

Coaching Philosophy, Eclecticism and Positivism:

A Commentary

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INTRODUCTION

Simon Jenkins' ambitious article sets itself the challenge of relating business coaching to sports psychology, sports psychology to psychotherapy, and psychotherapy to the philosophy of science. Rather than comment on all of these fields, it is our goal to narrow our attention to the relationship between business coaching and psychotherapy; and specifically to focus on one of the central questions raised by Jenkins, namely whether coaches should use a specific, coherent approach or technical eclecticism. In doing so, we will be drawing on the extensive work conducted on coaching and psychotherapy at Ashridge's Centre for Executive Coaching, which is led by Erik de Haan, one of the authors of this commentary.

PSYCHOTHERAPY AND COACHING

Jenkins begins by noting that there is not a tremendous amount of literature about the philosophical underpinnings of coaching and, correspondingly, a low level of research about the effectiveness of these underdeveloped methodologies. In making these assertions, he has a point. We have conducted outcome studies about coaching methodologies and their effectiveness [1, 2], but we agree there is simply not enough evidence available at the moment [3]. We differ, however, on the assertion that a typology of coaching approaches is unavailable. In fact, we have been using our typology, based on corresponding approaches in psychotherapy, for nearly a decade now. We do so on the premise that coaching and psychotherapy are intricately related, but have slightly different propositions in terms of outcome goals. Whereas psychotherapy is fundamentally applied to overcome something negative and is internally focused, coaching seeks to create greater success and is focused on the work context.

FOUR SCHOOLS OF COACHING

We posit [4] that there are basically four schools of coaching. Person-focused coaching (see [5, 6]) supports and facilitates the coachee with encouragement and

understanding. Its emphasis is on internal evaluation and self-actualisation. This methodology is largely based on the works of Carl Rogers and his well-known counselling approaches.

Insight focused coaching [7] explores and confronts the coachee's agenda from a greater distance. This approach is based on a long tradition of psychoanalysis and psychodynamic therapy and can be further subdivided into a purely analytic method, organizational role consultation, and a ladder method [4].

The third school, problem-focused coaching [8, 9] seeks to help the coachee with suggestions and instructions. Its emphasis is on rational analysis and step-by-step plans. Here again, this meta-typology can be further subdivided into Whitmore's [8] GROW methodology, Farrelly and Brandsma's [10] provocative method, ironic methods and paradoxical methods.

Finally, Solution-focused coaching [11, 12] seeks to generate positive options and provide positive feedback. While this methodology is also directive, it seeks to do so in a positive-psychology manner.

COACHING EFFECTIVENESS AND 'COMMON FACTORS'

The obvious question that arises is what works for whom? Different coachees, issues and objectives require different approaches (see [13, 14]). Some coaches have mastery over various methodologies, others do not.

A bigger question arises which is at the heart of Jenkins' article, but which is not stated. What is a theory or a methodology anyway? How does one judge the internal logic and cohesion of a particular approach? Surely all methodologies were created somehow by someone somewhere. The four traditions above, based as they are on the four main schools of psychotherapy, have a proven track record of consistency, sound philosophical underpinnings and internal logic.

Meta-studies in psychotherapy have indicated that distinct methodologies are equally effective. As Wampold [15] has shown in his 2001 review, there is no difference in the effectiveness of different approaches but there is significant benefit to be achieved from talking therapies in general. Most importantly, Wampold [15] confirms what Rosenzweig [16] posited in 1936 - that so-called 'common factors' are at play; i.e., that the active ingredients in helping conversations are likely to be common to *all* approaches.

Examples of common factors are the personality of client and coach, the relationship, the expectations of the client, and the allegiance of the coach.

We have already stated that there is presently insufficient data to take a similar approach of analyzing multiple studies to come to conclusions within the field of coaching. We suggest, however, that a similar outcome is more likely than an opposing outcome. Psychotherapy research states that any existing professional approach is as good as any other, but it does not tell us that we can combine or exchange approaches as we please. While one could theoretically study this to argue that a mix-and-match approach works, it would be hard to describe coherently and there would obviously be no consistency of approach.

Wampold [15] shows that *allegiance* is a very important 'common factor' (effect size up to 0.65; i.e., a large effect), therefore the adoption and application of a *preferred approach* is not a trivial matter. Allegiance to one distinct and perhaps

personalised approach, be it person-centred or solution-focused, analytic or behavioural, does make a clear difference in efficacy. Such a positive choice for an approach, any approach, is something that eclectic, pluralistic or nihilistic coaches wouldn't be able to make. The latter groups may feel all too free not to develop a coaching ideology that they truly believe in, or to pile intervention on intervention at random, without considering objectively how they fit in with their overall ideology, with their longer-term strategy or with the objectives of this coaching assignment.

To emphasize again, thorough research [15, 17] has shown none of the specific approaches have a differential impact on effectiveness. However, it has also shown that a considered 'belief', 'conviction' or 'commitment' with respect to one's own approach makes a considerable difference to the outcome of therapy: therapists who have strong views about how they should practice do better than those who haven't. This is a strong argument against eclecticism and pluralism, which is, in our view, disregarded at any coach's peril.

Seen from this angle, it may be possible to have a selectively eclectic approach in which one creates consistency over time. That is clearly how innovation works and how new approaches are developed and are proven to be effective once sufficient studies have been conducted.

What we are really against are approaches that resemble a grab bag of contradictory methods and messages which can easily undermine trust and the centrality of the client's agenda and the coaching relationship.

CONCLUSION

At present, and in the emerging field of coaching, we suggest that it is best to develop one approach as fully as possible and stay with that approach, especially given that sufficient research has been conducted in psychotherapy, and some research also in coaching, to show beneficial results. The approach can obviously be different for different situations and with different coachees as long as the coach has a well-considered ideology and rationale behind the specific choices made.

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