

Applying psychological theories of self-esteem in coaching practice

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The study of self-esteem has a long history, and it is not without cause that self-esteem is seen by many as central to human functioning and happiness, governing our sense of self-efficacy as well as ability to learn, grow and change. It is, therefore, not surprising that self-esteem issues frequently present themselves within coaching conversations and it behoves the competent coach to be aware of how self-esteem might mediate the coaching relationship. In this article we discuss how the concept of self-esteem has been defined and addressed in the psychological literature and how specific theories might apply in the coaching context. A model of self-esteem is used to illustrate four cases of coaching using 360° feedback within an organisational setting. We conclude with a summary of implications for coaching practice.

Keywords: self-esteem, coaching, psychological theories, 360 feedback, adult development.

'Self-esteem is the reputation we acquire with ourselves.' Nathaniel Branden

AT ITS SIMPLEST, self-esteem, as the quote implies, is the evaluation individuals place upon themselves, often representing a comparison between a perceived sense of self and a perceived ideal standard (James, 1860; Hamachek, 1987; Burns, 1978). This comparison is necessarily highly subjective, but has the power to produce a range of personally significant consequences. Studies consistently show (Baumeister, 1993, 1997; Coopersmith, 1967; Lent et al., 1986) that people with high and low levels of self-esteem adapt to events in markedly different ways, with high self-esteem (HSE) associated, for example, with greater confidence, less conformity, self-efficacy, optimism, risk taking and creativity. A coach, therefore, might well be interested in working with self-esteem issues directly or developing it as a happy by-product.

However, the issue of self-esteem is not prominent in the traditional coaching literature. It is largely assumed that clients are successful, high achieving and capable individuals who have every reason to feel confident and worthy of self-respect. However, according to Bandura (1998), many

talented individuals often feel dissatisfied with their achievements. Research recently conducted by Hindmarch (2007), as well as anecdotal data from our own coaching and supervisory practice, suggests that in reality the theme of confidence and self-esteem in coaching is often present in one form or another.

Although no agreement is reached in the current psychological literature on the causes of self-esteem, Hartner (1999) argues that self-esteem is a product of the developmental path, strongly correlated to the quality of parenting received. Some studies suggest (Coopersmith, 1967; Lent et al., 1986) that while self-esteem may fluctuate day to day, a base level tends to endure (Pelham & Swann, 1989). It is, therefore, not surprising that issues of self-esteem are often figural in counselling or psychotherapy processes. Deep seated self-esteem issues may, therefore, be beyond the scope of coaching. However, more transient or less severe issues may be more amenable to a coaching approach, assuming coaches are suitably aware of the issues involved.

The psychological literature offers a range of conceptualisations of self-esteem and it could be said that there are as many perspectives on self-esteem as there are

branches of psychology and psychotherapy. Some theories emphasise the origins of self-esteem, while others describe manifestation in behaviour, dynamics of change over time and ways of influencing it. In this article we have chosen to comment only on those theories that present an applied value for adults who wish to make changes in their working lives with the help of a coach. We therefore offer both a description of relevant theories as well as potential implications for practice. As a way of synthesising and making sense of the diversity of perspectives an adult developmental framework is introduced and discussed.

The article continues by examining one model of self-esteem in more depth, using it to illuminate four coaching encounters. This is offered to practicing coaches as a pragmatic tool to both help make sense of different types of self-esteem issues and inform potential avenues for intervention. The paper concludes with a summary of implications for coaching practice.

Theories of self-esteem

Early conceptions: James and the Social Constructionists

James (1890) is credited with the initial writing on self-esteem, defining it as contingent on the ratio of our successes to our failures, in areas of our life that we deem important to us. Self-esteem, therefore, could be seen as a motivator in life, constantly driving individuals towards success and away from potential failure, and to maintain a level of competence in key domains. In the context of coaching, this force can be tapped to focus clients on desired outcomes and goals. However, it may also be an unhelpful factor if the client is overly attached to unrealistic or unattainable goals, or domains that are no longer relevant to them.

An alternate early view (Cooley, 1909; Mead, 1913) emphasises the social nature of self-esteem, being regarded as the extent to which we perceive ourselves as matching up to a set of 'central self-values ... [that] individuals have learned to be worthy of emu-

lating or attaining through the process of socialisation' (Mruk, 2006, pp.120–121). Self-esteem is, therefore, a comparison with an internalised set of standards or values, introjected from familial, social and cultural interactions. Seen as such, self-esteem is contingent on others, in that individuals make comparisons with a (real or illusory) standard set by others, motivating them to maintain their acceptance and approval with others. This may also be unhelpful to the client if those standards are unattainable, unreasonable or outdated. The work of the coach, according to this conceptualisation, may, therefore, involve the re-examination of such standards, either downgrading them, or shifting them to more relevant areas (Bachkirova, 2000, 2004).

Humanistic psychology and person-centred therapy

Humanistic psychologists build on these early notions of self-esteem seeing it as a basic need central to human functioning. For example, Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs places self-esteem near the top of his pyramid, making self-actualisation contingent on the achievement of self-esteem. Self-esteem is seen to develop if a person receives sufficient 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers, 1951), and, therefore, becomes contingent when self-regard is conditional on achieving the standard or approval of others. However, self-esteem can be reclaimed by developing congruence with one's own organismic needs and desires.

This perspective on self-esteem impacts the presence and values exhibited by a coach, who must be able to offer unconditional positive regard to the client, irrespective of their actions, achievements or values. It is, therefore, more important to help the client to explore and reclaim a deeper sense of their self and their own needs, rather than necessarily deliver on an externally-derived (e.g. organisational) agenda. This perspective, therefore, potentially conflicts with the overt goal achievement orientation dominating in the traditional coaching literature.

Recent research

More recent writers (Epstein, 1973; Brown et al, 1988; Baumeister, 1993, 1999; Mruk, 2006) concur with the view of self-esteem as a core human need, seeing it as driving behaviour to defend or maintain a perceived sense of self. Two motives are identified; the self-consistency motive and the self-enhancement motive. The self-consistency motive drives people to seek out information that confirms what they already believe about themselves – whether good or bad. Once established, therefore, such a self-opinion may be difficult to discard or refine, and a coach may meet considerable defences if they attempt to disrupt the established ‘self-view’.

The self-enhancement motive differs in that it drives people to acquire information that tends to show them in a positive light, discarding information which may cast an unfavourable shade upon themselves. According to Baumeister (1999), the self-enhancement motive dominates; however he argues that people with low self-esteem (LSE) favour the self-consistency motive, preferring to believe a consistent, albeit negative, message about themselves, and will selectively discard positive information. In comparison, HSE is associated with preference for the self-enhancement motive, selectively discarding negative information. Objective feedback from an external party such as a coach will, therefore, be filtered, according to the dominant motivation.

Self-esteem is, therefore, fraught with the possibility for distortion (Dunning, 2006; Claxton, 1994) and various theoretical traditions and studies (Fingarette, 2000; Goleman, 1997; Hamachek, 1987) document the many ways we may defend ourselves against threats to our self-evaluations. Some of these studies challenge the traditional view that HSE is only associated with positive and desirable characteristics, Baumeister et al. (1999), for example, pointing out that HSE may be associated with narcissistic and antisocial tendencies. The pursuit of HSE may, therefore, not be the desirable goal that has been assumed

(Crocker et al., 2002, 2006). Baumeister (1993, 1999) has also challenged the conception of LSE in his research with others (Campbell & Lavelle, 1993), suggesting that absolute LSE is relatively rare. He postulates that LSE is actually a lack of clarity about the self, whilst HSE is associated with greater degrees of certainty. Other authors (Kernis, 1993, 2003; Jones & Meridith, 1996; Wink & Helson, 1993) suggest that stability of self-esteem is as important as level. A coach, using this frame, may, therefore, need to help a client reach an optimal stable level of esteem, working with the client to clarify their own sense of self, through exploration of their values, goals and needs, within a realistic assessment of their competencies and resources.

It must be noted that some authors challenge the very notion of self-esteem as a core human need (Ryan & Warren Brown, 2003), seeing any contingent evaluation as fundamentally objectifying the self in an unhelpful way:

‘Non-contingent self-esteem in contrast characterises persons for whom the issue of self-esteem is not salient, largely because they experience themselves on a fundamental level as worthy of esteem and love. Successes and failures do not implicate their self-worth, even when they lead to a re-evaluation of actions and efforts’ (Ryan & Warren Brown, 2003, p.72).

Described thus, ‘authentic’ self-esteem transcends the need for self-evaluation, and is realistic, secure and enduring. In the light of this very different view, the role of the coach would be to help the client avoid actions driven by esteem-related contingencies, and to reach for goals that contribute to something larger than self (Crocker et al., 2006; Bachkirova, 2000, 2004).

Self-esteem within an adult development framework

It may seem that the views of self-esteem discussed above are describing wholly different phenomena, such is the diversity of description and explanation. However, recent

thinking on adult development (Beck & Cowan, 1996; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Loevinger, 1976, 1987; Cook-Greuter, 1999, 2004; Torbert, 1991, 2002; Wilber, 2006) may both explain this diversity and offer a new paradigm for understanding self-esteem. These theories suggest that the concept and experience of self-esteem is itself a product of the individual's stage of development. Adult development is seen as progressing through a logical sequence of stages, the relative complexity of meaning-making expanding with each stage. Kegan (1982), for example, suggests that self-esteem has different meanings for people at different developmental stages. The following is the description of the three main adult development stages as presented by Kegan and Lahey (2009), showing how the meaning of self-esteem changes with stage. We suggest that this may explain the divergent perspectives of theories described above.

- 'Socialised Mind'. At this stage, individuals are seen as lacking in self-esteem, driven by the need to be approved by others and to be liked by them. They appear indecisive and may be perceived as a 'push over': 'I am the prime candidate for the assertiveness trainer, who may tell me that I need to learn how to stand up for myself' (Kegan, 1982, p.96). Kegan suggests that strictly speaking 'self-esteem' 'is not an applicable term for individuals at this stage, as 'esteem' does not come from their sense of 'self', but rather from the received and unexamined opinions of others. It could be speculated that this conception resonates with the 'social constructionist' view of self-esteem, where the sense of self is contingent on the views of others.
- 'Self-authoring Mind'. During this stage, self-esteem shifts to become a product of a self-evaluation where a sense of 'me' is earned by sorting out the agendas of others that dominated in the Socialised Mind stage. Individuals enjoy the freedom to form their own judgements

about themselves using their own criteria for comparing ambitions with reality. However, they can still be caught in traps of their own making when forming such judgement (Berger, 2006; Berger & Fitzgerald, 2002; Bachkirova & Cox, 2007), with resultant potential distortions in self-perception. The view of self-esteem at this stage may correspond to the views of Baumeister and others (1993, 1999), and his competing self-enhancement and self-consistency motivations.

- 'Self-Transforming Mind'. The meaning of self-esteem at this stage changes again, and may look much like that described above by Ryan and Warren Brown. There is very little attachment in this stage to any specific self-image, which is seen as fluid in changing situations and in relation to others. For this reason, self-esteem is not seen as an 'issue' but approached with curiosity and reflexivity.

According to this conceptualisation of self-esteem a unified coaching approach that prescribes a particular balance of support and challenge for each individual client would certainly need to be questioned. We suggest that understanding developmental trajectories may help coaches to be better equipped to address the diverse needs of their clients.

Table 1 (overleaf) presents a summary of the theories with their potential implications for coaching together with an attempt to map these theories onto the adult development framework.

A pragmatic model for coaching self-esteem issues.

In our literature search for theoretical models on self-esteem that may have a pragmatic value for the practicing coach we came across Mruk's two dimensional model (2006). As the result of our experimentation with this model in coaching we believe that this can offer coaches a practical approach to working with client issues in organisational settings. An adapted version of Mruk's

Table 1: Summary of self-esteem theories mapped against three stages of adult development.

Theories of self-esteem	Conception of self-esteem	Potential Motivator	Potential implications for coaching	Correspondence to Adult Development stages (Kegan & Lahey, 2009)
James (1860)	Ratio of successes to failures in domains deemed important	Goal achievement and competence enhancement in important domains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clarification of realistic goals ● Clarification of domain relevance 	Self-authoring Mind
Social constructionists (Cooley, 1909; Mead, 1913)	Extent to which the individual matches up to internalised/ socialised values and standards	Maintenance of acceptance of self in the eyes of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establishing realistic standards and expectations of self ● Negating outdated or unfounded standards 	Socialised Mind
Humanists (Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1951)	Extent to which we are congruent with our own needs/values/ standards	Reclaim deeper sense of self and own needs, not contingent on others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clarification of sense of self and own needs/values ● Unconditional positive regard from the coach ● Avoidance of unexamined internalised goals 	Self-authoring Mind
Baumeister (1993, 1999)	Defence or maintenance of a perceived sense of self	Self-enhancement or self-consistency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Minimise self distortions through feedback ● Creating a climate to minimise defensiveness 	Self-authoring Mind
Ryan & Warren Brown (2003)	Authentic self-esteem as non-contingent on internalised sources	Goals and causes greater than self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Transcend contingent self-esteem ● Contribution to goals larger than self 	Self-transforming Mind

model is presented in Figure 1. This model reflects some of the features of recent research, particularly the self-consistency and self-enhancement motivators, described by Baumeister (1999).

In this model, self-esteem is seen as the product of two factors, 'worthiness' and 'competence'; 'worthiness' defined as the need for approval from self/others, and 'competence' as the need for achievement and success. The interaction of these factors produces four different forms of self-esteem:

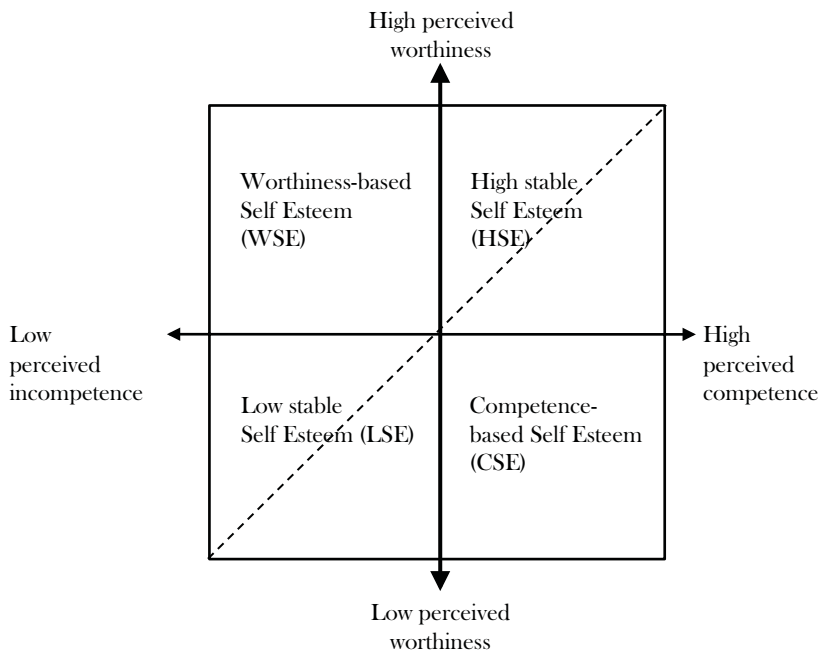
1. Competence-based self-esteem (CSE); based on the need for constant achievement and successes, masking a sense of worthlessness. At its worst this zone represents the chronic over-achiever, perfectionist and workaholic, never satisfied with their accomplishments.
2. Worthiness-based self-esteem (WSE); based on the need for constant approval from others and self, as a way of

compensating for perceived or actual lack of competence in important areas. At its worst this zone represents narcissistic and egotistic behaviours.

Both worthiness and competence-based self-esteem are inherently unstable and fragile, and may be threatened, for example by failures or negative feedback from others. Such individuals may be heavily defended against perceived threats to their self-esteem for fear of the anxiety this would induce.

3. Low stable self-esteem; a consistently poor and inherently stable self-appraisal. This form may also resist change, a person choosing to believe a negative self-concept rather than risk losing a sense of self-consistency.
4. High self-esteem; a consistently good appraisal of one's competencies and self-worth. This is inherently stable, but capable of taking on board negative appraisals or failures and responding functionally.

Figure 1: Self-esteem model (adapted from Mruk, 2006).



To use this model an effective coach would need both diagnostic skills and an awareness of how these forms of self-esteem might influence the coaching relationship. The remainder of this article suggests strategies for working with these potentially very different types of client, using the lens of this model. A recent coaching assignment that involved delivering 360 feedback to a range of clients is used to illustrate some of the issues involved. Feedback of this sort forces individuals to confront the actual perceptions of others, rather than continue to hold imagined perceptions. This can often be a highly anxiety provoking experience (Smalley & Stake, 1996; Ashford et al., 2003), especially when the sense of self is insecure, potentially resulting in a range of defensive reactions and responses (Shrauger & Rosenberg, 1970). Four client cases are used to illustrate different aspects of self-esteem issues.

Coaching the CSE client

The model predicts that the CSE client will have a lurking sense of their own worthlessness which they compensate for by hard-work and striving for achievement. Such a client may have work-life balance issues, may fail to prioritise effectively, and take little satisfaction for their many achievements, ascribing success to circumstance rather than personal action and influence. Workaholic tendencies may, therefore, be exhibited, with ever greater levels of achievement required to maintain an adequate sense of self.

Such a description could be ascribed to many in corporate life, and was a reasonable description of client R, who was working long hours despite increasing tensions with the demands of his home life. His response to 360 feedback was initial wariness, expecting it to confirm a low self-opinion, and he was considerably surprised at the high estimation he was universally held in. However, he rapidly justified why these positive opinions were irrelevant and focused disproportionately on the few less than positive items.

The coach's work with him initially, therefore, was to help him absorb more of the positive news rather than minimise or deflect it. As a newly-appointed Director, he had been selected over the head of a colleague who he regarded as more competent, and, in his eyes, more suited to the role. In the process of further coaching involved him clarifying his areas of expertise (using the Strengthsfinder diagnostic), reconnecting with his values as a source of worth and creating a personal vision for his new role. However, he still remained attached to his workaholic tendencies, albeit now with greater awareness.

Coaching the WSE client

In contrast to the CSE client, a WSE client would be expected to have a high opinion of self whilst devaluing others, possibly developing workplace relationship issues. This proved to be an accurate description of client A, an apparently very confident man but who continuously disparaged his colleagues and team, displaying some narcissistic tendencies. He was highly defended against feedback, criticising the 360 appraisal process in some detail, despite having scored well on many dimensions. The feedback meeting with this client was extremely difficult, with him challenging all less than positive perceptions as irrelevant or erroneous, picking out the positive messages disproportionately. The coach's work was, therefore, to discuss why others might have a less positive view of him on some dimensions and the possible value of developing skills in areas of inter-relating and team leadership. Interestingly, he saw no need for self-development and had no desire to continue a coaching relationship.

As with CSE clients, such clients are not uncommon in corporate life, and can be challenging to work with for a coach. The model predicts that their unstable sense of self will be heavily and possibly aggressively defended. Coaching is unlikely to be welcomed especially if perceived as remedial, however, may be more acceptable if it is per-

ceived as adding to their status or kudos. Cavanagh (2005) counsels against a direct 'attack' upon the potential narcissist, and advocates an appeal to their personal goals, and how they might need to work through others to achieve these. This poses an ethical dilemma to coaches in that it continues to pander to WSE, rather than address the perceptions of lack of competence.

Coaching the LSE client

The LSE client may seem the most in need of help from a coach. However, the model predicts that they may wish to avoid coaching for fear that it will make aggravate their poor self-opinion (Audia & Locke, 2003). They expect feedback that confirms their poor self-image, but may be more accepting of it as it confirms their self-story. Client T, initially avoidant of the coach's feedback meeting, resignedly recognised its negative messages, and deftly denied more positive themes. He recited stories of former work difficulties and how these were an unavoidable consequence of his life circumstances. He had little or no interest in self-development, as he viewed himself as fixed and unchangeable, and declined further coaching on that basis.

According to Mruk (2006), LSE issues spring from two sources, so a coaching strategy might have to tackle both worthiness and competence issues simultaneously. Deeper seated issues might involve examining the introjects that have been assimilated over the years, perhaps requiring deeper and longer levels of intervention than is typically possible in a coaching. Baumeister (1993, 1999), however, argues that true LSE is relatively rare, and that it is issues of lack of clarity that must be tackled, as well as challenging areas where an inaccurate view of the self has been formed.

Coaching the HSE client

It is questionable whether a HSE client needs coaching, given that they have a high, stable and accurate sense of their own worth and competence. They are able to accept

failures and negative attributions from others with good grace and discrimination, adapting their actions as required.

Client D demonstrated many of these qualities, accepting 360 feedback with curiosity and a desire to improve. She received positive and negative messages with almost equal interest, and was quick to see how development in some dimensions would aid her overall effectiveness. She was able to discuss openly her feedback with her colleagues and peers, taking on board their suggestions. She was keen to pursue a coaching relationship, seeing it as a vital source of support to develop in areas where she knew her competence was weaker. The coaching work started by defining the areas she wished to develop, how these would contribute to her overall goals, and then moved into devising strategies for developing these competencies. Interestingly her goals were not related to her own aggrandisement so much as promoting and developing the division she headed and was passionate to see succeed. Such clients are probably close to the Ryan's idea of non-contingent self-esteem, secure in their sense of self, irrespective of circumstances or opinions

The model, based on Mruk's ideas, helps to predict how clients may respond to coaching and the type of intervention potentially required. This model is, at least, a potentially useful diagnostic lens and implies that coaches require a range of worthiness-based and competence-based strategies at their command. Further, it suggests that the coach must be suitably adept at noticing and working with defensive and protective strategies, potentially testing their interpersonal skills. Use of this model depends, however, on the coach being able to understand and interpret the client's self-assessments, and accurately pick up associated behavioural clues as the interaction unfolds.

This model, while a useful starting point, cannot pretend to map the complexity of the entire self-esteem terrain. We would, however, argue that the model allowed the coach to perceive behaviours that would otherwise

be difficult to make sense of and differentiate a range of strategies accordingly. As long as the model is not seen as the only one useful and does not overly simplify a complex phenomenon, we can recommend it for coaches who are searching for useful tools to understand the issue of self-esteem in the coaching context.

Conclusion

Clearly the level and type of a coaching client's self-esteem has a bearing on their functioning and performance, and is thus of interest to practicing coaches. While it is unlikely that clients present with explicit self-esteem problems, self-esteem as a mediating factor is likely to attend in many coaching relationships. The theories outlined above predict that this may be both a positive force propelling change and growth in the client, but may also inhibit and limit what is possible in a coaching relationship. At its extreme, coaching may be rejected, not because of its inherent lack of value but because the client values themselves too much or too little to accept it. Similarly, those who might benefit from coaching the most might also have the greatest difficulties in using it effectively.

It is less clear from the literature whether 'base' self-esteem can be sustainably shifted as authors appear to differ on this point. If fixed, the level and type of self-esteem may cap the amount and direction of change that is possible, and thus the scope of the coach to intervene productively in this direction. However, temporary dips in self-esteem, as those caused by adverse external circumstances, may be very amenable to a coaching approach. Extreme low or high self-esteem might contra-indicate coaching and require referral to therapeutic assistance.

It is clear that self-esteem is a complex area, with a range of theories attempting to

make sense of it. We argue that adult-development theories offer a unique perspective on this very complexity suggesting that simplistic approaches are unlikely to be helpful for coaches. One model of self-esteem has been used in this paper to illuminate a variety of coaching encounters with full recognition that it cannot reconcile all perspectives on this phenomenon. We believe, however, that for pragmatic purposes of coaching this model can serve as a useful tool.

Finally, it is worth noting the dangers of the coach becoming a further source of unhelpful comparison to the needy client, perpetuating a cycle of continued contingent low self-esteem. Perhaps, as Ryan et al. (2003) implies, the true role of the coach in working with self-esteem issues is to help them escape the trap of contingent self-worth, and develop an authentic and accurate sense of themselves, irrespective of successes, failures, opinions and the evaluations of others. Further, this might also suggest that the most useful coaches are those that have developed such a healthy sense of self and are able to restrain themselves from inflicting their own contingent needs on others.

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