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Positive Psychology in Coaching: Help or hindrance? Dr. Carmelina Lawton Smith

Positive Psychology has become a popular topic within coaching with many publications demonstrating the value of positive interventions in coaching (Driver, 2011, Boniwell et al. 2014). The key idea put forward by this approach is that psychology has spent too long studying individuals who are unwell, to try to draw lessons about the human condition. The argument is that we now need to study those who are thriving and flourishing to define the conditions for optimal functioning and can use that knowledge to create interventions and tools to help others. This focus on 'optimal functioning' demonstrates clear synergy with coaching and has made it a topic of interest to many coaches. The aim of this article is to highlight some of the research in support of positive approaches in coaching but also to strike a note of caution due to a number of potential drawbacks. It will cover three areas, the availability of data, intervention engagement and the focus on positive experiences.

'At the core of Positive Psychology Coaching is a belief in the power of science to elucidate the best approaches for positively transforming clients' lives' (Boniwell et al. 2014:p157). This focus on the *scientific method* has generated numerous studies that show the impact of interventions and provide data to prove the case. Many coaches and those working in organisations like the evidence base provided as they feel it lends credibility to the use of such tools. While this data can be valuable, it is often taken too much at face value with little scrutiny of the potential implications for coaching practice. For example, Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) found that those instructed to contemplate each day 'the things for which they are grateful' did show an increase in happiness but *only* if the activity was done once a week. If the activity was done three or more times a week the effect was to *decrease* participant's levels of happiness. So as coaches how do we stop our clients thinking such thoughts more often than prescribed? It is very hard to introduce a thinking task and then tell clients not to think it on certain days of the week! Others also highlight that measuring emotions such as happiness at a single point in time with often no more than seven self-report questions presents an 'emotion measurement problem' (Lazarus, 2003) that raises questions about how much weight can be given to the data produced. When taken out of context the data can also be mis-interpreted and used to infer an outcome that may not be justified. This focus on data can therefore be valuable but it is important that coaches fully understand what it is able to tell us and what it is based on.

The data that is collected tries to establish to what degree specific interventions are effective in achieving a particular aim. Many of these interventions seem to align well with coaching, such as the 'Best Self' exercise (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). In this activity individuals are asked to imagine their 'best possible self in the future' assuming everything has turned out as well as possible and to continue this activity over a period of four weeks. This exercise was found to produce immediate positive emotion although it had to be maintained in order to continue to have an influence. However, despite the strong evidence base clients do not always respond well to the introduction of such tools. This may be partly explained by the notion of 'fit' (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005), as it has been shown that some tools only work well for some individuals. Coaches may therefore need to be selective in how they apply such approaches. However, engagement is often also affected by how positive psychology has been portrayed in the media. Positive psychology is often ridiculed and this plus the plethora of self-help literature has left it with a poor image that is hard to shake off. Add to this the often sugary language of things like 'gratitude visits', and many in the organisational sector find it hard to engage with the activities as stipulated. This raises the danger that intervention are adapted to make them more

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acceptable and appropriate but means that the data proving the efficacy of the original tool may no longer be valid. Coaches wanting to use such tools therefore need to be mindful of the potential issues and to find effective ways to maximise the value of the tools and techniques available, while avoiding the potential resistance that can be generated.

Despite these potential reactions to specific interventions many coaches use the principles of positive psychology to create a positive focus for conversations. It has been shown that sharing positive events can enhance well-being (Gable et al., 2004), therefore focussing on successes or achievements can be a valuable coaching approach. Yet here we need a significant health warning about awareness of time and place. An individual who has just received some very bad news may need time to offload and experience the sadness, loss or anger. The coach who cheerily announces their intention to create a positive focus for the conversation may find the working relationship and rapport seriously tested!

Positive psychology does provide some valuable ideas that merit further investigation in the coaching context and the evidence base is building in this respect. However we should beware of assuming that it offers a complete philosophy that can be transplanted into the coaching profession. New paradigms can be seductive but not always infallible.

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