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Positive psychology coaching – a model for coaching practice

Jonathan Pasmore and Lindsay Oades

Abstract

This is the first in a series of papers to look at positive psychology coaching (PPC) as an approach suitable for use with coaching clients. This paper presents a brief overview of PPC for readers who are less familiar with the approach and highlights other sources for a fuller account of PPC. The paper sets the scene for a subsequent series of papers in this and future issues within the Coaching Psychology Techniques Section. Each of these subsequent techniques papers presents a short description of a technique grounded in PPC and which are suitable for use with coachees.

Keywords:

Coaching; coaching psychology; positive psychology coaching model and applied positive psychology.

The background - Positive Psychology Coaching

Positive psychology has been referred to as the science at the heart of coaching (Kaufmann, et al. 2010). While other approaches in active use by coaching psychologists, including motivational interviewing, (referred to in a set of earlier papers in this journal – *The Coaching Psychologist*) have a strong evidence base, Positive psychology coaching (PPC) is becoming an increasingly popular coaching methods used by coaching psychologists, and others alike, under a range of titles including PPC, evidence based coaching (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007) or strengths coaching (Govindji & Linley, 2007).

Whilst these approaches overlap, our specific focus in this paper is on Positive Psychology Coaching (PCC).

What is PPC? We have defined PPC as:

“coaching approaches that seek to improve short term wellbeing (i.e. hedonic wellbeing) and sustainable wellbeing (i.e. eudaimonic wellbeing) using evidence based approaches from positive psychology and the science of wellbeing- and enable the person to do this in an on-going manner after coaching has completed” (Oades & Passmore, 2014).

Short-term (hedonic) wellbeing can be seen as similar to cash flow. That is, it is something great to have, but which is short term in nature and can easily be gone if there is not a longer-term supply. In contrast, Sustainable (eudaimonic) wellbeing can be viewed as an asset. It can be built or lost over a longer timeframe, and also impacts upon cash-flow. These analogies may also be useful to coachees and clients when collaboratively discussing aspects of wellbeing, which are often outside of the language and understanding of the average manager.

Underlying PPC are four key positive psychological theories; strengths theory (Proctor, Maltby et al. 2011), broaden and build theory (Frederickson, 2009), self-determination theory (Spence & Oades, 2012) and wellbeing theory (Seligman, 2011).

Strengths theory (ST) is perhaps better considered a family of theories, or a unifying proposition, as opposed to a single theory. The central proposition is that people will perform, feel and function better if they are using their strengths. For this reason, strengths researchers and practitioners have developed strengths assessment tools, to assist people to gain knowledge of their strengths, and then use their own strengths and spot strengths in others.

Broaden-and-build theory (BBT) was primarily developed to seek answers to the question “what is the function of positive emotion?” (Frederickson, 1998, & 2001). The broaden-and-build theory proposes that experiences of positive emotions broadens people’s momentary thought-action repertoires- that is the menu of choices of thinking and acting is broader when a person is experiencing positive emotions. In turn, the theory holds that the aim should be to build enduring personal resources including physical, intellectual, social and psychological resources. Fredrickson’s (2009) has suggested one route to doing this is through providing positive feedback in a ration equal or higher than three positives to one negative.

Self-determination theory (SDT), sometimes referred to as meta-theory, is a set of theories that examine the effects of different types of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The sub-theories are Basic Needs Theory, Cognitive Evaluation Theory, Organismic Integration Theory, Causality Orientations Theory, Relationships Motivation Theory and Goal Contents Theory. SDT is a needs theory that argues that there are three universal psychological needs: (a) autonomy; (b) relatedness; and (c) competency. As a result, people need to make their own choices, connect with others and feel competent as they exercise and grow their capacities. The theory proposes that if these three needs are met, a person will have increased autonomous motivation, leading to greater perseverance at tasks, particularly at tasks set or imposed on them, such as at work.

The fourth, and final theory of the set, is Wellbeing Theory (WT). Wellbeing theory is sometimes referred to simply as PERMA theory. It suggests that there are five domains of life that both constitute and which may be instruments in developing wellbeing. The five components are **Positive Emotions, Engagement, (Positive) Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. Exploring Positive psychology coaching**

The increasing popularity of PPC has seen a number of excellent texts emerge including books and individual chapters aimed at practitioners and advanced practitioners from writers such as Kate Hefferon (Hefferon, 2011), Ilona Boniwell and Carol Kauffman (Kauffman, Boniwell, & Silberman, 2010), Teresa Freire (Freire, 2013) and Ed Biswas-Diener (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

We have summarized some of these in Table 1.

Table 1: PPC books and chapters

Books	Book chapters
Driver, M. (2011) <i>Coaching Positively</i> . Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). <i>Practicing positive psychology coaching</i> Biswas-Diener, R. & Dean, B. (2007). <i>Positive psychology coaching: Putting the science of happiness to work for your clients</i> .	Hefferon, K. (2011) Positive psychology Kauffman, C., I. Boniwell, & Silberman, J. (2010). The positive psychology approach to coaching. Oades, L. & Passmore, J. (2014). Positive Psychology Coaching. Freire, T. (2013). Positive Psychology Approaches.

Applying Positive psychology theory to coaching psychology practice

Some critics may argue that positive psychology has been dominated by theory, and insights into psychological make-up. However it has failed to apply these theories into practical solutions, when compared to other approaches such as Cognitive Behavioural Coaching or even Motivational Interviewing.

We would suggest that coaching psychology is in fact applied positive psychology theory. In short, coaching psychology is where the rubber of positive psychology theory, hits the road of organisational and health practice. Positive psychology theories have been translated by coaching psychologists into practical techniques that can be used in organisations.

In the following papers in the techniques series of *The Coaching Psychologist* (TCP) we have taken a selection of techniques and illustrated how these techniques can be used by coaching psychologists in their day-to-day coaching sessions.

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