Creating the conditions for receptivity of feedback

Lise Lewis, Bluesky International, UK.
Contact: lise.lewis@blueskyinternational.com

Abstract

Feedback is generally accepted as key to improving business performance and is integral to coach practice. However, the anticipation of this activity can elicit feelings of anxiety and fear. Observations from business and coach practice developed a perception that feedback has negative connotations and is often avoided. The PPR Coaching Framework created from analysis and interpretation of data from coach practice offers guidance on a 'way of being'. The framework takes a relational approach for creating the conditions for receptivity of feedback. The anticipation is that engaging in feedback from this perspective will diminish the current conjecture and promote more positive engagement. There appears to be insufficient guidance in coaching text on how competency in feedback is acquired; evidenced by the emphasis on tools and techniques. With relational aspects gaining prominence (de Haan and Nie, 2012) this suggests that this study will inform those engaged in feedback and contribute to coaching literature.

Keywords: feedback, relationship, coaching, performance management

Introduction

A combination of HR and coach experience led me to recognise that performance management systems claiming to have robust processes for improving the way people worked were being disregarded and abandoned. I believe this was because they failed to recognise the 'human factor' and relied on documentation only to inform the performance discussion. Typically, these processes (appraisal recording documentation, competency frameworks, guidance notes for conducting the appraisal discussion) have been meticulously crafted with the positive intention of improving people's capability. A key element in applying the processes is that 'direct reports' engage in performance discussions with their managers. The aim of these discussions is to generate an information exchange including feedback that alerts the individual and ideally the manager to expectations for both their roles. These expectations may be determined, for example, by business strategy and objectives, role/competency profiles, diagnostic tools, peers, team members and working practices.

In these business performance discussions the word feedback can often be closely related with appraisal and ultimately reward. This may magnify both the importance and reluctance for participation in feedback discussions. The use of the word feedback, therefore, can have negative connotations. Appraisal 'should always be an opportunity for you to receive honest, fair and objective feedback from your employer. According to Plimmer (2013), not all managers are capable of doing this, and sometimes let personal differences, snap judgments, or unsubstantiated comments from others in the team affect their perceptions.

In my experience managers present different approaches to acknowledging or addressing the potential impact of feedback on their direct reports. Some managers hold the belief that direct feedback, sometimes with personalised statements such as "you're incompetent", is justified as acting with integrity when describing expectations about performance. Conversely, some avoid performance issues seeing them as too challenging to address. Feedback in these situations can be confined to positive events even when performance falls below the desired level. I have noticed instances where the growing realisation of this practice by both parties results in the process being viewed as inauthentic, although neither the giver nor the receiver appear to take responsibility for this outcome. Blame is frequently apportioned to the inadequacies of the performance management processes and the perceived bureaucracy of the documentation.

The practice of managers disregarding the 'human factor' as being significant in the performance discussion may be attributable to a lack of providing them with adequate support and development in feedback delivery. McDowall, Harris and McGrath (2009 p.17) draw our attention to this in their journal article on evidence from psychology for best practice in feedback. They state that 'individuals have subjective reactions to feedback' and 'it is also imperative that those who give feedback are appropriately trained and self aware'. We are alerted here to the importance of recognising that feedback for the receiver will be influenced by their worldview coupled with the significance of the giver being competent in its delivery.

Similar observations to those described above are also noticed in reflections on practice. As a coach in organisations, I notice that feedback continues to be recognised in a business context as being instrumental in improving individual performance. What people do at work is acknowledged as ultimately impacting on the commercial success and, therefore, the viability of the organisation. A similar scenario to that described for line manager/direct report can be present where coaching is sponsored by an organisation investing in employee development. In my experience of organisational development through coaching, the outcome of engaging in feedback is to raise self awareness leading to transformational change, to celebrate good performance and to identify areas of learning for individuals and teams. Typical areas for individual improvement that are discussed in coaching conversations are interpersonal effectiveness, leadership capability and continuing professional development. The aim of this research was, therefore, to suggest a way of changing the perception of feedback for both the giver and the receiver. This was to be achieved by researching phenomena occurring in relational aspects of coaching conversations.

Literature review

As the approach for this research was emergent and inductive the literature review was in two parts. Only the first part of the literature review is produced in this paper to demonstrate the rationale for focusing on the practitioner-client relationship. This initial review produced three themes relating to feedback. These are:

1. Tools and techniques that provide a platform and process for a feedback discussion – e.g. appraisal systems, use of diagnostics such as personality questionnaires, 360 degree. References: Parsloe and Leedham (2009), Bluckert (2006), Schleeter (2011)

2. Coach as a tool for providing feedback (use of self) and engagement with the client. References: de Haan and Blass (2007), Mearns and Cooper (2005), Barber (2009)

3. The impact of feedback on the client (readiness - receptivity – the client's experience). References: Rock (2008), Spinelli (2005)

The coaching literature primarily offered mechanistic processes described as tools and techniques (Parsloe and Leedham, 2009; Bluckert, 2006; Schleeter, 2011). As described in the

introduction to this paper these are not considered effective in encouraging the desired level of performance in people development. No further investigation of these was, therefore, pursued in this research. Psychology and psychotherapy texts offered a stronger focus on the relationship with scope for addressing the apparent gap in the coaching literature to explore the 'relationship' further (de Haan & Blass, 2007; Mearns & Cooper, 2005; Barber, 2009; Rock, 2008; Spinelli, 2005). This text was anticipated as contributing to a way forward in finding the 'missing piece' that encourages the coach and client to be receptive and see feedback as an opportunity for development rather than a potential threat to well-being.

This preliminary literature review together with observations from HR professional practice and coaching practice informed the creation of the objectives and underpinning questions to generate data for this research study:

Objectives

1. To explore relational aspects existing between coach and client or that can be created to improve the experience of feedback

2. To examine the phenomena that encourages the introduction of feedback into the coaching conversation

3. To identify what determines the timing of feedback

Research Questions underpinning the Study Objectives

1. What phenomena are occurring between coach and client during the coaching conversation?

2. What physical, cognitive and behavioural signals are present to encourage feedback?

3. How can these signals predict the optimum moment for exchange of feedback?

4. What meaning can be made of these signals?

5. How does this meaning-making inform the conditions for receptivity of feedback?

Methodology

Seeking coherence with my epistemology and ontology directed me to a choice of methodology that would focus on working with others and that also acknowledged my preference for other's involvement in the research. This degree of people participation was seen as generating a cooperative/collaborative inquiry 'researching with' rather than 'on people' (Heron 1996). Study participants were recruited from existing communities of practice using specific selection criteria. Pursuing further information on this cooperative/collaborative approach led me to Revans (1982) as the originator of action learning. His definition suggests a 'social process: people learn from and with each other, and a learning community comes into being'. This appeared to reflect the anticipated learning system that would be created through dialogue between individuals participating in collaborative learning groups over the lifetime of the study.

I realised that fully applying an action research line of enquiry would not be the best fit especially after reviewing the work of Revans (1982) on Action Learning and that of Reason (1999) on Co-operative Inquiry. This insight specifically related to the usual practice in action research of developing, trialling and modifying prototypes possibly three or four times over the

life cycle of the project. Additionally, without a hypothesis to prove or disprove the focus was on making meaning of the emergent data gathered from study participant observations on practice.
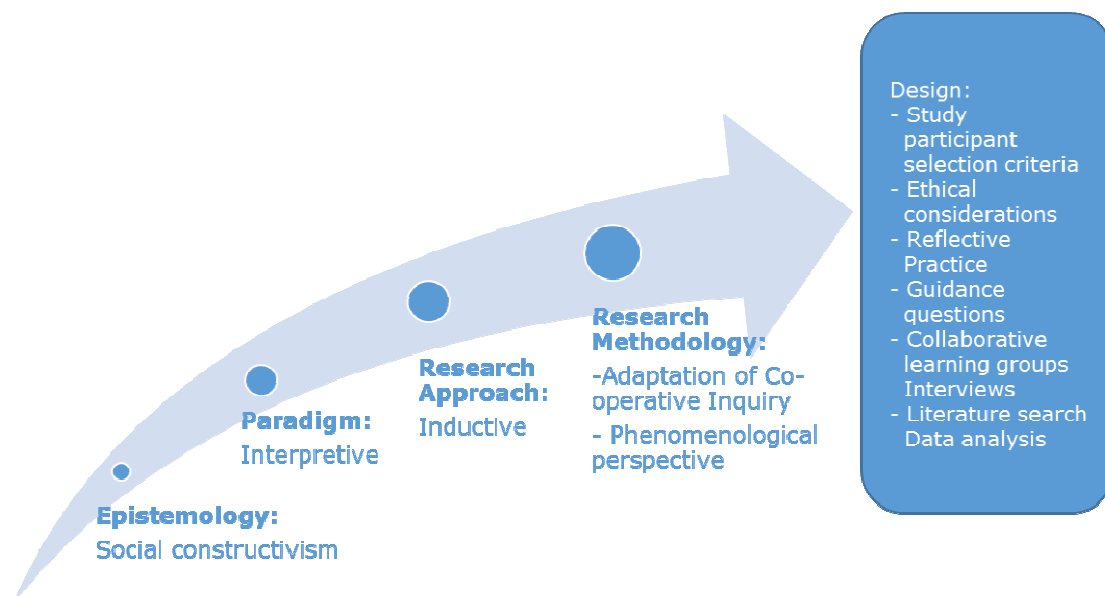

Figure 1. Overview of methodology and research design (author's own interpretation)

A phenomenological perspective was therefore adopted that encouraged study participants to be aware of reflexivity with a request for them to attempt to minimise their inherent bias when recording data from reflections on practice. A summary of the iterative process of applying the methodology used in this study is:

• Field Study No.1 (FS1) with participants gathering data through reflections on observations from coach practice and recording these in response to a questionnaire or through free-flow text.

• Data generated from dialogue in the induction preparing for the field study and collaborative learning group meetings was produced as transcripts.

• Transfer of data from study participant responses and indicative of phenomena occurring in the coaching conversation that related to the study objectives and research questions (relational, phenomena and timing of feedback) in to a spreadsheet.

• Arranging one-to-one interviews with study participants where language used in returns alerted me to the potential for a richer source of data. This activity was not planned at the start of the study and reflects the iterative process of responding to analysis of data as collected.

• Stage One: Data from all sources relevant to the research objectives were transferred to 'Table One'. I organised these as emergent themes identified from reviewing comments made by coaches and their clients and based on, for example:

  ▪ Vocabulary used (physiology)

  ▪ Recognised coach competences (self management)

- Techniques in common practice (mindfulness)

- Stage Two: The emergent themes were clustered into elements. The rationale for clustering was based on experience / knowledge from coach practice, that is, what would a coach do in 'preparation' for the conversation, what would a coach 'react' to during the conversation and what would a coach 'initiate' in the conversation with the client.

- Stage Three: I reviewed the themes and reduced these based on similarity (e.g. somatics and physiology) to clusters of themes underpinned by the original themes. These were organised into elements representing the suggested timings of when to introduce the themes into the coaching conversation. These timings were based on aligning the themes with experience and knowledge of coach practice and are defined as:

1. Preparation

2. Proactive

3. Reactive

These elements were defined and represent suggestions for **when** the element themes can be applied in a coaching or performance management conversation. Bringing these elements together I created the 'PPR Feedback Framework' resulting from the interpretation of findings. Following data saturation from FS1 further interviews were held with three relational coaches in Field Study No. 2 (FS2) to focus directly on a phenomena defined as 'rapport' and their engagement with clients. The purpose of this further study was to strengthen / challenge the PPR Feedback Framework produced from the outcomes of FS1 in conjunction with findings from an extended literature review and comparison with the EMCC professional standards for coaching/mentoring.

Ethical Considerations

Study participants were encouraged to engage clients when making the decision to participate in the study. This involved asking clients if they also wished to contribute data to be held confidentially if preferred. The intention was also to recognise that clients may perceive that their coach could be distracted if focusing on the study as well as the wish for transparency. Coaches were, therefore, asked to discuss this with their clients as part of a usual contracting discussion. Parsloe and Leedham (2009) identify the need to be sensitive to the mental state of self and others. I realised that this can relate to the vulnerability that some clients may experience through emotional reactions to feedback. Study participants were, therefore, asked to discuss this also with clients. Hopefully the usual practice of contracting would already address this; however, the study added another dimension for consideration. The research was conducted within the context of the Middlesex University research ethics framework and confidentiality agreements protecting data were also sourced from a service producing transcripts of meetings.

Results

The analysis and organisation of the data is summarised in the following Stages:

STAGE 1: TABLE 1: Emergent themes from Field Study No. 1 data

In Stage 1 relevant data was included in Table 1 and organised to show:

- Column A presenting the emergent themes identified by clustering descriptors of comments extracted from data.

- Column B detailing examples of comments from all sources of data from Coaches (study participants) and highlighted in 'red' when perceived as relating to a theme.

- Column C detailing examples of data from questionnaires / free flow text from Clients and again highlighted in 'red' when illustrating the theme.

- Where coach and client's comments appeared to have correlation these are presented side by side in Columns B and C.

An example from Table 1 for the theme of 'Intuition' is:

STAGE 2: TABLE 2: Themes clustered into elements for creating the conditions for receptivity in feedback

In Stage 2 the Table 1 data was annotated to establish the elements that appear in Column 1. These elements were informed by clustering the emergent themes that appear relevant for creating conditions for receptivity of feedback. The descriptions of the themes were sourced from refining data representing coach activity, a combination of coach and client activity and client activity.

STAGE 3: Series of visual representations of Table 2

In Stage 3 visual representations were created to graphically illustrate and give clarity to how the themes are organised to inform the elements of practice for creating the conditions of receptivity of feedback:

Visual 1:   An overview of all the emergent themes identified from data

Visual 2:   PREPARATION – identifies Element One themes

Visual 3:   PROACTIVE – identifies Element Two themes

Visual 4:   REACTIVE – identifies Element Three themes
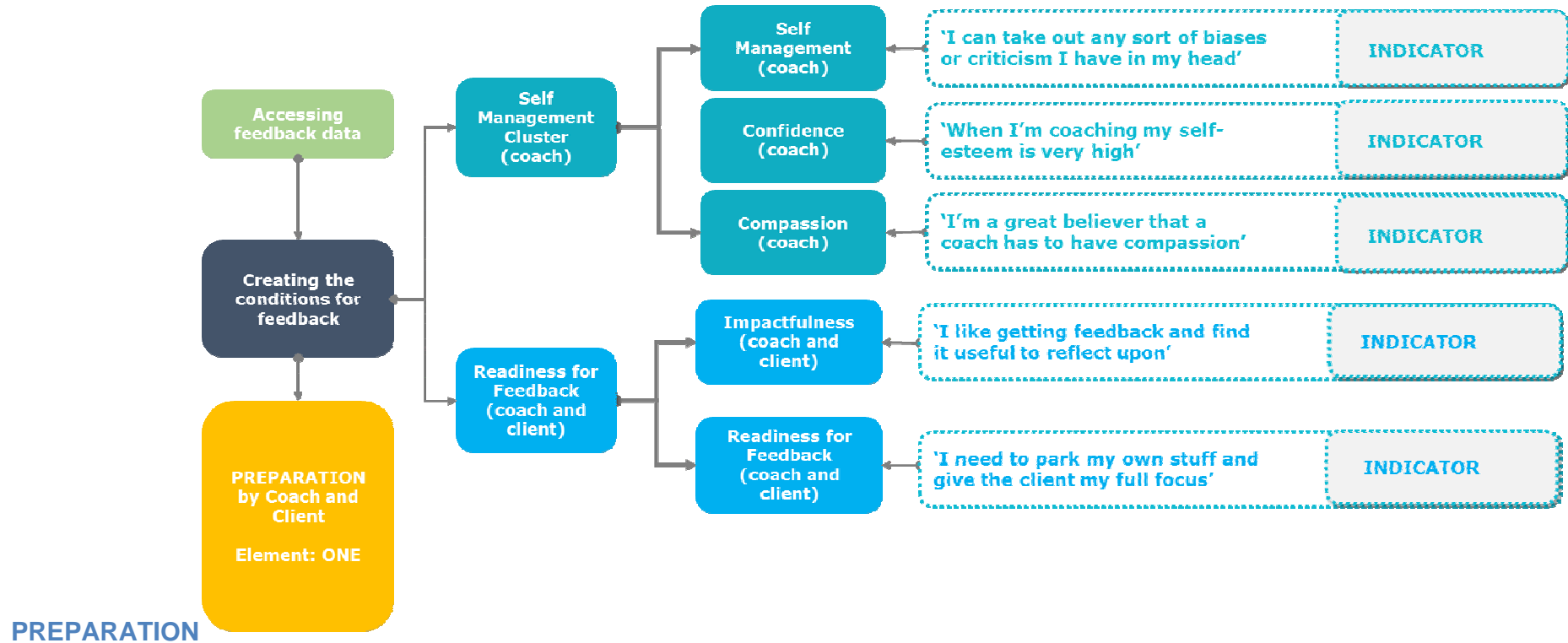
Visual 5:   Combines the 3 elements to create The PPR Feedback Framework

In the example visual below for PREPARATION the clusters supported by their underpinning themes are shown. These themes represent suggestions for preparation in readiness for the feedback discussion. The 'indicators' provide examples from research data that informed the creation of the respective theme.

STAGE 1: TABLE 1 – Emergent Themes from Field Study No. 1 data

COLUMN A: **Emergent Theme**	COLUMN B: **Coach comments indicative of phenomena extracted from all sources of data collection**	COLUMN C: **Client comments indicative of phenomena from question responses / free flow text**
INTUITION		
Intuitive reaction by coach in session	the "knowing" came from an instinctive feeling that the client needed to go deeper to really "see" the importance of their goal to them.	
Intuitive reaction by coach in session	I did was what you might describe as intuitive, but what I'm doing afterwards is the same old where did that come from, what was it that I was picking up on that caused me intuitively to do that.	
Intuition experienced between coach and client	some discomfort and awkwardness in him, it's a potential growth area for him a physical pull back and up and a 'oh no' voice in my head	…part is instinctive, we have established a good rapport. (know the time was right)

Visual 2: Element One:

Flowchart: Element One — Preparation

- Accessing feedback data → Creating the conditions for feedback → PREPARATION by Coach and Client — Element: ONE

- Self Management Cluster (coach):
  - Self Management (coach) — 'I can take out any sort of biases or criticism I have in my head' — INDICATOR
  - Confidence (coach) — 'When I'm coaching my self-esteem is very high' — INDICATOR
  - Compassion (coach) — 'I'm a great believer that a coach has to have compassion' — INDICATOR

- Readiness for Feedback (coach and client):
  - Impactfulness (coach and client) — 'I like getting feedback and find it useful to reflect upon' — INDICATOR
  - Readiness for Feedback (coach and client) — 'I need to park my own stuff and give the client my full focus' — INDICATOR

PREPARATION

Discussion

The next stage was to compare current knowledge, practice and findings from an extended field study with the purpose of strengthening/challenging the findings leading to the creation of the PPR Feedback Framework. Comparisons were made with the EMCC Competence Framework providing Standards for Professional Coach/Mentor Practice, an extended literature review and findings from Field Study No. 2. The following offers a few examples of highlights from this comparative review:

- 4 of the 8 EMCC competences show association with The PPR Feedback Framework elements / themes

- Both frameworks offer guidance to coaches on interventions to apply in practice. These are either described as elements with supporting themes (PPR) or competences with supporting capability indicators (EMCC). Only the PPR Feedback Framework explicitly encourages the client to engage in these interventions.

- The timing for the introduction of these interventions is specific to the PPR Feedback Framework.

- The client-coach relationship is seen as fundamental to the foundation for entering the feedback discussion in the PPR Feedback Framework. The EMCC framework promotes building an effective relationship with the client although this is not specifically related to the activity of feedback.

- I found that coaching literature reviewed over the course of the study increasingly echoed consensus about the importance of the relationship. There was reference to business coaching in that 'the strength and nature of the relationship between coaches and executives appears as a critical success factor in successful coaching outcomes' (Visser 2010). There was not, however, the same level of reference about 'how' to achieve this. A concern about the coach's possible impact on the relationship is illustrated in the 'coach's own agenda' and how that can 'hamper delivery of the coaching' is a sobering reminder of a 'factor coming through in practitioner publications' (Fillery-Travis and Lane 2006).

- Widening the literature review outside of coaching found an emphasis on the practitioner involving the client again illustrating the relational perspective found in the first literature review. In his prologue to the translation of Martin Buber's work 'I and Thou' Kaufmann (1970) introduces the practitioner and client as equal in the relationship. He talks of the desire for 'genuine dialogue' through 'a shift away from subject-object duality, with its 'seer and seen' towards "I-Thou". This "I-Thou" relationship involves seeing the other, as a whole, that exists in relationship to us. Similarly, where 'each participant is being equally affected by the other' and 'genuinely attuned to each other … responsive and responding' in 'mutual relationships and mutual intersubjectivity'. There is 'both receptivity and active initiative toward the other' (Jordan 1991a) **(illustrating the 'relational' theme in the proactive element).**

- Clutterbuck & Megginson (2009) remind us that 'it's easy to assume that a coaching client is ready for coaching, .. that isn't always the case' **('impactfulness' theme in the 'readiness for feedback' cluster for client in the preparation element).**

- Grant (2006) suggests that 'coaches need to explicitly assess the client's readiness for change'. Similarly, for 'successful change to occur the individual needs to be willing to believe that the target behaviour is important' (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008). These references are seen as

two examples of the evaluative element of the 'impactfulness' theme in **'readiness for feedback' cluster in the preparation** element.

- These observations appear to reinforce that good practice necessitates coaches developing 'engagement' as well as process skills. Co-creating a coaching relationship including assessment of readiness for feedback is suggested as instrumental in improving the perceived challenges for feedback. "It's sensitivity to feedback and challenge or finding ways to help clients to listen to new feedback or new observations or challenging feedback .. that is always important and not just in the beginning but also later on" (Coaches: Field Study No.2) **('readiness for feedback' cluster in the preparation element and 'timing of feedback' theme in the proactive element).**

- Further informing when to introduce feedback are Wallace and Shapiro (2006, pp. 690-701) citing 'research has found that therapists and interventions matched to a person's conative–motivational level are highly effective (Prochaska et al. 1992)'. This infers harmonious links between therapist and client. An alternative intervention from Coaches: Field Study No. 2 claims a degree of disengagement: "So I want them in that way to like me but in other ways I don't so I don't mind being very blunt in giving feedback to them or challenging them or saying exactly what I think about some of their issues and the way they avoid them and stuff like that but I do want them to know that I really try to understand them" ('**objectivity' and 'relational' themes in the proactive element).**

Conclusion

The research objectives and questions focused on phenomena observed in the interaction between coach and client and how these informed the activity of feedback. In summary, the significance of the data from these observations suggests that:

- The optimum conditions informing when to engage with feedback emerge from preparation for the conversation and from within the relationship.

- There may be evidence to suggest that external phenomena impact on creating the conditions for coach-client engagement.

These optimum conditions for engaging in feedback originate through recognising, creating and working with connections made in the coach-client relationship. This involves being prepared and alert to exchanges between coach and client and acting or not on those observations. The conclusion is that the PPR Feedback Framework is offered to facilitate **'a way of being'** in coaching practice and performance management discussions as these optimum conditions permeate all aspects of this framework. Engagement with The PPR Feedback Framework is recommended as a means of creating the conditions for receptivity of feedback.

Limitations & implications for research and practice

The PPR Feedback Framework is at present untested and is expected to benefit from application in practice, further research, development and refinement. It is presented at this stage as a platform for building relationships and introducing the feedback discussion into coaching conversations and performance management discussions. Examples of suggestions for development are:

- The theme of **'energy'** included in the **'physicality'** cluster relates in this study to a felt sensation within the coach. There are also indications that energy is present outside of the coach and client and that this may impact on the relationship. I believe a study into this type of energy

will indicate whether a further resource is accessible for developing, supporting and maintaining the coach-client relationship.

- The theme of **'three levels of mind'** integral to the **'intuition' cluster** refers to the '**unconscious', 'conscious'** and '**subconscious'**. This appears to be a huge topic with the potential of informing facets of a 'way of being' suggested as the conclusion of this research with the creation of The PPR Feedback Framework**.** An observation from this study is that phenomena are not adequately defined by the '**intuition'** theme. This, together with the growing number of references sourced, indicates that some coaches are working at a deeper level in practice.

- The work of Mearns and Cooper (2005) was significant in this research and a further study by McMillan & McLeod (2006) on relational depth will be investigated to inform the relational aspects within coaching.

- As the themes within The PPR Feedback Framework reflect activities already available to coaches and business, the framework or aspects of it are likely to be transferrable into practice with educative support. Bluesky International continuing professional development workshops at international, national, regional and local coaching networks are planned. These sessions will offer experiential practice in working with The PPR Feedback Framework. For example, I will be delivering a coaching workshop later this year using the work of Gendlin (2003) on 'Focusing' that invites us to sit with a 'felt sense' until something emerges and we can give meaning to this. The purpose of this workshop is to encourage coaches and their clients to connect with information that emanates from our subconscious as an information sources and resource (in the theme of 3 levels of mind in the reactive element of The PPR Feedback Framework). Similar workshops can be designed and delivered to share learning from The PPR Feedback Framework and to test its effectiveness in coaching practice.

- Similarly businesses can at least, in the first instance, adopt the ethos of The PPR Feedback Framework into their performance management systems.

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Lise Lewis is a cross-cultural executive and team coach working with people wishing to improve personal effectiveness and leadership capability. Clients typically wish to grow relationships, be visibly confident, work intelligently with emotion, be creative in decision-making and inspire teams to add value to business success. She is the leader of multi-cultural teams and President of EMCC International. She has been actively contributing to international standards in coaching/ mentoring over the last 10 years as an EMCC volunteer. Lise recently completed her doctorate at Middlesex University.