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Reflections on a coaching pilot project in healthcare settings

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on personal reflection of coaching experiences and learning as a coach to consider the relevance of these approaches in a management context with a group of four healthcare staff who participated in a pilot coaching project. It explores their understanding of coaching techniques applied in management settings via their reflections on using coaching approaches and coaching applications as healthcare managers. Coaching approaches can enhance a manager's skill portfolio and offer the potential benefits in terms of successful goal achievement, growth, mutual learning and development for both themselves and staff they work with in task focused scenarios.

KEYWORDS

Coaching; healthcare; management

1. Introduction

There has been an increase in the use of coaching approaches in management, organisational and life coaching settings over recent years. Having completed a postgraduate coaching course as part of workplace development and having utilised coaching within educational and learning settings, it gave opportunity for reflection about the potential for wider coaching applications in health care management settings.

2. Definitions

Whilst different accounts of coaching exist there is commonality about what the essential elements of coaching entail. Downey (2003) describes effective coaching as: 'a pre-dominantly "non-directive" approach, an approach that evokes excellence, in which learning is intrinsic and satisfaction derives from the pursuit and achievement of meaningful goals (p. 19).' Others highlight 'focusing on what clients want' (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 1998) or 'making changes' and moving from: 'imagination to reality.' (O'Connor & Lages, 2004, p. 4) or 'building awareness' and 'unlocking potential' (Whitmore, 2002). Implicit in all of these definitions are the elements of creativity, learning and goal achievement.

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Reflections on personal development as a coach identified some similar skills used in counselling such as listening and asking questions. However, there are also some distinctions as coaching considers the individual, the task and the context that Downey (2003) claims has an emphasis on learning and development. Counselling however focuses therapeutically on the individual and their context and is often remedial, in pursuit of 'wholeness'. Stevens (2008, p. 8) offered a useful contrast between the two disciplines via differences in central underpinning questions: therapy asks 'why me/ why this?' whereas coaching focuses on 'what next / what now?' The role of the coach thus is to move the coachee onto finding solutions and identifying ways to achieve goals. The coaching definition favoured in this paper is the GROW model for its simplicity and task related focus.

Reflective practice on coaching practice using a model such as Gibbs (1988) six stages of reflection (description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion action plan), offers a place for recognising differences between these approaches and consider the most appropriate approach in a given setting. Reflecting on my own journey, I identified an opportunity to use a coaching approach in management situations where the focus is on the task achievement.

3. Models

Different models exist that illustrate coaching activity such as the SIMPLE and GROW models (Figure 1). The SIMPLE model is a solution-focused, client-centred approach which outlines the principles of coaching. Implicit in this model is the notion of 'in-between'; i.e. working with what is said by the client and not on the interpretation of what is being said, or the prior 'knowledge' of the coach. This is a challenge when working with coaches within a familiar context or who are known to the coach.

The GROW model (Whitmore, 2002) focuses on the Goal, Reality, Options and Way Forward. Downey (2003, p. 25) also includes a 'Topic' element, based on initial understanding as a precursor to the GROW process. In this way it has a more explicit process than the SIMPLE model but none the less uses the same listening and questioning skills to support coachee developed solutions.

Other models, such as Stevens (2008) 'Who? What? Why?' approach and the CTI Co-active coaching model described by NLP approaches also focus on a 'journey' model beginning with goal setting and progressing through to an action plan (O'Connor & Lages, 2004, pp. 28–31). These resonate with Osteen's (2007) approach that also focuses on progression towards goals. These were not selected as there was more familiarity with other models and it was felt that this familiarity would help to maintain a focus on the content rather than the process of the sessions. The GROW model was adopted because its succinct framework included both process and features of a coachee centered interactive process.

In connection with the coaching interaction similarities to the phenomenological qualitative research practice of 'bracketing out' exist. 'Bracketing out' the self in research contexts so as to minimise preconceptions that shape interpretation is similar to the effect of focusing solely on what is being said rather than existing knowledge. It helps to identify where prior knowledge or assumptions affect the discussion and so help avoid this 'background interference' and maintain a focus on supporting the coachee make sense of their situation and develop a way forward.

The Simple Model (Jackson & McKergow 2007)

S - Solutions In the coaching context, the solution is what the client wants. The coaching conversation focuses on solutions rather than problems, whilst not ignoring or dismissing problems. Coaching works on the client's agenda rather than the coaches agenda.

I - In between When coaching the coach works with what is being said by the client, not on his/her interpretation of what is being said. The action comes from the interaction between the coach and the client. The role of the coach is non-judgmental.

M - Making use of what is there When working with a client towards their solution, find out what is already working and what has worked in the past or in other situations and build on it. Part of the solution may be happening already and the coach's role is to ask the questions to illuminate it for the client.

P - Possibilities When coaching, help the client look for possibilities in the past, present or future. Generating possibilities helps the client to find the next step. Coaches believe clients are resourceful and the role of the coach is to draw out the answers.

L - Language Keep language clear and as simple as possible. Break down the words used to ensure clarity e.g. delegation — what will be happening if your delegation improves? How will you know? As a coach, ensure you understand what the client means by the words they are using

E - Every Case is Different Every coaching situation will be different; therefore helping clients generate the right actions for them is of more value than suggestions. There is a place for the coach's ideals but ask for the client's ideas first, adding yours afterwards if requested by the client.

The Grow Model (Whitmore 1992)

G- Goal — A discussion of what the desired outcome is and articulating the goal in a specific and measurable way so that they can tell when it has been achieved. Additionally it is owned as a goal by the coachee.

R- Reality — An exploration of the current position and where the coachee wants to be. At this stage the coach encourages the coachee to be specific by asking questions to challenge them to really review their situation

O-Options — Once the destination is clear discussion moves to an examination of the options available. Here time spent exploring all avenues is valuable, weighing up the pros and cons of each.

W-Way forward — At this stage the coachee is asked to identify the specific actions required to move forward with the chosen option in order to achieve the goal. This is a choice that the coachee can commit to and own the progression process.

Figure 1. Two coaching models.

4. Reflections on management coaching

The next section draws on reflections based on personal learning experiences having completed a university sponsored coaching course for managers. Part of that course included a small scale learning project undertaking coaching with other staff. Four healthcare clinical managers in a professional network who were interested in utilising coaching approaches agreed to participate in the project. They worked in front line clinical management settings with other healthcare staff. Their preparation for the project included a short programme that introduced them to coaching models and gave some practice in using coaching approaches. They were asked to use coaching tools, where appropriate, in their interactions with colleagues. They also agreed to keep reflective coaching diary that was shared for the purposes of learning from the project in which they recorded evaluations of their reactions to and reflections on coaching. The project was undertaken over six months and following this a focus group was held to explore their responses to the coaching approach and particular elements. Furthermore, consideration was given to whether participants felt it would be appropriate to use elements of coaching with clients and other groups as part of a solution-based approach to problem-solving, behaviour change and personal development.

4.1. Preferred model

Project participants reported that they felt 'comfortable' with the GROW model from the outset because the stages of the process were easy to learn and internalise. The model itself has an internal progression to it which feels very 'natural and unforced' which they considered relevant to their particular work setting (as coach or coachee). It also has some resonance with a clinical supervision model used by group members which is based on asking: 'What? So what? What next?' questions typical of transformational supervision which involves reflecting systematically 'so as to change ourselves and our ways of seeing as the beginning of working with others' (Carroll, 2007, p. 39). Participants liked the GROW model with its similar question sequence as well as the term 'GROW' itself as it was a reminder of the underpinning values of coaching – to grow and develop the coachee.

4.2. Skill development – resources

There are many resources which cultivate skills development within a coaching framework and participants found the co-active coaching approach a useful source. They reported that they 'borrowed' skills and resources for coaching practice. Whitworth et al. (1998) identify four cornerstones: 'viewing the client as naturally creative and resourceful, addressing the client's whole life, the agenda coming from the client, and the relationship as a designed alliance (p. 3). The 'designed alliance is customised to meet the exclusive needs of the client ... and both players are involved in making it work (p. 13). This approach, in common with many others, is to develop particular skills which include: listening (described as: 'a striking experience partly because it is so rare' (p. 31)), intuition, curiosity, action learning and self management. These can be contrasted with other skills identified as core to coaching such as: 'rapport, listening, questioning, communication, learning and experience' (Stevens, 2008, pp. 25–42).

4.3. Skill development – listening

Extracts from reflective diaries included the usefulness of ‘listening’ with colleagues – one person commented that some staff had reported that the: ‘space to *speak and be listened to*’ was actually quite rare in many work settings due to pressure of work. This issue of ‘individual air time’ was also commented on by another participant, whilst another participant commented: ‘I have always thought of myself as a good listener anyway, but this made me refocus on those skills and devote time to reflecting on them and developing them further.’ Whilst another stated: ‘I realise now that with the increasing pressures at work I had got into the habit of not listening as much as I used to ...’ All commented on the benefits of listening and focusing on the individual or coachee in a solution-based session. This featured as a strongly perceived benefit of coaching – i.e. the ability to unlock potential and growth in a seemingly short condensed activity.

4.4. Skill development – reflection

For many community-based professionals, work is centred on listening and communication skills. However, participants reflected that coaching rekindled enthusiasm for reflecting on and evaluating communication skills. Furthermore, they commented how coaching and awareness of coaching models had expanded existing skills and increased knowledge of different techniques, and approaches. This was regarded as a positive outcome of utilising coaching. Participants reported that the level of creativity was ‘sometimes surprising.’ There appeared to be different applications and responses to coaching including the usefulness of feedback on a coaching session from people who are known to the coach, which can be both immediate or at some time after the event; Additionally other workplace coaching was considered valuable where the issues were often familiar or repeated as people encounter similar issues or contexts, although it is relevant to note that the SIMPLE model emphasises ‘every case is different.’

5. Coaching in management roles – possible barriers

In management terms, coaching focuses on the context, the task, the person and the team or others. Bluckert (2006, p. 115) argues that: ‘coaching can be more strategically rather than behaviourally focused’ which is useful to bear in mind, in healthcare where there can be a tendency to focus on (if not verbally than perhaps non-verbally) behavioural issues. However, there are different ways of applying coaching skills and approaches.

It would be wrong to suggest that all coaching experiences have been positive, on occasion it was reported that it had been difficult to utilise Action Learning because ‘a member of the team does not value the approach and tends to try to sabotage the session.’ Downey (2003, p. 123) suggests that sometimes it is worth leaving the resisting person alone if they are performing well, and if they are underperforming then this becomes a management issue. Whilst Stevens (2008, p. 98, 125) suggests that sometimes it can help for people to identify their ‘gremlins’ i.e. the things which make them resistant to being coached.

On occasions where there was a tendency to get ‘stuck’ at one level – participants reported that resolution was gained by going back to the model and utilising available resources – e.g.

through trying a different kind of question and some of the techniques around imagination (O'Connor & Lages, 2004) and visualisation (Whitmore, 2002).

Whilst workplace time pressures can make coaching difficult more frequent brief interventions have a value and whilst a directive approach might seem more appealing, perseverance with coaching generates a level of learning and insight that is was felt worth the time investment.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion participant and personal reflections on the coaching pilot project indicate that it had real benefit when used in a management role as it fuses successful goal achievement, growth, learning and development. There are benefits in the way of recognising resources, listening and reflection skill development alongside acknowledgement of barriers to the process of moving forward. Although there may be occasions where coaching may not be directly applicable, the repertoire of coaching skills are at the core of good management offering benefits in relation to working towards task achievement that are tangible at personal and team levels.

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