they are waiting for someone to tell them what to do (quite often this runs right through an organization with the chief executive in Livingston waiting for the government in London or the MD in Truro waiting for a guy in Tokyo). How goals are constructed is important, but when done well, they are highly motivating and focussing.
- 2 *The coachee needs to be thinking positively and resourcefully about themselves and their own competence.* They need to believe they can achieve what they want to achieve and be robust enough to overcome setbacks.
- 3 *The coachee needs to know what to do next.* They need to identify a way or ways to effect the changes they want. And, however uncomfortable the next step may seem, it has got to be perceived as more valuable than the status quo.

## Over-motivation?

It could seem from much of the research that motivation is all about lifting people up, about increasing motivation because most people lack it. But as Kennon Sheldon (2004) has pointed out, over-motivation seems to be the opposite of what many people suffer. Indeed we could say that over-motivation is rife with long working hours, obsessive presenteeism, 24/7 access to everyone and poor work-home life balance. Many of my fellow coaches tell me of clients who are suffering burnout, exhaustion and confusion while never quite achieving the perfect performance they mistakenly aspire to.

Over-motivation is probably not the best description of what these people are suffering. In fact, what is happening is that their motivation has gone wrong somewhere. They may, for example, have lost the motivation they once had for spending time at home or playing with their children, engaging in sports or hobbies they once enjoyed. So as Sheldon (2004) suggests, they are effectively motivated towards the wrong things or their motivation is out of alignment.

The issue for the coach here is not a moralistic one but it is about what is working or not working for the client. My personal view is that such a lack of balance, over an extended period of time, is a bad thing in general and does not promote individual or collective well-being. However, when I am coaching, I am less interested in my own views, and more concerned with



helping my client identify how they would like things to be and then to 'make it so' to quote Captain Picard of *Star Trek*.

There can be a dilemma here for the coach. I may see signs of stress in the client which they themselves have not or I may react strongly when I hear how many hours they are spending at work as their relationships with partner, children and friends, go down the tube.

The crucial distinction I need to make as a coach is whether I have data from the client that I can feed back to them or whether what I wish to say is my own opinion and therefore comes from my own agenda rather than the client's.

One client I worked with told me as we began a session 'You can't imagine the pressure I have been under this past month!' That usually strong and active person looked pale and exhausted. She told me she wanted to work on her leadership of her department. So I felt I had data enough to play back to her. 'I normally see you smiling and full of energy and enthusiasm but today you look really tired and pale. I notice you looking down a lot. What do you want from me as your coach today?' And later on I did check whether she had enough support about her and I encouraged her to use it.

Feedback is vital – all good coaches know this and you will find it referred to in many coaching books. However, in my work as a supervisor of newer coaches, I have seen that learning to offer feedback rather than advice often brings a new level of insight and takes the conversation to a much deeper level. Sometimes finding out the client's over-motivation rather than their motivation is the key to successful coaching.

## Causal attribution

OK, so you think your clients have a growth mindset, and you believe their motivation is pretty strong, what about their causal attributions? What are attributions? Attributions are the explanations we give ourselves for why things happen. Did I make that good presentation because I am naturally gifted at presentations, or was it because I worked hard and checked in with the audience first? Did that one-day training I delivered go wrong because I am really not very good at this kind of work, or because the wrong people came and the projector stopped working halfway through?

The inexperienced coach will tend to home in on 'what went wrong' and assume that this is the area for attention. They will be looking to help the coachee identify which planning methodology to use or how they can manage their time better, or how they should carry spare projector light bulbs at all times. The problem they will then find is that nothing changes. The coachee will continue to underperform because none of this problem-solving addresses the real issue.

What is important for the coach is not so much the facts of the matter, but the story the coachee is telling themselves about the event. Because it is the stories that we tell ourselves that determine our future behaviour. If a coachee believes they are no good at presentations, they will likely avoid doing them, even when they need to. Alternatively, their belief will tend to become a self-fulfilling prophecy and they will engage in behaviour which tends to undermine their own success, for example, not planning-in time for preparation or exhausting themselves by staying out late the night before and then arriving too tired to present well.

In coaching, attributions are very important as they give the coach clues about how a coachee may be contributing to the issues they face, or failing to achieve the goals they set themselves.

There seem to be two factors at play in how causal attributions are made. First, does the coachee attribute the event outcome to an internal or external factor? This means, do they believe it was down to themselves or rather to someone or something else? An example here is a senior manager who had had an extremely successful year, increasing the profitability of his division by 20 per cent. When I congratulated him on this, he replied, 'Well, I think we were lucky because the market remained pretty buoyant and we had some really good people around.' So this 'I was lucky' or 'nothing to do with me' is a sign of an external attribution which therefore makes no recognition of his own contribution to that success. Dweck and others have shown that when considering successes, internal attribution are more motivating and build more effectively than external ones.

The coach's job in this case is to help the client take a greater level of ownership of their success, attributing more of it to their own action than to fortune. Why are we doing this? Not just to be nice, but because this is a way to unlock their ability to handle current and future issues and challenges more effectively. The above interchange might then continue like this:

#### *Example 2.4*

*Coach:* I notice that you have mentioned luck and having some good people around. What was your own contribution to this success?

*Coachee:* Well, I suppose, I spotted some market trends early on and made some tough decisions about which products to invest in. I did also put a lot of time into working with the team and making sure they were all on board.

*Coach:* OK, so you spotted the trends, took some tough decisions and made sure the team were all on board?

*Coachee:* I suppose so.

*Coach:* So what does this tell you about how you can tackle the coming year's challenges?

The second aspect of attributions is whether a person attributes something to enduring factors such as social attitudes, or to temporary factors such as a short illness or unexpected circumstances.

When dealing with a failure or difficulty, it can be the coach’s role to help a coachee surface enduring attributions and replace them with more temporary ones. A word of warning here. Attribution research is not a means to ignore or deny the existence of external factors like prejudice. What it is saying is that certain kinds of attributions leave a coachee in a more resourceful frame of mind and certain kinds of attributions leave them stuck and not resourceful. The coach does not deny the external factors, but works with the coachee to identify how their beliefs about these factors may be more or less useful and how they may be limiting their scope for action.

A number of my colleagues work on coaching programmes specifically aimed at women and people from black and minority ethnic communities. It is not uncommon for them to encounter external attributions for failure to get promotion – the ‘glass ceiling’ of discrimination preventing the coachee progressing. For the coach, the mistake would be to collude too fully in this attribution. Because in coaching terms, the issue for attention is how the individual can be more successful in future. If the coachee truly believes in the glass ceiling, it will be hard for them to gain promotion whether or not that ceiling really exists.

In summary, the research tells us that internal attributions work better than external ones for successes and external, temporary ones work better for failures. The coach needs to learn to spot attributions and be prepared to highlight them or challenge them as appropriate.

Table 2.1 summarizes the various attribution styles a client might take.

**Table 2.1** Attribution styles

	<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>
<b>Enduring</b>	<p>‘It went well because I am an excellent presenter’</p> <p>‘I didn’t get the job because I am hopeless at interviews’</p> <p><i>Useful for believing I am competent</i></p>	<p>‘It went well because they like me here’</p> <p>‘I didn’t get the job because they don’t like women directors’</p>
<b>Temporary</b>	<p>‘It went well because I prepared fully’</p> <p>‘I didn’t get the job because I went out the night before and was still hung-over during the interview’</p> <p><i>Useful for attention to effort, preparation etc.</i></p>	<p>‘It went well because they asked me about things I knew’</p> <p>‘I didn’t get the job because they changed the format of the session’</p> <p><i>Useful for explaining failures</i></p>

## Self-efficacy

To be motivated to do something, a client needs to have a high expectation of success and to believe they can do it. The high expectation of success is called self-efficacy. This is important for people to have when they encounter difficulties. If a person has high self-efficacy, they will keep putting in the effort and not be discouraged. Such expectations will also drive other behaviours aimed at delivering a goal. So a person will focus better on negotiations and interactions with others if they really believe in what they are doing. A traditional response (especially among British people) is the ‘Yes, but ...’ reaction which says well that the person might be wrong or exaggerated in their belief. This is a possibility, but as Sheldon (2004) points out, there is current evidence that having positive illusions can be more beneficial as they often help people achieve more than would seem possible.

A related belief for the client is that of their own competence. A client needs to believe in their ability to do what they want to do. Again the British pragmatists will say ‘we can’t all be good at everything – maybe OK’. But again there is increasing evidence that most people can do most things if they really want to. They can’t do them all because there is not time to become outstanding at everything. But people in fact retain the ability to learn right into later life and they are capable of far more than most of us believed.

Matthew Syed (2010) has a chapter entitled ‘The Myth of Talent’ in his book *Bounce*. In it, he outlines the research that now shows that the most talented sports players, musicians and artists are only distinguished by the amount they have practised and the quality of that practice. It seems they are not necessarily born with any greater innate skills that you or me. Syed says there are of course some genetic physical limitations – a short man of 5’4” like me could not be a professional basketball player. Well, I checked – there was recently a guy of 5’3” playing in the top US league!! Mind you he would have had a tough time in a jump off against the tallest player at 7’6”. But if *he* made it ...

I have used the mindset approach in coaching and in workshops for leaders, and even with parents. Most people find the research both convincing and affirming of something they perhaps wanted to believe but did not dare. What is important I believe, is not that anyone can have the most outrageous dream and that it can become possible, or that we can all become international basketball players, but that if a person allies a growth mindset to their own motivation and passion and their strengths, then they can achieve far far more than they believed.

A key part of the coach’s role is to encourage their clients’ resourcefulness. The concept of self-efficacy is important here. It refers to a person’s belief that they can take the necessary action to achieve specific goals. Clearly then, a

person with high self-efficacy is more likely to see a challenge as something they can achieve with the right effort and focus, whereas a person feeling low in self-efficacy is likely to see the same challenge as completely impossible.

The coach can support self-efficacy in a number of ways, for example, by challenging soft goals or goals which do not really chime with the client's values (watch their body language and tone here). Invite them to revise the goals and make them more engaging, challenging and valuable. On a few occasions I have challenged clients to shift their goals from being competent at something to being great at it. At times I have found this scary – was I selling them a dream? But as long as it came from them, I found that each time being allowed to think higher, they knew exactly what they wanted and exactly what to do.

Another important way for the coach to raise self-efficacy and sense of competence is to put and keep the client in touch with the resourcefulness they have demonstrated in other situations. Resourcefulness is the 'can do' part of the person and there are many techniques to help this. Several techniques derived from neurolinguistic programming (NLP) are very useful here. I often use a very simple technique in which I ask the client to tell me about a time when they achieved something similar or made partial progress. In examining that success, they find ways to bring those personal resources into the present challenge.

#### *Example 2.5*

*Client:* I can't handle this change – it's beyond me.

*Coach:* So you're finding it hard to handle this change. Tell me about a time when you *did* handle change well, at least in part.

*Client:* I remember about five years ago, I had to downsize our team from 20 to 15 – it was a nightmare.

*Coach:* So how did you handle that?

*Client:* Well, I did a lot of talking to people, I planned well and I got lots of ideas from them about how we could make the changes work.

*Coach:* So talking to people, planning well and getting their ideas seem to work well?

*Client:* I guess so.

*Coach:* Let's see how you could do some more of those things as you face up to this new change.

## **Approach vs avoidance**

A client's motivation is fundamentally affected by the quality of the goals they are working towards. Perhaps the most important factor is the distinction

between what the positive psychologists call ‘approach and avoidance’. Essentially, many of our clients begin a coaching session by focussing on something they do not want: an unsatisfactory relationship with their boss, a difficult new role, a team which does not work together, an imbalance between work and home life. These are called ‘avoidance’ goals; they are about getting away from something undesirable. To begin to harness motivation, the coach needs to work with the client to establish an approach or ‘towards’ goal. This is a goal which expresses what the client does want. And the more specific and more vivid this goal can be, the more motivating it will be.

#### *Example 2.6*

*Client:* I want to work on the terrible in-fighting in my team.

*Coach:* So if there were no in-fighting, what would there be?

*Client:* People would work together professionally and offer and receive support from each other.

*Coach:* So we’re looking at how you can help your team to work together professionally and offer and receive support from each other?

## **Supporting autonomy**

Autonomy is another crucial word for coaches, but it is a word that is often misunderstood. Autonomy is not independence or individualism – it does not mean doing things in isolation from others or merely in one’s own interests.

I have sometimes been concerned that coaching might be a very individualistic type of intervention and therefore that it could be rather culturally specific, having arisen largely, though by no means entirely, in the Northern hemisphere and in the Anglo-Saxon world. Sheldon and Krieger (2007) have addressed this question and shown that the true meaning of autonomy is ‘coming freely from and owned by the self’. Therefore, they argue, unlike concepts of self-centredness, autonomy, defined in this way, is a universal concept consistent across a range of cultures from South Korea to North America. It is immediately clear that autonomy within the coachee is something to be encouraged. Goals produced autonomously and actions identified are more likely to work for the client and they will also build sustainability. Harnessing the client’s autonomy in the pursuit of their goal will result in positive motivation.

I worked recently with the careers department of a university. They are using coaching as a way to help students in their career development. Why coaching rather than traditional advice or guidance? Because people entering

the jobs market in the first two decades of the twenty-first century can expect to have several careers through their lifetime. So rather than merely 'finding a job' which was the goal of careers services in the past, the modern service realizes that these students need to build sustainable career skills which will serve them across jobs, roles and sectors into the future. Autonomy rather than dependency is therefore vital for them.

Some of the new careers coaches tell me frankly that this is a tough call for them. They have been used to giving careers advice and seeing immediate (sometimes) results and having a sense of 'being useful' because of their relevant careers knowledge. In fact, they tell me that their need to be useful can be detrimental to their students because they take responsibility away from the students who end up becoming dependent on the careers advice and do not take away lifelong skills.

It is clear that the coach can consciously or unconsciously strengthen or weaken a coachee's sense of autonomy. So can bosses, employers and other organizations like universities and schools. Building on this definition of autonomy, Sheldon and Krieger conducted a comparative study of students at two very different law schools. The first emphasizes competition, grading, status while the second stresses students' individual needs, mastery of the subject and psychological well-being. In both cases, students found the experience taxing and their initial excitement soon faded. However, the researchers realized that the first school was inadvertently fostering a fixed mindset while the second was fostering a growth mindset. The students rated the second school as significantly more supportive of autonomy than the first. That much seems obvious. However, the researchers also discovered that in fact the students at school two also achieved better results in their final state law exams. So the focus on growth mindsets and autonomy has a significant impact on motivation and performance too.

Once again the research offers us as coaches some very important lessons. The coaches who feel a need to give advice, to 'input', to steer or condone – often with the most positive intentions – will inevitably reduce the coachee's sense of autonomy and engender within them the beginnings of a dependency. Ultimately this will reduce their motivation and lessen their achievement.

Many coaches have nonetheless found through experience that they do need to 'stay out' of the issues their coachees bring. Instinctively perhaps they have realized that enabling the coachee to do their own thinking and to retain control of the goals and strategies they set enhances the end result. I know many coaches who work in this way or at least aspire to. Perhaps they knew why only from experience and gut feeling. Now though, we have the research evidence to back that up.

*Exercise 2.2*

Think of someone you know who is over-working or over-doing things in some way. What advice do you want to give them? Get it out of your system. Now, what feedback could you give them which might be useful? Try and phrase it something like this:

‘Something I notice about you is ... (refer to actual behaviour or observable facts).’

‘The effect this has on me is ... (be honest – are you concerned, disappointed, confused, angry?)’

‘I am wondering ... (link this to something of importance to them: e.g. how this might be perceived in your work ...).’

Another way to help the client achieve a better balance in their life is to do a strengths questionnaire or a 360° feedback instrument (see Chapter 1) and invite the client to use this information to re-adjust the balance.

## Implementation intentions

Many of the coaches on my panel tell me they have had clients who identify all kinds of actions and leave a session full of enthusiasm, only to return next time having done none of them. ‘Implementation intentions’ therefore describe how likely a client is to do what they say they will do. While it is true that some of our coachees might lie to us about what they intend to do, real intentions are not always conscious and good intentions can be undermined by unexpected circumstances. Motivation may not be enough, it needs to be translated into positive action. Motivation in a client can be assisted by the coach so that the intention to effect a change is more likely to lead to action. Of course the bottom line is that we are working to the client’s agenda and that means we have to allow them to ‘fail’ if that is what they choose.

Good coaches will certainly encourage clients to be specific in what they are deciding to do next. Often part of the problem is that intentions are vague, like the client saying, ‘I’ll have a word with him.’ So the coach can probe this further, ‘When you say have a word, what specifically do you intend to say?’ The coach may also ask for a time frame, ‘And when will you do this?’ There is a danger of the coach becoming inquisitorial at this stage, in fact I have heard one or two trainee coaches get annoyed with their clients when they did not get a clear time and date at the first asking. The crucial factor is not when or where but whether the coachee is really committed to the next steps. If the coachee seems to be prevaricating or stepping back from commitment, then that is interesting and worth raising, for example, as a scale question, ‘On a scale of 1–10, how committed are you to doing this?’ Or the challenge



can take the form of feedback: 'You said you will speak to your boss as soon as possible, but as you said that you looked down and I was unsure how committed you were to doing that.' This kind of challenge can be very helpful in shifting the conversation to the real underlying issue which may be about fear, confidence or a lack of self-concordance.

## **Priming**

Sometimes, a client goes away from a coaching session with a definite action in mind and is very motivated and genuinely keen to try it out. However, when the moment comes, they don't do so. Maybe it comes upon them as a surprise or the crucial moment follows hard on another activity and they are not mentally ready, for example, for a straight-talking conversation. A useful aid to consolidate implementation motivation is the notion of 'priming'. Priming means making things ready or 'primed' for action. So in coaching this means enabling the client to identify in advance the trigger for a new behaviour so that when the trigger event occurs, they will carry out the behaviour immediately. For example, in helping the above client to 'have a word', the coach might spend a while helping them to identify the specific situation – perhaps a meeting already in the diary – and how they might be ready for and use that opportunity. The client might, for example, decide to arrive early or ask for some time afterwards. So the client is 'primed' to arrive early and initiate the conversation with the person in question. In this way they are more likely to seize the moment as they will have a better sense of when it is coming.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how the coach can increase the motivation and self-efficacy of the client by encouraging them to think about their attributions and how to actually implement their intentions. All these actions are part of positive psychology. The next chapter discusses another main theme of positive psychology: resilience.

# 3 Resilience

## Introduction

What is resilience and why is it important in coaching with positive psychology? Psychologists define resilience as the ability to keep going in difficult times and to get up and carry on after a fall. For Margolis and Stoltz (2010), writing from a business point of view, it is the 'capacity to respond quickly and constructively to crises'. For Barbara Fredrickson (2010), it is the ability to bounce back after a negative emotional challenge like witnessing the events of 9/11. One way of thinking about this is that we each have a certain level of emotional stamina. How long can you keep going? And how quickly do you recover from setbacks?

Coaches within and outside organizations tell me that a common topic for coaching is dealing with a difficult situation which has caused the client to feel bad or to feel unable to tackle a situation they face. They may feel they are being treated unfairly by their boss, they may be upset about not getting a promotion, they may be experiencing difficulties in their life outside work; they may feel they just have too much on their plate to cope with.

One of the things the coach may notice is that in this kind of situation, clients often get very stuck in their thinking. They seem not to have the capacity to identify and work with new or different strategies to deal with the situations they face. The coach can be helpful in getting the client to consider different strategies and to follow these through to action which can improve the situation, for example, working out how to broach the issue with a boss, how to delegate more effectively, how to work in a more focussed way on their career progression.

But although this can help the immediately presenting issue, it often happens that similar patterns re-emerge later on when the boss repeats behaviour or the delegation does not work.

Here the coach is faced with the challenge of helping the client develop longer-lasting resources which can help them better handle a wide range of situations when they arise or possibly even to avoid them happening. A particular characteristic that can be worked on to do this is the client's resilience.

## Why resilience is important

Coaching covers a very wide range of issues, topics and challenges faced by clients. We are all therefore going to have clients who are stressed, facing disappointment, handling imposed change, have lost people or been removed from jobs which were important to them. So the issue of resilience is fundamental in coaching and anything a coach can do to help clients be stronger in the face of adversity or to bounce back more quickly when they get knocked down, will make them a better coach and help both the client and others who depend on them. Some specific situations I have encountered where resilience was fundamental include:

- managers in middle age, not yet old enough to retire, who fail to get a job in a reorganization;
- newly qualified professionals emerging in times of cutbacks and who cannot find employment;
- people suffering harassment, bullying or aggressive behaviour from bosses, peers or customers;
- methodical people propelled into uncertainty;
- company executives facing a financial crisis;
- sports players and musicians experiencing an unexpected loss of form;
- people excluded from privileges, inclusion or other benefits they previously enjoyed.

A coach will be an important aid for these people as they suffer a difficult time. And very often there will few if any other people with whom a client can open up and really talk about what they are feeling. It is therefore important for a coach to have some understanding of resilience and positive emotion so that they can help the client re-access that resourcefulness they have within them, find their resilience and therefore find a new balance and a way to be well in the changed situation.

Resilience is probably a far more important characteristic than many of us realize. Gail Wagnild (2010) has researched resilience and has come to the conclusion that it is highly significant for our physical and psychological health. Specifically she has shown that resilience can protect against and can help reverse depression, fear and anxiety and can therefore have a secondary effect on physical well-being.

## Positive emotion and resilience

Positive and negative emotions are crucially connected with a person's ability to handle difficult times and to get up again after a disappointment. I shall

outline some of the research behind this as it is significant for coaching and for leadership behaviour. Positive emotion is discussed more fully in Chapter 9.

Most early psychological work on emotion focussed on negativity. A book edited by Stephen Fineman, *Emotion in Organizations* (1993) dealt mainly with problematic and negative emotion. It has some useful content on the emotional exhaustion caused by organizations and bosses who 'demand' a display of positive emotion at all times.

Like me, you may have attended (or even run) traditional performance management workshops where you were shown how to give feedback. You were told to make it behaviourally specific, future-focussed and constructive, balancing positive feedback with negative. This is excellent advice – but here's a question: how do you react if someone gives you one piece of negative feedback and one piece of positive? Very likely the weight you give to each is not the same. You are likely to dwell more on the negative than on the positive. So one for one does not constitute 'balance' because it leaves the recipient more tipped towards the negative.

Barbara Fredrickson (2010) has conducted considerable research into positive emotion looking more widely than just feedback, at people's experiences of positive and negative emotion, and found that indeed one negative plus one positive emotion does not equal zero.

She has shown that just to balance things out, a person needs to experience significantly more positive than negative emotion. From her research, she has come up with a ratio of at least 3:1 – three positives to one negative which she describes as the 'tipping point' beyond which people begin to do well individually and collectively. Fredrickson has found this 3:1 ratio replicated in many places including in a mathematical modelling exercise and in research on marriages.

Why does this matter? Surely we all feel a bit negative at times and that's just life? It matters for several reasons. First, it seems ethically right that people should experience more positive than negative emotion in their lives – the pursuit of happiness is after all enshrined in the US Constitution and the philosopher Jeremy Bentham spoke of the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. So I would argue that being happy is a good thing in itself and should be encouraged in the workplace where many people spend most of their daily lives. However, there are further arguments in favour of building more positive emotion into our lives because the impact positivity has on individuals and therefore teams and whole organizations is significant.

While a minimum ratio of 3:1 is needed to balance things out, Fredrickson has found a further point around 4 or 5 positive to 1 negative, beyond which individuals really flourish. In relationships this means the difference between lasting successful marriages and ones which come to an end. In business this means the crucial difference between individuals and teams which deliver consistent high performance and those which perform poorly.

You may be wondering how specifically positive emotions lead to improvement in marriage or at work. And is it not the other way round – that good marriages and work experiences lead people to feel happy? While the latter is true to some extent, the direction of predictability – something psychologists are insistent upon measuring – has been shown to be primarily from positive emotion to positive outcomes at work and in marriage.

So how do positive emotions work? Fredrickson and others have shown that each time a person experiences a positive emotion, their thinking and capacity to think more widely about problems are increased. And their psychological resilience also increases. While this increase is often fleeting, over time it builds up into increased resourcefulness. Specifically, they have found that it builds into important resources such as: wider search patterns, new ways of thinking and new actions. It has an impact on inclusivity in social groups and builds more flexible goals and mindsets. It is immediately clear how important all these are in tackling the state of being stuck we often experience in clients suffering adversity. Additionally, Cohn, Fredrickson and others (2009) have shown that increased positive emotion can specifically strengthen psychological resilience.

So the key difference between more resilient people and those who are less resilient, is the amount of positive emotion that they experience. It is important also to understand that resilience is not the same as hard-heartedness or a lack of concern for people. Positive emotion and negative emotion are not opposites, and resilient people experience the same amount of negative emotion as others. The difference is purely in the degree to which the person experiences positivity in their life. Thus when they experience a very negative situation, they retain a range of positive and negative emotions afterwards, whereas those who sink or become depressed are likely to experience predominantly only negative emotion.

A particular aspect of resilience researched by Fredrickson was recovery from negative emotions. She found that people who are more positive, and who experience more positive emotions recovered more quickly from setbacks. Their blood pressure and heart rates returned to normal faster than for those with less positivity. So positive emotions helped overcome negative ones and restored measurable factors such as heart rate to normal more quickly. Given the link between stress effects like heart rate and longer-term illness, this suggests that finding ways to experience positive emotion, particularly in difficult times, could be extremely important. A coach could be very helpful in enabling a client to become aware of potentially harmful patterns and find more positive emotion to counteract the stress they experience.

Fredrickson describes resilient people as ‘emotionally nimble’, being able to spot emotional changes and respond effectively to them. They experience the same emotions as others but worry less than others and respond faster to actual reality rather than to fantasy about what might happen. In this they show evidence of mindfulness and the ability to live in the present rather than with ruminations about the past or future.

Positivity is also associated with mental openness – the ability to see the big picture and find positive even in negative situations.

## Business leadership and resilience

It is common for a coach to hear their client talking at some length about the wrongs done by their organization or their boss. A good coach would at least invite the client to take at least some ownership of the situation with a killer question such as ‘Let’s suppose 99 per cent of this is someone else’s responsibility, what is the 1 per cent that is yours?’ Very often this leads along a more resourceful path. But a crucial factor too is how the person responds to and manages their emotional response to events outside of their immediate control. This is where resilience comes in.

### *Example 3.1*

A finance manager put forward well-argued plans for rationalizing the company’s property portfolio. However, the board rejected the proposal out of hand and spent little time on its consideration. The finance manager was upset, left the premises and phoned in sick the following day. This led to a tricky situation because the board thought highly of him and had him in mind for future senior vacancies. He was encouraged and agreed to speak to a coach confidentially and was helped to think beyond his immediate response to tough situations so as to manage more consistently his emotional responses. As a result, he became more robust and able to handle negative feedback and disappointments.

A study by Tusaie and Dyer (2004) has shown that people can show resilience in some areas of their lives but not in others. This is important for the coach because it means that when a client recounts non-resilient behaviour or thinking (for example, wanting to or actually giving in or avoiding something), the use of resourcefulness techniques may be very powerful.

The essence of these techniques is that they connect the ‘unresourceful’ client to their ‘resourceful’ selves. So the teacher who fears job interview presentations can be helped to get in touch with how they present successfully each day in the classroom and transfer the what and how of that success to the interview being faced.

### *Exercise 3.1*

As you listen to your client, you will probably be struck by the apparent disparity between something they fear or find challenging in contrast to the

strengths and resourcefulness you generally see in them. The popular way of handling this among friends is to discount the fear or concern: ‘You don’t need to worry ... you’ll knock them dead ...’ or ‘You’ll be fine!’ The coach does not discount or collude when the client themselves discounts something. Instead, by surfacing this perceived disparity, the coach then helps the client identify what is missing for them right now, and then to identify when it is or has been present at other times. See how the potential conversations diverge at this point:

<i>Client: ‘So I’m really terrified of giving presentations’</i>	
With a friend:	With a coach:
<i>Friend: Why?</i>	<i>Coach: ‘Tell me about a time when you have done a good presentation.’</i>
<i>Client: ‘Well I think I’ll look stupid or dry up, or...’</i>	<i>Client: (thinks) ‘Well there was that time when ...’</i>
<i>Friend: ‘Don’t be daft, you’ll do fine!’</i>	<i>Coach: ‘OK, so that was a good presentation, what worked that time?’</i>

This kind of connecting technique can be very useful for people starting new jobs or new situations and in a particular way for, mostly women, returners to work. By focussing on a time when things worked well, they experience more positive emotion and therefore, their capacity to tackle the current problem is enhanced, they tune into their own resourcefulness and they are more likely to find an effective way forward.

Building resilience

There are questionnaires to measure psychological resilience but these might feel odd being used in coaching. However, happily, researchers like Fredrickson as well as Margolis and Stoltz (2010) have found that resilience can be increased. The latter take a rather rational approach helping a client to develop resilience by consciously thinking differently about issues they face. However, if strong negative emotions are still being experienced, a client will not immediately apply logic, however well-phrased the question is.

The technique that works best in coaching is to use both approaches. First, to counteract negative emotion, the coach helps the client to experience some additional positive emotion. At a simple level this can mean just inviting a client to think more positively, for example seeing an event as a challenge

rather than a threat. By thinking about ‘challenge’, the client immediately experiences some positive emotion. A useful segue here is to ask for additional examples: ‘When else . . .?’ Alternatively the coach can invite the client to use a technique such as Seligman’s ‘gratitude exercise in which they write down each day for a week three things they are grateful for that day’ (see Chapter 1).

Having established some initial positive emotion, it then becomes possible to use some good positive outcome questions to get the client to take ownership of the situation and begin to create some change. A useful question might be: ‘What could you do to make an immediate impact on the situation?’ or a great question from CAPP, ‘What is the smallest thing you could do to make the biggest difference right now?’

### *Example 3.2*

Jane had worked in HR for many years and risen to be a Director in a small district authority. When a major national reorganization happened, she was not selected locally and kept on applying for jobs further and further away from her home and from what she really enjoyed doing. In her coaching session she acknowledged how she was feeling and I asked her to talk about times she had been at her best and really enjoyed her work. She became animated and positive for the first time and, having encouraged her in this way for some while, I began asking her questions about what small things would make the biggest difference. Very quickly she began to consider moving out of the local government sector – an option she had not previously considered – and by referring back to some of the positives she had recounted, she began to identify other sectors which were familiar to her or were related to her experience. She then moved on to a more positive job search and found a great new start not too far from home.

## **Hope theory**

Another recent addition to research has been in the field of hope theory, see Scioli and Scioli (2004). This is an inter-disciplinary field with significant psychological input very much from a positive perspective, which can increase resilience.

Hope refers to a person’s expectations and beliefs in a positive future or a positive outcome to some event or initiative. It also includes an expectation that following identified pathways will lead to desired results. Hope is therefore a crucial component of resilience – if a person does not know how to marshal their efforts or believe that their efforts will lead to a positive result, then they are unlikely to bounce back from disappointment or put in more



effort to overcome obstacles. It is immediately obvious that it would be very hard to coach a person without hope and that building hope can be an important part of the coaching agenda.

A strengths-based coaching session can be very effective in building hope. But it is important that the client has sufficient belief that putting effort into their strengths will yield a valued outcome. This suggests that the coach needs to pay attention to ensuring that this hope stays alive once the client is taking action in the real world. So they can work with the client to firm up hope by helping them identify markers or primes which will trigger desired behaviour by them at the right time.

### *Example 3.3*

Mike more or less fell into a training role mid-way through an engineering career. He enjoyed this work but tended to feel dissatisfied with how the courses he ran went and that 'something was missing'. He came for coaching to a member of my panel and the coach realized very quickly that Mike was massively creative but could appear very 'off the wall' at times, especially to some of the more traditional engineers. Until then, Mike had seen this creativity as a liability at work (although he wrote and played music outside work to a near-professional standard). The coach encouraged Mike to see his creativity as a strength and asked him how he could bring more of 'his music' into his work. For the first time, Mike began to consider how he could do this and found some specific opportunities to be far more creative and put more of himself into his courses. The results were electric and he quickly became known as the guy who made technical stuff fun to learn.

## **Building energy**

Thus far I have attempted to show that resilience is primarily driven by the degree to which a person's experiences of positive emotion outweigh their experiences of negative emotion and that a 5:1 ratio is needed for people truly to flourish. However, I meet many clients whose lifestyle mitigates against finding opportunities for positive emotion. I meet clients who are just too tired, confused, upset, uninformed or disorganized to have access easily to the positive. I have concluded that in order to build resourcefulness, a client needs to have energy to direct towards building it.

In physics, energy is defined as the potential to work or function and this is why a coach often asks a client how much energy they have to work on a particular goal. If the energy is not there, then finding the energy becomes the preliminary goal.

There seem to be four main domains in which energy flows or gets blocked: the body, the mind, the spirit and the emotions. These four are identified in various places, for example Stephen Covey refers to them as the 'four dimensions of renewal' in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989). The Hoffman Process (Lawrence 2003) uses them in a self-development programme run around the world by the Institute of the same name. The same four domains also form the basis of an excellent *Harvard Business Review* article on energy by Schwartz (2007). Schwartz argues that individuals need to recognize the cost of energy-depleting behaviours and that energy can be expanded and renewed through practising different behaviours. So in building behavioural change here, a coach can be a major asset.

### The body

I often discover that my clients, friends and colleagues just do not get enough sleep. Very recent research has shown that there are significant negative effects on a person who consistently sleeps less than 7 hours a night. Often though, the person is unaware of the effects precisely because their awareness and judgement are impaired. Closely linked to this is a lack of exercise and healthy diet. Everyone knows the importance of these, but so many of us do not do what we know we need to. Schwartz give examples of how taking time out from a long and busy day to exercise and eat properly actually represents an investment for the client and saves them time as they are more energetic, more alert and therefore get things done more quickly. It can be difficult for a person to change the habits that have got them into a low physical energy state. Identifying small, relatively easy, quick-wins seems to help to get started. The strengths approach can be helpful here, helping a person to identify patterns and routines that they find energizing rather than a drudge. Also helping them create compelling but doable, 'towards' goals is important.

### The mind

I often encounter clients who are confused about something. They have lost their clear-headedness. Sometimes this shows itself by a client overlaying several issues on top of each other, or slipping from one issue into the next before considering it fully.

Although I have stressed the positive in coaching throughout this book, there can be great mileage in asking a client a question like: 'What will happen if you do nothing about this?' or perhaps: 'Imagine it's five years down the line now and you have done nothing about this. What is happening?' Considering failure and its consequences can be a good way to create energy. It is important next to focus on the positive and what *can* be done so that we

do not inadvertently tip the client into unresourcefulness. Let them focus their mind on the negative to encourage focussing on the positive.

*Example 3.4*

A client says, 'I want to get a job as a teacher. I get phoned up to do short-term supply work. That creates a problem with child care. Child minders want ongoing arrangements not "as and when". They might be full that day. How can I work when I have children? Some of the schools are far away. My mum can only come over two days a week to help out.'

This is a good example of the mind using up unfocussed energy by going round and round. A very useful way in to break the pattern is for the coach to ask: 'What are the facts here?' I have found very often that because of the confusion, clients often have not checked the facts or are assuming. Sometimes this is exacerbated by colleagues and friends offering more guesses or 'I think probably ...' statements. My friend and former colleague Eversley Felix, also an experienced coach, calls this 'pooling ignorance'. So coaches can be very helpful to their clients by helping, sometimes insisting, that they clarify the facts and then identify the underlying issue and the goal they wish to work towards.

### The spirit

This can be taken to refer to a range of different aspects of a person's life. It may be about their values, their purpose in life, what they wish to leave behind, 'what it's all about' or the afterlife. In my experience and that of my fellow coaches, the most common way for energy to get blocked here is for a client to find themselves doing, or needing to do, something which they do not want to do or do not believe in. This can include challenges like having to make a change which affects people's lives, being asked to take what feels like a step backwards to fill an organizational need or being instructed not to pass on information about a pending reorganization.

*Example 3.5*

I worked with a senior manager who had a very high performing team and who had been briefed about a reorganization in the company but told not to pass this on. Because his staff had heard rumours about changes and came to ask him, he felt compromised, feeling he was supposed to tell them there were no changes being made. In this kind of situation it is important for the coach to retain an independence and objectivity – not because they are callous or do not care but in order to make these resources available to the client. I asked him what he would expect of his boss if his boss were placed

in the same position. He said that he would understand that there might be a degree of confidentiality but that he would not wish to be lied to. I invited him to consider how he could meet these criteria in the present situation and he decided to tell them openly that he could not tell them everything, but to promise that whatever he did say would be the truth. Perhaps this sounds obvious to an outsider but it was by no means obvious to the client before that conversation. Precisely because this was a personal values issue, it was important that this client found his own way of articulating and following through on an action. The consequence was that he felt much better and was able to get on with his job with more energy – and his staff responded well and accepted his position.

### The emotions

Although much of this chapter has been about emotions, it is certainly true that many clients block their energy for action through their emotions. Here are some typical ways I have identified:

- by avoiding setting a goal;
- by pulling back from committing to action;
- through fear of a person or the consequences of an action;
- through limiting beliefs about their own capability or what is 'right';
- through self-sabotage.

Much of the advice about leadership dilemmas is very left-brained or logical. For example, there is lots of advice about 'disputing' negative thoughts and arguing yourself into abandoning them. However, if the block is emotional, then logic is very unlikely to shift it, at least in the first instance.

Emotional blocks often operate at an unconscious level, so the first way in which a coach can help is to uncover them and encourage the client to own them. For example, if a client is afraid, they need to be aware of the fact in order to move on. Otherwise, even if they identify an excellent set of actions, the fear will come back to sabotage them. I have listened to many trainee coaches and it is common for them to move the client from a goal directly to action without exploring the emotional component of the issue they face. A good example is in the area of personal organization. I can hear the coach 'labelling' this as 'a time management issue' and then steering the conversation towards prioritizing techniques. In fact the real question is generally not what the client should be doing – they know that already – but rather how they are stopping themselves doing what they want to do. Often underlying this is an emotional block, for example, fear of a boss or of losing a job or of the consequences of saying 'no'. Once the client owns this block, then a

disputing technique can be useful. For example it can then help them to consider how they could say 'no' without fracturing a relationship.

Releasing the blocked energy into creating positive emotions therefore increases resilience and improves the client's capacity to deal with the situation they face.

## **Conclusion**

If a client is to be able to handle difficult times and to have the capacity to bounce back from disappointment or adversity, they need to be paying attention to their whole self. This means that body, mind, spirit and emotions need to be nurtured and kept healthy. A coach can play a vital role in helping a client gain greater awareness of where they are not investing in themselves and to help them to develop strategies to increase their energy in any or all of these four areas.

A particularly strong link has been identified between the balance of positive to negative emotion and an individual's resilience. The coach can help a client to experience greater positive emotion by focussing them on moments of success and resourcefulness and by bringing the strengths demonstrated at those times into the here and now to tackle current challenges.

## 4 Coaching Leaders and Managers

### Introduction

Now we have covered some of the main themes in coaching with positive psychology, let's turn to discussing how coaches can use these themes to help a specific constituency: leaders and managers of organizations.

Like many coaches, I work primarily with people who lead and manage within organizations and therefore the challenges they bring are familiar to me. In this chapter I will show how research from positive psychology is important for leaders of all kinds and at all levels. I will suggest some practical ways in which this research can inform coaching for and by people in leadership positions. Most of the coaches on my panel work with leaders at or near the top of public and private sector organizations. So leadership and leadership development are fundamentally important for them as they are for all executive coaches.

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins (2001) researched what distinguished 'great' companies – those which were outstandingly successful over a long period of time – compared to those which were merely good. Collins found that there were significant differences between good companies and great ones. In particular, the leaders of the 'great' companies were very different types of people than those in the 'good' companies. They combined surprising humility with particularly strong will. And these leaders talked about and attributed their success above all to their teams and the great people they had. The good company leaders in contrast talked mostly about themselves. The latter kind were often the more extraverted 'big' personalities, but were in fact achieving less success than the others. Collins concluded that organizations seeking to be outstandingly successful need the kind of leaders who are humble, develop people and share the successes. He concluded that: 'Good is the enemy of great.'

Recently, Zenger and Folkman (2002) conducted an in-depth study of leadership and also found there were significant differences between good leaders and what they termed 'extraordinary' ones. One major difference was that leaders rated as extraordinary contributed very much more to organizational success – to the bottom line – than those who were merely good. In fact, the difference in value to an organization is enormous: there is a step change in the results delivered by leaders assessed to be above the 80th percentile. Thus

average or even moderately good leadership is severely impairing an organization's performance. By enabling people to move from 'good' to 'extraordinary', the organization can reap significant business rewards including greater profitability, higher staff engagement and lower staff turnover.

An important question for coaches is therefore how leaders can become extraordinary because coaching can help to build this extraordinary capacity. A consistent finding by Zenger and Folkman is that the top leaders they identified had all worked to develop a core set of outstanding strengths. They all had obvious weaknesses too, but had ensured that these never became 'fatal' such that they undermined the strengths. This has significant implications for coaching. It suggests that it is very important to help a client to move into the 'extraordinary' zone and that using strengths is the best way to do this. As part of my research for this book I consulted a panel of expert coaches and they told me, for example, that many people come to coaching looking to fix things, but the ones who get most benefit are consistently those who aim high. One of my panel, John Bull, works with leaders in the sports world and likes to use a phrase coined by Peter Keen, head of UK Cycling: 'Unreasonable ambition' – the first building block of high performance. He has found that extraordinary leaders aim unreasonably high.

It is true that in coaching, it is primarily the client that sets the agenda. But I do feel that as a coach I need to have high aspirations for my clients and at times to challenge them to consider the 'unreasonable' and to move out of their comfort zones.

What, then, does a coach need to do to help a client move from good to extraordinary? Here are what some of the panel have told me works:

- encourage clients to articulate more aspirational 'mastery' goals;
- challenge more: when the client seems content with easy goals or backs away because of fear or limiting beliefs;
- give honest but challenging feedback;
- take some risks in confronting the client when they are inconsistent, for example, when the actions don't match the words;
- hold them accountable for following through on next steps.

#### *Example 4.1*

One of my panel was coaching an up-and-coming young manager who had been very successful thus far in her career. She had hit problems with her immediate team – they were underperforming, and as the session went on it transpired that several were off on stress-related sick leave. Her stated goal for the session was to identify ways in which she could involve the team more, taking a more 'coaching' approach to her team leadership and being less of

a 'taskmaster'. As the client started to identify next steps, she began to say things like: 'I need to sit down with each team member and make it clearer to them what I am expecting.' My colleague spotted that this was 'more of the same' – more of what did not work. This is a common trap for a coach but skilfully my colleague challenged: 'And how will doing even more telling help you to get greater involvement and build your coaching skills?' After some thought, she replied: 'Yes, I have to do something different.' They moved on to consider how her considerable strengths of drive and task delivery could be used alongside her underused strengths in motivating people.

#### *Exercise 4.1*

There is an old consulting technique called the 'Five whys'. It involves asking 'Why?' five times until a client gets to the heart of the problem they face. This approach is not much use in coaching as all it does is to keep both parties stuck in the problem. A more useful alternative I have tried is the 'Five Whats' which might go something like this:

*Client:* I want to manage my boss better.

*Coach:* And what will that do for you?

*Client:* I'll be able to say 'no' to some of her last minute demands.

*Coach:* And what will that do for you?

*Client:* I will have more time to focus on what is most important.

*Coach:* And what will that do for you?

*Client:* I will do my job better.

*Coach:* And what will that do for you?

*Client:* I will be less stressed.

*Coach:* And what will that do for you?

*Client:* I will feel much more satisfied and in control of my life.

## **Why positive coaching is important for leaders**

There are many approaches to defining and describing leadership. Different approaches may focus on:

- *Leadership qualities or characteristics:* These may include vision, being in touch with reality, courage, an ethic of service, integrity.
- *Leadership competencies:* These are things considered important for a leader and might include: developing strategy, innovating, providing direction, self-management, etc. Each of these may be broken down into several more behavioural factors.



In either case, I have seen that coaching can help a leader to work within any overall approach precisely because it follows the client’s rather than the coach’s agenda. I have coached people for whom courage was a major factor and who needed to display it in the face of aggressive behaviour from above or from peers. Coaching provided a place to express vulnerability, be supported but not parented, and to marshal their strengths and personal resources to tackle the obstacles faced. In terms of competencies, I have worked with many 360° feedback instruments, helping leaders to extract meaning from numbers and bar charts, to identify usable goals and to pull together real development plans. My experience as a coach has made me conclude that a leader needs to balance a number of apparent contradictions:

• To think big picture	and	To have a handle on the detail
• To develop long-term strategy	and	To handle short-term problems
• To lead and foster change	and	To create commitment and focus
• To please boards and shareholders	and	To motivate staff

I have found that positive psychology and other recent advances in human science can contribute significantly to how a leader handles themselves within these contradictions and therefore to how successfully they lead. The coach who knows something of positive psychology can be in a very important position to help leaders be at their best and therefore contribute to making working life a positive and productive endeavour for themselves and many other stakeholders.

Decisions, decisions

One of the greatest writers on organizational life, Henry Mintzberg (2009) pointed out how the bulk of senior managerial decision-making was done quickly and intuitively and how many executives rarely spent longer than 10 minutes on any one activity. This accounts for the popular belief that senior managers tend to have the attention span of a goldfish, and it challenges the type of management training typically aimed at more junior managers, which focuses on making carefully thought-through decisions and conducting well-run planned meetings.

There is some recent support for Mintzberg’s claim that a lot of senior decision-making is not done rationally. Malcolm Gladwell (2006) has shown how it is often our first instinct, sometimes a split-second thought, a ‘Blink’ (the title of his book), which contains the right answer or choice. This is the result of our powerful brains accessing and processing information far faster

than we can logically explain. Gladwell also notes that often we tend to discount these gut feelings and hunches. Perhaps we do not believe that anything so quick can be reliable. How many spouses and partners would like their loved ones to pay more attention to their 'Blink' when they shop for clothes, and so avoid spending several hours trailing around shops only to go back and buy the first thing they saw?

I have seen that, despite or as a reaction to what Mintzberg found, leaders specifically avoid following their instinct by resorting to long-drawn-out processes which sometimes just confirm what they know, or sometimes lead them into a poorer decision. This kind of prevarication can relate to an underlying concern or fear, or to a self-limiting belief formed in childhood. A coach can help the leader or manager in a number of ways here, supporting them in backing their intuition and taking a risk, or at other times, helping them tackle their limiting beliefs or assumptions. What emerges is a powerful balance of creativity and intuition supported by a sense of reality rather than fear.

So intuition can be massively powerful. And at times it can be faulty and lead to the client holding fixed ideas which do not work. My coaching panel tell me of a range of fixed leadership assumptions they encounter, for example, about how people should be treated, how many hours they should work, what they are capable of or allowed to do, etc. These assumptions can lead to them ignoring evidence which is before their eyes and, if actually considered, would make them more successful. Despite the increasing body of evidence that increased well-being at work is connected to improved performance, a surprising number of clients focus on long hours and efficiency rather than increasing the intrinsic motivation of their workforce.

Some of the evidence is presented in an article for a German HR magazine, by Alex Linley and Nikki Page. Among other things they show that:

- Happy workers are more productive.
- Employees who experience more positive emotion are rated as better performers by their companies.
- More satisfied workers, among other things, use their time better, have less time off and stay with the company longer.
- Where managers work actively to engage staff, their business units are more profitable and customer loyalty is greater.

This work has been replicated many times now but it is clear that many senior executives do not get time to really think things through and make the kind of shifts that this research suggests are needed. A coach can be a vital resource to help them find the time and mental space to consider how this evidence could work in practice and to build plans and the drive to implement them.

*Example 4.2*

I worked with a client who turned out to be suffering from extreme stress but covered it up well to those around him. He was working ridiculously long hours, was exhausted and anxious. He was unable any more to stop and think differently about his situation and he could see no way out, no end in sight. He could not even allow himself a holiday. His partner had recently walked out. It was the first time I actively encouraged a person to seek professional help, starting with his GP. Once this was in place, and he had taken some time off, we were able to formulate goals and build a different approach to work and home life which was sustainable and rewarding for him.

Sometimes people choose to work hard or put work above other parts of their lives. But when it is no longer a choice, or when it is doing them harm, then as a coach I need to challenge this. Not only is this the right thing to do for that person – it also leads to improved performance in the longer term

## **Strengths and leadership**

The strengths approach is an important contribution that positive psychology makes to leadership and management. It suggests that playing to our strengths rather than constantly striving to make good our weaknesses is more motivating and delivers better performance (see Chapter 1).

Despite the evidence for strengths, recent research on leaders in organizations suggests that in fact they are rather poor at knowing what their strengths and weaknesses are. Kaplan and Kaiser (2010) show that leaders typically underestimate both their weaknesses and their strengths. Given that many writers (e.g. Goleman 2000) have stressed the importance of self-knowledge in leadership, this is an important area to address and a potential challenge to coaches.

Alex Linley (2008) has led some major work on strengths and he defines these as things which we are good at and which energize us. He notes that often we can take our strengths for granted. Perhaps because they come relatively easily and we enjoy using them, we assume that they are nothing special and that they are the same for everyone. As Kaplan and Kaiser show, this can mean that executives are sometimes overly resistant to positive feedback. Somehow, being praised for what you are good at is counter-cultural or feels like boasting.

As leaders move up within an organization, the less feedback they receive of any kind. A coach may need to work hard at times to get a client to hear any feedback at all, let alone positive messages about themselves. So leaders

need someone to hold up the mirror and help them notice and take ownership of their strengths. A coach can play a crucial part here, offering their own feedback and talking the client through psychometric reports on strengths like the Realise 2 or VIA.

Once the leader has greater awareness of their strengths, the coach can move on to help them to make best use of these strengths and to bring into play strengths which may be under-used. Where the leader does play to their strengths, they will be more effective and happier. Because strengths tap into a person's true self, they will then bring their more authentic self to their work. And this is what creates the trust and integrity characteristic of great leaders.

#### *Example 4.3*

I recently coached the owner-director of an IT business. He was working out where to take himself and the company next. After completing the Realise2 profile and a coaching session around that, he became very decided and also highly motivated about his next steps. This was an excellent way to help him out of a hole where he and the company had been stuck. It also enabled him to drop some ideas he had had previously which seemed to be 'the right thing' but in fact left him cold.

Kaplan and Kaiser (2010) have sounded a warning bell: it is possible for a leader to overplay their strengths. This is important for executive coaches keen to work on the strengths of their clients. The over-playing can be for two different reasons.

First, the leader may be particularly comfortable playing to that strength and keep using it even when not appropriate. A common example here is the leader who has a strength for building relationships: when they focus too much on this strength, they are likely to draw back from tough decision-making, as this may appear to endanger the relationship. Similarly if they have practical, hands-on strengths, they may struggle to take time out for strategic thinking and high-level decision-making.

Second, a leader can over-compensate for what they believe to be weaknesses but are in fact strengths. So they can be experienced as the opposites of that strength. A leader may feel they lack empathy and therefore go overboard in using it. Because it is not a real strength, however, they come across as inauthentic or overly personal.

So from one perspective, an over-used strength can tip over to become a weakness. Put more positively, an overdone strength is still a strength, but it is a hand played wrongly and so can become a liability.

Either way, a coach can help their client to moderate the use of strengths at times so as to perform the full job role more effectively. At the same time,

the coach needs to be careful to preserve the sense of strength which the client may have acquired after some resistance. Hence the level of rapport and trust is again vital.

*Example 4.4*

A recent client of mine, a director in the public health service, was told by her Chief Executive that she needed to operate at a more strategic level. She was unhappy about this initially but as we explored what was going on, she realized that she was overdoing her 'concern for people' strength (her words). The danger for many executives in such cases is that they begin to think either/or: either I work at a strategic level or I work with the people. I was able to challenge her assumption here and invite her to consider how she could move her thinking to a more strategic level while still honouring her strength. She worked out a way to do this by focussing additionally on the development of her immediate reports and encouraging them to use a more inclusive style – effectively on her behalf. So her focus became 'How do I ensure people are looked after?' rather than 'How do I look after people?'

The use of strengths therefore needs to be aligned with organizational need. Having done a strengths interview or psychometric test, the coach and client may find that some strengths are not called for in the present role. Some strengths sceptics have argued that you cannot just play to strengths all the time – and this is true. The coach can help their client identify real strengths which they can use to best effect. For other important strengths, there may be ways of using them outside the current role, for example in family, social or community settings.

Most leaders are also required to do things that don't come naturally to them and which they would prefer not to do. How does a strengths approach help a leader when they have to perform well in an area of weakness? Alex Linley suggests a number of ways:

- Identify which of these need not be done.
- Identify which could be done by someone else.
- Identify how you could become 'good enough' at them.
- Identify how you could use your strengths creatively to cover the same ground.

These are all useful considerations in coaching, and the coach can support their client in 'reframing' the task or finding different ways to tackle it.

*Example 4.5*

One leader, a 'people person' through and through, needed to improve her report writing. She hated doing reports and tended to do them in a rush, poorly and late. This was affecting her reputation and potentially her career in the profession. There was nothing about report writing that she could find to like and no-one else to write the reports instead of her. Through our coaching, she did, however, identify two other people who contributed to the reports and who could at least send written content rather than just notes. She then thought long and hard about her strengths and decided that she could use her sense of 'personal responsibility' to ensure that people got what they needed on time. Once she began to make these, apparently small, changes, she became less stressed because she felt she was being truer to what was important to her.

## **The growth mindset and leadership**

It is important for leaders to be able to think well. For example, leaders with a growth mindset (a mindset which believes that skills, talent and success can be developed with effort and focus) are more likely to state their opinions more honestly and to disagree more readily with colleagues than those with fixed mindsets (mindsets which think that talent is fixed).

Since many of our clients are senior leaders, it is important to be aware that how they speak and how they behave are crucial to the mindset and motivation which is experienced by the people they lead.

Burke (1992) and others have shown how it is, above all, leadership behaviour which drives workplace climate and therefore motivation and performance. But it is easy to get the climate wrong and therefore to undermine the very performance a leader is seeking to promote.

*Example 4.6*

Joanna is head of a corporate function within a large public sector organization. She has only a few staff, all specialists like her. But when we first met, she was concerned about the level of buy-in she had from senior managers elsewhere within the organization. For legal reasons they had to deal with her department but mostly they tried hard to keep her and her team at a distance. So at a simple level, her goal was 'How can I influence these people more effectively?' However, as I invited her to talk more about the situation, it became clear that she had a very low view of herself and her function. 'We keep them out of court,' she said. Through a mix of a downbeat self-view and

assumed negativity on the part of colleagues, she had acquired a pessimistic and fixed mindset. I offered some feedback on that statement: 'When you say "keep them out of court" that sounds rather negative and my reaction is that I want as little to do with you as possible unless I am in a really difficult situation. I wonder if your peers have a similar reaction?'

I then invited her to consider what positive benefits she brought or could bring to her client managers. On this basis she was able to re-brand her department and herself and she is now a far more respected and valued figure in the organization. It was not influencing skills she needed, but rather a different mindset.

Mindset is part of the culture of a department or a whole organization. Carol Dweck attributes the fall of Enron to a fixed mindset and an obsession with 'talent'. Because of the need to appear successful at all times (because if there was any hesitation, or any suggestion of failure, maybe they would not really be talented), those who were part of it felt obliged to take greater and greater risks. This became unsustainable.

When it becomes widespread, the fixed mindset leads to groupthink. The phenomenon of groupthink has been well researched. It refers to a collective state of mind sometimes found in executive teams where people think too similarly, in a very fixed way and where dissension or alternative views are discouraged or even punished. It leads to flawed, and at times disastrous decision-making. In order to avoid the groupthink trap, during the Second World War, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill gave certain people the specific job of challenging decisions where there seemed to be consensus.

Leaders create a mindset in their organization or their part of it. They therefore have the choice of creating an environment in which people thrive or in which they stultify. Increasing importance is now being placed on how the leader creates the conditions for high performance rather than just on traits skills. My friend and colleague Mike Fitzpatrick often asks leaders, 'How do you force bacteria to grow?' The answer is, 'You can't; you create the conditions and they show up.' So leadership is as much about creating the conditions in which people 'show up' well physically, mentally and creatively, as it is about doing things to them. Most of my coaching panel have stories of helping clients move their focus from 'doing well' to creating the conditions for others to do well.

Many of my coaching panel have expressed the concern that many of the managers they work with and even CEOs become bosses rather than leaders. To quote Dweck (2008): 'They wield power instead of transforming themselves, their workers and their organizations.' Because of this, the conditions for growth are not formed and organizations underperform.

George, Sims, McLean and Mayer (2007) conducted a detailed study of authenticity in leadership. They found that there was no such thing as a universal set of skills or traits which characterized them but rather they were people who had looked hard at themselves and put significant effort into knowing and developing themselves. These leaders were found to be a particularly powerful in seeing organizations through difficult times.

Jim Collins in 'Level 5 Leadership' (2001) identified that the most consistently high performing US companies were led by people who had a rare combination of deep personal humility and intense will. Collins notes that this finding is both counter-intuitive and also counter-cultural. He thus disproves the prevailing view that great corporate leaders have to be larger than life characters. Indeed, those types consistently perform poorly or have only short-lived success.

The leadership coach needs to be aware of this research. It is easy to find our clients falling into patterns of groupthink, trying to be someone else or putting on false charisma. There is nothing as embarrassing as a senior executive, who is basically not funny, telling a joke at a conference. The best leaders lead from their strengths, while making good relevant weaknesses. In this way they are themselves, but their best selves. The coach can help them to be that best self.

## **Characteristics of positive leaders**

I have noticed, and this is supported by my panel, that the leaders with growth mindsets express gratitude for and acknowledgement of the support and contribution they have received from others, while those with the fixed mindset tend to talk only about themselves. In addition, the growth-mindset leaders refer frequently to developing and growing both individuals and teams while the fixed-mindset leaders rarely mention them.

In the end too, it seems to be the leaders with the growth mindset who are happier and more fulfilled. Perhaps this connects back to the importance of happiness and well-being in realizing human potential.

It is important to note too that it is the growth mindset leaders who have delivered the highest and most consistent corporate performance. This is because they do not confuse respect and valuing others with tolerance for poor performance – indeed in many ways they are more demanding, paying more attention to what is really happening in the organization, what the books are saying and also facing up to tough messages and problems.

Specifically what these leaders do is open up communications, encouraging contributions from all irrespective of hierarchy. Many of them sweep aside committees and meetings which do not add value and then make sure that the right people are brought along who can actually solve the problems



being tackled. In this they differ substantially from the fixed mindset leaders who stress power and formal hierarchy and who have a need to be seen as top dog at all times.

What are people in the company worrying about? If it's the CEO or their boss, then that's a sure sign of a fixed mindset culture – eyes have been taken off the end results: products, services and satisfied customers.

There may be a challenge for some coaches here because we have always said that it is the client's agenda we are pursuing, not our own. Increasingly the coachee's manager, often a CEO, is likely to be part of the contracting and goal setting stages of the coaching. So the corporate interest cannot be ignored even if the actual one-to-one sessions remain confidential. The coach may need courage to insist on clarity of expectations from the sponsoring manager and also in confronting the coachee with behaviours which are clearly not in the company's interest.

#### *Example 4.7*

##### Three-way contracting – a typical structure

- 1 Initial referral to coach, often from HR person.
- 2 Introductory conversation between coach and coachee.
- 3 Three-way meeting between coach, coachee and coachee's boss to agree overall agenda for the coaching and issues such as confidentiality of sessions. During this meeting, the coach can help the boss to give very clear feedback to and clarify expectations of the coachee and help the coachee to ask questions and for the clarification they need.
- 4 Subsequent session in which overall coaching goals are agreed. See Chapter 6 on goals for ideas on how to help the coachee match their own values to what the boss or company need.
- 5 Continue regular coaching sessions. Coachee sets the agenda but coach may challenge at times how the boss's expectations are being met. Content of sessions remains confidential.
- 6 Interim or final three-way meeting to review progress.

## **Positive coaching techniques for leadership challenges**

Here are some useful coaching techniques for coaching leaders and managers.

### **Under-used strengths**

Martin Seligman encourages the use of strengths in new ways. One approach is to get the coachee to take a relevant strength and find, say, an hour every day to use that strength in new ways in the service of the organization.

### Positive shift

Where a coachee is struggling to make a change or feels it is beyond them, ask them to think of something they did poorly or not at all in the past and now do well. Get them to identify how they made that shift. What were the circumstances which helped and what specifically did they themselves do?

### Unskilled at feedback

Although I have argued that leaders need to create the conditions for performance, at times they need high levels of skills to do so. Giving feedback correctly is a much under-used skill and it plays a significant role in establishing a growth mindset.

A coach can help a client to consider the impact of how they give feedback and to focus on effort and character strengths like courage or follow-through rather than just performance targets or talent.

### Unclear strengths: using 360° feedback

Alex Linley has provocatively called 360° feedback a ‘recipe for mediocrity’ and there is good reason for his allegation because we cannot all be excellent at everything and, yes, we do have weaknesses. If we spend our lives with plans and objectives to develop our weaknesses, we will be unhappy, perform worse and probably never succeed. Kaplan and Kaiser criticize the way 360° feedback is typically constructed. They contend that it tends to confuse strengths with their frequency of use. They warn of straight 1–5 scales for traits or strengths and advocate using a scale such as shown in Figure 4.1.

<i>Too Little</i>					<i>About Right</i>					<i>Too Much</i>
5	4	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	4	5

**Figure 4.1** Scale of traits

In this case, zero is the ideal score. In summary here, there are two questions the coach is working with: ‘What are my strengths?’ and ‘How am I using my strengths?’

### Time poverty

Probably the most over-used managerial excuse for not doing important things today is lack of time. Time poverty attributes failure to the external

factor of time. But there is not less time in a day in the twenty-first century than there was in the sixteenth. What this excuse actually means is that the person either did not prioritize a task above others, or they planned poorly or they have not managed themselves well. The coach can be of enormous help to a leader facing this kind of challenge as he or she can offer feedback and challenge as well as helping the leader to formulate goals which are truly motivating and actions which are more likely to get done.

### **Interruptions**

A major factor in a person's time poverty is their preparedness to be constantly interrupted. There seems to be a pervasive belief that this does not matter. However, recent neuroscience research has shown that contrary to popular mythology, neither men nor women can multi-task. When a person tries to do two conscious things at once, or is interrupted, their brain requires a certain amount of switching time – it cannot do two things at once. Added to this is the 'what was I doing?' catch-up which adds a further time delay. In fact, doing a piece of work with frequent interruptions can take twice as long – excluding the time the interruptions take. The coach's role here may include offering challenge to assumptions and at times providing reading or other input to help the client begin to open up possible other ways of working. I have, for example, found that even asking a client to turn off their mobile phone for our session can arouse anxiety for some. Where this is the case, it is very likely that they have fallen prey to electronic presenteeism and this in itself is likely to be creating pressure for them. The first step is to get some perspective – perspective which constant accessibility does not permit. A very useful question here is: 'What's the worst that could happen if you turned off your mobile for 1 hour?'

### **Low energy**

In addition to this, there is plenty of evidence that well-being at work is improved by having absorbing interests outside work and keeping healthy by exercising, watching one's diet and taking proper breaks. As Schwartz (2007) has shown, taking a break and managing your life to keep your energy up need not ignore the fact that most executives today have very challenging jobs which demand much more than 9–5 Monday–Friday. There is also increasing evidence that less than 7 hours sleep a night is positively unhealthy, more or less for everyone. The problem is that many of those who say they get by on 5 or fewer hours are unaware of the effects tiredness is having until it is too late. Again here, a coach can work with the client to challenge assumptions about work patterns and to help them find more effective ways to organize their busy lives. Where people pay greater attention to their attention patterns and physical needs through the day, they find that they complete work quicker and their judgement is improved.

*Example 4.8*

I worked with a very overweight chief executive who never mentioned this as an issue despite arriving wheezing and sweating to most sessions and experiencing significant stress at work. It became the 'elephant in the room' behind most of the issues he spoke about. Having established a good relationship with him over the first few sessions, I felt I was able to take the risk of mentioning the 'elephant' and he responded very positively and is now working actively on his health as a life investment rather than 'something I ought to do'.

**Conclusion**

It is no accident that coaching for senior leaders and managers has become such a widely used resource. Coaching is essentially a learning process and the learning is about oneself first and foremost. This enables a client to reach higher levels of learning which build their capacity to tackle and solve problems generally rather than just sort out this week's issues. Because outstanding leaders contribute far more to organizational success than moderate or even good ones, it is in their employers' interests to invest significantly in their learning. Coaching provides a timely and focussed way of learning and can offer major breakthroughs in performance. Ultimately, the organization benefits. I coached one senior manager on his personal organization and prioritization. Afterwards, he reckoned he had saved on average half a day a week – that's worth a lot of money to his employer.

## 5 Leaders as Coaches

### Introduction

In Chapter 4, we looked at how coaches can help leaders and managers to become more efficient by focussing on their strengths and not dwelling on their weaknesses. This scenario presupposes that a coach will have been hired as an external consultant by the organization which employs the leader or the manager. But what if the coaching is undertaken internally, by the leader or manager in the organization? There are a number of reasons given for helping leaders and managers to learn coaching skills, which include a wish to move away from an autocratic management style, a strategy of empowering people at all levels and a desire to cut costs. What does positive psychology tell us about leaders as coaches? That's what this chapter is about.

Because of these broader aims, the development of coaching skills is often part of a wider organization development or re-structuring programme. Coaching can indeed be a valuable part of any change or development programme as it develops skills for both coach and coachee and facilitates quality thinking at important moments.

At the same time, I have talked to many junior managers in organizations and they are often vocal about how their senior managers and directors manage them. Some of their most common complaints are:

- They don't listen.
- They don't give you the time.
- They tell you what to do – and mostly it won't work or I know a better way.
- They switch from my question to their own agenda.
- I start off raising a question then suddenly I am listening to them go on and on about their favourite theme.

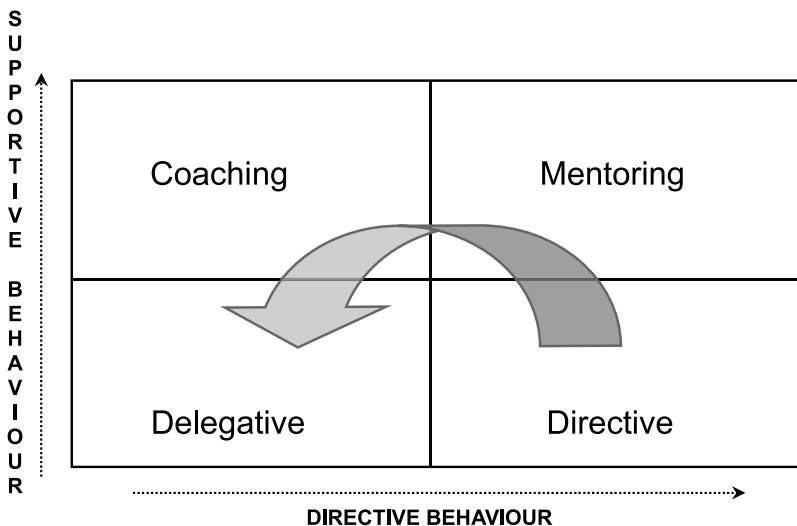
The last point is supported by an interesting finding of Joe Luft (1969), who found that subordinates generally know a lot more about their bosses than their bosses do about them. Learning coaching skills can therefore become an important way to redress this balance, allowing employees to do more of the talking and leaders to do more of the listening.

Coaching skills can be very successfully introduced as part of more general leadership development programmes. The advantages of coaching skills development for leaders are numerous. Apart from supporting a wider range of styles, coaching requires the leaders to develop much more advanced skills in listening, questioning and building rapport. These are fundamental for excellent leadership and I have seen coaching training provide an important step for leaders who had had lots of earlier training – often knowing ‘about’ things but not being able to actually do them. You certainly can’t learn coaching only from a book.

Many experienced managers and leaders find the idea of coaching initially difficult because they are used to being in an expert role or a role of authority. So, for example, a senior operational manager is often used to making a thousand decisions a day, and to people coming to them mostly because that is precisely what they want. It is important to understand that coaching is not a panacea for all leadership conversations, or a substitute for decisiveness and direction when needed.

## Situational Leadership

A useful way to position leaders as coaches is to use the ‘Situational Leadership’ framework devised by Hersey and Blanchard (Figure 5.1). This framework suggests that all one-to-one interactions between a leader and a colleague



**Figure 5.1** Situational coaching

require the right combination of two dimensions: direction and support. Direction is the amount of telling, asking or giving feedback that the leader uses. Support is the level of listening, encouragement and exploration the leader uses.

Figure 5.1 is based on one part of Hersey and Blanchard's model of situational leadership which suggests that leaders need to adopt a range of styles dependent on the development level of the person being led. Figure 5.1 serves to identify that coaching, being a high support intervention, is not always appropriate. So, for example, when new to a job or a role, a person needs a lot of direction and relatively little support. As they get to grips with the work, there tend to be challenges and setbacks so more support is needed and once they become fully conversant with a role, and are up for it, then the leader can move to a more delegative style.

This is often not the case in practice. I have seen that in many organizations, leaders tend to flip between high and low direction but provide relatively low levels of support. Thus, using the logic of the model, we can infer that the development of the colleague is likely to be impaired or at least slowed because the two high-support stages are not being used fully.

This finding is not surprising because most leaders are time-pressured and the higher support styles do need more time – and more skill. Of course, very often the time taken is really an investment rather than a straight cost, because the colleague is helped to reach their optimum level of performance more quickly. The other major advantage of using the coaching styles is that the colleague not only learns more about their role and their job, they learn more about learning too so they can apply the principles they learn to new future situations. In this way the improved performance is increased several-fold and the time gain from the initial investment is significant.

It is not only Hersey and Blanchard who consider coaching important for leadership development. Goffee and Jones (2006), in their book *Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?* suggest, 'Be yourself – more – with skill.' Edgar Schein (2010) in his book *Organizational Culture and Leadership* identifies a number of leadership characteristics that can assist change, including being proactive, being committed to learning, being positive about people in general and committed to communication. Clearly, strong coaching skills will help a leader develop and display these characteristics.

It is fundamental for an executive or managerial coach to have some knowledge of frameworks like Situational Leadership because it helps us to map the issues a client has and to help them learn more about their own behaviour and its impact. It is true that this may seem to move away from the principle of non-direction. However, it is very helpful for an experienced and knowledgeable coach to step out of coaching 'mode' from time to time – and only for a short time – to outline a model or some research which relates to the client's goal.

On several occasions I have coached leaders who are themselves keen to develop coaching skills. I have found it helpful to step out of coaching in real time to map our conversation onto a simple coaching framework such as GROW (Goal, Reality, Options, Will, by Whitmore 1996). I have found that this is a great vehicle for learning – learning within the coaching process itself. I have found this method particularly helpful where we are working on establishing a goal. I might, for example, ask them to consider how a well-formed goal is much more usable than a broad wish or third-party goal that we began with.

## **Some specific examples of leaders being coaches**

### **Goal setting**

Many leaders find goal setting really hard (see Chapter 6). They are often used to driving the agenda in conversations, so to pause and enquire first about what a colleague wants to achieve is a new skill to be learned. Where coaching is appropriate for the leader in dealing with a colleague, there are really two goal questions to be answered: ‘What is the big aim?’ and ‘What is our aim in this conversation right now?’ The answer is not the same in both cases.

#### *Example 5.1*

A company director is coaching a more junior manager in her division. The junior person outlines a major problem with a member of staff who is under-performing. He says he has tried everything but nothing seems to work and he is at his wits’ end. The director gets side-tracked into asking for lots of detail about what is going on and what he has tried. She offers advice – but he has tried it all already. Finally, remembering her coaching training, she asks for the big goal: ‘What do you want?’ The junior guy has to think for a moment – he’s been on a negative roll – and he explains that his goal is to do what he can to help this person to up their game. Remembering to stay out of things for now, the director listens and summarizes. Then she asks for the here and now goal. ‘OK, so what would you like to get from our conversation here today?’ Then her junior manager has to do some more thinking and he identifies a meeting coming up with this difficult person in a week’s time. He wants to get some practical ideas about how to handle that meeting. This then forms the goal for the next part of their conversation.

### **Giving acknowledgement**

Much is written about the importance of feedback for leaders and coaches. What a leader acknowledges and how they do this are vitally important to



building the right mindset in their subordinates and therefore in driving performance. There is more about this elsewhere in this book but the essential thing here is to acknowledge effort rather than only achievement or ability. The director mentioned in Example 5.1 saw the manager two weeks later. He had had a real breakthrough with his member of staff and she acknowledged this: 'You really worked hard on preparing for that meeting and getting really clear about what you were going to say. And it took some courage to raise some tough questions with a member of your team who can be difficult at the best of times. Well done.' The result of this acknowledgement was to ensure the manager increased in confidence and retained a growth mindset – he continued to believe that he could solve most problems with hard work and focus.

### Enquiry

Leaders tend to use advocacy (arguing their case and explaining their own thinking) more than they use enquiry (asking and exploring the other person's thinking), but coaching skills can restore this balance and lead to some powerful results.

#### *Example 5.2*

An experienced retail manager was promoted to a corporate role. After a year in the job, she was struggling. The director in charge had offered lots of training and support but realized that the manager was not going to make it and was preparing to move into the formal disciplinary process which would probably end in dismissal. At the last minute, he decided to opt for a coaching approach, rather than telling off. Sticking with some open questions and probing what was the manager's real motivation in all this, he realized that she was in a job which played entirely to her weaknesses rather than her strengths. She was really good and motivated by working with others, supporting them and developing them. She was much weaker in the area of corporate policy and strategy where she often had to work alone and rarely saw the end results of her work. The director noticed the much higher energy when the manager spoke about working with others and invited her to re-live her best experiences, noting how she felt. This led to a greater level of self-insight by the manager and an acceptance that she should move out of that role. After some discussion, they reached an amicable arrangement for her to move sideways into a regional line management role where she is now one of their most successful people at that level. The director tells me she now has a really good person in the right job, playing to her strengths. And she has avoided all the negative emotion that surrounds formal disciplinary procedures and the consequent poisoning of the atmosphere for those who remain.

## Positive coaching and leadership development

Coaching is often used to support leaders attending a leadership development programme and it is an area in which my coaching panel often work. Having talked to them and to many other coaches and coachees involved in this kind of coaching, I have seen that there are a number of potential limitations – and some very useful learning for coach, coachee and the sponsoring organization.

### Potential limitations

- The organization drives the agenda too tightly and looks for conformance rather than development.
- The organization is too hands-off and the coaching is about whatever the coachee wants to cover, irrespective of organizational need.
- The coachee does not know what to focus on in the coaching.
- The coaching is disconnected from the development programme.
- There is no accountability on the part of the coachee for any change or development.
- Line managers are not involved or are even sceptical about the programme and the coaching.

### When coaching works best

- The coachee has some clear developmental goals for the programme and the coaching.
- The line manager is closely involved in setting these goals and supports the coachee in meeting them and in trying out new behaviour.
- The coachee is able to own these goals, and also work on other more personal goals.
- The line manager or organization holds the coachee accountable for demonstrating learning and progress.
- There is a clear expectation that learning and progress will be shared with peers within the modules.
- Coaching is not compulsory but actively encouraged.
- There is some introductory training for coachees on what coaching is.
- The coaches are familiar with the programme and empowered to require a degree of accountability on the part of the coachee for developing goals and meeting them.

## **Summary**

- Most people need someone to help them think. As people rise higher within an organization, they become distanced from feedback and thinking different to their own. Having a coach who is part of the hierarchy and who is brave and skilled enough to challenge and offer feedback can help overcome this.
- Senior leaders need to perform at high levels and, like high performers in sports, the arts and elsewhere, they need a person to help them get even better at what they already do well.
- Coaching leaders may relate to business issues but very often the key is about leading or managing themselves.
- Above all, coaching for leaders is about them making some kind of change to respond more effectively to the current challenge they face.
- Leaders can learn coaching skills and attitudes and this can be immensely powerful.
- By using coaching, rather than instructing or abandoning them, a leader can develop his or her people better and more quickly.
- Coaching is therefore a powerful business proposition and needs to be more widely adopted.
- The best leaders are on both the giving and receiving ends of coaching.
- Coaching can be an excellent support for focussed learning on leadership development programmes.

## 6 Goal Power

### Giving your Coaching a Good Kick-off

#### Introduction

This chapter will examine why goals are important in coaching and how to help coachees set really useful goals that will truly bring out their best performance.

I have the privilege of supervising many people working towards professional qualifications in coaching and mentoring. As part of this, I have observed or listened to thousands of hours of their coaching in order to provide feedback and learning for them.

One of the areas in which they often struggle is in keeping the coaching conversation *focussed*, ensuring that it has a sense of direction and purpose for the coachee. Because they struggle, these coaches often question the usefulness of their coaching. In my experience, when they feel this way, they are usually right, something could be better. Most frequently what could make the most difference is to help the coachee develop much clearer more motivating goals *for themselves*.

My interviews with experienced coaches confirm this. They say consistently that they also encounter a sense of dissatisfaction at times and this is sometimes but not always shared by the coachee. This lack of a clear focus and purpose to the conversation is therefore, I think, something all coaches face at least some of the time. Again, when you track it back, the lack of focus has frequently arisen because the goal has not been set clearly. So I am more than ever convinced that goals are essential for coaching and that a coaching session without a goal is either unproductive or far less productive than it could be.

#### Goal setting

Goal setting has been the subject of much research over the past 40 years. As long ago as 1968, Edwin Locke suggested that employees were motivated by clear goals and appropriate feedback and that working toward a goal provided a major source of motivation to actually reach the goal, which, in turn, improved performance. Unlike many theories of motivation and

development, goal theory has worn well and continues to underpin much managerial practice. Jenny Rogers (2008) shows how goal setting is particularly important in coaching.

Recent research in the positive psychology school (for example, Kombarakaran et al. 2008) has shown that goal setting is an intrinsic part of successful coaching. Others (e.g. Green et al. 2006) have also shown that setting goals in a coaching context increases hope and therefore the belief that improved performance can be achieved. Sheldon and Krieger (2007) have shown that, when properly constructed, goals can be immensely powerful in building confidence, well-being and improved performance. So there is significant evidence that goals provide focus, energy and motivation and that they help to actually achieve things. This is true for management and leadership development and so too for coaching.

## **From challenges to goals**

Some writers and practitioners of coaching challenge the view that coaching sessions should have goals. Some of this comes from therapeutic traditions where goals were not originally set – psychoanalysis, family therapy and Gestalt, for example. For many of them, just setting a goal feels far too structured based on their experience of working in the here and now. Specifically, they would argue that the coachee, when asked ‘What is your goal?’ cannot say or has only a vague idea, or can only really articulate a problem or issue they have. This concern is an obvious one and all coaches face it some of the time. It happens when the coachee has some reservations or misunderstandings about the coaching process, when contracting has not been done clearly enough or when the coachee faces a particularly complex challenge and has not yet thought through what they want.

Nonetheless, the fact that a coachee presents as not having a clear goal does not mean that the coach can dispense with the need for one. I have listened to many coaches do just that – and almost inevitably one or more of the following problems ensue:

- the conversation begins to ramble;
- there is far too long taken on recounting issues, problems and detail;
- the coach’s questions become disconnected – the flow is lost;
- the coach begins to try to analyse the situation and ask questions arising from their own thoughts and ideas;
- the coach begins to worry about their own performance: and whether they are delivering value to their client;
- there is a rush to ‘what can you do?’ and next steps;
- the coach starts to lead and offer their own ideas.

Another argument against rigorous goal-setting is that clients almost always express great satisfaction with the coaching they get, even when there has not been a clear goal set. So why should a goal be so important? It is certainly true that in my many years of coaching and coach tutoring, I have hardly ever heard a client say that a session was not of value – even when I have heard the session recorded and there has been demonstrably no progress at all. But this kind of immediate feedback is highly unreliable. The coachee is not an expert on coaching, and is therefore unaware of what really good coaching could be. During the coaching they are in their own world of concerns, thoughts and feelings and so are not in any case really observing the coach. Again, having two hours of someone's undivided attention can be a marvellous and unusual experience, and so just having the experience can feel good.

Research on psychotherapy (Elkins 2007), which relates to coaching too, has in fact suggested that the approach taken – which tradition the therapist belongs to – makes no difference to the outcomes. What makes the difference are factors such as the relationship between therapist and client, the experience of the therapist and the attitude of the client. This would suggest that goal setting is fine but not essential.

Clearly, the nature of the relationship built between coach and coachee and the mindset brought by the coachee are major factors and any good coach will work to make these as positive as possible. However, much of the research quoted by Elkins comes from before the time of positive psychology and before related but powerful areas of research like cognitive neuropsychology. This more recent research has taken a more forensic approach to issues such as goal-setting in a way that had not really been done before. So there is more and more to say as new research unpicks precisely what a goal really is, what makes a good goal and what effect it has. I present the principal findings below as applied specifically to coaching.

My own experience is that when those coaches mentioned above, who struggle with focus and purpose, begin to set goals more carefully at or near the start of a session, then their clients get so much more from their investment of time and money. The coaching is transformed.

## Getting the best goals – SMART is not enough

So goals are important, but not just any goals. Many clients consider that any goal to do with achievement is adequate. Many readers will be very familiar with the SMART acronym for goals setting – **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**esources- and **T**ime-bounded. SMART was the mantra for performance management for many years. But let us take a goal like: 'To identify 10 per cent cost savings for the next financial year by 30 November'. Ostensibly, this goal meets all the criteria for SMART. But it is hardly surprising

that people are not really turned on by this kind of goal. At a very simple level, if you are not interested, you are unlikely to apply much effort, however SMART your goal is. So SMART is a start but it is not enough.

### Three components of goals

Recent research in positive psychology has unpicked in more detail exactly what makes a goal more motivating and therefore what makes it more likely to lead to enhanced well-being and performance. In order for goals to be useful for coaching, coach and coachee need to address three key areas:

- 1 *The value of the goal:* goals need to be of value to the coachee. This means that the goal needs to be perceived by the coachee as relevant, important and of some benefit to themselves or to something they believe in. Goals like the cost-saving one above are unlikely to tick these boxes. So as a coach, you may need to work with clients to help them identify a goal which is going to work for them. Sometimes, this can be achieved by finding the right 'angle' on the subject, for example, by working on a form of words which represents more value for them. At other times, you may need to help the client tune in to a goal in a new way – perhaps finding the element within it that they can fully own and take forward. It is helpful to remember that an imposed goal just for its own sake is unlikely to work well as a coaching goal. You can spot when this is the case primarily through how the coachee talks about it. If their energy is low, that is a good prompt to challenge and clarify.
- 2 *The coachee's expectations of success.* While research (for example, Locke 1968) has shown consistently that motivating goals need to be challenging, the coachee has still got to believe that they are able to achieve them, albeit with some degree of challenge. You are likely to meet these unbelievers from time to time. Often the real question for a coachee is not 'How can I achieve this goals?' but rather 'How come I let myself agree to this goal?' Until that question is resolved, any discussion about the presented goal is pointless.
- 3 *The mechanisms to achieve the goal:* The coachee needs to identify strategies and pathways towards success which they believe will work. These in themselves are not goal setting but are part of the picture both coach and coachee need to have in order to use goals effectively. Recent research on leadership (Bull 2009) has highlighted that vision and purpose are fundamental but are of little use without the strategic thinking needed to work out how to achieve them. Identifying the mechanisms to be used to achieve the desired goals is then the work of the ensuing coaching session.

## Motivating goals

A goal needs to be motivating and therefore to be of value to the client. This means that it needs to engage the coachee's energy and commitment to working towards the goal. The 'Management by Objectives' (MBO) approach led by Peter Drucker in the 1970s directed attention to the value of goals and led to much more focus on them by organizations and individuals. While this did lead to people asking 'What are we trying to achieve here?' (sometimes for the first time), MBO has often become the excuse for meaningless, but apparently measurable targets which produce alienation rather than energy. Here's a short part of a session I heard on one recording:

### *Example 6.1*

*Coach:* OK, so what would you like to focus on today?

*Coachee:* Well, I've been given a target of 10 per cent cost reductions for the next financial year and I have to present my plan to the board in two weeks time, so I'd like to think about how I do that.

*Coach:* Good, so our goal today is to look at how you make those 10 per cent cost reductions?

*Coachee:* Yes.

It didn't exactly set the client's world alight did it? There are two problems at least with this as a goal:

- 1 It is imposed by a boss or the organization and has been re-played 'as is' as the coachee's goal.
- 2 While achieving the goal clearly meets the organization's needs, it does not, thus far, appear to address those of the coachee.

It is important for a coach to notice this kind of goal statement and to realize that this is not enough to bring about real development for the coachee. Specifically the coach needs to be able to distinguish internal from external purpose and to notice the level of ownership for embarking on the pathways towards the goal.

Kennon Sheldon and others have written extensively of goals. Sheldon (2004) distinguishes between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* goals. An internally validated or 'intrinsic' goal offers a payback or reward which comes from within – it might be the warm glow or feeling of satisfaction gained by doing something or achieving something, it may be a feeling you have done your very best. An extrinsic goal comes from outside – it is externally validated, for example, winning a prize depends on external parties condoning or rewarding



**Table 6.1** Extrinsic and intrinsic goals

<i>Extrinsic</i>	<i>Intrinsic</i>
To win a prize	To give my best performance ever
To earn more money	To be able to fulfil my potential
To be respected for my good work	To contribute to eradicating poverty

in some way. So where is success or achievement located? In other words, does the coachee’s measure of success depend on someone or something outside of themselves or is it to be found within? While external factors cannot be ignored, an important research finding is that internal or intrinsic goals are more powerful and get better results than external ones. Table 6.1 shows how a goal can be re-stated to move it from extrinsic to intrinsic. This aspect has therefore been dubbed the ‘What’ of goal setting.

The second problem in the above example is that the goal is imposed and not autonomous or owned by the coachee. Sheldon has shown that imposed goals are significantly less effective than autonomously created ones. This is sometimes dubbed the ‘Why?’ of the goal. So a sense of autonomy is essential to high goal achievement. And although bosses and employers need to be able to focus the work of their staff, they will do this more effectively if they give them some freedom to develop their own goals, perhaps within a given framework. It is immediately visible how so many organizations struggle to achieve results because they constantly impose and never talk. Table 6.2 shows some examples of imposed and autonomous goals.

**Table 6.2** Imposed and autonomous goals

<i>Imposed</i>	<i>Autonomous</i>
Because I’m told to	Because I want to
Because the Board will approve	Because this firm needs to do well
Will meet government targets	Will improve patient care

Vansteenkiste et al. (2006) have shown that just articulating goals in intrinsic and autonomous language can improve actual task performance. So the challenge for the coach in the case cited above, as it is for any coach, is to work to achieve a goal that would be more motivating for the coachee, by getting the coachee to express it in intrinsic and autonomous language.

## The stages goal setting might pass through

Setting good quality goals is not always quick or simple – although clients do learn how to do them with time. Using this framework, a coach might help their client move through a number of stages in working towards a more motivating goal. Figure 6.1 gives an example of how a goal can move to become more motivating.

<b>Boss says deliver by 1st November</b>	<b>Deliver by 1st November to look good in front of boss and Board</b>	<b>Deliver on time and well enough to enable firm to do a better job</b>	<b>Deliver on time and well enough to feel competent and develop new skills</b>
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**Figure 6.1** Move from extrinsic imposed to intrinsic autonomous goal

In this case the coachee has moved from resigned acceptance, gradually acquiring more personal ownership of the stated goal and then connecting it to their own values. Bringing in the element of doing the job well starts to create some autonomy for the coachee. The earlier conversation might therefore run something like this:

### Example 6.2

- Coach:** OK, so what would you like to focus on today?
- Coachee:** Well, I've been given a target of 10 per cent cost reductions for the next financial year and I have to present my plan to the board in two weeks time, so I'd like to think about how I do that.
- Coach:** OK. So the firm has asked you to present that plan. What's in it for you?
- Coachee:** I think that it will go down well if I make a good presentation and don't whinge. It's just that it's an awful job to have to do.
- Coach:** As a minimum it will go down well. You say it's awful, but what part of this *can* you agree with?
- Coachee:** I can see that it's going to help the firm to survive a difficult year.
- Coach:** And what other benefits will that bring?
- Coachee:** Well, I'm more likely to be in a job I really do like and the firm will still play its role in the community where I grew up.
- Coach:** So what is important to you is that you continue doing a job you really like and the firm continues to play its part locally?
- Coachee:** Yes.

The greater motivational force achieved this time is obvious. The coach is helping the coachee:

- 1 Identify reasons why the apparently negative requirement could have a good side to it.
- 2 Uncover benefits to themselves in seeing this through.
- 3 Tapping into the coachee's broader values which connect to the goal.

## Concordant goals

An important theme in positive psychology is *self-concordance*. Self-concordance means asking the question 'Is this really me?' It means checking whether a given course of action is in line with an individual's needs and their sense of who they are. Behaving in self-concordant ways is linked with greater well-being and improved performance.

### *Example 6.3*

When I was a student, I discovered I was able to learn and speak foreign languages well. I qualified as a translator as it seemed the right thing to do and got a job with a company in a small translation unit. After a while, I began to feel more and more bored and detached from the work. I had never heard of coaching and knew little of personality types or psychology at the time. A pity, in retrospect. I sat in an office translating scientific and legal documents from other languages into English – I was good at it and I had all the qualifications. But the only times I came alive were when a French lorry driver came onto our site and I had to look after him for an hour and direct him back to the motorway. What I discovered was that translation was a great thing to do, but it was not 'me'. The thing that got my blood flowing was interaction with people. Speaking rather than writing language was a way to do that. After 3 years, I took a bold step. I resigned from my secure, well-paid job and got a job in Kenya teaching English. It felt like a huge step at the time, but it was like discovering myself for the first time.

In this case, my job as a translator was concordant with my skills and my belief at the time about what I should be doing. However, I found that the teaching role agreed with my more fundamental values and beliefs. I felt that I was doing a job that I believed in and which was useful to people and that in some way helped society. I felt stimulated and challenged by the constant contact with many people. I absolutely agree that a professional translator might experience some of the same, particularly about contributing to society. But what was key for me was to connect to my personality and values in a new and more fulfilling way. Consequently, too, I put a lot more effort into that work.

Part of our role as a coach is to help our clients achieve greater self-concordance in what they prioritize and do. This will help them to be both happier and more effective. The link to goals is therefore very clear, because the more self-concordant a goal is, the more a person feels that the goal is something they believe in and 'is' them, the greater the effort the person will put into achieving the goal and therefore the greater the likelihood of success.

Take, for example, the issue of change, which is one of the most common topics for a coaching conversation. Handling change can be problematic at the best of times but two very common questions I face are:

- 1 How can I manage change I do not agree with?
- 2 What shall I do next in my life?

The issue of self-concordance is central to finding a way forward in either case. Managing imposed change is a tough call. I have seen many people duck the issue and, as it were, suspend their own views. And I have seen others who have wrestled with it and fought to retain and honour their own values despite everything. For the life-change client, again the more the coach can help them to be in touch with what really makes them tick, the better the result. To get through the presenting fog of change and confusion to some real concordance can take time, skill and courage on the part of the coach. I cover these two areas and some other typical challenges below.

#### *Example 6.4*

A senior IT manager told me that he wanted to develop his leadership skills, in particular, his strategic thinking and his wider impact within the organization. In outlining this, however, he used some very condemnatory language about the people who often got to the top. He referred to them as the 'mouths' and added that the 'doers' like him were the ones who delivered the business but often did not say things in the right way, or told the truth and so were overlooked for promotion. I sensed that he was articulating a goal for himself, but that it was conflicting with what he believed about himself and others. Intellectually the goals stood up, but there was no passion or 'self' in there. So I challenged him quite hard about this. 'How much is that really you?' He thought hard about this and realized that he had fallen into an either/or trap. Either you were good at the job – or you got promotion. This led on to a very fruitful conversation in which he examined in more depth what he really wanted from work and also how come he felt so negatively about certain other people who he believed to be more successful in their careers than he was. After that he was able to find a way forward which allowed him to perform well in his own terms, but to enable others to see that and value what he did.

## 88 GOAL POWER

A lack of self-concordance is often identified by a coachee for themselves. At other times, the coach may notice it or suspect it. In either case, there are broadly three ways to go:

- 1 Help the coachee to work with the goal to alter it or to find self-concordant elements to it which can become their focus.
- 2 Help the coachee examine how their own beliefs about themselves might need to change in order to achieve greater concordance with the goal or sometimes to create different goals.
- 3 Help the coachee find ways to avoid having to work on the goal (including, perhaps, finding other work).

However, there is a danger in what I have said that the coach assumes that all goals need to touch a higher purpose to be valid. But this would be for the coach to take over the agenda from the coachee. Kennon Sheldon (2004) has studied concordance and notes that, despite the evidence, people still pursue goals which are externally imposed or bring only extrinsic rewards. And at times, this is valid because some other need or aspiration is served by doing them.

### *Example 6.5*

I have a client who works very hard in a job he dislikes. What he values is the pay, the security and the pension. The danger for me as a coach is that I try to encourage him to change to something more personally owned. But he has deeper reasons for doing this job: his core identity is as a father and family man. The job is near home and allows him to get away on time most days. It also give him a good holiday allowance. I have to be careful that my own values – even my love of good quality research findings – do not get in his way. If he were to move, it could undermine what he holds to be most important. For example, putting his own professional interest and fulfilment before his role as a father would be un-concordant for him. Certainly it might be worth looking at how he might find more satisfaction while retaining his identity – but that was not his agenda. It could easily have been mine though.

For this client, then, it is important to work to external goals as doing so helps him to concord with something fundamental to his self-view. In this sense, his goals are in fact concordant despite the fact that they are neither chosen nor intrinsic.

## Specific examples

### Working with goals which are imposed from outside

We need to be realistic, many of our coachees' goals are externally imposed or at least originate as such. The question a coach has to answer is 'Do we leave it here, or do we do something more?'

Let me use a related example. I often think that one of the challenges of leadership is to be an interpreter: to work with the language of boards, government departments, politicians, and translate this into language and meaning for oneself and others who are charged with delivery.

As a school governor and parent, I have an interest in these matters. Schools in the UK get inundated with national and local government diktats, objectives and initiatives. Often they become nominalizations – words or buzz phrases with no tangible meaning – because the job of digesting and interpreting has not been done. What does 'Every child matters' actually mean? Often staff and governors have heard the words and use them to each other. But no-one really has a sense of their practical meaning. Hospitals face similar challenges. A recent UK initiative was called 'Essence of care' – I worked as a coach or consultant in several hospitals at the time but never found a person able to explain what it meant on a ward.

The danger for the chief executive, head teacher or chair is that they just pass on these buzz phrases. Apparently more tangible goals like 'X per cent grades A–C' or 'Y minutes response time in Z per cent of emergencies' are also often just passed on with no digestion or interpretation. This leads first to confusion and a sense of helplessness, then dependency, and then usually to a resort to authoritarian leadership styles because nothing seems to be working.

So as a coach, we will come across coachees living with this kind of 'hand me down' goal. Our task is to help the digestion and interpretation process and to achieve real meaning where there has been none. To re-phrase this, we need to help our coachees move from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. Or at least to a position which satisfies their relevant needs.

### The 'Whither Me?' client

Some clients arrive with very big questions like 'Where shall I go with the rest of my life?' The coach therefore needs some ways of helping the client to focus down to some more manageable goals. A very useful technique to use here is the 'At my best' technique (see Chapter 1). Essentially what the coach is doing is to ask the client to talk about times when they were at their best

and in the ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Then, from these stories, the client draws out perhaps four or six key elements which made them special and which are most important to them. These are then used to help assess various choices or give a guide to the kinds of future areas to explore.

Another very useful approach here is to use a strengths inventory such as Realise 2 (see Chapter 1) and to apply the findings to the current challenge.

I have seen many clients benefit from either or both of these techniques. Using them together is extremely powerful and can give the client a lot of new data about themselves and the choices they have.

### Handling the ‘referred’ coachee

Another good example of how goals need to be worked on is when the coach receives a referral from, for example, an HR Director: ‘John could do with some coaching on ...’. On contacting John, I am met with a tirade against ‘this organization’ and the suggestion that it is everyone else who needs to be here, not him. Even if the ‘coachee’ accepts that they need to please HR or a director or line manager, this is not enough. The coach needs to reassure them that the coaching will not proceed without a goal, and then to work with them to seek out a goal that they do believe in and do want to take forward themselves.

#### *Example 6.6*

A senior finance manager was referred to me by the HR director of a high street bank. When I spoke to the person, let’s call her Fiona, she railed against the organization and complained about how badly she was treated and how no one understood her job and her high standards. I made it clear that coaching is about change and that any coachee has to want something to change or be different – otherwise there can be no coaching. She was reassured by this and we then talked through what coaching actually is. Once she had calmed down, Fiona acknowledged several areas of her work that she would like to work on in coaching. We arranged a meeting with her boss who, for the first time properly, explained that she was unhappy about the way Fiona dealt with Board members when they wanted information or to discuss financial matters. This had led to a number of negative comments to the Chief Executive and needed to be sorted out. Fiona, who believes in doing a highly professional job, realized from this conversation that this also meant dealing skilfully with all kinds of people, not just Board members. As a result she was able to develop some very powerful goals for herself which she worked on in her coaching.

So with referred clients, a three-way contract may be needed and some persistence too in working out a truly usable goal.

### Unpicking self-impositions

Sometimes a coachee comes to us with a ‘must do’ goal but as they begin to speak, the coach realizes that this is more about an internal imposition or belief than an external one. Often it is nonetheless expressed as an introjected command. Here are typical examples which I have come across:

- I really should lose some weight.
- I *have* to pass my medical exams.
- I must get more organized.

Again these goals are not highly motivating in themselves because there is not real ownership of them – they are probably learned from somewhere (‘fat is bad’) or go back to parental pressure (‘both my parents are doctors’) but have not really been internalized. The word often used for this kind of goal is ‘introjected’. In Gestalt psychology, introjections are ideas and beliefs that we swallow whole without processing or digesting rather as some people with eating disorders swallow their food whole. The coach in this case needs to probe beyond the raw stated belief and help the coachee build some personal ownership. So a similar approach needs to be used in these cases to make the goal more valuable and more energizing.

#### *Example 6.7*

*Coachee:* I really should lose some weight.

*Coach:* Who says? You don’t sound very keen.

*Coachee:* No, well, I’ve been meaning to do something about this for five or six years.

*Coach:* What would losing weight do for you?

*Coachee:* Well, I wouldn’t wheeze as much going upstairs.

*Coach:* And if you didn’t wheeze what would you do?

*Coachee:* ‘I would breathe normally and deeply. And I would feel better about myself and I would look better because I could wear the right size trousers.

*Coach:* What would the right size be?

*Coachee:* About 34 waist.

*Coach:* OK, so you’d like to work on how you can achieve a size 34 in trousers, breathe normally and deeply as you walk upstairs and look and feel good?

*Coachee:* Yes, that sounds much more exciting.



## **Working with ‘analysers’: moving from analysis to goal**

I work frequently with doctors, HR managers, and line managers who want to develop coaching skills. One of the issues they face is that their previous training has taught them to be analytical and investigate why a particular problem or issue has arisen. So when their coachee states an issue, they will tend to ask questions like: ‘How long has this been going on?’, ‘What caused this?’ or ‘Why has this happened?’

When probed, the trainee coaches find it hard to explain the purpose of these questions. Sometimes they just want some more information about the background to the issue, so the conversation moves to their agenda not their client’s. Sometimes they think that if they can understand the cause, they can prescribe or assist in finding a solution. This tends to lead to a futile analysis of the issue without really pinning down a cause. Indeed, there is often not a simple single cause. The outcome is that the coachee is no further ahead but is even more conscious of what a difficult problem they face and how difficult it is to ‘solve’. Asking ‘why?’ tends to lead to more explanation or justification, even defensiveness.

Having listened to many hours of recorded coaching sessions, I have seen that the effect of this traditional problem-solving questioning is that after half an hour, the conversation falls into all the traps mentioned earlier on. In this way, the thinking process which is so valuable is short-circuited and the coachee is leapfrogged from problem analysis to action, having moved nowhere in between.

## **Working with insecurity and confusion**

At times, coachees come to a session without a clear goal, even without a general sense of what they want to work on. I have found that a certain number of clients come along with an extended history of focussing on what they do not want – inter-locking problems, other people’s behaviour, their own inadequacies ... So just to answer the question ‘What do you want?’ early on in the coaching is impossible.

I have also worked with career coaches and advisers and they tell me that when working with students and school-leavers, it is often hard to get them to set a goal. These kinds of clients are often used to a formal learning environment in which they are told what to do and what to learn. So the experience of being asked to set a goal on their own can be scary.

Occasionally therefore, the goal for a coaching session becomes ‘What is my goal?’ And for some people this is an important first step to independence and self-management. The coach needs to be able to encourage without

taking away ownership and to support without rescuing. In particular, the coach needs to be able to remain silent while the coachee grapples with new questions and new ideas. At times it can also be helpful for the coach to offer the coachee a mini-tutorial in what goals are and why they are important in coaching.

Another useful starting point where the coachee is not specific about what they want is to use a psychometric questionnaire, such as a strengths inventory or an activity such as the 'Balance Wheel' where the client is invited to plot the different areas of their life as segments of a circle and then rate them each on a scale of 1–10 in terms of how satisfied they currently are. A wheel like this can provide starter thoughts and themes which can be developed into goals.

#### *Example 6.8*

I coached a Tarzan recently. He was great fun and enormously energetic. His mind flew along at jet speed, leaping from one topic to another, like Tarzan leaping from tree to tree. This was really tricky at first. On the one hand, he was a highly motivated client who really wanted to change and grow. So I did not want to get in the way of his energy and enthusiasm or 'dampen him down'. On the other hand, I could see that we were in danger of never going anywhere and finishing with a jumble of unrelated, incomplete ideas flying round in our heads as we left. I had to remember first that he was not me and that even if I was confused, maybe he was not. But I did interrupt him. And, trying to match some of his energy and pace, I invited him to notice how he was talking and to consider how useful that way of proceeding was for him. We contracted for me to interrupt and challenge him openly about this style and whenever I did, he responded with the same energy and enthusiasm. I talked explicitly about goals and why they were important. He accepted this and each session thereafter, he came along with a set of pretty good goals already formulated. Thereafter, I let him do the work and found myself being like the sailor – hand on the tiller, steering, but letting the boat, the wind and waves do the work.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have looked at the importance of goals in coaching. The importance of goals for learning and development has been established over some 40 years and continues to be the focus of academic thought and research.

More recent research, particularly within positive psychology, has developed the theme of goals and unpicked exactly what makes a goal powerful.

These findings are of great importance to coaches and coachees in helping them to set the kinds of goals which generate change and drive performance.

For many of us, it confirms things we have learned from practice. But I still find it useful at times to go back to the beginning and 're-learn' something rather than merely try to map new information onto what I have already learnt. I recommend this practice to experienced coaches as well as trainees because it is easy to become complacent and complacency undermines a coach's professionalism.

# **7 The Wider Implications of Positive Psychology in Coaching**

## **Introduction**

This book is about how positive psychology and other areas are important for individuals at work and that they fundamentally offer resources to the contemporary coach. I have shown how positive psychology underpins and provides support for many existing practices within coaching and can enhance them, by goal setting, for example, in Chapter 6. The strengths approach (Chapter 1), which is at the leading edge of positive psychology, offers innovative ways to help people be more truly themselves as well as to do a better job. At the same time much of positive psychology seeks to identify more widely how people can be at their best, experiencing greater happiness and well-being (Diener and Biswas-Diener 2008). One of the key ingredients of well-being is active and warm social relationships. Given this, the messages of positive psychology have important implications not only for individuals but also for people collectively whether in work teams, departments, divisions or whole organizations.

## **A coaching culture**

Many organizations have seen the benefits coaching can bring when it is available to and practised by leaders at all levels. As a result, they have begun to consider the idea of a 'coaching culture' and Clutterbuck and Megginson (2006) define the coaching culture as existing where coaching is the principal way of managing. A number of organizations claim to aspire to this but Megginson and Clutterbuck found it hard to identify organizations that actually had such a culture. Nonetheless, a lot of organizational training managers and internal 'OD' practitioners continue to talk about creating a coaching culture without really knowing what they mean. For example, they do not (or cannot) clearly define what they mean by the term 'coaching culture', they confuse doing coaching with being coached or they do not have the senior management backing which would be essential for any such cultural change to happen.

A recent tender advertising for coaching skills development within a large UK public sector organization sought to put a number of middle to senior

managers through a single day of coaching skills training and thus, allegedly, to create a coaching culture. In fact, all this amounted to was a sure-fire way to achieve nothing at all for a modest investment. I'm sure these people meant well and had a tight budget. But it underlines the fact that many organizations hide behind clichés or broad-brush aspirational statements about culture without thinking things through.

## What is culture?

The kind of thinking suggested by that advertisement is already the product of an organizational culture and it is in fact paradoxically the block to what it claims to seek. A national or ethnic culture is a set of common beliefs and practices. The beliefs concern the nature of life and how people should live together. The practices include rituals and other well-established behaviours.

In organizational contexts, the general consensus on what culture means is 'how we do things around here'. While this is a useful shorthand description, it does not address the complexity of culture and does not really help in identifying ways to change that culture. There are many theories and models of organizational culture and I have selected two which I have found to be useful pieces of knowledge for my coaching work.

In their book, *Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?*, Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones (2006) use a traditional sociological model to describe organizational cultures. They identify two dimensions to culture: *sociability* and *solidarity*, and both these dimensions can be positive or negative.

- 1 Solidarity is 'task-focussed collaboration between individuals and groups'. It stems from perceived shared interest and can lead to very focussed work. Positive solidarity gives focus and gets the job done efficiently and effectively. Negative solidarity is intolerant of dissent and can lead to the efficient delivery of the wrong things. It can also emerge in internal competition between individuals and functions.
- 2 Sociability is about the warmth of relationships between people. Ideas and values tend to be shared and relationships are valued for their own sake. High levels of mutual help are common. Positive sociability is people working hard for one another. Negative sociability is typified by covering up for poor performance and the formation of cliques.

There are two key ways in which this analysis relates to coaching leaders. First, these leaders are part of a culture and are therefore influenced by it. I have worked with many leaders who work in high negative solidarity organizations with low sociability. This can be a very demotivating environment to work in

and the coachee often needs help to access their own resilience in order to continue performing.

Second, these leaders also create the culture, especially for the people in their departments or divisions. The coach can help them to consider how their behaviour – what they do or do not do – may affect others around them and therefore either be supporting or obstructing a culture of high performance.

My friend and colleague, Mike Fitzpatrick tells me of a CEO he coached who realized she had inherited a culture that was low in both sociability and solidarity. She needed people to talk to each other more – to cut across their business silos and to deliver better and more flexible performance, and also to support junior staff and trainees. She came up with the idea of introducing a staff restaurant for the first time and pushed this through, against some opposition. The result has been that managers there now meet over lunch and talk together. Relationships have improved dramatically and so has inter-departmental collaboration.

Another useful model, the ‘culture web’ was developed by Johnson and Scholes (2006). In this model, the organization’s culture is shown as an interlinking set of factors which go to make up the totality of the culture. These are:

- *Stories*: The events that are talked about and how things are related.
- *Symbols*: How an organization represents itself visually through logos, websites, etc.
- *Power structures*: How and where real power is held and wielded.
- *Organizational structures*: How the formal organization holds itself together.
- *Control systems*: How control is enforced, for example, financially.
- *Rituals and routines*: The day-to-day ways of going about things.

Together these make what Johnson and Scholes call the organization’s ‘Paradigm’ or its collective mindset.

This model offers a framework for the coach to help a coachee in identifying where they may be supporting or blocking the kind of culture they want to put in place. One client I worked with had put in place excellent routines and structures to support the work and to support individuals too. But the staff there told me that they would really love a ‘Good morning’ sometimes. What they were lacking was the human face and simple acknowledgement of their existence. From the positive psychology perspective, the simple fact of greeting people can be seen as just one way in which to build a more positive culture. The impact of simple greetings and acknowledgement is both positive and motivating. It creates a series of short, positive emotional experiences and, as I have outlined elsewhere, researchers such as Barbara Fredrickson

show that a stronger experience of positive emotion (see Chapter 9) at work can ultimately improve performance. Not only does this cost nothing, it is easy to learn and to practise.

A challenge I have faced in coaching is to help clients understand that their behaviour is never neutral. For the organized manager mentioned above, their lack of greeting to staff was not at all neutral – it had a significantly negative effect which held back the potential for growth that the excellent routine systems and structures could have supported. So a coaching client's behaviour – or lack of it – can be a significant symbol and can offer rituals which can support a positive, performance-focussed culture.

The Johnson and Scholes culture model shows overlapping circles because the elements of culture are interconnected. It is common for coachees to wish to talk about reorganization in their coaching sessions and these include restructuring. There is a danger here that restructuring is seen merely as a functional set of decisions based on cost or operational effectiveness, although these are indeed important. However, the way restructuring is managed and communicated is equally important. Also what is signified by the new structure versus the old one is vital to how successfully the transition works. A structure is never just a structure, it reflects corporate purpose and intention and contributes to the beliefs and assumptions people hold in relation to their jobs and the whole organization.

I know of countless restructuring exercises which have been badly thought through or cobbled together because there was not the will to do it properly, the change was really aimed at solving another problem, such as moving a difficult poor performer from a key role, or there was a lack of leadership courage to risk a level of unpopularity.

I have, for example, met several organizations who have reorganized to allow them to 'make redundant' an ineffective director. This has led to staff in one function ridiculously reporting in to someone with no knowledge of their area: so HR people reporting to finance, facilities managers reporting to HR or someone else. It has led to people managing people who are paid more than them. And I have several times met people reporting to more than one manager and living in a state of permanent confusion and chaos. In theory, all these scenarios could be made to work. The problem was in each case that a botched restructuring had led to bad decision-making and half-finished arrangements.

In each case, the organization's culture of poor follow-through drove behaviour which negatively reinforced that same culture. Coaching can be an important support to leaders who are embarking upon change of any kind. It can provide a place to do some real thinking, and be challenged to think beyond simple quick fixes.

Culture, of course, is not only created and maintained by those at the top of an organization. Antonella Delle Fave from the University of Milan is a

leading researcher and exponent of positive psychology. She has shown (Delle Fave et al. 2011) how individual behaviour affects the community around a person and that therefore every person in some way is an ‘agent of cultural transmission and change’. Whereas much writing on culture suggests that it is very complex issue and how to influence it is not simple and reserved for those at the top, this research suggests that individuals can act effectively within their workplace. In terms of coaching, this connects well with the notion of being ‘at cause’ – seeing oneself as an actor in all situations, not just the victim of circumstance – and in our principle that our clients are resourceful people. More specifically, the coach can help a client to see more broadly their potential to influence their surroundings either through intentional action or at times through choosing inaction.

#### *Example 7.1*

One of my coaching panel was working with the director of a publishing company that had recently identified its company values, including ‘valuing people’ and ‘inclusivity’. The company won a well-respected industry award and invited some guests along to celebrate. At the celebration, the Chief Executive addressed the guests, telling them what a good job the company had done and how pleased he was with the award. At no point did he acknowledge the hard work and loyalty of the various in-house teams – who were also present. The coach heard some pretty strong mumblings about ‘typical’ and ‘more of the same’. At his next meeting with the director, he offered a challenge about the mismatch of the espoused values and the behaviour. He invited the director to consider the impact of that ‘celebration’ on the staff. It was an important moment of learning for the director – and, to be fair to him, he acknowledged that impact and began to consider how else those values could be lived out by him and his colleagues.

It is important therefore for a coach to have some understanding of organizational culture and the role of leadership in creating, maintaining or changing it. My coaching panel tell me that they quite often meet clients who take a very transactional, low-level view of their own presence and influence within their organization or sphere of work. These clients are often senior managers. The negative impact they have on their organizational systems can be immediately obvious to the coach – but not always to them. The typical avenues for the positive coach can include:

- challenging the narrowness or low level of goals being set;
- inviting the client to consider the wider implications of their actions;
- asking how non-action might affect other stakeholders.



## Capital: investing in people and the organization

How would it be if the leaders and managers I have mentioned saw their behaviour and their decisions as serious investments in the future of their organizations? That a serious way to invest in economic and business success was to invest in key drivers of success: in the people 'capital' that drives financial capital?

Although this book is primarily about psychology, it is useful to understand that parallel positive ideas are also developing in the fields of economics, sociology and politics.

David Halpern (2005) and others have brought the concept of 'social capital' to public attention over the past two decades. Essentially the term refers to the value of social resources in a society (and therefore within an organization) which offer it the potential of development or improvement. Halpern suggests that social capital involves:

- 1 *Networks*: the extent to which connections between people are able to be made and work well – particularly between people, say, from different parts of the organization, who do not know each other well.
- 2 *Norms*: the behavioural rules, values and expectations which people apply collectively.
- 3 *Sanctions*: the way in which behaviour is regulated, sometimes formally but most often informally.

It is immediately clear that coaching can offer a significant impact in these areas. For example, many coaching conversations are about making connections. I have met many senior managers who hide their discomfort with networking and connecting externally by busying themselves with 'policy' or 'strategy' or in micro-managing others, often to the detriment of their own and their organization's performance. Jenny Rogers tells me of several very successful senior leaders who have worked on their networking skills in her coaching sessions. If they can make this shift, they can open up many channels of communication and make it 'OK' for others to do the same.

Again, coaching can enable a manager to review the norms which they have applied to their work and to consider how their own norms affect others around them. A typical coaching question here might be, 'And what is the likely impact of this on ...?'

In terms of sanctions, I have not coached many people around formulating a disciplinary procedure, but very frequently about how they handle a performance issue and how they can tackle poor performance or behaviour in a constructive way.

There is a strong argument that an organization that can open up channels for building relationships easily, can work to conscious purposeful norms

and can support high performance consistently would perform well. So coaching can support the development of positive social capital and therefore contribute to organizational success.

## Psychological capital

Jenny Rogers (2008) gives six principles of coaching. A fundamental principle for the coach to hold is that the client is a resourceful person and does not need fixing. It follows that the coach's role is to do the following:

- 1 Connect the client to that resourcefulness when they feel disconnected from it.
- 2 Keep the client in touch with that resourcefulness to help them think positively about the challenges they work on.
- 3 Strengthen their resourcefulness to enable independence and learning which they can apply in future.

I have argued throughout this book that the coach – whether an outsider or a line manager – can help their client be more resourceful by helping them to play to their strengths, helping them to experience more positive emotion and helping them to develop a growth mindset through which they believe in their own capacity to develop and overcome obstacles.

If we imagine for a moment that all or many people within an organization were helped in this way, we could immediately see how the culture would be impacted. Just taking the Johnson and Scholes model, most coaches have experience of their clients changing important cultural factors such as the stories they tell and how they tell them, the routines formal and informal, in which they engage and through which they engage with others, and how they adjust formal structures and power structures to deliver improved performance.

It follows from this that coaching has the potential to be a powerful force for cultural change or alignment within an organization. We can certainly think of collective resourcefulness as being a feature, if not a determinant, of an organization's culture. If culture is about our collective beliefs and behaviours, then it is very useful to consider how these can become more positive.

The research from positive psychology suggests that more positive beliefs and behaviours can contribute to positive organizational behaviour and performance. A coaching approach can therefore be considered to be an investment in 'the way we do things around here'. Just as an organization looks to build its financial capital by increasing its monetary value, so it can invest in its 'psychological capital', building the value of its psychological resources.

The concept of psychological capital has become important in the positive psychology world in recent years. The term is used specifically to describe the

value of psychological well-being in an organization or in society. Because it has been researched properly by psychologists such as Youssef and Luthans (2010), psychological capital has moved beyond being merely a 'good idea' to being a demonstrable and measurable aspect of organizational life which is important in building well-being and performance and which can be proactively managed.

Youssef and Luthans (2010) have shown that psychological capital consists principally of four factors:

- 1 *Efficacy (or self-efficacy)*: this is a person's belief about how well they can mobilize their resources to perform well. It is also described with expressions like confidence and believing in oneself. It is above all about beliefs a person holds about themselves. Coaching can provide powerful support for self-efficacy by enabling a client to uncover and shift limiting beliefs about themselves and by beginning to hold and act upon new ones.
- 2 *Hope*: Hope is defined as a 'sense of agency', that is having energy directed towards goals and believing one has the ways and means to achieve those goals. So being able to see the way ahead is crucial here. Coaching, unlike other interventions, does not leave a client with just a greater awareness of an issue, but helps them to move forward and identify actions to be taken. Thus energy is released and channelled towards goals. Very often, new pathways are opened up which are simpler and straighter than the client could have believed. Many of my clients who have faced redundancy or enforced early retirement or have had to deal with difficult bosses or problem staff, find quite straightforward and doable ways to address the issues they face.
- 3 *Optimism*: This is about two factors, first, positive expectations about the future and second, holding the most useful attributional styles when positive and negative experiences occur. In particular, useful attributions tend to include owning successes (rather than discounting them or attributing them to luck) or attributing failures to something temporary which can be rectified with the right approach. Coaching can help a person straighten out their expectations of the future, freeing them of interference and anxiety so that they can address challenges with their full resourcefulness marshalled. It can also help them to review current and recent events from a positive and resourceful perspective.
- 4 *Resilience*: This refers to the capacity to bounce back from disappointment and sometimes from positive events. Coaching can help a person talk out the issues they face in a way they often cannot do anywhere else, and to face up to difficulties, without denial, but identifying how to keep going. Coaching can help a person pick themselves up again and refocus on what they want rather than the immediate problem that has set them back. See also Chapter 3.

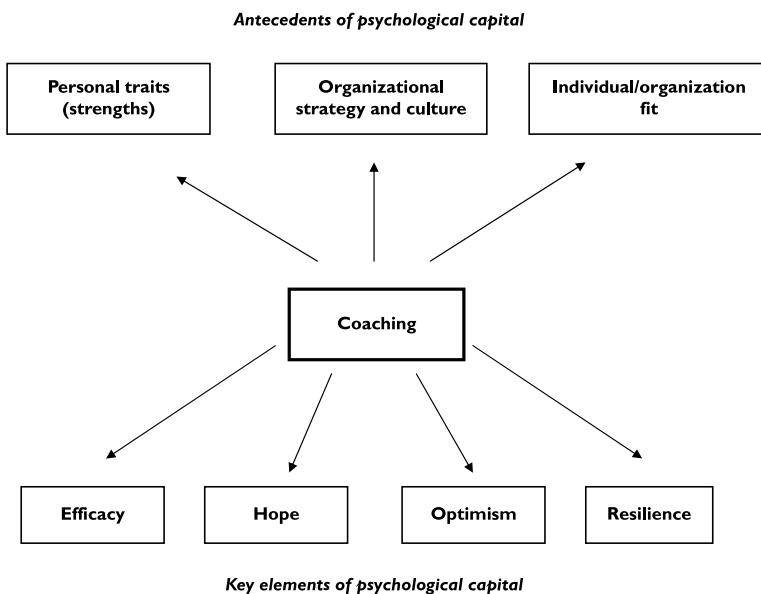
*Example 7.2*

A simple example of optimism is a client who felt they could never make an impact on the organization's senior management team because they had messed up their one earlier chance. By reviewing this experience, they were able to see how they could have handled it differently and to identify strategies to handle the next meeting differently.

At the same time, there are some factors which need to be present if these elements of psychological capital are to be developed. Youssef and Luthans refer to these as the 'antecedents' – the things that come before. So to build psychological capital, the organizations needs already to have:

- people with the right personal characteristics and strengths;
- a culture and strategies which support developing psychological capital;
- people who are in the right jobs and with the right values and beliefs.

It seems very clear to me that positive coaching can contribute to building both the antecedents and the key elements of psychological capital and that therefore it can be a powerful lever of cultural and performance change. These connections are shown in Figure 7.1. Coaching can strengthen both the antecedents and the key elements of psychological capital.



**Figure 7.1** Coaching and psychological capital

## Conclusion

Whereas the model proposed by Goffee and Jones (2006) is descriptive and suggests no one combination of sociability and solidarity is best, a report by the UK-based Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) found that certain approaches to culture were associated with better organizational performance as measured by organizational commitment, turnover, customer satisfaction and profitability. In particular, the report highlights the importance of organizations having strong shared cultures.

Therefore, it follows that putting coaching in place in a strategic, purposeful and organized way, is likely to strengthen the shared culture. Because it can assist the antecedents of psychological capital, for example, by facilitating a better person–job fit, it can help an organization ensure that most people are well fitted to their jobs. This directly affects satisfaction and performance. The wider implications are that successful coaching increases happiness and well-being across an organization and beyond.

## **8 Being a Positive Coach**

### **Introduction**

How can the coach give their best performance? That is the subject of this chapter. I asked the coaching supervisors on my panel what their supervisees typically struggle with in coaching. They talked about failing to ask good quality questions, not setting goals, not challenging, offering advice too freely. When we dug a bit deeper and considered ‘how come’ these trainees find these areas difficult, we came to the conclusion that it was not so much a lack of skill or knowledge about coaching and the coaching process, but rather because they were setting out with a frame of mind which did not support coaching. Often they were still wearing other hats they wear each day like ‘boss’, ‘doctor’, ‘expert’ and these got in the way of them using the skills they did have. In this chapter, I will consider how positive psychology can help us understand the best way, psychologically, to go into a coaching session and so get the best out of it for our client.

### **Having a strengths mindset**

I have written about the strengths approach in Chapter 1 and referred to recent books by Malcolm Gladwell (2008) and Matthew Syed (2010). It is easy to see the implications of their work for delivering coaching, but they have important messages for coaches themselves. They show that most top performers billed as ‘supremely talented’ have in fact put in many thousands of hours of practice and hard work to reach the point of being ‘spotted’.

For coach and coachee, this is fundamental because most people can achieve far more than they realize. The majority of a person’s limitations are self-imposed. But with the right thinking, setbacks and disappointments can be springboards rather than barriers. Coaches need to have this mindset for themselves. And they need to have it for their clients, which often means seeing beyond their clients’ believed limitations. The best coaches do not see themselves as ‘talented’ or otherwise but approach life as a constant journey of learning. They are open to and indeed welcome feedback as a means to improve.

Here is a question which can be hard for everyone, including coaches: how do you respond to feedback which is critical? Does it leave you feeling a failure? If so, you may have what Carol Dweck (2008) calls a fixed mindset (see Chapter 2), at least in part. One way to develop or strengthen the growth mindset is to really notice and take ownership of the positive you achieve.

#### *Exercise 8.1*

Think of some recent negative feedback or a disappointment or failure you have experienced. Now sit in a balanced, relaxed but upright position, keep your eyes above the horizontal, and identify at least two positive take-aways for you from that incident. Useful learning may be one. For a few seconds, stay with that positive and notice how much better it feels.

## **The humble coach**

Humility goes in and out of fashion. It was scorned during the Thatcher/Reagan 1980s where a new age of individualism swept in. It returned a little after that and seems to have waned again just before the Enron scandal and the world banking crisis. It is perhaps associated by many of us with old-fashioned religious practice and excessive respect for authority, allied to an 'I'm not worthy' mindset which could easily become a neat way of avoiding responsibility. So in many ways, it has become seen by many as irrelevant or even an impediment to progress and self-fulfilment.

However, it is a virtue that has re-emerged within positive psychology and I believe it is of great value to the coach in entering the best possible mindset before and during coaching. June Tangney, at George Mason University in Virginia, USA, is a researcher on humility. She describes humility (Tangney 2004) as having four main elements:

- an accurate assessment of oneself, including both strengths and weaknesses – neither unduly favourable nor unduly unfavourable;
- an openness to new information, including ideas that contradict former opinions;
- an ability to keep one's own place in the world in perspective. David Myers points out that humble people are less inclined than the normal population to show self-serving biases.
- an ability to forget oneself, to move out of the middle of the frame.

There is perhaps one more element here. Jim Collins, the writer and researcher, has looked for many years at what distinguishes 'good' from 'great' – this can be for organizations or for individual leaders. In his book, *Good to Great* (2010a), he argues from his own research that great leaders combine humility

with fierce determination. In other words, these are not mutually exclusive as many would have imagined.

So June Tangney's four points offer a really good guide to what a coach should be focussing on in their development. It is a professional danger that coaches do not consistently develop an accurate self-assessment. Mostly they are working one-to-one with a client who is not a coach, so the feedback they get tends to be broad and positive. Sometimes in fact coaches can unconsciously become quite resistant to feedback, especially regarding areas for development. Coaches need to develop themselves constantly. If you are looking for a coach for yourself, a good question to throw at them is 'What have you done for your own personal and professional development in the past year?' If they have been 'too busy' or 'learning by doing', then be careful as they may not be paying sufficient attention to themselves as the instrument of coaching.

Tangney's second point looks obvious at first reading, but for the same reasons, coaches can become cocooned against new information. I have met coaches whose background is in psychotherapy and they sometimes struggle to accept coaching approaches which come from other backgrounds, like cognitive psychology. I have also met many coaches with training in areas like neurolinguistic programming (NLP) or transactional analysis (TA) which are experience-based programmes rather than research-based. Often they find it hard to incorporate findings from academic psychology.

International coaching organizations like the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) are working hard to ensure that coaching is professionalized and one thing they are requiring for accreditation is a record of continuing professional development, just as most professions do.

The final two points raised by Tangney are fundamental for a coach. A coach cannot allow coaching to follow the client's agenda if he or she is centre-stage. Not that many, if any, of us would admit this. But again I have met a number of coaches who fall easily into the trap of talking too much, of matching what their client says to their own favourite psychometric model or of being driven by a need to appear helpful.

Another danger for coaches is that they swing the other way, they become rather subservient to their client, perhaps being in awe of them (and some clients are indeed really impressive people) but then do not challenge, offer feedback, or manage the process strongly enough.

So humility as defined here seems to me to be a really useful way of being as a coach. And as Jenny Rogers (2008) suggests, it is often the 'being' side of the coach rather than the 'doing' which makes the difference. And the best ways of staying humble (as defined here) are to have regular supervision and to build in opportunities for self-development and personal stretch.



## No time like the present

Another of the best ways to be a successful positive coach is to plan ahead. Yet most of the organizations I work with struggle to plan well. I believe this is because planning, although about the future, is an activity done in the here and now. And keeping their attention in the here and now is hard for many people. This is made harder by the constant pressures on people at work which are to do with delivery of all kinds (future) and also because the present is constantly interrupted. People have not yet learned to master their emails and mobile phones, but rather are controlled by them. It is hard to keep your attention in the present when you know that you will be constantly interrupted. So very often, planning, which is present moment thinking about the future, is done in haste or with a lack of attention and a constant pressure towards action.

Coaching can also become like this at times. My fellow coaches and coach supervisors all from time to time find their attention wandering to the past or the future. For example, it is common for a coach to find themselves wondering what question to ask next, so their attention is on the future, not what is being said right now. Alternatively, they may be ruminating about some personal history triggered by what the client has said, or trying to remember something the client mentioned a few minutes ago. There is nothing wrong *per se* about these shifts to the past and future. However, I have come to see that learning to have our attention in the present moment helps us to be better coaches, and is of greater benefit to the coachee.

### Example 8.1

I supervised an HR Director who was working towards a diploma in coaching. She seemed to be making little progress and her recordings demonstrated a lack of progress and unexpectedly poor skills. On the face of it, she should have been doing really well. We met up to review things and I asked what was going on. She told me that she was overly busy all the time, rushing from one place to the next and that often she arrived late for coaching sessions to find her client already waiting for her. So she was starting off hassled, sometimes out of breath, and constantly anxious about how badly she was treating her clients and 'what an awful coach' she was.

This person needed to get her head together. She was setting up the conditions for poor coaching (and poor everything else, I believe) by failing to allow herself time and space to get into the right mindset. Effectively she was never in the present but always rushing ahead or feeling bad about what had gone before.

Once she had established some routines for creating thinking and grounding time before coaching, this HR Director became a really good coach – and, I suspect, a much better Director.

## The present moment

The notion of living in the present moment is an ancient one. It is there in the writings of religious mystics from the Middle Ages like Jean Pierre de Caussade who lived from 1675–1751 (de Caussade 1989). It is in modern writings by Eckhart Tolle (*The Power of Now*, 1999) and Chiara Lubich (*Here and Now*, 2000). It is taught in schools of meditation. It is also a core theme of Gestalt psychotherapy and coaching.

Keeping one's attention in the present is also called 'mindfulness'. It has been the subject of increasing interest by positive psychologists over the past decade. There is increasing evidence that practising mindfulness leads to significant physiological and psychological benefits. Oberdan Marianetti and Jonathan Passmore (2008) have surveyed recent research and have shown that among the benefits found are reduced blood pressure, faster recovery from skin disorders and even improved survival rates in a care home. Perhaps more immediately relevant for coaches are findings that emotional awareness, communication and interpersonal sensitivity have all been found to improve. So mindfulness is important for the coach. At the same time, workplace benefits including improved job satisfaction, creativity and decision-making, which have all been identified from mindfulness research.

Being fully in the present is, in a sense, the only reality. Life only exists in the here and now. The future is at best an accurate fantasy and the past just a memory. There is a real fullness and focus to being in the present. Mike Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has described the sense of being fully absorbed in the present as 'flow' (see Chapter 10). This is not a mindless absorption, that would mean a person's attention was not in the present, but it is a full, conscious attention and engagement with the present which is not self-conscious.

Self-consciousness in fact immediately spins us out of the present experience. An example is when you are having a really good chat with a friend and he or she says 'This is a really good chat we're having!' Immediately you are both flipped out of 'flow' and the really good chat comes to an end. In NLP language, this is a shift from an associated state to a disassociated state, from being inside the experience to looking in at it.

## Getting into the flow

This flow state is typical of what high performers of all kinds experience. It is helpful too for a coach. Since coaching is a present moment conversation with another person, where listening, thinking and enquiry are paramount, there is nothing like personal presence to help it along. Similarly, when the coach gets distracted, becomes self-conscious or starts driving for action, then

the present focus is disrupted, rapport fails and the coachee finds it hard to make progress.

Perhaps one of the most important qualities of a coach is congruence. This means an authenticity of self and the ability and readiness to say exactly what you mean honestly but with the fullest respect for the other person. There is a clear link here between congruence and presence or mindfulness. Being fully in the present enables the coach to be in touch with the coachee's verbal and non-verbal language and the emotions they are experiencing. It further enables the coach to pay attention to how they are experiencing the session, for example:

- their own emotional responses to what is being talked about;
- their wonderings, metaphors or images that may come to mind;
- their own hot buttons – becoming aware when they are agreeing, disagreeing or their own strong opinions are being hooked.

While many people agree with idea of mindfulness and being fully present, many do not find it easy to do. Derek Roger (1997) has shown that the only way 'in' to the present is through one's senses. So sight, hearing, touch, smell, all put us in immediate touch with present reality. One thing I have found extremely helpful in coaching when I'm finding it hard to stay present is to consciously use one or other sense to notice more about my client's face or posture, or about their voice. At other times, I have found it helpful to consciously tune into my own body to notice the feelings I am experiencing as the client speaks. Another useful approach is to then draw this to the attention of the client. 'As you were talking about all the job pressure you are under right now, I started to feel my breathing speeding up and to lose focus. I wonder what was going on for you just then?' Saying your reaction out in this way serves to mirror back to the client the impact they may be creating and can be vital data for them. What it also does is to bring you both fully into the present.

Trainee coaches tell me they often struggle to switch roles, for example, from being the finance expert to being the non-directive coach. Once again the effect of mentally being in the wrong role or having the wrong hat on is that you are not in the present. The result in most cases is that goals are set poorly, there is no depth of enquiry by the coach, and because there is little progress, the coach resorts to advice giving or bullying the coachee into action far too early.

I have developed a notion of 'changing brain' to help people make this shift. So, for example, some of the clinicians I supervise now consciously create an image of 'taking out' their medical (expert) brain and replacing it for the duration with a 'coaching brain'. They find that this helps them get into the different role and to stick to it. Many others also rehearse models or

questions which represent the essence of coaching for them. These include things like the fundamental principles of coaching (e.g. Jenny Rogers) or the GROW model (John Whitmore et al.) or their own personalized frameworks.

### *Exercise 8.2*

What is your warm-up ritual? Sports psychologists tell me that top performers have rituals for the final minutes before running the race, playing the game, etc. They also practise visualizing and mentally rehearsing these as well as rehearsing the actual event. As a coach, you need to get into the right mindset or 'head space' before you start coaching. So take a few minutes here and now quietly and calmly to project yourself into the preparation for your next coaching session. Give yourself 15–30 minutes prior to meeting the coachee – what are you doing in that time? Map it out. How will you make sure to let yourself have that time? What do you need to do to get the physical place and the mental space?

## **Developing as a coach**

I was interviewed recently to join the executive coaching panel at a major pharmaceutical company. I was impressed by the thoroughness of the interview and the knowledge that the interviewers already had of coaching. However, what really won me over to them was a 'killer' question: 'What have you done for your own development over the past year?' They knew that this would sort the field out. For that company, it was important to have evidence that coaches worked constantly on themselves and their own development. After all, how can you work on helping someone else grow and develop if you don't do it to yourself?

I am sometimes accused of being a learning junkie. I think many people expect someone in their mid-fifties to have done everything they were going to do and to have learned everything they were going to learn. Like many coaches, I don't buy that. And recent research on brain plasticity – that is, its flexibility and ability to learn new things – shows that personal change and development are possible for the entirety of life.

There are quite a lot of coaches though who do little development work on themselves. I have seen that they often fall into traps like:

- becoming the expert too soon;
- talking too much;
- leading their clients and hijacking the agenda.

Worryingly, too, they often do this without any awareness of what they are doing. In this respect, they run the risk of becoming mates in the pub rather

than professional coaches. Coaches therefore need to make a conscious and consistent choice to develop themselves.

Self-development is about self-knowledge and this can be unsettling at times. Some traditional views held that you only needed learning and development if there was something lacking, and I do meet quite a lot of people, even in the development world, who seem to operate on this belief. I find many coaches and other developers very loath to receive robust, structured feedback. I find many coaches who don't have their own supervisor or coach and who don't have any kind of ongoing development plan. Personally I would not hire them. Increasingly, as coaching becomes more and more professionalized, organizations and individuals will not be hired. As part of my accreditation as a coach, I now have to submit an annual record of my development and to demonstrate that this is ongoing, not just drawn up for the submission. In this respect, it is very different from a traditional annual appraisal or objectives session.

So what does positive psychology tell us about developing as a coach? I think my summary would be the opposite of the 'Golden Rule' found in most religions:

'Do unto yourself as you would do to others.' Here are my golden rules for being a successful coach:

- 1 *Set goals:* The most successful business people I know set goals for themselves, not just others in their companies. An entrepreneur couple I am friendly with sit down once a year at least and draw out on a full flip chart page their goals for the coming year and beyond. They use collage, colours, drawings, bubbles, whatever comes to mind to create a vivid set of images of where they are heading. Then they keep it somewhere visible to help them keep their goals in mind. They say the process of agreeing the goals is as important as what they are or the output they create. Unsurprisingly, they achieve most of the goals they set. The best coaches I work with can also tell you at any time what they are working on to develop themselves and their skills. They set goals or targets for themselves.
- 2 *Develop the mindset:* When I attend a course, a conference or other learning event for myself, I always begin by wiping the slate clean as far as I can. This means that I go in trying to put aside the knowledge, skills and experience that I already have so that I can fully enter into the world of the tutor or coach I am with. I have found that if I continually try to map things onto my existing frame of reference, then I miss crucial learning and fail to understand what is new or challenging in what I hear. If I keep my mind consciously open, then I almost always find a new gem. The concept of 'mindset' which I deal with in more detail in Chapter 2 is a good example. It would be

quite easy to take a superficial understanding of this and try to map it onto existing knowledge about learning styles or the learning cycle which most coaches and trainers are familiar with, or some NLP concepts of outcome thinking which are also very valuable. However, having come at it with an open mind, I found that this work constituted some of the most new and challenging ideas I had come across for a decade. I could have missed its elegant simplicity – the simplicity characteristic of true genius. Since the coach helps their client to re-consider their assumptions and ‘taken for granted’s’ in order to learn and grow, so too the coach needs to adopt this policy to themselves. Once again, having a supervisor or coach yourself is fundamental here.

- 3 *Be a role model:* When I run coaching training, I often ask people to talk about key figures who have had a major positive influence on their development and learning. Always people say that this figure was a role model for them – they walked the talk. Positive psychology offers many ways to stay your own authentic self but to be the best you can be. I remember that when I first worked in people development, I ran a course on ‘time management’. After a while I gave that up because by common consent I did not walk the talk – how could I help others to prioritize and plan if I was so poor at it myself?
- 4 *Play to your strengths:* When I came across the strengths approach in positive psychology, I realized why time management, as usually taught, had always been so hard for me. Now I can approach issues of organizing myself from the standpoint of my strength of authenticity, which is motivating, and taps into what I am good at rather than from a ‘having to’ negative stance which drains me and which I will never be good at. The strengths questionnaires mentioned in Chapter 1 can help you to clarify your strengths and then you can use their frameworks or your own coach to help you apply your strengths to the challenges you face.
- 5 *Manage your weaknesses:* If you do the standard course or read the old books on careers and job seeking, you will be advised never to admit a weakness. When the panel ask you to own up, you should have ready a weakness that is actually a rather good one to have. One person I knew used to say, ‘Well, I suppose I sometimes find it hard to get away from work on time or to leave a job unfinished ...’ In fact, for many people, owning up to a real weakness is really hard. The positive psychologists have abandoned all this pretence – it is OK to have weaknesses – that is, real things you are not good at. Because if you had no weaknesses you would have no strengths. But having to play to our weaknesses drains our energy, and we are unlikely to do the task well. So from a positive psychology perspective, it is important

for a coach to be aware of their weaknesses and to find ways to address them just as they would help a client to do the same. Some of the best coaches and consultants I work with are very clear about their own strengths and weaknesses and will regularly pass work on to others when it is not their specialism or it is work they are not energized by. Others by contrast, will take on anything – perhaps they do not even know themselves well enough to distinguish their strengths from their weaknesses.

- 6 *Get supervised:* I argued earlier on in this book that relationship is the fundamental vehicle for learning in coaching. The quality of the relationship you establish with your client is of supreme importance and it is through this relationship that they truly learn. If that is so, it must also be true that you as a coach will only learn and grow through relationship. In this respect, you therefore need a coach or supervisor for yourself who will help you to set goals, develop the best mindset, raise your self-awareness and build your insight and understanding. They will also be a crucial help when you hit moments of difficulty. Allied to some formal learning – perhaps through courses and reading, this makes for the kind of powerful development that all coaches need to be committed to. It is important to note too that individual coach accreditation is increasingly common and increasingly demanded by purchasers. All accrediting bodies require practising coaches to have a supervisor and to have evidence that they use them regularly.

## Conclusion

- The positive coach needs to think as a coach. This includes coming to coaching with the right ‘head on’ and keeping their attention in the present.
- Appropriate humility is a real strength and helps the coach to keep to the client’s agenda.
- Developing a strengths approach is fundamental for coaches and in how they work with the coachee.
- Continuing professional and personal development keeps skills and thinking up to date and helps you avoid falling into a fixed mindset.

## 9 Positive Emotion and Techniques

### Introduction

This book is based on using positive emotions in coaching to benefit both coach and coachee, so that means you have to channel positive emotions. How can you do that? This chapter discusses the power of positive emotions and offers some helpful coaching techniques that can boost your positive feelings.

When you are reading or writing a book or having a social conversation about coaching, it is perhaps obvious that emotion experienced by a coachee is going to affect their motivation. A person feeling upset or frightened is going to have less resourcefulness, at least in the short term, to put into making a change than one who is confident and happy.

I have noted, however, that many coaches in fact miss or ignore emotional signals fairly regularly. At times this is because the coach feels uncomfortable with the emotional expression and just wants to move on quickly. At others it is because they just fail to notice a key word or phrase, or a shift in posture or tone.

The more defensive coaches and quite a lot of managers who 'do' coaching argue that they are not therapists and that surely the aim of coaching is to tackle the job in hand.

The more I coach and work with other colleagues who are coaches, the less I can find a clear distinction between coaching and, for example, counselling or some forms of psychotherapy. I have found no satisfactory distinction. I therefore conclude that as a coach I cannot merely walk away from or ignore strong emotions of any kind being experienced by my client. In fact, emotions are often the key to moving through blocks and to a breakthrough in understanding leading to action.

Barbara Fredrickson (2010) has developed a theory called 'broaden and build'. It is based on very rigorous research into emotion and its effects over many years. Essentially what she has found is that when a person experiences positive emotion, joy, for example, their scope for thought and action is increased. This means that the experience of the positive emotion broadens their awareness, and encourages new, varied and exploratory thinking and action. Fredrickson conducted randomized control tests and found that people experiencing positive emotions showed increased creativity and 'big picture' focus.



With time, the effects of positive emotion connect up to build resourcefulness and skills, thus enabling greater achievement of goals. In contrast, negative emotions have the opposite effect, restricting thought and action, and tending to focus attention on short-term survival actions. The coach can do much to support this broaden and build pattern and to challenge negative thinking patterns. Some ways in which the coach can support positive emotions in the client include:

- Noticing when the client shows a positive emotion in their words, tone or non-verbal communication, bringing it to their attention through feedback, acknowledging it and inviting them to hold the emotion for a while before continuing.
- Playing back or summarizing expressions of positive emotion so that they are in effect amplified.
- Probing non-feeling words presented as feelings. For example, *Coachee*: 'I felt really good about that.' *Coach*: 'Say a bit more about how good it felt.'
- Inviting the coachee to re-live and re-experience positive moments from the past, for example when they did have a resource they now lack (such as confidence, calm, courage) and to recall not only with the mind but with their feelings too.

Sometimes, clients are experiencing very negative emotions. In these cases, it is no good just trying to force them into feeling better (chin up, stiff upper lip, look on the bright side, etc.) as this tends to make them feel worse. In these cases it is important to acknowledge the emotions. Once acknowledged by the coach and owned by themselves, clients can then generally move on and think about what next.

The Gestalt world has a notion they call the 'paradoxical theory of change'. This suggests that in order to let go of and move on from a negative emotion, the client must first of all experience it to the full. So with one client who was very upset about not getting a job, I invited her to express her upset and for a few moments really fully experience her upset and anger. After a few seconds, her face reddened and she shed a tear. Then as quickly as that had come, it went and she breathed out and let it go. She immediately began to experience more positive emotions and picked up her resourcefulness to address the next challenge.

## **Working with autobiographical memory**

A fairly recent focus in clinical psychology has been in the area of autobiographical memory. This is very much what it says – a person's memories of

past events, good and bad. Clinical psychologists have found that this memory is a powerful potential source of positive emotion. By accessing autobiographical memory, in particular specific episodes, a client can be helped to bring resourcefulness and well-being from the past into the present. While memory can be faulty and is sometimes re-constructed in the light of other events, it has nonetheless become an important area of working positively with people in distress. There is a useful Wikipedia article at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autobiographical\\_memory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autobiographical_memory).

Many coaches make use of techniques which tap into an individual's memories. For example, in a conversation about using strengths, the coach may encourage a client to recall and re-live positive experiences of using strengths in the past. Again, it can be very helpful just to get a client to re-experience positive emotion from the past and then to hold onto it in the here and now. The more vividly these memories can be re-experienced, the easier it is for the client to access the positive, resourceful state and strengths that characterized that moment and therefore to access them again in the present to help achieve desired goals.

From a practical point of view, it is important for the coach to keep the client in that past state as long and as vividly as possible. When invited to recall past events, many clients begin to talk *about* them. However, cognitive neuroscience has shown that just talking about past experiences uses a different area of the brain and does not have the same power as re-living the experience. The emotional and physical experience of recalling an episode rather than the merely intellectual element of recounting is what brings that powerful recall of resourcefulness (Vittersø et al. 2009). So part of the coach's role is to make this clear to a client and then by their words to guide the client into the past event and hold them there.

Once this experience is over, the next step is to connect the positive emotion to the goal or issue being considered right now. Some useful questions include:

- What does that positive feeling (use their words) say to you about what you need to do right now?
- How can you experience more of that (name the feeling) in the present situation?

## **Techniques to build positive emotion**

### **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is also known as living in the present moment or in the here and now (see Chapter 8). It is a highly effective way to disconnect from negative

emotion and substitute positive. There are many approaches but here is one exercise for you to do.

*Exercise 9.1*

Sit in a comfortable chair, relaxed but upright and balanced without arms or legs crossed. Take a few long breaths. Close your eyes. Bring your attention to your feet and notice them touching the floor. Feel every part of each foot. Now notice your body in contact with the chair – your back and rear. Feel how you connect to the chair and notice the parts of your body which touch it and do not touch it. Now take your attention to your surroundings. Notice any sounds and as they come, inside or outside, hear them and then let them go again so that you can hear the next sound, and the next one. Don't dwell on the sounds, just hear and let go. Notice feelings you experience – physical or emotional – maybe some twinge or stiffness, maybe some affection or frustration. Notice and again let go. Open your eyes and notice what you see. Notice and let go. Look around giving your full attention to whatever comes to your attention. Let go and move on.

In this short exercise, I have used the senses to keep the person's attention in the present, not dwelling on the past. It is actually impossible to experience two thoughts or feelings at once so this exercise is excellent for breaking a cycle of worry or rumination about the past or future.

### **Savouring**

Savouring is the ability to take time to enjoy the small pleasure in life like a warm sunny day or a good bar of chocolate. It has been shown to be important for human well-being. Recent research has shown that access to or the desire to have access to wealth in order to experience 'special' things like a luxury holiday in fact impair our ability to savour (Quoidbach et al. 2010).

At the same time, the ability to savour is a positive predictor of happiness. Because many of our coaching clients live their lives in a permanent rush, it is likely that they do not savour much or often. So the coach can help a client by slowing them down at times to notice good things or to capture progress when it is made. An example of this is when you are catching up with a client at the start of a second or subsequent meeting. I find that often the client recounts what they have done as if I was a teacher marking multiple-choice questions: quickly and without stopping to reflect. At this point I often get them to stay with what they have done and notice their achievements. I also like to ask: 'So what have you learned from this?', as in itself this asks them to savour at least a little. Occasionally I ask a coachee to agree to take some time just to 'be' after an important conversation or meeting.

### **Kindliness**

It is not for nothing that the Golden Rule of doing to others as you would have them do to you appears in every world religion. Fredrickson, referring to this as ‘kindliness’, has shown that offering acts of kindliness to others greatly increases the giver’s experience of positive emotion (Fredrickson 2010). Probably the receiver’s too. Why else would so many thousands of people work for charities of all kinds or voluntarily coach sports in their local park each weekend?

So as a coach, you might well encourage your client to identify ways in which they can give to others. I have seen several people emerge from low times in their lives by throwing themselves into an activity in which they generously contribute to the well-being of others.

### **Go outside**

An interesting piece of research into the effects of weather on positive emotion (Keller et al. 2005) found that good weather does indeed increase a person’s experience of positive emotion – but only if they go outside! So, if it’s a nice day, get your client outside and they will think more positively about their challenges. In fact, it even appears that intelligence is increased in this way. So there is something for our leaders to think about when they run meetings or have one-to-one chats. Certainly I have found that going for a walk with a coachee can really help them to access resources and to think differently and more resourcefully. When I ask coaching trainees to try this out during a course, they look surprised at first but come back energized and smiling.

### **Meet people**

Most of these approaches are interconnected. Fredrickson (2010) has found that experiencing greater positivity almost always leads people towards stronger social connections with others. People experience more positivity when they are with others too. And this is not limited to extrovert personality types – more or less everyone who engages with others experiences positivity. So, again, a coach can be a great vehicle of positive emotion just by being there and can encourage the client to work to build more and more positive relationships.

### **Engage in something fully**

I have noticed that at difficult times in life, say, at work, many people start to show signs of pressure in other areas of their life. They may start drinking more or eating more. They sometimes end up cutting off (not necessarily

deliberately) friendships and relationships that were important before. They often become unfit and begin sleeping poorly and say all they can do is 'slump in front of the television'. They become wearied and stale, even depressed. What these clients need is what Fredrickson (2010) calls 'distractions' – the best kind of distractions are the ones which absorb you fully and don't leave any space for thinking about other things like your work problems. I found a while ago that re-awakening my student interest in martial arts, specifically taekwondo, gave me a space to re-charge physically and psychologically. At 54, I was 20 years older than anyone else in the class, but I have progressed up the ranks slowly. It has given me a great boost and continues to do so. The research on strengths by Seligman, Linley and others suggests that real strengths give us energy and come relatively easily. These are the best places to look for good 'distractions'. I often now ask my clients about what they enjoy or get a buzz from: sometimes they are self-effacing or embarrassed about answering but inevitably we find something that can serve to rest and re-charge them, be it writing, playing music, drawing, running or hill-walking. In his article, 'Manage your energy not your time', Tony Schwartz (2007) confirms how finding enjoyable but active things to do can help people cope with punishing work schedules and difficult times.

### **Meditate or pray**

Meditation and prayer have often been suggested as practices which can help increase physical and psychological well-being. Seligman (2003) found that practising a faith was associated with greater happiness. Fredrickson (2010) looked at the effect of regular meditation on positive emotion and therefore on resilience. She found that regular practice did indeed lead to increased daily experience of positive emotions and these in their turn built increased mindfulness, a greater sense of purpose, social support, and less illness. Beyond that, she found less likelihood of depression and increased life satisfaction. Certainly this constituted a commitment on the part of the participants in her research and they often found it difficult, but the results are powerful. So as a coach, teaching or pointing a person towards meditation is a great way to build their resourcefulness.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of emotion in organizational and managerial life was largely unrecognized until the past few decades. It is still a tricky subject to talk about with leaders who are rooted in the operational mindset. Even coaches, who tend to be more aware of emotion in the people they deal with, often underestimate its importance both as a block and as a source of energy for growth

and change. Many coaches do indeed notice negative emotion and explore blocks to change in their clients. In the light of all the research on emotion, they can now use positive emotion even more to help their clients access even greater personal resources.

It is important to be clear that addressing emotion in coaching is not an end in itself but is of value because it produces valuable benefits for the individual and the organization. As Fredrickson and others have shown, building positive emotion can lead to individual growth, health and improved performance. It can increase personal coping resources and therefore resilience – the capacity for coping and recovery – in times of pressure or setback. Sekerka and Fredrickson (2010) take this further showing how developing positive emotions can bring about benefits at a social (therefore organizational) level such as more favourable reactions to others and increased helping actions towards others. They suggest that as positive emotions broaden individual mindsets, they help to create a more positive view of the working environment and increase relational strength. This has been shown to lead to people working more productively together, for example, in project teams and self-organized coalitions.

Thus, as positive emotion broadens and builds across the organization, it can lead to transformative change. It therefore offers a significant starting point for planned organization development and change and can as a consequence constitute part of the explicit agenda for coaching.

# 10 Positive Themes and Coaching

## Introduction

In this chapter I summarize the core themes of positive psychology as I see them related to coaching: (1) meaning; (2) helplessness and optimism; (3) flow; and (4) happiness.

## Meaning

Meaning is certainly not an area of interest only in positive psychology. It is crucial to many areas of psychotherapy but there is a regular positive psychology conference on meaning.

Paul Wong is a psychotherapist who has worked with positive psychology and Logotherapy to develop 'Meaning Therapy'. Viktor Frankl, who was the founder of Logotherapy, was imprisoned in Auschwitz in the Second World War and noticed that some people there seemed to do better and survived than others. Eventually he could even predict who would die early and who would survive. The key differentiator was the meaning they placed on events and the choices they made. He realized that whatever the guards could take away from him, food, clothing, loved ones, he could still retain the capacity to choose his reactions to those same guards. Thus he could create his own meaning even in the face of horrific external circumstances.

In developing this further, Paul Wong (2010) has argued that the pace of change in contemporary life means that our understandings of what happens to us and around us cease to be able to cope with or explain what is going on, and this causes people to lose a sense of meaning. An example might be when a person has worked for many years in a fairly stable organization where there are explicit and implicit rules about behaviour and relationships. So they have an established set of meanings in place. A major change comes along – perhaps the company is sold or a major reorganization happens. Their old meanings cannot cope with new (or apparently no) rules or new patterns of relationship.

It is common for coaching clients to struggle to make sense of changed circumstances facing them. In such cases, it is helpful for the coach to focus on the meanings the client has in place and to test out how useful these still are.

Paul Wong (2010) shows that there are two different kinds of meaning we may be dealing with:

- 1 *Cognitive meaning*: this is about how a client makes sense of what they do, what happens to them and what happens around them. For the coach this will mean exploring what meaning a client may have, for example, after losing their job. The coach's role will then be to help them to discover more useful meanings. For example, when some clients hear bad news about their jobs the 'meaning' they access first of all is often dramatic: 'this is the end' or 'I'm on the scrap heap'. These are not useful and will cause them to have significant negative emotions. In helping the client to make these explicit, the coach has already helped them to begin the process of re-evaluating the meaning and therefore to create some mental space or perspective.
- 2 *Existential meaning*: this level concerns a person's sense of the overall meaning of their lives and their sense of purpose. Wong says that clients can become focussed on 'misguided' goals and need help to discover the 'true meaning and purpose' of their lives. It is common for the coach to meet clients who are very successful in what they do but who are at the same time disconnected from any overall sense of where their lives are going. This bigger question often crops up when clients find themselves at a significant crossroads in their lives such as being made redundant or realizing they want to make a lifestyle change.

## Helplessness and optimism

In the 1970s, Martin Seligman (1996) and others identified a phenomenon known as 'learned helplessness'. They found that, when experiencing externally controlled negative situations, about two-thirds of people after a short while stopped trying. Later, even when the controls were lifted, they continued to think and act helplessly. When Seligman looked at the types of people who were more likely to give up, he identified what he called different 'explanatory styles', i.e. different ways of interpreting and creating meaning about events they were involved in. Those who became helpless tended to focus on the external and permanent nature of these events. A classic example of this, familiar to most coaches, is the person who is presented with an idea but responds: 'You could never do that here!' – the explanation for inaction is that external forces always prevent it. This explanatory style is typical of people subject to depression but many coaching clients also exhibit it, at least in part. Seligman says that learned helplessness is therefore 'at the heart of defeat and failure'.

It is quite normal for our clients to bring along issues to do with failure. They may have failed to get a job or find themselves unable to influence



colleagues as well as they need or have once again double-booked themselves for two important meetings. But the real failure that Seligman is concerned with is the client's negative and pervasive interpretation of these occurrences, seeing them as indications of permanent inability, stupidity or incompetence.

Later on, Seligman became interested in studying people who do well – for example optimists – and wrote a book entitled *Learned Optimism* (2006), showing how it was possible to move away from helpless thinking and actually to develop one's optimism. Like many researchers, he shows that there is much to be gained by learning to be optimistic, such as improved health and a longer life. In fact, it is not that hard to begin to learn optimism and a coach could be just the right person to support the emerging optimist.

Much of Seligman's work has entered mainstream therapy and coaching, but some of his useful techniques which are highly usable in coaching include *disputing*: learning to notice a negative assumption and argue with it mentally. This can include checking the facts – how factually correct is the belief? For example, when the client says words like 'always' or 'never' that is a good statement to dispute: 'Always?' Another useful approach is to look for alternative explanations: 'What else might be going on here?' 'What alternative explanations could there be?' A third way of disputing is to check how useful an explanation is to the client. 'How useful is it for you to believe that nothing will ever be allowed?' This is useful in taking the emphasis away from what is believed to be fact and to begin to consider alternative meanings.

#### *Example 10.1*

I was coaching a director of a company. She had been told by her boss, the CEO, that a reorganization was due and that she would have a new role. However, the CEO was not telling her what that was so that she would keep her 'eye on the ball' meanwhile. We could have got into a long conversation about the alleged unfairness of this CEO but I asked 'What do you believe is going on?' She said that she believed the CEO did not trust her and was looking to move her sideways or out. I asked what other meanings she might place on events. I disputed this, asking what evidence she had for the CEO thinking these thoughts and she admitted she had none and that in fact it was highly unlikely that she would be let go. I then asked her to come up with alternative meanings for what was going on. In the end she felt that probably the CEO had several options and had not decided what to do. This made her feel much better and she was able to let go of her worry.

Optimism has been shown to reduce a person's propensity to depression and to help them bounce back more quickly after depressive episodes. Depression in this case can mean severe clinical depression but also the more common depression that many of us experience from time to time. It is this latter kind

that the coach is more likely to encounter in clients, and using these sorts of techniques can be very useful.

A technique of Seligman's that I have taught to many clients, family and friends, is an exercise in gratitude (see Chapter 1). The idea is to take a few minutes towards the end of each day for a week to identify three things you are grateful for. This is an excellent way to get someone to think about good things rather than bad. You can also help them not to contaminate these three things with 'balancing' negative thoughts and to make sure they identify things for which they really are grateful. The gratitude technique has been shown to help reduce a person's propensity to depression.

Jenny Rogers has identified a list of six principles of coaching. The first of these is that 'the client is resourceful'. This is a principle to inform the coach rather than a statement of fact. So it is important for the coach to be optimistic for the client, to believe that somewhere inside they do have the capacity to identify what they want and to find ways to achieve it. Similarly, part of the coach's role is to keep their client in a resourceful state. Optimism and some understanding of it are therefore particularly useful here. The good news is that optimism in the way I have described it has been well researched. Its benefits are well studied. It is not some idealized state of self-pretence but an attitude that people can learn and benefit from. In particular, optimism has been shown to help them be more resourceful in setting goals and working actively towards them.

A word of caution. Optimism as studied by Seligman and others is not about pretending all is well when it clearly is not or remaining positive at all costs. In fact, he has shown that pessimists actually have a more accurate recollection of events. And it is important not to fake optimism when, for example, a client is facing a degree of risk or uncertainty ahead or when they in fact have little likelihood of achieving something. Again, a very useful role for a coach can be as devil's advocate, asking the 'sabotage' questions like 'How might you stop yourself succeeding?'

## Flow

During the 2010 USA tennis championship, Roger Federer hit one of the most amazing shots every seen on court. He was facing away from the net, about 5 metres outside the playing area, and hit the ball back between his legs. It landed perfectly and left his opponent standing still, in awe. Afterwards, Federer was unable to describe how he did it.

This is a great example of what has become known as flow – a state of mind in which a person is completely caught up in what they are doing and yet performs to a very high level. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has researched this state over some 30 years and he is one of the founders of positive psychology.

Flow is often known in sport as 'being in the zone', in spirituality it is connected to mindfulness. In most areas of human life, it is a characteristic of how people are when they are at their best.

If you want to know about your own flow moments, think about these questions (from Seligman, 2003):

- When does time stand still for you?
- When do you find yourself doing something you don't want to end?

I remember reading the final *Harry Potter* book, for hours on end, hoping that I would not get to the end. I remember too training to do a long charity swim, over several months, pushing myself in middle age further than I ever had as a youth, tired but exhilarated. They were times of flow for me, times that gave me a level of satisfaction that things like watching TV or drinking excellent wine never would.

In fact, what we experience in flow is important for this very reason. Seligman distinguishes gratifications from pleasures. Gratifications are those things which absorb us completely, in which consciousness is often suspended. Pleasures are the things that cause an immediate and transitory emotion. It is the gratifications which have a deeper impact on us and contribute to our happiness.

Csikszentmihalyi has found that flow is experienced in many different fields of human endeavour including sports, music, reading, dance, doing charitable work, social meetings. It is characterized by a number of specific factors:

- Goals are clear: the person knows exactly what they are doing.
- The person receives immediate feedback on what they do: they are responsive in the moment to how well they are doing it.
- They experience an optimum balance between challenge and ability: this is important – there is neither too little nor too much stretch.
- They are concentrated fully on what they are doing: they are not trying to multi-task.
- They are fully in the present and external worries, plans, etc. are absent: they are not thinking about tomorrow's work or the journey home.
- They do not worry about failure: they do not experience any pressure to perform.
- There is no self-consciousness: they are fully inside what they are doing and are not looking in on themselves.
- Time becomes distorted: they may lose themselves, for example, in writing for several hours and not realize the time has passed or the act of one second can seem like hours.

- The activity become an end in itself: there is an enjoyment in actually doing the thing, there is no external reward or end point in view.

Csikszentmihalyi found that teenagers who reported spending more time in 'flow', that is in gratification activities such as hobbies, playing sports and doing homework, when followed up later on, had significantly more self-esteem, better social relationships and more successful careers than those who spent their time in pleasure activities like hanging around shopping malls or watching television. He refers to flow as building psychological capital for the future.

Flow is important for coaching, because it is a useful way to tune into and increase our clients' resourcefulness (their psychological capital) and to keep their resourcefulness present during sessions.

We can help the flow of the coaching by using the right accommodation, avoiding distractions, setting clear goals, providing challenge but not too much, keeping ourselves as coaches fully present, and by avoiding unnecessary analytical thinking.

We can help the coachee access their resourcefulness by inviting them to consider times when they were in flow and at their best, and then to learn from those examples about how to tackle current challenges. Here it is important that they speak from within those positive experiences rather than speaking intellectually *about* them. The coach can help here by using the present tense in questions or requests. 'As you are once again in that moment, tell me what you notice – what are you seeing or hearing or feeling?'

The coach can also apply elements of the flow research to present issues the client is facing. For example, the client may be putting undue pressure on a 'problem' member of staff, thus making things worse while thinking they are helping. Or they may not have identified clearly what they really want from a tricky situation or from an approaching career choice. Useful questions can include:

- How clear are you about what you want next?
- How might your own actions be contributing to that person's difficulties?
- What will happen if you are not successful?
- How do you (does he/she) know whether you are doing a good job or not?

By understanding what flow is and how it manifests itself, the coach can help the client retain or restore the balance between the level of challenge they face and their competence to perform. Csikszentmihalyi states that a person's competence needs to match the level of challenge they face. When there is the balance, they can more easily experience flow. What underpins success at work here is that the individual's sense of competence is correct and is what

is required by the work situation. So, for example, a person can experience a flow state while doing the wrong things or performing poorly – because they either believe they are competent when they are not, or they are mistaken about the requirements. They may also believe they are not competent enough when they really are. In any of these cases, the coach can be helpful in ensuring the client has a clear understanding of the job requirements and a realistic sense of the level of their own competence.

Many coaching clients want to understand how to live fuller lives, how to gain a greater sense that they are doing what they want to do or were ‘meant’ to do. In these cases, it is helpful for the coach to understand the difference between pleasures and gratifications since the former are unlikely to deliver real benefits. Helping the client identify flow states and experiences can help them tune into what is most important to them and what they can do more of to experience greater meaningfulness.

#### *Example 10.2*

A colleague coached a senior person from the UK civil service. The client spoke about some ‘peak moments’ when she had been in a flow state. She was thunderstruck because in that instant she realized why she had been so unhappy for the past 20 years and so disliked her job. The coaching had ostensibly been about next career steps, but it now turned to consider what she could do to really fulfil herself through her work.

## **Happiness**

It seems appropriate to end this chapter looking at the idea which has underpinned positive psychology for the past decade and is, in my opinion, fundamentally linked to the rise of coaching and the impact that coaching increasingly has on people’s lives whether inside or outside the workplace: happiness.

There is now consistent, well-conducted research that shows that happiness is not just a goal in itself but that it produces results which are good for individuals and for society. Seligman has shown that happy people:

- *Live longer*: even when other factors like income and lifestyle are taken out of the equation.
- *Are healthier*: they have lower blood pressure and stronger immune systems.
- *Have a better social life*: they have a wider circle of friends and more close friendships, they are more involved in social activities and are more empathic and altruistic, for example, in their giving to charity.

- *Do better at work*: they are more satisfied with their jobs, are more highly rated by their managers and earn more.

In checking these factors, Seligman found that people with positive frames of mind select higher goals and show greater persistence and performance. There are some strong messages for coaching here. It seems reasonable to me that a coach should aspire to achieve happiness for themselves and their clients. This is not the superficial, 'smile and the world smiles with you' pseudo-happiness which has been much criticized. It is well-documented and achievement-focussed happiness which enables people to set higher goals and achieve more. How can people be happy, though, and what can a coach actually *do* to facilitate a client's happiness?

Seligman goes into these strategies in some depth, and they include:

- Increasing your satisfaction with the past by expressing gratitude, by forgiving and forgetting hurt, and by doing a 'weighing up the past' inventory once a year.
- Building optimism about the future by learning more positive attributions, building hope and disputing negative beliefs.
- Learning to experience more happiness in the present by finding more 'flow' activities.
- Learning to savour good things and live mindfully in the present moment.
- Learning about your strengths and playing to them.

I refer the reader to Seligman's book *Authentic Happiness* (2003). I re-read the book towards the end of my research for this book and I realized that it contains a lot more valuable content than I had realized the first time I read it.

For the coach, dissatisfaction is a common issue. Arguably because coaching is about change, there is always some element of dissatisfaction even if this is about how good things could be even better. I have used some of these approaches to help people increase their happiness:

- *Letting go of anger or hurt*: I have found that very often clients are blocked by negative feelings about the past. For example, they may be angry about how they were unfairly treated by a boss or customer. Here it can be helpful to allow them some space in which to voice what they really want to say, with no consequences. This can be addressed to you, representing the other person, or to an empty chair or just as they imagine the person being there. I have found it helpful to encourage the client not to restrict themselves and to really speak from the gut. When they manage this, it is usually a breakthrough moment.

- *Building optimism about the future:* People are often held back by fear – fear of what might go wrong or that something that happened before will happen again. I have mentioned disputing above and find this helpful to uncover what the true likelihood of a catastrophic result is. I also find the question ‘What will happen if you do not take this forward?’ can be very powerful. Often the negative feelings of associated with not having tried are enough to gain a commitment.

I have also spoken earlier about helping clients to experience more flow by bringing their attention to the present. Getting them to talk in the present about how they are feeling right now is also very helpful to let go of future and past worries. As for learning about strengths, please see Chapter 1 on how a coach can work with these.

Put all together, and with the generally positive approach taken by most coaches, there is much to be gained by our clients from a positive, strengths-based, happiness-focussed coaching relationship.

Ed Diener (2009) has investigated the research on coping and adapting to negative events. He found evidence that re-appraisal strategies are more effective than suppression and provide the person with more positive emotions. Other coping mechanisms included positive interpersonal relations and using humour. Diener also found that optimistic people tend to use more effective coping strategies, for example seeking out social support or using re-appraisal, more naturally than pessimists. Optimism also predicts problem-focussed coping and quicker recovery from surgery.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have suggested that four key themes from positive psychology can be useful underpinnings for coaching. These themes are: meaning; helplessness and optimism; flow; and happiness. By understanding these themes and attending to them during coaching, a coach can ensure that the coachee experiences the best conditions for learning, insight and change.

# 11 Positive Tips and Techniques

This chapter pulls together a range of tips and techniques that I have devised or learned from colleagues.

## The cauliflower technique

I have underlined the importance of a positive mindset and of focussing on strengths rather than weaknesses. Because we are dealing with people, it is natural that at times, we do encounter a block or a point where neither our coachees nor we ourselves know where to go next. My coaching panel tell me that it is easy to fall into the trap of either starting to lead or asking lots of questions as they try to dig their coachee out of their ‘stuckness’. This is a form of rescuing which takes the ownership of the issue away from the coachee.

Here is a simple ‘get you going again’ technique that I have developed:

- 1 Identify the block or question in hand.
- 2 Identify at random a thing or object or any kind (or use Table 11.1). Table 11.1 shows a list of nouns you could use at this point. Ask the coachee to give you a letter from A–D, then a number from 1–4. This will identify which word to use.
- 3 Invite the client to apply this literally or metaphorically to the matter in hand.
- 4 Let them think and talk.
- 5 Get them to draw out the relevance for this block.

**Table 11.1** Random words

	1	2	3	4
A	Cauliflower	Donkey	Railing	Hill
B	Snake	Doughnut	Apron	Newspaper
C	Shirt	Spectacles	Encyclopaedia	Ring
D	Light Bulb	Key	Carpet	Cloud



Things you would never say as a coach

Sometimes I hear trainee coaches say things like:

- I know I mustn't give advice ...
- I know I must stick only to the client's agenda ...
- I can't let my own ideas or judgement interfere ...

These are good general guidelines and I believe that you do need to learn how to stay out of the client's issue before you can come in again – and I have met several coaches who have never learned to do this.

But, as a coach, I cannot just ignore my reactions to what is going on, especially when they are particularly strong or just seem to pop out of nowhere. For example, I may experience:

- feelings about the client;
- personal observations of the client;
- judgements about the client;
- impatience or other feelings in relation to the client;
- an image or metaphor about what they are saying;
- a wish to give them orders.

It's true that these could be just my own thoughts getting in the way, but given that I have set out to create rapport, to listen and to work to the client's agenda, it is very likely that they contain important information for the client and that they connect to the issue in hand. The secret, then, is in offering these reactions back to the client without you as a coach appearing personally judgemental or taking over the agenda from them.

Table 11.2 is a list of things you might want to, but couldn't possibly say. Then I offer a translation into a form of words that you could use.

Table 11.2 What a coach would never but might say

<i>You would never say</i>	<i>But you might say</i>
I hope you don't wear THAT to the interview.	What do you propose to wear for the interview?
Just make up your mind, will you? Hell, you're boring.	You seem to be finding it hard to decide here. As you started to talk about next month's software upgrade, I felt my energy drop and I'm wondering how important this really is for you.
You are all over the place, aren't you?	So, you are finding it hard to focus on one thing at a time and you've found yourself double-booking appointments over the past month. Is that right?

Don't bother!	What will be the benefits of completing this?
I agree with that other person.	How come he sees things so differently from you?
Your boss is right about you.	What might you be doing to give your boss this impression?
Please shut up!	Let me interrupt you here. How does this relate to the goal we agreed earlier?
I hope you don't come back for another session.	We've had 6 sessions now and you've made some good progress (for example ...). I think that's as far as I can go with you and I'd like to suggest that we end our coaching today. If you want to continue with a coach, I will be happy to recommend someone.
I wouldn't give you the job.	What reservations might the panel have about appointing you? What can you do to address these?
Stop whingeing!	I notice you have mentioned your boss's rudeness three times in the past 10 minutes and that's obviously a concern for you. In relation to that, what would you like to get from this coaching session?
You're pathetic.	I notice that you have attributed everything so far to other people or circumstances. What is your role in preserving the status quo?
I can't stand you.	As you talk about ... I feel a sense of frustration. What is going on for you right now?
You're too fat.	You've said that you are under considerable stress and handling a big workload. How might your lifestyle be making this harder for you?
What about your kids?	Who else is involved or affected here?
What does your husband/wife/partner think?	How is your life outside work affected by this pressure?
How might it all go wrong – again?	How might you sabotage yourself? What do you need to do to avoid that?
You really DID mess up!	OK, let's acknowledge that didn't go very well and you could have done things better. Where do you want to go next?
Stop mucking me around!	I notice that you have missed three of our agreed appointments now. I prepare for and book out these sessions well in advance and when you don't show up, that time is lost to me and I feel pretty frustrated and annoyed. I'm wondering if this is what your team experience.
You're a liar!	I'm not sure I buy that.
Stop blaming everyone else.	You have mentioned your boss, your colleagues and a customer so far, but I'm wondering what your contribution to this problem is.
You can't be bothered, can you?	How much do you want to do this on a scale of 1–10?

**Table 11.2** Continued

<i>You would never say</i>	<i>But you might say</i>
You're just lazy! Get a life!	What will happen if you do nothing about this? You seem to be bogged down with this. What do you need to do to move on?
Damn well come on time next time.	You have arrived late for the past two sessions. Can I ask you to arrange things so that you can arrive on time. I cannot stay later than our agreed end time.
No, I disagree. Don't do it!!	How might your boss react if you do that? You have said that your team react badly to you lecturing them. How will another 'tell' session make any difference?
Your hair is a mess.	What will you do to ensure you really look the part at the interview?
I'm out of here!	(Standing up and walking towards the door) John, I have another meeting in 10 minutes and I need to get my papers together. I will see you next month.
Grow up!	Given what I know of you, I am surprised at the strength of your reaction here.
I'm not surprised they don't take you seriously!	As you have been telling me about this project, I notice that you have not looked at me once and have begun to repeat yourself. I am feeling rather confused and finding it hard to follow what you are saying. I'm wondering whether this might be how the rest of the board experience you at times.
You need a therapist, not a coach.	If you really do have an issue with addiction, I strongly suggest that you talk to a specialist about it. I am not a therapist but I can put you in touch with one if you would like. In the meantime, let me outline how I might be able to work with you.

**Getting off the couch**

Most coaches have met the low energy client who can never muster the motivation to get things done, tends to over-eat or drink and who feels low a lot of the time. You may, for example, notice a discrepancy between the clarity of a goal and the lack of energy in pursuing it. You may too notice that a person seems physically unfit and over-weight, perhaps rather wheezy, when they are setting out to handle a tough assignment or handle a particularly difficult new role. Either way, your observation, or perhaps a hunch, is likely to be relevant to the client and their issue.

One of the excellent things about positive psychology is that its boundaries are not too firmly fixed. So a lot of positive psychologists are now also incorporating current research on physical well-being into their work.

Although the coach is working with the client's agenda, there are times when it starts to look very likely that a client needs to change lifestyle if they are to achieve their goals.

Marie-Josée Salvas (2010) has written about why couch potatoes are tired. She quotes substantial recent research which suggests that inactivity has major negative psychological and physiological effects including disturbed sleep, greater susceptibility to stress and increased negative emotions. It is also typically associated with poorer cardio-vascular functioning and poor eating habits.

I have underlined the importance of positive emotion elsewhere, but sometimes with a 'lazy' client of this kind, the coach may need to get them moving – quite literally – before they can begin to really experience more positive feelings. Although couch potatoes complain of tiredness a lot of the time, the answer is (paradoxically from their perspective) to get more exercise.

## **Walking coaching**

Part of our challenge in coaching is to keep ourselves and our clients in a resourceful state. At times, for example mid-afternoon, sitting in a room, with the sun pouring in, you may feel a lack of energy come over the two of you. At this point, if you continue to match your client's energy, you may find yourselves in the fullest rapport and both asleep very quickly. Since the two of you sleeping may not be constructive in helping the client achieve their objectives, this is a good time to break rapport, to shift that connection you have been trying to build, and to inject a different energy.

You might clap your hand together (not too loud), stand up and say something like:

OK, John, I'm starting to feel a little tired here. You know that a different physical perspective can often help our mental perspective. So how about a ten-minute walk around the block? We'll continue talking as we go.

Fresh air and exercise, even briefly, can make a difference to mental attitude.

## **Coaching is like ...**

Here's a short energizer for coaching learners.

- Think up a coaching simile, such as coaching is like losing weight: the idea is simple, most people agree with it in principle, but it's hard to do.

## Get it out

A common issue on coaching is handling a difficult conversation or addressing a thorny issue with someone. Often this is accompanied by lots of negative emotion and judgement about the other party. This technique invites the coachee to let down their barriers and talk out what they want to say with no consequences.

The coaching will have identified a situation in which the client wishes to be more resourceful, for example, in giving a difficult message to their boss or a member of staff.

The coach gets the coachee to stand up and they place two chairs facing each other (preferably not head-on as this look confrontational). One chair represents the client and the other, the person to whom they are giving the message. Let us assume the client's name is John and the other party is called Sue. The coach says something like this:

John, I want you to imagine that you, John, are sitting there giving the message you need to give to Sue. Get a good image of that in your mind and notice how John is sitting confidently and sounding confident. Notice that the conversation is going well, perhaps better than he expected and that he is really putting his message across clearly and with a positive impact. Stay with that for a moment.

Now, listen carefully to what he is saying: What is he saying? What are the actual words he is using? What is the core of his message? Notice that.

How does John feel now he has said what he needed to say?

The coach then ends this part of the technique and symbolically moves the chairs back as they were. The coach then says: 'OK, so, based on that successful conversation you just saw, what advice do you give yourself? What is the next step?'

## Psychometrics and other questionnaires

Ed Diener (2009) and other positive psychologists have connected aspects of well-being and coping with personality characteristics or traits. For example, introversion and neuroticism have been shown to be more closely related than their opposites to pessimism and to choosing less useful coping strategies like denial in the face of illness or other negative life events.

It can therefore be useful for the coach to employ psychometrics to help a client understand their predispositions and therefore to actively seek out

mechanisms which are more likely to work for them. They can be helpful, for example, in helping a client build optimism and find more effective strategies to cope with difficult moments in their life.

There has been considerable research on personality factors and researchers attempting to make some overall sense of this research have boiled them all down to the so-called 'Big Five' personality factors which have been most consistently identified. Wikipedia gives a useful summary of them:

- *Openness* – (inventive/curious vs consistent/cautious). Appreciation for art, emotion, adventure, unusual ideas, curiosity, and variety of experience.
- *Conscientiousness* – (efficient/organized vs easy-going/careless). A tendency to show self-discipline, act dutifully, and aim for achievement; planned rather than spontaneous behaviour.
- *Extraversion* – (outgoing/energetic vs shy/reserved). Energy, positive emotions, and the tendency to seek stimulation in the company of others.
- *Agreeableness* – (friendly/compassionate vs competitive/outspoken). A tendency to be compassionate and cooperative rather than suspicious and antagonistic towards others.
- *Neuroticism* – (sensitive/nervous vs secure/confident). A tendency to experience unpleasant emotions easily, such as anger, anxiety, depression, or vulnerability.

It is important to understand that these are descriptors of aspects of personality. They do not tell us everything about a person. Both ends of each scale have potential strengths and potential weaknesses but they do not permanently condemn a person to think or behave in a certain way, for example, handling upset effectively or badly. And care is needed in interpreting feedback on instruments purporting to measure such factors. I was affronted to read in one online report of the Big Five that I was low on conscientiousness and that therefore, 'Your work tends to be careless and disorganized.' This is a highly judgemental statement and, while I might accept that I am not the most disciplined, organized person, my work is not careless or disorganized. What is more likely is that I do not default to efficiency and being organized – but I can do them well when I have to. The other end of the scale is equally valid: for example, 'low conscientiousness' can mean 'high independence and spontaneity'.

So the coach needs to be careful to ensure they understand clearly what is being measured and check that a report does not use sweeping statements which might wrongly be interpreted as truth. In this way they can help a client to establish the correct interpretation of any results and to avoid simplistic or deterministic interpretations.

Psychometric questionnaires, if properly used, can therefore provide useful information for a coachee to get to understand themselves better and to help the coach in supporting a coachee to handle difficult times better.

I found that taking the strengths approach (see Chapter 1) is a very useful way of working with psychometrics and other questionnaires. Our inbuilt negativity bias leads us to focus more readily on low scores or what seem to be areas we need to improve. The strengths approach looks for what is good in a profile, actively avoiding negativity and judgement. It helps the coach to adopt a more encouraging style with the client, for example, by insisting on a thorough focus on what is good and working well, and how this can be leveraged even more. All of this comes before any consideration of weakness.

I mentioned (in Chapter 1) some of the positive strengths inventories such as Realise 2 and Values in Action and while I have found these particularly powerful in coaching, I realize that many client organizations have preferred instruments they use for development and which the coach may therefore need to use in their coaching.

## **Conclusion**

A colleague asked me to summarize my message from the whole book. As I considered everything I had read and written, it seemed to me that there are six underpinning guidelines for the positive coach. These are informed both by what I have written in this book and by my own experience and that of my colleagues who have generously offered their insights, stories (unattributably) and challenges. So when I get stuck – and all coaches get stuck sometimes – I find it useful to refer to one of these simple guidelines to get me and my client started again.

### **Tune in**

I have argued that staying ‘at cause’ and having a growth rather than a fixed mindset, helps the coach to pay full attention to their client and to avoid overlaying their own agenda.

There is a constant risk that a coach assumes they understand what the client is saying or is drawn to their own agenda in the session. Unconsciously they can be mapping what is being said onto their own view of reality and failing to notice or probe how the client is experiencing things. So learning to tune into the client – their words, energy, body language, voice – is essential.

Learning to tune in helps the coach spot and work with the uniqueness of each client. It also helps them to keep an open mind and to spot when they, the coach, are getting too involved, making assumptions or driving too

hard. It helps then to foster a spirit of enquiry which gets to the heart of the issues the client faces.

### **Being proactive**

I have stressed that the coach is the instrument of successful coaching and that, therefore, developing and honing their skills and awareness is essential. Some of those who have been slower to adopt coaching consider it to be a very passive or ‘touch feely’ process. Yet coaching can be challenging precisely because it has a structure which includes setting goals and agreeing actions. The consistent message I have from my panel is that they are at their best – and most valued by their clients – when they are active, engaged and challenging. The best coaches are great listeners and builders of rapport but they know how to shift energy, interrupting, confronting and giving feedback. This allows the client to maintain progress and avoid wallowing or getting off the subject.

### **Being open**

I have referred frequently to the importance of emotion and the need for a coach to be able to handle their own emotions and those of their clients. At the same time, what specifically a client will reveal is unknown at the start of an assignment – probably even to the client themselves. A clear challenge for a coach is to be flexible enough to coach most people who come their way. There may be issues of confidentiality which prevent a coach working with some people (for example, if they know the person’s boss socially) but generally a coach, whatever their personality or beliefs, should be able to work with more or less everyone. I have met coaches who are very keen to work with specific types of clients but the problem they face is not knowing in advance what a person will be like. I have found that after several sessions, we begin to uncover values or resourcefulness that were absolutely not in evidence at the beginning. At other times, coaches can be slightly in awe of their clients. Again, I have found that once we are into the coaching, the most confident individuals unearth worries or perceived inadequacies that are disabling and which become burdensome. So the coach needs to stay open enough to accept a wide range of clients and to receive new insights or information as the coaching proceeds.

### **Look for the best**

Positive psychology is about what works and the positive coach looks for and fosters the best in themselves and their clients. They adhere to the underpinning coaching principle that clients are resourceful people and are not in need of curing or fixing, so they see their role as helping clients seek out their best self, the self who is able to know what they want and work towards it. The



positive research on strengths and mindset are fundamental here. Many clients work hard and successfully in areas that drain them of energy and which they would love to leave. Others hold back talents they have because of limiting beliefs or fears. I coached a person recently who had discovered in mid-life a powerful skill in presenting both face-to-face and through the media. He had developed because someone believed in him, encouraged him and acknowledged when he did well.

### **Hang in**

Barbara Fredrickson and other positive psychologists have shown how resilience can be cultivated. This is fundamental for coach and coachee. Clients deal with some significant issues in their coaching and at times the coach will experience strong reactions. I remember one client with whom I started to feel very angry, and another who, at one stage I felt strong dislike for. When a person has a strong reaction to another person or situation which seems out of keeping with their normal reactions, this may be what the Gestaltists call 'projection'. This is experienced when a person does not fully own something about themselves and the way forward is for the coach to notice it and consider (perhaps between sessions) what it is that they need to accept. The client I was angry with was consistently late for appointments in every part of his life – including his coaching. I was livid when he arrived late for the third time – so much so that I could not even mention it. I realized that I too am late fairly often (although not for coaching) and, having accepted that about myself, I was able to address the issue with him but without the emotional baggage and in his interests rather than mine.

Another time to hang in is when a client seems to be attacking you. Occasionally they will say something like: 'I'm getting nowhere despite all this cost!' or 'You're not giving me any answers!' Several of my panel have found themselves feeling under attack. But in every case, it was the client's own frustration coming out. It would have been a mistake to interpret the words as directed primarily at the coach. Rather than reacting defensively, the experienced coach gets curious and explores what the strength of feeling is really about. They can then work with the client to deepen understanding and identify steps forward.

### **Build the relationship**

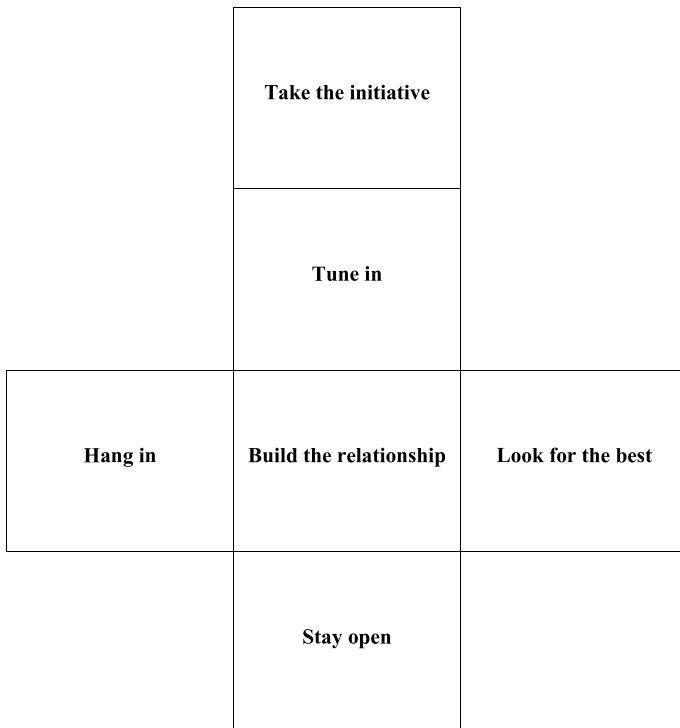
Martin Seligman (2003) has shown the importance of healthy relationships to human well-being and happiness. In coaching, even the smartest techniques or cleverest questions have no use if there is not a relationship between coach and coachee. And, although the coach and coachee roles are different, the relationship needs to be two-way. I began my coaching life seeing myself as somehow outside the coaching arena – that I needed to be objective and stay

out of the issue. That is fine, but in my case it led to a lack of empathy and of real connection with clients. Once I decided to get more involved, to bring my real strengths, my full person to the coaching, for example, my humour, my inquisitiveness and my spontaneity, there was a step-change in the quality of my work. My clients responded to my greater authenticity by being more themselves in return and therefore were better able to explore issues and find steps which fitted their own character strengths and aspirations.

## The positivity cube

Sometimes as a coach or as a client you just don't know what to do next. In such cases, random chance can be a good way to make a choice. So here's a positive way based on the six guidelines outlined above: make up this cube in Figure 11.1. Copy the page, cut it out and glue it together to make a cube. Then, when you get stuck, name the question, and throw the dice.

Do whatever it tells you. Use your imagination.



**Figure 11.1** The positivity cube

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# Index

- Achievement, 9  
Attribution, 36–38  
Authenticity, 110  
Autonomy, 9, 41
- Balance wheel, 93  
Biswas-Diener, R. 6, 95  
Body, 53  
Buckingham, M., 14  
Bull, J., 82  
Burke, W. W., 23, 65
- Centre for Applied Positive Psychology  
(CAPP), 1, 2, 13, 14, 51  
Change, 98  
Choice, 7  
Clifton, D., 14  
Climate, 23  
Collins, J., 57, 67, 106  
Covey, S., 53  
Csikszentmihalyi, M., 6, 89–90, 109,  
125, 127  
Culture, coaching culture, 95
- De Bono, E., 20  
Delle Fave, A., 98–99  
Diener, E., 2, 6, 95, 130  
Drucker, P., 83  
Dweck, C., 6, 29, 34, 37, 66, 108
- Efficacy, self-efficacy, 39, 102  
Emotion, 4, 45, 47, 55, 110, 115–121  
Energy, 10, 52  
Expectations, 82
- Feedback, 75–76, 107  
Flow, 125–128  
Frankl, V., 6, 122  
Fredrickson, B., 6, 45, 47–48, 50, 97, 115,  
119, 120, 121, 140
- Gestalt, 91, 116, 140  
Gladwell, M., 31, 60–61, 105  
Goals, 35, 40, 75, 79–94, 112  
Goffee, R. & Jones, G., 74, 96, 104  
Goleman, D., 23, 62  
Growth, 5
- Halpern, D., 2, 100  
Happiness, 2, 3, 128–130  
Helplessness, 123  
Hersey, P. & Blanchard, K., 73  
Hoffman Process, 53  
Hope, 51, 102  
Humility, 106–107
- Intention, 43
- Johnson, G. & Scholes, K., 97, 98, 101
- Leadership, 23, 49, 57–71, 72–78, 98, 99  
Linley, A., 1, 6, 13, 14, 17, 34, 61,  
64, 120  
Litwin, G. & Stringer, R., 23
- Management, 57–71  
Meaning, 122  
Memory, 116–117  
Mind, 53  
Mindfulness, 48, 109, 116  
Mindset, 5, 28–44, 105, 112  
Mintzberg, H., 60, 61  
Motivation, 33, 35, 79, 83, 86  
Myers Briggs Type Indicator®, 32, 33
- Optimism, 102, 123–124
- Performance management, 47  
Personality, 136–137  
Positivity, 3, 4, 48, 77  
Prehn, A., 7

- Present moment, 48, 108, 109, 130
- Priming, 43, 52
- Psychological capital, 101–104, 127
- Psychometric questionnaires, 136–138
- Questions, 76
- Realise 2 questionnaire, 17–18, 63, 90
- Relationships, 2, 5, 8
- Resilience, 5, 45–56, 102
- Resourcefulness, 49, 101, 102, 116
- Roger, D., 110
- Rogers, J., 31, 100, 101, 107, 111, 125
- Role model, 113
- Savouring, 118
- Self-concordance, 86–88
- Self-development, 112
- Self-impositions, 91
- Seligman, M., 1, 2, 6, 13, 14, 24, 68, 120, 123, 125, 126, 128–129, 140
- Sheldon, K., 34, 35, 39, 80, 83, 88
- Social capital, 100
- Spirit, 54
- Strengths, 2, 4, 12–27, 113
- Strenghts Finder, 14
- Supervision, 114
- Syed, M., 31, 39, 105
- Tagney, J., 106
- Values, 14, 82
- Values in Action, 15, 63
- Wagnild, G., 46
- Well-being, 1
- Whitmore, J., 75, 111
- Wong, P., 122, 123
- Youssef, C. & Luthans, F., 102
- Zenger, J. and Folkman, J., 27, 57–58





## Coaching Positively

### Lessons for Coaches from Positive Psychology

Coaching is a positive practice which focuses on building people's resourcefulness and positive beliefs about themselves. Recent research into positive psychology supports and builds upon current coaching practice and also refines it. This straightforward, practical book brings together:

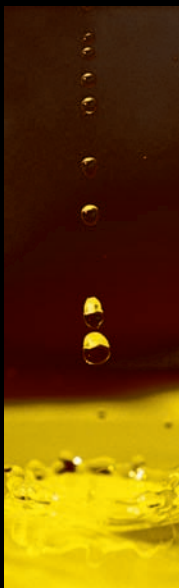
- Substantial psychological research
- The author's experience of coaching and the practice of many other coaches
- Examples from coaching clients that show what has worked best for them
- The importance of relationships, autonomy and achievement in the coaching process

Like many other coaches, managers and consultants, Matt Driver has found this relatively new field to be inspiring and to offer practical insights into his work. It is proving to be of enormous value to people who are interested in what works rather than what does not and who aim to fulfil themselves by developing their natural strengths.

**Whether you are a coach or a line manager, learning the skills or commissioning coaching for others, you will find this book adds to your knowledge of current practice and gives you a range of practical tools and techniques that will have an immediate impact.**

**Matt Driver** has been an executive coach, a tutor and a supervisor to other coaches for 12 years. With considerable experience across the public and private sectors, working with people from different countries and from many cultures, Matt brings a strong hands-on approach to complement his academic focus in business and psychology.

**Jenny Rogers** (series editor) is a writer, management consultant and executive coach who has advised both industry leaders and young people on their careers.



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