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How coaching helps leadership resilience: The leadership perspective.

Abstract

Objectives	Resilience has grown as a topic of interest to coaches and increases in resilience as a result of specific coaching programmes are often reported (Grant, Curtayne & Burton, 2009). However the perspective of the coached leaders has remained largely unexplored. This study seeks to gain the leadership perspective on two key areas. Firstly to assess if existing coaching might already be affecting resilience, despite that not being a contracted objective. Secondly, to identify what aspects of coaching might be most influential in leadership resilience.
Design	The study was positioned in the pragmatic paradigm using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). Interview data was gathered from eight senior managers who had previously had coaching. Analysis was based on the grounded theory coding approach using NVivo software.
Methods	Eight leaders volunteered to be interviewed on the topic of resilience and had to have completed a programme of coaching at least one year prior to data collection. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews asked about the coaching that they had received and if they felt it had affected their resilience.
Results	The results indicated that leaders did perceive coaching to have affected their resilience, even if this was not a defined objective for the coaching. In addition leaders reported that coaching helped in five ways. It helped them reclaim their self-belief, it contributed to their learning, it helped them see the wider perspective, it provided a supportive relationship and gave them a thinking space.
Conclusion	Leaders often came to coaching as the result of facing a challenge and experienced significant experiential learning in relation to their resilience as a by product of coaching. While the development of certain cognitive strategies proved helpful, participants expressed the importance of the supportive coaching relationship during times of challenge where resilience was required. This questions how far resilience can be enhanced as a proactive preventative approach through training. Recommendations are made to support coaches when dealing with leaders in a resilience context.
Keywords	Resilience, leadership coaching, confidence

Introduction

Resilience has traditionally been studied within the developmental (Benard, 1993, Masten & Reed, 2005) and clinical arena (Friborg, Barlaug, Martinussen, Rosenvinge, & Hjemdal, 2005) but has more recently entered the organisational literature as a key attribute in dealing with rapidly changing and challenging situations. In organisational settings much of the existing work is based in military or nursing contexts (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004, Bartone, 2006, Maddi, 2007) and deals with adversity and coping skills. However there has been increasing interest in promoting resilience to a wider organisational population. Luthans (2002:702) proposes that resilience is one of four essential psychological capabilities (PsyCap) for any successful leader, in addition to hope, optimism and confidence. Resilience in this model is defined as “the capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure, or even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility”. The PsyCap model suggests that leadership resilience can be enhanced through personal growth and that such learning will contribute to wider organisational resilience. As a consequence of such interest, enhancing resilience through coaching has become a focus of some interest in the literature (Sherlock-Storey, Moss & Timson, 2013, Palmer, 2013)

Literature Review

There is growing evidence that coaching can enhance resilience. Sherlock-Storey et al. (2013) used a ‘brief and structured, skills based coaching approach’ and found increased levels of resilience as measured by the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2007). This study asserts that ‘coaching builds resilience’ but the quantitative approach employed gives little detail on what might have been the

most significant aspects of the coaching that contributed to the reported change. As a consequence, it is unclear if alternative conceptions of coaching which are less structured would have had a similar effect. Given the breadth of alternative approaches to coaching it would be valuable to understand the specific components of coaching that were felt to affect resilience.

Grant, Curtayne & Burton, (2009) also reported increases in resilience following a ten week Solution-Focussed Coaching programme for health care managers. Again, it is unclear *how* the change was achieved. The programme used a Cognitive-Behavioural Approach and resilience was measured using the Cognitive Hardiness Scale (Nowack, 1990). It is interesting to note that this study was not designed specifically to enhance resilience and yet an increase in resilience was measured. The aim of the program was 'to develop the leadership and management capability of executives and senior managers' (Grant et al., 2009:398). For the coaching profession this raises an interesting issue about the broader impact of coaching and the potential for unintended consequences. Given these findings, it is likely that much existing coaching is already affecting resilience but has not been overtly measured as an outcome.

One possible reason for the reported effect of coaching on resilience is the extensive overlap between methods used in coaching and those proposed to promote resilience. A cognitive behavioural methodology is a common approach in coaching (Williams, Edgerton & Palmer, 2010) and Neenan (2009) asserts that individuals can learn to deal with adversity through learning the application of such cognitive behavioural techniques. Neenan (2009) proposes using this cognitive focus to enhance resilience by developing a set of core strengths: high frustration tolerance, self-acceptance and the ability to keep things in perspective. A cognitive approach is also used by the Penn Resiliency Program (Seligman, 2011) teaching people to 'think like optimists'. Evidence

from this program supports the idea that resilience can be 'taught' through training. Adapting the cognitive behavioural approach to the coaching context, Palmer (2013) suggests a role for 'Resilience Enhancing Imagery' in coaching. It is proposed this can enhance self-efficacy to 'assist in building up confidence prior, during or after challenging events' (p50).

The cognitive approach linked with a positive psychology focus was also the basis for the Promoting Adult Resilience Program (PAR), (Millear, Liopsis, Shochet, Biggs & Donald, 2008). The PAR program is a 'strengths-based resilience building program that integrates interpersonal and cognitive-behaviour therapy perspectives' (p215). The programme was designed for the workplace context to 'promote mental health and individual resilience'. Short group training sessions over an 11 week period saw a reported rise in coping self-efficacy that was maintained six months after completion of the programme. The participants on this programme rated learning positive self-talk as the most valuable skill learned, which is also commonly used in the coaching context. The authors conclude that resilience can be taught in the workplace as a preventative intervention.

The evidence therefore suggests that resilience can be enhanced proactively in the working context through approaches that are also common in coaching. Coaching may therefore be a valuable route for enhancing resilience as a preventative strategy to support those in challenging contexts. Using coaching may present a number of benefits over and above the training option. Firstly, personal coaching offers the opportunity for a confidential and private discussion that may be more conducive to open discussion about difficulties. Thus, issues that might require working in the resilience domain may be more likely to surface. Secondly, coaching is often delivered in a proactive context to enhance skills. A recent meta-analysis of resilience literature

suggests that enhancing protective factors such as self-efficacy, positive affect and self-esteem may be more effective than reducing risk factors such as anxiety (Lee, Nam, Kim, Kim, Lee & Lee, 2013). This means that working proactively on preventative attributes may be more beneficial to resilience than attempting to reduce anxiety through such approaches as 'stress management' training. Coaching for resilience may also gain more engagement from the management population, than interventions aimed at stress reduction as they are seen as more acceptable (Palmer, 2013).

Coaching therefore appears to be having an impact on resilience already based on a number of measures but it is unclear how this is being achieved. While a number of quantitative approaches suggest a role for coaching, there is little which adds the coachee perspective to this body of work. This study will address this gap with an initial exploration of what leaders perceive to be the role of coaching in supporting their resilience.

Aim

The aim of this study was twofold. Firstly to assess if existing coaching might already be affecting resilience, despite that not being a contracted objective. It is important to understand what effect coaching is having on our clients and the literature suggests that at present resilience may be an unintended outcome of coaching. While some might see this as a positive additional coaching contribution, it suggests that coaches are not aware of the consequences of their interventions. This presents two potential issues: The first is that coaches may stray into areas beyond their competence by using approaches that open up domains they were not expecting: The second is that coaches could find themselves working in the personal resilience space that is beyond the contracted objectives that may be seen as inappropriate or unnecessary by the client or sponsor.

The second aim of this study was to identify what aspects of coaching might be most influential in leadership resilience. There is significant overlap in the approaches used in coaching and resilience training, however coaching approaches vary widely. The objective is to identify specific aspects of coaching that are most pertinent to the development of resilience. This will be valuable information to inform coaches who wish to enhance resilience.

Methodology

Paradigm

This research was conducted within a pragmatic paradigm. 'Pragmatism is not committed to any one system or philosophy and reality' (Cresswell, 2003:12). Fishman (1999) likens it to using different pairs of glasses, and glasses are chosen according to which pair 'is most useful in meeting our particular, practical goals in that situation' (p83). The aim of this research was to provide knowledge and understanding to inform the practice of coaching in relation to resilience. It therefore provided an appropriate paradigm for the practical and applied nature of the problem under investigation.

While there is significant work on resilience there is no coherent theory that addressed the leadership perspective on this existing phenomenon. The aim was therefore to build a theoretical model based in existing practice which led to grounded theory (GT) as a potential methodology. Grounded theory has been proposed as a valuable approach to investigate leadership (Kempster & Parry, 2011) because it can 'produce a social theory of a particular phenomenon from the relational experiences of participants' (p108). Charmaz (2006:6) proposes that grounded theory can produce

some 'explanatory theoretical frameworks, thereby providing abstract, conceptual understanding of the studied phenomena'. GT therefore was expected to help explicate the leadership perspective on the role of coaching in resilience and thus inform coaching practice.

Suddaby (2006) has described GT as a 'pragmatic approach' and most suited 'to efforts to understand the process by which actors construct meaning out of inter-subjective experience' (p634). 'Usefulness' is also highlighted as a key element for a GT study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This alignment with usefulness and the construction of meaning showed a clear synergy with the pragmatic paradigm within which this research was positioned leading to GT as the adopted methodology.

Participants

The participants were eight senior leaders (department manager to chief executive) across both private and public sector organisations in the UK. None of the participants were known to the researcher prior to the interview. All eight leaders were aged between 35 and 65, and comprised of two females and six males. They were recruited using a snowballing approach through coaches. All participants had taken part in a formal coaching programme with seven different coaches. However no specific coaching approach was stated as a requirement (e.g. Cognitive-Behavioural) so that findings were not limited to a single coaching paradigm. The aim was to collect information from the coachee perspective so it was important to gather personal descriptors rather than bound the findings within the language of one specific coaching paradigm. Participants had completed their coaching more than one year prior to data collection. This delay was felt to be important so that experiences to test resilience were more likely to have taken place. To ask questions about resilience too soon after any intervention may have resulted in conjecture rather than experiences on which to base their responses.

Procedure

All participants volunteered to take part following a recommendation from a practicing coach, who may not have been their own coach. After they received the Participant Information Sheet they were contacted to ask if they were still prepared to take part. The first eight affirmative responses were recruited as participants.

A mutually convenient time and location was arranged for a one hour interview. This interview asked for their understanding and experiences of resilience and then requested specific information about the coaching they had received and if they perceived any relationship to their resilience. If there was a perceived relationship, the interview went on to discuss which aspects of their coaching they felt had made the difference.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed with pseudonyms used throughout. Data was analysed in line with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) using NVivo software. Initial open coding was followed by focused and axial coding revealing five emergent themes.

All data collection and storage was in line with ethical procedures and frameworks required by Oxford Brookes University.

Reflexivity

The researcher came to the research with no preconceived ideas of what might emerge, however as Morgan (2007:69) states:

'research questions are not inherently "important," and methods are not automatically "appropriate." Instead, it is we ourselves who make the choices about what is important and what is appropriate, and those choices inevitably involve aspects of our personal history, social background, and cultural assumptions'

It should therefore be noted that a single researcher conducted the research and analysis which may lead to a particular perspective on the interview data. However, even without an initial position there remains a danger that the first interview might colour all those that follow, so the challenge for the researcher is more generic; how to avoid formulating and testing any potential hypothesis wherever it originated, even if unconsciously. Here the need for reflexivity and awareness is vital to reliable data. To minimise such effects reflexivity and memos were used together with constant comparison, being sensitive to multiple meanings (McLeod, 2001) in an effort to ensure quality.

Results

All respondents reported that they felt coaching had enhanced their perceived resilience. Five overarching themes emerged that described how participants felt this was achieved.

1. Reclaim my self-belief
2. Learning
3. Seeing wider perspective
4. Supportive relationship
5. Thinking space

In analysing these emergent five themes there was significant interaction and overlap between them. As a result they can be represented as overlapping elements, as shown in Fig.1.

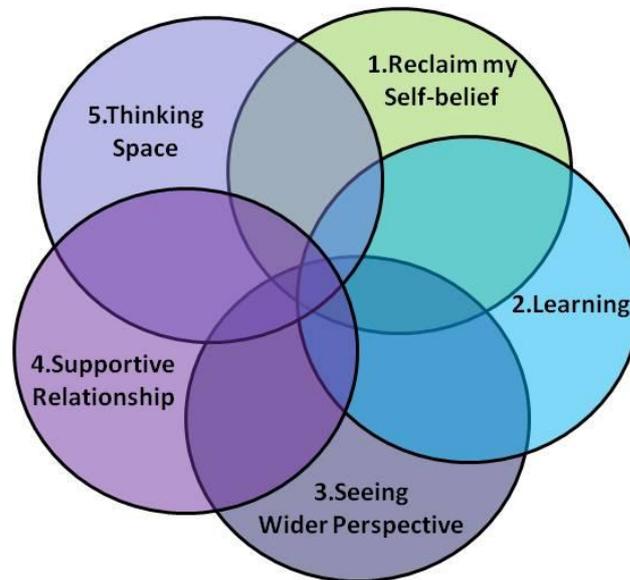


Fig. 1 - How Coaching Helped – Five elements

1 - Reclaim my self-belief

This theme reflected feelings the leaders had about themselves and seemed to imply having lost something they once had, this manifests as self-doubt. This self-doubt made leaders question their own judgement and there was a clear implication that coaching helped them feel validated. Jack explains how he no longer trusted his own judgement and that vocalizing with a coach helped gain clarity.

I think part of how the coaching helped, you're sort of bouncing ideas off and thinking, well actually these don't seem like total nonsense, they are quite coherent, quite consistent, there's a logical strand to them.I suppose you do get a sense of validation or clarity really, because you realise yourself, oh yes, that probably is a good idea or no, it's not the right time for that, or it's not a priority. {Jack}

This example suggests validation for ideas. There were also examples of validation of perceptions or courses of action. Validation of feelings was also important for some

leaders, and was supported by the coach effectively giving permission for their feelings, as expressed by Rachel.

I think it's important to have someone say, "It's okay to feel like you do. It's understandable that you feel like you do." {Rachel}

Once leaders gained a sense that their thinking was still sound and it was both acceptable and logical to feel as they did, they were open to a realisation that the situation was not always their fault. It may be because leaders are so used to exercising control and taking responsibility that they adopt responsibility for the difficulties they are facing. Yet the coach is able to help them step outside that position, and separate themselves from the situation.

... it's that business of looking at yourself and realising that actually it's not all you, it's largely the environment and things like that..... because there is a tendency to think the situation is down to me. Being able to step back from that a little to say well okay perhaps I am contributing in these areas, but actually this is a pretty bad situation, it would be a pretty bad situation regardless of who was sitting here, is quite a useful discussion. {Brian}

The descriptions give the impression that leaders can almost lose their ability to evaluate themselves as separate from the organisation and lose their individual worth. They become part of the system and no longer feel they have worth outside that system. They often describe it as having lost confidence or self-belief as Brian went on to describe.

And strangely enough you have to have certain amounts of self-confidence to go and look for another job for a start, and self-belief, and I had almost got to the point of thinking, 'well if I can't cope with this job why should I look for another one', which is a slightly daft approach, but never mind. You need to be able to step back and look at yourself and look at the situation [...] and I think a good coach helps you do that, and that's quite a powerful part of it. {Brian}

Working with a coach therefore starts to replace this confidence that had somehow been lost. However the clearest indication that this confidence was 'reclaimed' under certain conditions came from James who explained how the coach was able to 'bring back that inner self':

So if you're faced with a dilemma, if you're faced with a question, if you're faced with a direction of where you're going to go, you often have that inner self who talks to you, don't you? You say, "Should I really be doing this?" and then that inner self says, "Yeah of course you should, you should go for it, it'll be great." I think if you don't have any resilience that inner voice suddenly disappears you don't hear it and I think that's almost what I got from [coach] was to bring back that inner self who would question me and say, "You don't need to be so worried. Get out there, stand proud, this happens to everybody." {James}

So the coaching enabled leaders to regain a self-belief that they had temporarily lost that contributed to their resilience in dealing with difficult situations. This resonates with previous research that identifies how important a supportive relationship can be in building aspects of the self (Wilson & Ferch, 2005).

2 - Learning

Throughout the interviews leaders explained how much coaching had contributed to their learning long term. As explained by George.

I think for each and every session that I had with [coach] there was stuff that I would take away and it has now become part of [...] the way that you dealt with things. {George}

Leaders refer to learning about specific topics or situations but also learnt a great deal about themselves. This self-learning helped support self-acceptance, or instigated the motivation to change. For example, one leader began to appreciate that others do not expect 100% accuracy, so he became more accepting of his own failings and started to work on changing his approach to tasks.

The biggest thing of all and I still struggle with this was the 80/20 rule is good enough. You don't have to do everything to 100%. And she made me practise, and it's a hard thing to do things to a lower standard than you'd normally do and I really struggle. {Mark}

This shows a clear overlap in how learning can support the reclaiming of self-belief. His self-belief was predicated on perfectionism that was not sustainable. Learning this about himself helped him see what needed to change.

For Mark this self awareness went hand in hand with the adoption and application of resilience strategies. He started to appreciate how to recognise the triggers that signalled a need to use a particular tool or technique.

I thought I was resilient before, I feel now that that was a fairly brittle resilience, that was fine if I could just keep powering through, I think I've now got many more tools in the toolkit to enable me to do that and also to recognise when I need to get some of them out. The first step I think is recognising it as an issue. It's as simple as that, recognising that resilience is an issue and however strong I am, I'm going to need my own time to rest, relax, recover, recharge. {Mark}

The coaching therefore contributed to the development of resilience through the application of tools, self insight and awareness that came together to create a far more holistic change in the individual that often went far beyond the component parts, as explained by Rachel.

So there have been moments where I've had coaching with [coach] where I've had a real sort of duh, and those are things I can hold on to, they're not just about that, they're about something much bigger.....but noticing more is the biggest one, because that is kind of a way of being. {Rachel}

The perception of enhanced resilience is therefore not just based on specific learning but rather a more integrated development that enables leaders to be in the world in a different way.

Learning therefore happens in a number of ways. Leaders learn about others, about situations, and about tools and techniques. Interestingly, very limited reference was made to specific tools, it seemed more important to learn about themselves, this contributed to their self-belief, so they ultimately develop in a more holistic way.

3 - Seeing wider perspective

The ability of the coach to help see the wider picture was a vital coaching contribution that helped avoid the 'tunnel vision' described by Jack.

[coach] helped me to question and identify priorities, reprioritise things in my own mind and look at things from a slightly different angle than I

wouldn't naturally on my own. [...] so talking to the coach, I suppose kept me aware of the need to not get tunnel vision. {Jack}

Participants reported being able to step out of the situation and through these wider perspectives, stimulate new ideas and consider implications as explained by George.

*....the ability to see it from other people's perspectives, and the role of coaching, would be to throw up those kind of questions
sometimes, some of the suggestions that I came up with, even if I didn't act on them, made me feel like I knew I had that course of action open to me, broadened my horizons in terms of thinking about the problem.
{George}*

By contributing wider perspectives the coaching is still supporting learning as the individual learns how to adopt another point of view. This other point of view extends to the view they have of themselves, thus supporting the re-building of self-belief. By seeing their own performance from another perspective they can start to appreciate they are not as incompetent as they may feel.

One of the most perceptive explanations of how this alternative perspective manifests came from Rachel. She likened pressure to 'getting trapped' on the dance-floor in a night club, unable to get back onto the balcony. So the role of the coach was to enable her to gain distance, and see the bigger picture.

..... it's feeling unable to get back onto the balcony. It's when you've got trapped on the dance floor in a fast salsa or something. There is a sense that you know something more is required of you and you can't find quite what it is. {Rachel}

This may lend support to the view that pressure results in a narrowing of focus as in the model of dynamic affect (Zautra, Affleck, Tennen, Reich & Davis, 2005). In a leadership context this results in an effective paralysis and a failure to see a way forward which may be due to the inability to gain distance on the issue. A similar effect would be predicted by the 'broaden and build' theory where a lack of positive emotion created by pressure would reduce creative possibilities (Fredrickson, 2009). Yet, coaching seems to help the individual regain perspective on the issue and may cause a reverse effect. Whereas positive emotion is said to enhance creativity and generate a wider

perspective, perhaps the reverse is also possible: Creating a wider perspective through coaching generates positive emotion. Alternatively, it may be that the generation of ideas supported by the wider perspective taking builds hope as suggested by Snyder, Rand & Sigmon (2005) in Hope Theory. Such potential mechanisms might be fruitful areas for future investigation.

The coach therefore encourages a wider perspective and in so doing contributes to learning how to adopt another point of view that may reveal new ideas. This can also bring a new perspective to individual strengths and weaknesses that support self-belief.

4 - Supportive relationship

When elaborating on the coaching contribution to resilience, participants often talked of providing a sounding board and the value of having an outsider to talk to. This perceived neutrality and impartiality was vital in creating a safe environment, as explained by Jack.

Because sometimes when things are very complex, it's helpful to have that external sounding board, to help clarify your ideas....., getting good coaching, takes you out of the data that you are in, puts you into a context which is neutral, non-threatening, and not directly connected to work, and allows you to then think through what's going on in the other context, in a fairly safe environment. And I think that's the key.
{Jack}

This concept of a safe environment meant leader participants could obtain honest feedback that they found valuable, because the coach could highlight potential issues without creating tension. The supportive relationship created a trusting and safe space that allowed honest or challenging feedback to be discussed which was vital to being able to see the wider perspective. This helped leaders become aware of their own errors or shortcomings when seen from a different perspective. It enabled true feelings to be disclosed and acknowledged, that created candid reflection on the situation. This safe environment also made it acceptable to disclose feelings which could not be shared with others. James explained how honest disclosure was difficult with family or

friends, *'But with somebody like [coach] who is divorced from the whole thing, it's much easier to communicate what you're really feeling.'* {James}

Therefore the coach contributed emotional support but in a unique way that could not be provided by family or individuals within the organisation. By virtue of being outside the system, the coach was seen as neutral and this gave the coach significant credibility. Because the coach has no relationship or vested interest, their opinion is given more weight than a family member who is seen as partisan and just trying to make you feel better.

You might have a family member who would say that to you as well, but I think hearing it from somebody who gets paid to coach lots and lots of different people, and to improve and expand their comfort zones carried a different weight..... He was just inquisitive 'what are you going to do.....what's your next move?' and that really was deep down coaching for resilience, but it didn't feel like it. It just felt like someone I could talk to, who was just divorced from everything and somebody that I trusted. {James}

But leaders also drew attention to this being a unique relationship because of the ability to focus on 'yourself' which leaders rarely get the chance to do.

A coaching relationship is about you, and there aren't very many relationships that you have, that are focused around yourself. Certainly not that I have anyway. And so, that's quite unique as well, because most of the time when you're discussing – it's focused about something else. {Brian}

In times of difficulty the power of narrative has been shown to confer unique benefits that may account for the processes at work here (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2005). Niederhoffer and Pennebaker (2005) highlight that 'not talking about emotional upheaval was ultimately unhealthy' (p575) because suppression of these thoughts or emotions, required physiological work, reflected in central nervous system activity. However, expressing this emotion in verbal form seems to confer benefits above and beyond other expressive mediums such as dance or art. It appears that simply 'letting go' of these emotions through art or music does not show the equivalent health outcomes seen as a result of expressive writing. The processes proposed to account

for the increased benefit of verbal expression rely on two factors. Firstly, in order to construct a coherent narrative that can be conveyed to another person the individual needs to order events that give a sense of control. Secondly, once formed, this narrative can be 'summarised, stored and ultimately forgotten' (p576). These cognitive processes give a sense of meaning and closure to potentially difficult events.

In order to tell the story to a coach the leader is therefore engaged in cognitive meaning making that is, in itself, a valuable process to reduce the emotional impact, but telling the story then reduced the physiological strain caused by inhibition. Once the story is created and told it is suggested that this brings a secondary benefit in creating social connection. Without the ability to communicate and tell the story to others the individual is likely to become isolated as explained by Niederhoffer and Pennebaker (2005).

'Suppressing thoughts on a daily basis is a large cognitive load, making it difficult to organise thoughts about the event and to make sense of what happened. Thus, the keeper of the secret is more guarded, and the surrounding people who will be unaware of the individual's thoughts and feelings cannot offer sympathy or help. As a result, the individual becomes more isolated' (p577).

This effect was seen in this study as leaders often described disconnection as a key characteristic of not being resilient. Therefore the coaching relationship may provide a unique way to reduce the cognitive load created by inhibition. The coaching relationship can, in one place, remove the inhibition by allowing emotion to be expressed, facilitate the building of a coherent story by being available to listen and provide a form of social support reducing the sense of isolation.

5 - Thinking space

The last theme that emerged was 'thinking space' that expressed the value of dedicated reflection. Jack reflected a common view that coaching enabled reflection

and thinking. Having this dedicated time was seen as important to the process of making sense of the situation.

I think that came out of talking it through, and reflecting, and refining things in my own mind.....[.] I suppose you set aside time to problem solve to a certain extent, whereas you might just be thinking, that it might be flowing in and out of your mind, whereas if you set discrete time aside to focus on things, it helps to move your thinking forward.
{Jack}

This lack of reflective time is compounded for leaders who often feel they cannot take time for themselves, so coaching allows them protected time as expressed by Amanda. Having this dedicated thinking time seemed to support meta-reflection that helped her analyse and observe her own thinking.

And I think it just made me think about why was I thinking like that, [...] So it made me look at myself and think, well actually you wouldn't get to where you were if other people thought that you couldn't do the job, so why is it now that you're thinking you can't do the job? So I think it made me think more, and take time for me. {Amanda}

This quote clearly shows a widening of perspective that contributes to her learning and is starting to help her reclaim her sense of self-belief, demonstrating the interaction between the themes.

This thinking space is consistently explained as valuable, yet it is clear that leaders rarely engage in this alone, and for some, like Rachel, this would not be an effective strategy as she highlights the benefits of using a coach to aid reflection.

One knows that the right thing to do is to reflect regularly but knowing it and doing it are entirely different things, and reflecting properly on your own is really, really hard I think, especially when you're extroverted. I need someone else bouncing back in order to help me reflect properly.
{Rachel}

The value of vocalization to 'bounce back' ideas may indicate the conversion of ruminations into a verbal narrative supporting the work of Niederhoffer and Pennebaker (2005) discussed above. Brian also highlighted the value of 'turning it into conscious

thought' through vocalization that could be an indication of the cognitive processes suggested.

....because it just gets it out there in the open and allows you to think it through... Because you might not be verbalising it, otherwise you might not actually be turning it into something which is conscious thought. And for me, that's quite useful because I don't think I'm particularly good at listening to my feelings. {Brian}

The thinking space provided by the coach is a special place where leaders can retreat and think through actions and events, gaining personal insight and reaching decisions. The process of vocalization helps them organise their thoughts and they can focus on their own needs, instead of the needs of others and the organisation that usually take priority. Yet without the justification of a coaching interaction leaders do not, or cannot justify thinking time. Even if they could, there are questions about how effective this might prove for some.

Coaching was clearly perceived by the research participants to support development of their resilience and five key elements were identified as important components of coaching practice that help support resilience. However in many cases the leaders described issues and events that were current and alive at the time of the coaching. In fact, seven of the eight leaders interviewed highlighted that they engaged in coaching specifically because they were facing a difficult issue at the time. This raises questions about the potential efficacy of pro-active resilience building programmes without the experiential learning that seems to be happening in the reported situations. Coaching can undoubtedly support leadership resilience but may need to be used selectively at times of difficulty to maximise learning and development.

Discussion

Implications for coaching practice

Coaching was reported as a useful resilience building intervention by leaders, although there are questions about how effective pro-active programmes might be for this population. Leaders report experiences that suggest many have demonstrated significant resilience to previous events, which may have contributed to their rise into leadership positions. However when challenges do arise coaching can be a valuable learning vehicle to make sense of the experience and develop further. Using the real life experiences, leaders are supported through the events but also learn more about themselves and approaches that can help them longer term. There is therefore both a short term and long term benefit when coaching in relation to resilience.

In terms of the significant elements that leaders felt contributed to building their resilience, five key areas were identified: Participants reported that coaching helped them, reclaim their self-belief, to learn both new techniques and about themselves and also helped them see the wider perspective. The relational aspect was also important with the supportive relationship highlighted, which helped contribute to the unique thinking space. These five areas show significant interaction but are aspects common to most genres of coaching. Wang (2013) identified that despite the variety of coaching approaches used some common factors contribute to effective coaching. These include, building a supportive collaborative relationship, paying attention to context and applying a learning process, which show significant synergy with the factors highlighted by participants. Therefore it is likely that most genres of coaching will impact resilience in some way.

For those wishing to enhance resilience specifically the research highlights some key areas of focus.

Firstly, the need to create a supportive relationship that gives individuals space and time to reflect. While this is a core founding principle of coaching, what also appears important is that the relationship is seen as external and neutral. While internal coaching can be a valuable resource in organisations (St John Brooks, 2014), where resilience is the focus it may be necessary to employ independent professionals to offer credible and effective support. This is important because the client needs independent face validity in order to accept and engage with the coaching. Both the responses and alternative perspectives provided are only seen as believable and credible when coming from an independent source with no vested interest. A representative of HR or the OD department may fail to achieve enhanced resilience, not because they lack coaching skills, but simply because the client does not engage with them.

Secondly, it is important for the coach to model acceptance and to validate both thoughts and feelings. Only by allowing all such aspects to be discussed can the client start to make sense of the experience and thus reduce the cognitive load. It is clear that during times of challenge leaders can experience significant changes to their normal modus operandi. Despite a usually confident and assertive approach leaders can experience self-doubt which can lead to questioning of worth and competence leading to disconnection. The coach may therefore find that their client needs a very different approach to that normally employed. A coach in a long term relationship with a leader may need to moderate their use of challenge under such circumstances. This serves to highlight the importance of the dynamics of the coaching relationship and how the coach needs to adapt not only to each client but also to situational factors within each meeting with a client. This has been described as the coaching 'dance' that

requires attendance to 'rhythm and reciprocity' for each dance (Wang, 2013) not just each client.

Thirdly, while learning and change may be at the 'heart of coaching practices' (Bachkirova, Cox & Clutterbuck, 2010), for resilience it forms only a small part of the equation. Coaches need to beware of trying to address resilience issues with leaders from a purely educative perspective. Programmes aimed at supporting resilience often focus on the importance of such things as reframing events and handling failure. Yet leaders are often well versed in such techniques so coaching can bring a new dimension to learning in the context of resilience. The learning required is often about the self, awareness of the triggers that lead to issues and building an appreciation of the personal strategies that are most appropriate for that individual: Learning about how to manage themselves in a more resilient and holistic way rather than just learning tools and techniques to apply.

Study Limitations and Future Research

This study was a small scale study with a number of limitations. The small number of participants means that the findings might benefit from validation with a larger and more diverse sample group. The factors identified may not therefore be comprehensive in reflecting all the potentially relevant factors in coaching.

The invitation to participants asked for those who had received coaching and were interested in discussing resilience. There may therefore be a bias towards those who felt there was in fact a connection between these two aspects. It was therefore more likely that participants would report a positive relationship that may not be common to all coachees. However since this is a qualitative study it does report the views of those who took part so represents a starting point for further investigations.

Future research might focus on a more diverse group with a longitudinal approach that would avoid the retrospective memory bound aspects of this study. With a more in-depth and contemporary approach it might also be possible to investigate the mechanisms involved. Both the 'broaden and build theory' (Fredrickson, 2009) and Hope Theory (Snyder et al., 2005) suggest possible explanations for some of the findings which might merit further investigation.

Conclusion

This study had two aims. Firstly to assess if existing coaching might already be affecting resilience, despite that not being a contracted objective. Leaders reported a clear perception that coaching they had received had helped their resilience. Participants in this study often brought current challenges to coaching and by working with these seemed to experience an increase in resilience as a by product of their coaching. Coaches therefore need to be aware that their coaching may already be affecting resilience, but also that when resilience is under threat they may need to adapt their coaching style to support resilience overtly.

The second aim of this study was to identify what aspects of coaching might be most influential in leadership resilience and thus might inform the coaching style that coaches choose to adopt. Participants highlighted five key aspects of the coaching they received that they felt contributed to their resilience. Firstly, it helped them reclaim their self belief as a result of the validation and acceptance that they experienced. Secondly, they reported learning tools and techniques that helped, but also learning about themselves and how to recognise and manage issues through this enhanced self-awareness. Thirdly, the coach brought a wider point of view that facilitated thinking, helping generate new ideas and a sense of perspective. The importance of the

supportive relationship was the fourth factor identified, and significantly the independent and external nature of this relationship was seen as key. Finally, leaders highlighted the importance and value of the dedicated time and space available through coaching. Difficult times are often characterised by very busy and hectic schedules with a need to focus on key business priorities. The coaching space gave leaders the time required for reflection and the interaction needed to support self analysis. Without this time and stimulus leaders often found it difficult to justify the time for reflection and self-focus that is so critical to reflective learning and development.

These findings therefore go some way to explaining how generic coaching programmes appear to show an impact on resilience (Sherlock-Storey et al., 2013, Grant et al., 2009). There is also clear support for the importance of building confidence and self-efficacy to support resilience (Palmer, 2013). However the findings also highlight the importance of a supportive relationship during times of challenge and that just learning about tools and cognitive strategies alone may not be adequate. Leaders often came to coaching as a result of facing challenge but did not contract for resilience outcomes specifically. They were frequently experiencing a loss of confidence and an inability to step back and take a wider perspective on the situation. Coaches might therefore consider the following as key steps to consider when working with leaders in the resilience domain.

1. Self-belief – Even leaders who are very senior and may have previously demonstrated exceptional confidence may need interventions to re-build self-confidence. The level of challenge may need to be reduced with a higher focus on validation and support.
2. Learning – Maintaining a focus on learning by directing attention to create holistic learning about self, others and personal strategies may prove more valuable than just teaching cognitive strategies. While tools and techniques might prove useful, personal learning seems more valuable.

3. Seeing the wider perspective – It appears that pressure can narrow the focus of attention for individuals so continued attention to the wider system, other potential points of view and alternative perspectives can be helpful.
4. Supportive relationship – Highlighting the independence and neutrality of the coaching space and allowing emotional expression may reduce the resources occupied in the suppression of feelings. This may give benefits through the release of energy.
5. Thinking space – Maintaining and protecting the private thinking space that focuses on personal needs rather than just problem solving is important. While leaders are busy and are often overly focussed on the needs of others and taking action, they need to understand the benefit of the personal reflective space that coaching can provide. While counter-intuitive this ‘time-out’ may ultimately provide a solution that might never have emerged from endless rumination and analysis.

Leadership resilience has become a topic of significant interest to coaches in recent years but the leadership perspective on this phenomenon has remained largely unexplored. This study has elucidated the leadership perspective on resilience and how leaders perceive coaching helps. It is hoped this can help coaches support leaders more effectively in the future and raises a number of new areas for future exploration.

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