

Exploring Coaches' Experience of their Clients' Issues of Self-Esteem

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Abstract

Self-esteem is generally perceived as fundamental to performance and research highlights its central role in our psychological well-being. Yet there is little coaching literature to help us understand this phenomenon. This article reports on a phenomenological study to understand the real-life experiences of six executive coaches who had clients with issues of self-esteem. As a result, four key findings emerged: in 'contracting' meetings, self-esteem is rarely the presenting issue; coaches find themselves operating somewhere between coaching and therapy; the process of coaching self-esteem requires the client to embark on a courageous journey of transition; the coach's 'unconditional positive regard' creates an environment that allows their clients to generate their own self-esteem.

Key words: Executive coaching, self-esteem, confidence, competence, transition

Introduction

This paper reports on a phenomenological study that explored coaches' experiences of clients' issues of self-esteem. The phenomenon of self-esteem is generally perceived as fundamental to performance. Yet, in the field of coaching, aside from some notable studies by Bachkirova (2000) and Maxwell and Bachkirova (2010) and Maxwell (2009) there is currently limited coaching literature available on the subject. Previous research on the topic, mainly from the fields of psychology and psychotherapy, highlights its central role in our psychological well-being and acknowledges its complexity. Therefore this study aimed to advance our understanding of this construct by contributing to the current knowledge, particularly its significance within the coaching practice. In order to do so I capture the experiences of six executive coaches who have coached clients with issues of self-esteem, trying to liberate them as Downey (2003, p.11.) states 'from tyranny of fear and doubt', so that extraordinary results accrue.

The Concept of Self-Esteem

As I became closer to the intriguing subject of self-esteem, I discovered that I was under a misconception that high self-esteem was what we should strive for and that low self-esteem created problems. In studying the literature, I found the opposite to be true. For example, Baumeister et al. (1996) showed that the perpetrators of violence have a favourable view of themselves as superior, not inferior - a belief that, Baumeister states, is characteristic of high self-esteem. Crocker (2002) saw that there were costs to the pursuit of self-esteem. These include an inability to learn from mistakes or criticism. She also identified the damage to relationships in that, if one's self-esteem depends on being smarter or more attractive than others, then others have to pay the price by being less smart or attractive. Furthermore, if we feel that our self-esteem is under assault from others, we may distance ourselves or become angry with the threatening individual. In a thought-provoking article by Slater (2002) called "The trouble with self-esteem" she brings to light the common assumption that 'the less confidence people have the worse they do; the more confidence they have, the better they do' is not strictly true. This was brought to life when one of my clients, a highly competent manager, told me she had a "crippling lack of self-esteem". What baffled me was that her professional performance showed outstanding results. This led me to investigate whether there was an explanation for such a contradiction.

Mruk (1999) offered a way to understand this dilemma through his research on the work of psychologists such as (Branden, 1994 and James, 1950). In doing so he found a 'theoretical consistency between the major approaches to enhancing self-esteem and the general theories they represent' (Mruk, 1999, p.152). He found that they focused on the component of worth, or competence, or both. As a result he produced an integrative definition that reflects both components: 'self-esteem is the lived status of one's competence in dealing with the challenges of living in a worthy way over time' (Mruk, 1999, p. 26). He distilled 'competence' as success, mastery and authenticity and 'worthiness' as providing our actions with value, (Mruk, 1999, p.147). In addition, he suggests that, 'the type of competence that contributes to self-esteem involves acting in ways that are honourable'. This definition, displayed as a matrix, suggests four types of self-esteem (Self-centred; Medium self-esteem, Negative and Overachiever) with the majority of the population clustering close to the axes of worthiness and competence.

In reviewing Mruk's (1999) matrix of self-esteem in a more detailed way, he described 'high' as having ample supplies of self-acceptance and competence. This resulted in more confidence and success when taking risks and dealing with stress, while being more open to life and the changes it brings. In contrast 'low' may suggest the opposite traits such as cautiousness, fear and negativity. With 'defensiveness' comes narcissistic behaviours often characterised as a form of self-love, but there is considerable doubt as to the authenticity of the positive self-views. In fact, Zeigler-Hill et al. (2008, p. 754) suggest that "overt grandiosity in narcissists may actually serve as a facade to disguise their underlying feelings of insecurity and inferiority". In Mruk's (1999) research, and contrary to what I believed before reading his work, some types of defensiveness can drive over-achievement and provide an explanation for the manager described earlier.

Methodology

Executive coaches were chosen in order to learn from their experiences of coaching self-esteem. In undertaking to explore these experiences an inductive and qualitative study seemed appropriate. During my personal life and professional career, I take the view that individuals will perceive the same situation or event in different ways and that there is no one reality. It is because of this worldview that my ontological perspective for the study was constructionist, founded on a belief that what is "real" is a construction in the mind by an individual. My role as a researcher was therefore to form an understanding of those individual realities. In trying to make sense of the researched phenomenon my epistemology was interpretive as, 'in order to understand the world of meaning one must interpret it' (Schwandt, 1994, p.118). As through interpreting the subjective experiences of coaches working with issues of self-esteem, new insights may be gained. To achieve this, I adopted as Bryman (2008) suggests a phenomenologist approach and attempt to see things from another's perspective.

By adopting a phenomenological approach, I was able to pursue the subjective meaning of social interaction, 'explore the lived in' experiences and appreciate how 'others make sense of the world' (Bryman, 2008, p.15). By doing so, I capture the individual experience and enable the reader to 'understand better what it is like to experience coaching' (Creswell, 1998, p.55) - in this case, self-esteem. As I believe that the researcher and participant co-construct reality, I found interpretive or hermeneutic tradition seemed more appropriate as it allowed me to bring in my own experiences. Bryman (2000, p.19) explains that the researchers' own accounts are constructions, as 'they too present a specific version of social reality'. In addition, it is difficult to suspend one's presuppositions, and if unaware of them they can be brought unconsciously into the research processes. Therefore in order to become aware of them, I asked a fellow coach to interview me in the same way I would the coaches. This was then transcribed. Having clarified the decision to include my experiences, I chose a method that I deemed best suited to this study - Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith and Eatough, 2006).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Smith and Eatough (2006, p. 324) defined the essence of IPA as being concerned with 'the analysis of how individuals make sense of their lived experience'. It explores an individual's subjective perception, or account of an event or state, instead of attempting to produce an objective one. An important aspect of IPA is that it recognises the complications, dependency and influence of the researcher's own conceptions, which are required to understand that other person's world through a process of interpretative activity.

The executive coaches were selected based on two criteria: that they had experience of coaching self-esteem *and* worked at an executive level. I used the Stokes and Jolly (2009) definition of executive coaching as providing, 'a form of personal learning and development consultation by someone external who focuses on improving an individual's performance'. To find the coaches, I approached two coaching organisations both employing a wide network of Executive Coaches. I was also recommended to an independent coach who volunteered his time and vast experience. To ensure people would willingly give up their time and without coercion, an email was sent out to all the coaches asking for volunteers. I received interest from eleven volunteers in total. To decide the number of coaches, I referred to Smith and Eatough (2006, p.328) as he explains, 'that there has been some convergence on what is the optimum size, this being between six to eight participants'. I finally settled on six executive coaches to provide sufficient data. The coaches were made up of five males and one female, all of whom had over five years experience of coaching at executive level as defined above. Prior to becoming coaches, their professional backgrounds included banking, education, telecoms and clinical psychology.

Data Collection

One of the advantages of IPA is that Smith (2004, p. 40) offers practical and accessible guidelines when collecting and analysing data. However he also identifies the limitations of following a 'cookbook approach' and suggests it is the development and adaptation of the researcher that will ensure a successful outcome. In keeping with his guidelines, I planned to take this study into the field and talk with the research partners in their natural setting, to ensure the findings were in context and not contrived (Creswell, 1998). However due to a volcanic eruption in Iceland grounding all domestic and international air travel and affecting two of the coaches, I revised my plans to interview in person. I considered the advantages and disadvantages of telephone interviewing, as I was afraid that I would lose rich learning through observing body language and the ability to build a greater sense of rapport. To allay my fears I found that Musselwhite *et al.* (2006) had identified a number of benefits of telephone interviewing. Aside from the saving of money and time, they found that there was a potential reduction in some forms of social bias through facial expressions or social desirability. In light of the difficulties mentioned, and the proposed benefits from telephone interviewing, I accepted that the most practical solution was to use the telephone.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I planned to use semi-structured, in depth interviews, which are widely used as a research tool within the qualitative perspective. But having tested the adequacy of the questions, it occurred to me that I was still leading the study, so therefore I revised my whole interview strategy and replaced the questions with just one open question. It was, "Imagine you have a card sitting in front of you with the words *Coaching Self Esteem* - where does your mind take you?" By doing this I gave the coaches the freedom to choose what they wanted to say.

There were times during the interviews, using the above approach, where the coaches' response took me into areas that had not been anticipated. For example, I had not expected them to quote the words their clients had said to them. They were interpreting their clients' experiences as well as their own. This proved fruitful, as both experiences were important and provided a holistic account. The

richness and diversity of the contributions to the study were enlightening. I was inspired by some of the insights provided by the coaches and already could hear some common themes starting to emerge. These themes included transition and the many ways self-esteem presents itself, as well as maintaining the boundary between coaching and therapy. The calls were recorded with their permission, enabling the rich accounts to be transcribed ready for analysis.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

A professional transcribed the interviews verbatim, following which I carried out a qualitative analysis, attempting to elicit the key experiential themes. To analyse each transcript, Smith (2004) suggests starting with several detailed readings. At the same time, I listened to the tapes, as the intonation also helped my understanding. IPA is 'strongly idiographic, starting with the detailed examination of one case until some degree of closure or gestalt has been achieved' (Smith, 2004. p. 41). Therefore, with each transcript I made an initial identification of the themes. Under these, I listed the quotes from each individual transcript using a numbering and colouring system to identify where they had come from. Having refined the themes, I then clustered them under three superordinate and six sub-themes, (Figure. 2) by identifying a narrative interplay between my interpretations and the research partners' experiences.

Ethical Considerations and Quality of the Study

To ensure an ethical stance for this study, I made certain I had 'informed consent' from the coaches. I explained that they could withdraw from the study at any point and checked that that the coaches felt in no way coerced. Punch (1998, p. 281) states that 'all social research involves ethical issues' because qualitative research always intrudes in peoples' lives. In practice, the discussions on self-esteem often led the coaches to talk about some very sensitive topics, in one case rape. I avoided deliberately delving into this further. Confidentiality was kept intact and the use of real life examples was overcome by the use of pseudonyms. Also, I chose to refer to all the coaches as male in the study so as not to single out the female coach. In keeping with the Data Protection Act 1988, the coaches were made aware of the use of that information and that it would be securely stored for five years. Consent was sought to record the interviews, on the understanding that these would only be used for the purpose of data analysis, after which the recordings would be destroyed. I also made efforts to ensure each candidate remained anonymous from one another, especially as four of the coaches worked for the same organisation.

Emergent Theoretical and Practical Implications

The emerging findings from each super-ordinate theme and sub-themes are expanded upon below along with some potential recommendations. The themes are shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Super-ordinate Themes and Sub-Themes

Self-Esteem – Its Many Masks

From the coaches' experiences, self-esteem is rarely the presenting problem in the contracting meetings even if it is the main underlying cause of the problem. This is in keeping with the findings of Maxwell and Bachkirova (2010, p. 26) who state that, 'while it is unlikely that clients present with explicit self-esteem problems, self-esteem as a mediating factor is likely to attend'. It seemed apparent that these presenting behaviours, or "presenting masks", provided the coaches with some difficult challenges such as dealing with reality, as 'reality is the enemy of self-esteem' (Branden, 1994, p.49). On reflection, the masks seemed so fully developed it was easy for coaches to miss the signs, and instead, accept the reality the clients have created for themselves. These are two examples of the masks the clients were presenting.

Incredibly brash, absolutely brilliant, um, has a very, very sharp intellect, - he takes great pleasure in demolishing any of his colleagues that he can through intellectual destruction (4)

Very senior, he's very young, loads of awards and prizes – Validating he was good – Worked enormous hours – lost marriage and could not even celebrate his success as striving for next feed (1)

A particular implication of these presenting masks is that they may prevent or delay working on the real issues of self-esteem. The problems were prolonged when a client's employer did not provide honest feedback. For example, if the presenting mask was aggressive and bullying behaviour in the workplace and the employer chose to avoid telling the client this was unacceptable, the coach was in an invidious position. As Rodgers (2000) suggests, one solution to this would be for the employer to provide direct and honest feedback straight to the client, with the coach present.

It was also salient that some of the coaches did not appear to have considered the concept of self-esteem as a stand-alone topic that one might learn about, like transference or motivation. This was apparent in the various deliberations over the definition of self-esteem and how the study had made them look at the concept in its own right. As one coach said...

I'll probably ramble a bit...Umm, but... But I suppose we've got to trust it, don't we...it will get us, it will get us somewhere in a, in a, sort of ram... I don't want to ramble (Laughs) Yes. No, I mean the word, self-esteem its a sort of conundrum, isn't it really (3)

One reason for this may be the under-emphasis on self-esteem in the coaching literature (Maxwell, 2009). Another reason may be that even in the field of psychoanalysis there does not appear to be a consistent definition. Indeed, maybe there does not need to be, as Mruk (1999, p.8) argues that 'in one sense we all know what self-esteem "really is", because it is a human phenomenon and we are all human beings.' With this in mind the pragmatic approach the majority of coaches took was to enable the clients to describe self-esteem in their world, which one described as "liberating". A recommendation would be to have specific training and development for coaches in raising awareness of the crucial phenomenon of self-esteem; in enabling coaches to learn to recognise its features, and in working with clients dealing with self-esteem issues.

The Courage to let go – The Courage to be Happy

The courage to change arose from my interpretation of the coach's experiences when helping their clients to understand the root cause of their self-esteem issues and then helping them to "let go" of those issues. This, for me, is captured by the words of Branden (1994) enabling clients to have 'the courage to tolerate happiness'. What follows is a few of the pivotal moments when the coaches witnessed their clients' struggles to let go of the shackles that were holding them back, allowing them to move on. It shows how a reflective process is demanded, rather than a solution-focused agenda. What also becomes apparent is how the language the coaches chose to use when describing this coaching

journey continues to mirror Hopson's (1988) model of transition. Many of the coaches spoke of how their clients were stuck or frozen as though they could not move forward, describing it as:

Stuck in the neutral zone... Transition stuck holding on needing to let go...Tough to know how to let go. (2)

These references made by the majority of coaches describe the difficulties their clients faced as they chose to 'let go' of the familiar lives they had created, and their established beliefs. The language chosen suggests an understanding of a transition theory by Bridges (2003). However all the coaches made the point that there is a time to move on from analysing the past. Such as this coach who said:

To listen to the, you know, why don't I feel loved and, and what happened to me in, in life that shaped that. But at some point I do find myself saying, right, okay, what are you going to do? Confidence rarely comes from sitting and thinking. (3)

This reads like a call for action to enable the client to move on.

Another finding was that most of the coaches seemed to be working in a grey zone (Figure. 3) somewhere between coaching and therapy. In many cases they were using therapeutic techniques, and were dealing with clients who displayed emotions such as anger or uncontrollable sobbing that Rogers (2008) suggests is cause for referral. Although the coaches spoke of holding the coaching line or working on the boundary between coaching and therapy, there appeared to be little consistency to where this boundary lies. This conforms to (Bluckert, 2009; Maxwell, 2009) where they refer to the 'blurring of the boundaries'. However, it may be more than acceptable to operate within this grey zone if the coach is fully trained to do so and clearly understands where the ultimate boundary into therapy lies.

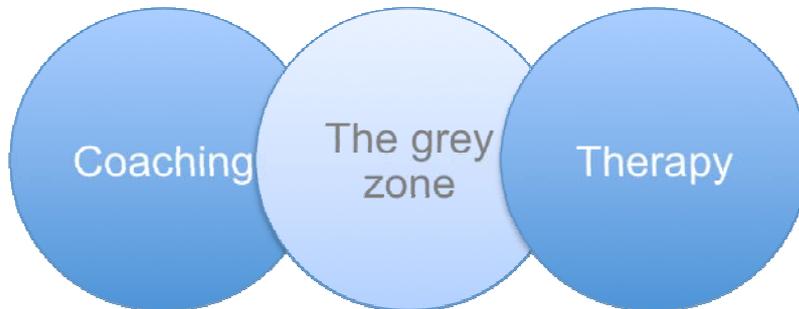


Figure 2: The Grey Zone

However, there may be added benefit in further research and professional development into clarifying these boundaries. Indeed, Maxwell's (2009, p.1) findings support the 'impetus for more rigorous coach training' when working on the boundary between coaching and therapy. Allcorn (2006, p.126) also endorses that executive coaching requires an understanding of 'psychoanalytical theory that provides in-depth insight into human nature', and training on this should be common practice. This will not only make better coaches, but also help to limit coaches from straying too far into therapy, when instead they should be referring their clients to therapists.

The Coach as a Liberator

It also seemed apparent that the coaches saw their roles as liberators as they witnessed at first hand their client's difficult transition. Rogers (1967) speaks of the 'joy at being a midwife to a new personality', and we heard of that joy from the coaches as they described their roles as the most

rewarding in their careers. It was also apparent that acquiring these new personalities took time, sometimes a lifetime, and that coaching was the start of the journey. What appeared to be most fundamental in their role as liberators was the provision of an 'Unconditional Positive Regard' (Rogers, 1967) as this created a non-judgemental environment for the clients to face their worries, fears and concerns. If the coach could accept the client for who they were it started the process of the clients accepting themselves in the same way.

Limitations of the Study

One limiting factor of this study is the complexity of the concept of self-esteem. As Maxwell and Bachkirova (2009) state 'there are as many perspectives on self-esteem as there are branches of psychology'. Therefore my study may only provide minimal progression, as the six coaches' experiences cannot represent the coaching profession. Because the study only focuses on the executive profession, it does not include many other applications of coaching such as life coaching. The fact that the coaches are providing coaching to senior executives may have restricted the breadth of experiences that may have been gained had I opened up the study to different communities or cultures. A potential limitation was that some of the coaches found the interview lacked structure as there was only one question and in two cases the coaches asked for reassurance that we were heading in the right direction. A further limitation to the study was the fact that I only interviewed the coach and did not hear the views of the clients, any perspective of the client being provided only through the experience and interpretation of the coaches.

Conclusion

Overall the findings highlight the centrality of the construct of self-esteem in the coaching setting. Research and clarification on the boundaries between coaching and therapy, along with the inclusion of self-esteem would seem an important focus for all coaches' professional development. It therefore suggests specific training for coaches - in raising awareness of this crucial phenomenon of self-esteem; in enabling coaches to learn to recognise its features, and in working with clients dealing with self-esteem issues. The practice might also benefit from the development of a tool addressing self-esteem, which can assess whether coaching is the appropriate solution.

Finally, it was heartening to hear from the coaches that the majority of their clients went through their transitions successfully. This is ultimately due to the bravery of the clients, but helped along the way by the fundamental aims of coaching and the skills of the coaches in being a 'midwife to a new personality' (Rogers, 1967). The experiences of the coaches offers credence to Mruk's (1999, p. 69) tongue in cheek comment, 'self-esteem is so important. If only we could enhance it, then everything would be all right'. On the contrary, to me it now seems that rather than enhancing self-esteem, it is about enabling a client to be content, to be themselves without condition.

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