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Coaching and emotions: an exploration of how coaches engage and think about emotion

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This research project set out to investigate if and how coaches actually respond to emotions that they and their clients have. They were also asked for their views about what have been the main influences on their orientation to emotions. In addition, the participants were asked about their perception of the boundary between coaching and therapy in relation to emotions. A case study methodology using semi-structured interviews was chosen to explore and understand the participants’ approaches, motivations, attitudes and meanings related to how they thought about and responded to emotions in themselves and their clients. A Grounded Theory approach was used to analyse the data and to develop theories and frameworks to make sense of the participants’ perspectives. Findings suggest that coaches use a variety of approaches to engage emotions in their clients and themselves. These include acknowledging or playing back their clients’ emotions, noticing their own emotions during a session and asking or commenting about their clients’ bodily experiences. Levels of engagement with emotions seemed to vary according to coaches’ comfort with emotions, their coaching purpose, and how they defined the boundary between coaching and therapy. The study findings also emphasised the importance of coach education around emotions, in particular, for coaches to understand the connection between emotions and change, leadership and motivation. Related to this, it is important for coaches to have clarity about their coaching framework and how emotions fit into it.

Keywords: coaching; emotions; coaching practices; therapy; change factors

Introduction

There has been a growing body of literature focused on the influence of emotions and moods on various aspects of our lives. For example, Damasio’s work (1994) has shown that emotions are essential to decision-making and reasoning. Barbara Frederickson (2003) wrote about positive emotions affecting our thinking processes, resilience and social connections. Even more targeted to the world of work, in 1996, Goleman first coined the term Emotional Intelligence and commercialised the importance of considering emotions in the workplace by writing his book, Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ. Around this time, Mayer, Salovey and Caruso (2002) were developing the foundations for the first emotional intelligence test.

Despite these and many other related developments, and the fact that the ‘experience of work is saturated with emotion’ (Ashworth & Humphrey, 1995, p.98),
there is little written about how coaches and leaders can best respond to emotions in order to optimise the potential benefits to people’s performance and to organisations. Given that many coaches would define coaching as being about change, what is the connection, if any between working with emotions and the process of change?

The coaching profession is a fast-growing area that attracts people from varied backgrounds who aspire to work in the field. Although there are increasing numbers of accreditation courses and bodies, at this stage, there are no restrictions on someone claiming to be a coach. Coaching can be a powerful mechanism for change but can also be carried out in a less effective manner, or at worst, in an unethical or potentially harmful way. Given this context, research into how coaches actually engage with, and think about, emotions is important.

Despite prominent accreditation bodies such as ICF (International Coach Federation) and EMCC (European Mentoring and Coaching Council) requiring coaches to demonstrate competencies in working with emotions, there seems to be some confusion and debate about whether working with emotions is equivalent to ‘doing therapy’ or whether coaches should engage with emotions at all.

If emotions convey important ‘data’ in reading situations and making decisions (Caruso & Salovey, 2004), are some coaches and managers more effective because they do engage with emotions? Examples of engaging with emotions can range from noticing emotions that are present but not speaking about them, to encouraging clients to experience their emotions more fully. If some coaches and managers are avoiding any type of emotional engagement because they perceive it as therapy, are they stopping themselves from relating to emotional issues in even simple yet useful ways that do not require significant psychological training? For example, by asking clients (or colleagues) how they feel.

There has been little research on what coaches actually do and think about in relation to emotions in their clients and themselves. A recent research project (Bachkirova & Cox, 2007; Cox & Bachkirova, 2007) has focused on this topic. One implication of their research is that education and training of coaches need to include topics such as how emotions influence individual change, emotional intelligence, and empathy. Secondly, coaches need ‘appropriate support in order to advance their awareness and understanding of specific emotions in the coaching process and their individual capacity and style of working with these’ (Cox & Bachkirova, 2007, p.187). The authors also suggested that an area for further research is to investigate the different influences on coaches’ approaches to emotions.

Building on the above research, this study attempts to understand what specifically influences coaches’ approaches to emotions and how they think about, and respond to, emotions in themselves and their clients. This research defines emotions more broadly (including positive emotions like enjoyment and subtle emotions like feeling relaxed) than ‘difficult situations’ which the previous authors mostly focused on in their research. Finally, the aim of this research is to bring more clarity or recommendations for further research.

Study method

A qualitative, phenomenological approach to this study matched the aim of investigating coaches’ in-depth attitudes and approaches in an attempt to understand meanings and motivations that coaches ascribe to their emotions and those of their
A Grounded Theory approach was utilised to make sense of the experiences coaches have had with emotions and how this informs the way they approach emotions in their clients and themselves. Grounded Theory is a strategy or methodology for doing research which also has implications for how the data will be analysed. Its greatest appeal is the claim that it allows for concepts and hypotheses to arise from the field which can then be used to generate theory (Robson, 2002). The researcher’s rationale for using Grounded Theory included: it suits exploring a topic that has not been deeply investigated; it suits data in a raw state; and it focuses on the participant’s point of view (Goulding cited in Denscombe, 2007).

Typical sampling in a Grounded Theory approach is done progressively and emerges as the research continues (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Two tools of a Grounded Theory approach that were not fully used in this project were ‘theoretical saturation’ and ‘theoretical sampling’. In relation to the former, the researcher was not able to continue the research until she believed that there was nothing new to be gained from further data collection. This applies specifically in relation to further sampling of coaches from less psychologically-informed backgrounds. Bryman and Bell (2003) state that the main virtue of theoretical sampling is that reflection on the data informs whether more data are needed. They also refer to some researchers being clear that their sampling was convenient and because this project was a Masters thesis, the limitations of time and resources affected these aspects of the research. It should be noted that the researcher made several attempts to contact coaches with stronger business backgrounds, but in each case they declined to be interviewed. Perhaps the topic of emotions ‘self-selected’ the project interviewees to a certain extent.

Sample
Nine UK-based coaches who identified themselves as executive coaches were interviewed for this research. The mean number of years they had practised as coaches was 11.4, with a range from 3 to 23 years. Coaches were selected who represented a broad range of coaching approaches including Gestalt, Body-oriented, Transactional Analysis, Systems-Psychodynamics, Cognitive-Behavioural therapy, Person-Centred, Existential, and Performance Coaching.

Within the sample, there were two psychologists. Genders were balanced by selecting five female coaches and four male coaches. The mean age of the coaches was 46.8, ranging from 36 to 56 years old. Although the researcher attempted to interview a majority of coaches who had no formal psychological training, during the interviews five mentioned that they had trained in related areas such as NLP, Gestalt or counseling. Even more surprisingly, six of the coaches had mentioned psychotherapy experiences. This psychotherapy bias, together with the small number of coaches who were interviewed, may limit the generalisability of the current findings. The coaches with no therapy experience had engaged in coaching trainings that may have contributed to their positive attitude towards emotions.
Data collection

During the interviews, the coaches were asked the following questions:

1. What is your approach to engaging with emotions in your clients?
2. What is your approach to engaging with your own emotions as a coach?
3. What do you think are the main influences on your approach?
4. What would you say are your main beliefs, assumptions, or premises regarding emotions?
5. How would you describe the boundary between coaching and therapy in relation to emotions?

The questions were designed to invite the coaches to talk about the range of possibilities they encounter in their practices, what they do, and how they think about their approaches. The researcher probed throughout the interviews to elicit examples, details, clarifications and motivations. Each one-hour interview was taped and transcribed and these transcripts were sent to the participants for verification and additions.

Reflexivity

Because the researcher works as a freelance executive coach, the notion of preunderstanding (Coghlan & Brannick, 2007) cautioned her to not assume to know what the interviewees were talking about and therefore risk not probing enough. Most of the literature on qualitative research discusses reflexivity; and journal keeping was a valuable tool that helped to make explicit initial assumptions and potential biases.

There were three main ones recorded. The approach and attitude that coaches take towards emotions in their clients and themselves is largely influenced by their backgrounds, training, assumptions, experiences to date, and the context of business and the coaching profession. Emotions are an integral part of being human and seem to be part of how people change but how emotions need to be engaged with is not clear. Thirdly, the coaching relationship is the fundamental foundation for the client’s goals to be achieved. If the relationship is ‘good enough’, perhaps emotional work gets done subtly without either party needing to actually deal with emotions directly. For each assumption, it was hoped the research would provide more clarity.

Data analysis

On the first thorough reading of each transcript, for each new comment or topic raised by the participant, a provisional theme was identified, labeled and coded on the transcript margin. Depending on each question, different clusters of themes became evident. Themes were identified by words, statements, or particular terms together with the frequency with which certain words occurred (Bell, 2005).

The transcripts were read thoroughly again and this time, basic tables were drawn up. Questions 1 and 2 were, at this stage, linked together as they captured the approaches to emotions in the coaches’ clients and in themselves and the data indicated there was a strong connection between these two areas. The transcripts were read and checked several more times for consistency and accuracy of themes.
A colleague was asked to offer his feedback and input for coding and categorization of comments for which a second opinion was required.

For questions 1 and 2, the categories were examined for frequency of response, that is, how often issues were mentioned per person. The aim was to investigate whether there were common threads across all participants. The data also seemed to require a deeper level of analysis and so various continuums were created and explored to capture the common themes that participants raised in their descriptions of the ways they engaged with emotions. For example, coaches differed in how much they explored their clients’ past history, or actively encouraged emotional expression, or were comfortable to discuss their clients’ personal issues.

For question 3, the data were analysed further to look for links between level of engagement with emotions and specific influences such as therapy experiences and/or psychological training. Question 4 was further analysed by counting the frequency of particular groupings across all participants.

Question 5 data were analysed in a deeper way by investigating the main distinctions the participants used to differentiate between coaching and therapy. Another series of continuums were created to illustrate the range of perspectives shown in the data. There also appeared to be a broad range of views and opinions of what therapy entailed, and so two continuums were created to explore the data as well.

Findings

Questions 1 and 2 were designed to elicit approaches and techniques that coaches utilise when engaging emotions in their clients and their own emotions. Table 1 shows the main categories that coaches referred to and examples of verbatim responses by the coaches, renamed R1 to R9.

All coaches mentioned linking emotions with thinking and/or actions. Over half of the coaches referred to the first 12 approaches, and a smaller number of coaches reported using the remaining three. It is important to keep in mind that coaches were not asked directly about all of the approaches and so Table 1 shows what they recalled during the interview. Although one purpose of having sent the typed transcript to the coaches was to allow another opportunity for them to add to the text, this is not the same as giving them specific items to check. Overall, the results give a fair indication of what the coaches actually do in relation to emotions but not their complete response to each of the approaches. Therefore the following discussion can only cautiously interpret these findings in relation to any significance of the rankings.

From a coaching practice perspective, several questions are relevant. What is effective coaching? If we assume that it is about learning and change in performance, then what is effective in helping people to change? And therefore what skills do coaches need to affect change in their clients? Is it necessary to engage emotions in the way most of the coaches interviewed do? Or does it actually involve something else? These are big questions and all worthy of separate investigations which are beyond the scope of this research. However, relevant literature will be discussed that relates to some of the approaches the coaches use in order to interpret these findings further.
Table 1. Summary of reported approaches to emotions with clients and own emotions (in descending order of response frequency).

(1) Link emotions to clients’ thoughts and/or actions
   I’m encouraging the sense of ‘okay, let’s be in that emotional place and what do you need to understand, to learn from that?’ (R2); I don’t work with feelings in isolation. I work with them in connection with thinking and doing (R3).

(2) Acknowledge or playback the emotion verbally
   More focused on wanting to play back to that individual client their way of being and seeing it as quite a unique way of being (R1); I just state ‘I can see that that really pisses you off’ (R6).

(3) Emphasis on the relationship
   I want them to see me as their development partner. I want them to know that I’m with them, I’m on the journey with them, I’m doing that and I’m not not going to be myself (R6); If the coach does create that safe space and it is intimate and it is trusting and the coach is good at being present with their client, then it’s going to happen to whatever level it’s going to happen because people will be more authentic (R8).

(4) Slow down, use silence, stillness
   Gives me pauses, slow down (R9); When someone is emotional, the pace is to be still (R8).

(5) Coaches notice their own bodily responses and feelings
   Regularly check in with myself, notice posture, voice rate, how hard I’m working, breathing (R4); The whole time I’m coaching, I’m checking in with how I’m feeling (R7).

(6) Contracting
   One is to question what merit there is in going down a particular route. And again I would use the contract, what we’d verbally agreed to work on in the session, to judge whether that question should be asked (R8); I would explicitly contract with them that the work we do is likely to engage emotions, that we work on the whole experience (R4).

(7) Supervision
   It’s a vehicle for venting, and for exploring the things that I may not be noticing in my own emotional space. And it’s also affirming (R1); I seek out supervision. We often go to the stickier clients whereas it might well be that the one you’re doing super work with might (R4).

(8) Coaches, when potentially helpful, bring their feelings into the conversation
   But I might notice afterwards that someone’s behaving, or my response to them, might be the sort of response they generate in other people and so therefore is that an important thing to bring up, or do I just need to be aware of that and choose not to respond in that way (R5); ‘I can feel myself getting angry with you’ is something I quite frequently say (R6).

(9) Ask what the clients are feeling in their bodies, and/or comment on what the clients are showing physically
   ‘One of the things I’m reading from your leg, you look incredibly irritated or impatient’ (R5); I will access feelings through body language. ‘You look tight’ or ‘You look very relaxed’, ‘Where do you experience that in your body? What does it feel like?’ (R2).

(10) Educate and/or affirm clients regarding process of change, learning and emotions
   Helping people to understand what a learning transition looks like and helping them to get perspective on what are the emotions associated with change in a learning transition or change process (R1); I normalise, norming that that’s part of the human experience and you’re not feeling mad (R4).

(11) Discuss past issues
   I would ask them if they ever felt this way before, when they remember feeling past similar emotions (R7); I access someone’s historical world as a reference for the present (R2).
Empathy and quality of relationship

The second approach of acknowledging or playing back the clients’ emotions seems to link with empathy and the quality of the relationship (the third approach in Table 1). Wasylyshyn’s outcome study on executive coaching (2003) found that the top two personal characteristics of an effective executive coach are their ability to form a strong ‘connection’ with their clients, and professionalism. Similarly, McGovern et al. (2001) found that 84% of participants in their research on coaching outcomes pointed to the quality of the relationship between the coach and executive as critical to the coaching’s success.

There are similar findings in the therapy field. Many studies have shown that therapist relationship skills such as empathy, acceptance and warmth are integral to the establishment of a good working relationship (Asay & Lambert, 1999). ‘Experimental and correlational studies have shown that an empathic therapist style is associated with low levels of client resistance and with greater long-term behavior change’ (Miller & Rollnick, 1991, p. 26). Bachelor and Horvath (1999, p. 162) state that ‘the experience of a trusting and safe environment facilitated by the therapist’s availability, responsiveness and constancy, in which clients can explore past and present feelings and interactions, may initiate change’.

Slowing down and noting bodily responses

Several coaching authors link emotions with the body. Ludeman and Erlandson (2004) discuss their executive coaching work with Alpha Males which they claim represent 70% of all senior executives. The authors describe five goals in helping these clients become motivational leaders of high-performing teams. Several of these goals have an emotional aspect to them including a focus on the alpha recognising his underlying emotions before they build. They add that ‘tying emotions to physical sensations makes the process seem more concrete’ (Ludeman & Erlandson, 2004, p. 8). These authors do not appear to be psychologists but are doing work with their clients’ emotions.

The coaching framework of authors Anderson and Anderson (2005) includes work with emotions. They write:
Emotions need to be experienced. There is little value in thinking about emotions; you have to work with them directly. Emotions are experienced in the body, so in order to expand the emotional vocabulary of a client, the coach must guide the client to identify how the client experiences various emotions in his or her body. (pp. 71-72)

These writers emphasise the importance of slowing down in order to access emotions in the body. This has relevance to coaches accessing their clients’ emotions and their own (Approaches 5 & 9 in Table 1). Approach 8 is also related to this and takes this body awareness a step further by the coach bringing their feelings into the discussion. The participants varied on this point: most brought some feelings into the discussion while one did not see their feelings as relevant to the coaching and thought it would take the focus away from the client, and another coach didn’t feel comfortable enough to do so.

One of the more interesting pieces of research on successful therapy clients and positive change was done by Gendlin (1978). Cornell, who studied with him, explains that, ‘at some point in the session, the successful therapy clients would slow down their talk, become less articulate, and begin to grope for words to describe something they were feeling at that moment’ (Cornell, 1996, p. 4). The main point here is that the successful therapy clients were sensing in their bodies feelings that were often hard to describe immediately. Cornell says that the unsuccessful therapy clients stayed articulate during the entire session.

This approach takes a strong position that the actual experiencing of feelings in the body, and in the present, is what leads to change. If we could change just by thinking it, many of us would have changed a long time ago. Gendlin (1996, p. 16) stated that ‘what is split off, not felt, remains the same. When it is felt, it changes. Most people don’t know this’. The other interesting aspect of this technique called Focusing is that practitioners in the area do not see it as belonging to psychologists or psychotherapists but as a practical tool for anyone who is interested in learning it.

The client as the most important factor in change

Some of the literature takes a slightly different perspective in saying that it is the client who is the most important factor related to change and effectiveness of coaching. A Harvard Business Review (HBR) survey on coaches showed that willingness and good chemistry were cited the most frequently as important for a successful coaching relationship (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009). Wasylyshyn’s research (2003) shows that the most positive outcomes in coaching are linked to executives who are ‘genuinely motivated to learn and/or change’ (p. 103).

Tallman & Bohart (1999) claim that the most important common factor in change is the client and that, at least half the percentage of influence that many researchers have attributed to ‘the relationship’ can also be added to the ‘client’ factor. They cite many studies to support this claim and, in particular, believe that the reason there are no significant differences between therapy approaches is because they all allow clients opportunities to work through their issues. In fact, they state that the most helpful factor reported by clients was having a time and place to talk and focus on themselves, and that many of the specialised techniques that therapists use occur naturally in life. They also admit that most people rarely have friends who are willing to sit with them for a long period of time and focus only on them.
Table 2 shows what coaches perceived were the main influences on their approach to engaging with emotions. This is an important factor and relevant to understanding the previous results.

As for Table 1, the participants were not asked to expand on each category or to rank the order of importance: they were encouraged to raise only the influences they deemed most important.

All coaches mentioned life experiences as one of the main influences on their approach to emotions. Due to inadequate details and the form of this research, it is not possible to draw specific inferences from coaches’ life experience with the coaches’ level of engagement with emotions. The results, however, do suggest that coaches with therapy experience and/or some psychological training appear to be more comfortable with deep or extensive emotional expression in their clients. This is indicated by one or more of the following:

- They are more likely to use a higher number of techniques and approaches in Table 1 than other coaches.
- They are more likely to use language that shows their comfort and familiarity with emotions.
- They are less likely to make comments about feeling uncomfortable or unconfident about emotions.

Table 2. Summary of main influences on how coaches engage with emotions (in descending order of response frequency).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1) Own life experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My whole understanding of my emotions is because I have to deal with them, they’ve gotten me into trouble, they’ve made my life exciting, they’ve made my life miserable (R6); Life experience in terms of my own life’s journey and story and critical incidents which have brought particular emotions (R1).</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>(2) Professional training and work</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My professional training definitely because that gives me some frames to explore emotions (R5); And then I was a primary school teacher and that’s all about creating enough safety and warmth in the environment for children to learn. I think that’s really relevant (R7).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>(3) Therapy experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I had a powerful personal experience of working with my emotions and at a deep level, really influenced my life experience (R4); It has to be my Gestalt therapy and therapy background. I remember sitting in groups not knowing how I felt at all (R7).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(4) Ethics and coaching qualifications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If I look at it purely from getting a professional qualification perspective, ICF accredited coaches and Master coaches expected to challenge clients and the expression of emotions (R3); I’m aware of what I don’t know so in that place, aware of where need to keep my ethical boundaries (R9).</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>(5) Other influences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I do believe that as a culture we’re very logical, sort of left-brain thinking (R5); If I wanted to refer to anything, I would say the scientific part of Daniel Goleman’s book ... makes it okay to work with emotions because they’re kind of there. I never thought they weren’t there but it makes it all a bit more straight-forward (R6).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is interesting to note that ‘therapy experiences’ was not given as a trigger and that
the participants used strong, positive language in talking about the benefit of their
therapy experiences. This does not necessarily mean that all of these coaches work
deeply with emotions in their practices but seems to indicate a level of comfort and
familiarity with emotions.

The variations among the coaches’ practices seem to be also related to another
factor besides ‘comfort with emotions’: their perception of the boundary between
coaching and therapy. The latter will be discussed further when question 5 results are
shown. Some coaches mentioned their coaching purpose and, when they did, there
appeared to be a match between their purpose and how they worked with emotions.

**Question 4: How coaches think about emotions**

Table 3 shows how the participants responded to being asked what their main beliefs,
assumptions, or premises were regarding emotions. The responses were grouped into
the following seven main categories.

The first category was raised unanimously by all coaches, and the second one by
nearly all coaches. Without exception, all coaches viewed emotions as important and
integral to how people perform and interact at work. Although coaches appear to
agree that emotions are essential to leadership, motivation, thinking and so on, this
did not automatically translate to them engaging with emotions to a large extent.
Again, this seemed linked to their coaching purpose and comfort with emotions.
Indeed, the coaches who seem to be more comfortable with emotions also stated
more ‘facts’ about emotions and these appeared to come from their experience
as well as from an intellectual perspective. Although it was surprising that all coaches
were positive about the value of emotions, talking about emotions is not the same
as experiencing or engaging with them.

**Question 5: How coaches distinguish between coaching and therapy**

During the interviews with the participants, it became evident that not only did
people have different views about the difference between therapy and coaching, but
they also had varied views about what therapy actually involves. Figure 1 shows two
main continuums that are relevant to how the coaches view therapy.

Some coaches’ perceptions of ‘therapy’ emphasise the left-hand side of the two
continuums in Figure 1 while others view therapy more broadly in terms of both
sides of the continuums. The data from the participants and their views from
working with other coaches and managers, suggests that for some coaches (and
managers), emotions are synonymous with the left-hand side perspective of therapy.
In some cases, a person’s perspective on therapy can influence their views of coaching
and consequently, of the place of emotions in the coaching process.

Connected to these findings, Figure 2 shows how coaches describe their coaching
in relation to four main themes concerning emotions. This diagram was created out
of the analysis of the interview transcripts and not directly from asking the
participants where they would place themselves on the continuums.

Each of the coaches interviewed worked at different ends of the continuums in
Figures 1 and 2 and, in some cases; their coaching favored the right-hand sides of the
continuums. For other coaches, their coaching seemed to cover more ranges on both
The results suggest a couple of important comments to add to this ongoing debate. Firstly, it seems important to place coaching and therapy in their historical context. Coaching had a more remedial emphasis compared to recent trends. It used to be a professional embarrassment and a sign that the person had problems but now coaching is a signal that an executive is on a fast track (Kets de Vries, Krotov & Florent-Treacy, 2007). Similarly, as one of the participants added, Gestalt was

Table 3. Summary of main beliefs, assumptions, or premises regarding emotions (in descending order of response frequency).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>Comment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>Emotions are generally valid, vital, important, and underneath most behaviors.</td>
<td>My fundamental belief is, performance and however you want to measure it, is an emotional dimension, not a cognitive dimension (R6). I can’t think of any client where there hasn’t been emotion at some level (R8).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>Emotions are connected to sustainability, motivation, engagement, resilience, trust, etc.</td>
<td>Key emotions, fear and uncertainty. Key role this plays in workplace can’t be denied (R9). Big part of what makes work fun and enjoyable...it’s almost like the life force...it’s why businesses are so interested in motivation and engagement, isn’t it (R7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>People have varying levels of comfort with, and openness to, emotions.</td>
<td>Some people are resistant to thinking about emotions (R5). So the only emotion that’s allowed at work is anger and then that’s got to be controlled anger (R3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>Emotions give us important information or data, to be curious about.</td>
<td>Being curious about emotions, if I’m more open to data from my emotions or intuition, they’re the levels that my conscious can’t grasp, I’m better informed (R4). They give us a lot of information (R1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>Emotions are part of building and sustaining relationships.</td>
<td>The oil of the relationship is the emotion (R2). Have to work with senior people so relationships built on emotions (R9).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>Emotions are connected with learning and the change process.</td>
<td>Connected with learning and change and for me that’s what coaching is about (R1). I talk in terms of a systems check sometimes, change curve or response to situation (R4).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>Negative consequences of not dealing with emotions.</td>
<td>I think culturally, we have narrowed the ‘okay’ range of emotions. They all have their place, that’s why we have them but when we fix them or hold onto one or another then there’s problems (R4). The inability or unwillingness to express emotions at work manifests itself in many different ways, one of the biggest challenges, emotions manifests itself through resistance (R3).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
initially a personal development approach rather than therapy for dysfunctional people. The historical contexts of therapy and coaching are, to some extent, still influencing current views.

Secondly, how people define therapy and coaching seems important in how emotions are viewed. Two of the participants commented that when they have demonstrated coaching, students or managers protested that the work was therapeutic or therapy when the coach discussed emotions with the ‘client’. What does therapeutic mean? Does it refer to everything that is emotional, for some people? Do some coaches not engage with emotions, even in some of the simple ways already discussed, because they think they would be doing therapy and are scared? It would be fair to say that there are many coaches (and managers) who would see the left-hand side of the continuum in Figure 2 as ‘therapy’, and it’s true that therapy does include these features. Although it is not possible to generalise fully, several of the coaches who had experienced therapy included the left-hand side features of the continuums, while others with less psychological experiences or trainings, were more oriented to the right.

Conclusions and recommendations

Within the limitations of this project, the following conclusions can be drawn from the results. The coaches interviewed used a variety of approaches to working with emotions. Many of these approaches linked with literature on change and coaching effectiveness, and the question was raised as to what role the client plays in the success of coaching. More coaches who are not interested in emotions needed to be interviewed to obtain a fuller view of both ends of the spectrum.

All coaches stressed the importance of emotions and its link to areas like motivation, engagement, and behavior in general. There seemed to be an overall perspective that emotions were trustworthy sources of information and feedback in general. The coaches’ attitudes and beliefs about emotions did not always necessarily
translate to the depth or breadth of work they engaged in with their clients. This
raised the issue of coaches’ comfort around emotions and their coaching purpose.
It perhaps also raises the issue of intellectual ‘knowing’ and knowledge from
experience.

All coaches mentioned life experiences but it is not possible to find a cause-and-
effect link between specific life experiences and their approach to emotions. However,
the coaches who had experienced therapy and/or psychological training seemed to
have more comfort and familiarity around emotions.

Based on these conclusions are the following recommendations. Given that the
ICF and EMCC require coaches to work with emotions, coaching training (and
manager-as-coach training) needs to include psychological and emotional topics
such as empathy, body awareness, and relationship skills. The training would best
include an evidence-based approach about the merits of the different topics
presented, in particular, to understand the connection between emotions and
engagement, motivation, resilience, leadership, and most relevant now, dealing
with uncertainty and change.

The benefits of this training would hopefully assist coaches (and managers) to
demystify their views about emotions, and to expand and deepen their approach and
attitude towards emotions in relation to coaching and the workplace.

Connected to the previous point, it would be beneficial for coaches to have
guidance or training to assist them to articulate their coaching framework which
would include their coaching purpose, and amongst many things, a conscious
position around how they engage with emotions, and why. For some coaches, this
research project allowed them to do just that in a small way, that is, to articulate or
clarify aspects of their thinking and practice.

An interesting area for further research is related to ‘client factors’, i.e., what
aspects of the client contribute to successful coaching. This would have useful, and
potentially cost-effective, applications to the business world if, for example, having
time and space to talk was one of the most important ingredients in why coaching
worked. Further research is needed on what actually leads to change and successful
outcomes in coaching such as job performance, turnover or life satisfaction including
a focus on how coaches work with emotions.

Due to the limitations of theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation inherent
in this project, further research is also suggested with a wider range of coaches with
little or no therapy or psychology in their backgrounds.

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