

Academic Paper

Finding your values – why you may want to, and why it shouldn't be a lonely task

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Abstract

Most companies and professions profess values – whether to instil good practice, or to reassure clients, but what of our own values, often lost beneath those we should adopt? My research used constructivist grounded theory methodology to propose a theory explaining how coaching can enable a coachee to identify their personal values. Uncovering Values requires deep work with an expert guide in a safe focussed space. This paper considers one aspect of that – the need for an expert guide and its implications – and the benefit this may bring at a time when the search for meaning is increasing.

Keywords

values, search for meaning, deep work, expert guide, constructivist grounded theory

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Introduction

In coaching literature researchers and practitioners refer to the importance of values (Stelter, 2017; Western, 2017) and the need for coachee and coach to know their own, (Iordanou & Williams, 2017; Joseph, 2018). Most authors in the two most recent compendiums on coaching (Bachkirova et al., 2017; Cox et al., 2018) commend the use of values as motivational drivers, key to transformation and vital to adult and coach development; as such coaches should help clients understand their values (Jackson & Cox, 2018).

While professional values come from coaching association codes (Global Code of Ethics, 2021), and cultural values may be observed through research (Abbott, 2018), little is written to suggest how personal values can be identified. If coaching is a development process promoting sustainable change (Cox et al., 2018), and values play a role in the behaviours enabling that change, then accurate identification of values supports the coaching process. My research considered “How coaching can enable a coachee to identify their personal values” and this paper looks at one aspect and then one application of that.

First, how to find values – primarily for those in coaching but potentially applicable to therapy and other helping disciplines. My research (2022) identified a number of tools for identifying values, mostly self-administered. However, my findings showed that personal values are often held deep within a person, and that accessing these is best done with someone who knows their language, meaning and implications. If finding values is of interest, then those doing so should consider that searching for them alone may take longer, be more difficult and less accurate than doing so with an experienced guide.

Second, the desire to find meaning in life. The pace of change from the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014) of an increasingly connected world creates disquiet and unease, exacerbated for some by coronavirus impacts and current economic and political concerns. Amidst this there is increased desire to find meaning, as evidenced in internet searches (Google Trends, 2023), and anecdotally in therapy and coaching. Third generation coaching (Stelter, 2014), created around the same time as VUCA, focusses on meaning and accesses that in part through values. This suggests that knowing how to find your personal values may be of relevance to the increasing numbers of people searching for meaning in their life or career.

In what follows I explain some of the literature reviewed to understand the role of values in coaching, what they are and existing processes or tools for finding them; I explain why I chose constructivist grounded theory for my research; I explain the findings relevant to this paper, discussing them in the context of coaching and other helping disciplines; and conclude by suggesting the implications of this for coaching practice.

Literature Review

Using values in coaching

In first- and second-generation coaching literature, a goals or skills focus should be congruent with a coachee's values to create motivation and support success (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2017). In positive psychology coaching, focussing on the values from which strengths come (Colan & Davis-Colan, 2019) creates momentum to achieve desired outcomes (Bonniwell & Kauffman, 2018). When coaching for life or career changes, both should be linked to values to be sustainable (Grant & Cavanagh, 2018; Hazen & Steckler, 2018). Similarly, the qualitative changes in attitude and values created in developmental coaching require that both be known and understood (Jackson & Cox, 2018) and leadership coaches suggest leaders must understand the impact of their values to be effective (Stokes & Jolly, 2018).

Third Generation Coaching brought a profound focus on values to enable new meanings to be made (Stelter, 2014), underpinned by Mezirow's transformative learning which recommends

a facilitated, critical exploration of interpretations, assumptions, beliefs and values that contribute to a disorientating dilemma (Bennett & Campone, 2017, p. 111)

Grant's extension of this in the workplace shows performance improvements through a values focussed approach that is personally (and organisationally) meaningful (2017).

In genres informed by third generation coaching values clarification is an important step in creating a meaningful life (Lawton Smith, 2017). Person centred coaching works on core beliefs and values as an essential part of understanding the self (Joseph, 2018), and emotions that arise are regulated by considering events through the lens of the coachee's values (Moore & Jackson, 2018). For further reading, see either compendium referred to earlier.

Values in social sciences

As one of coaching's antecedent disciplines, social psychology was a main contributor to values' research. Vernon and Allport (1931) measured values' relationship to motivation, behaviour and personality over forty years (Oles & Hermans, 2010). In parallel Maslow challenged the preference for reason over emotion. He suggested values become "a basic aspect of all scientific studies..." (1954, p. 362) to accurately perceive ourselves and our world, laying the foundations for the values / strengths focus that became positive psychology. Rokeach saw the importance of values to guide action, resolve conflict and give expression to human needs (1973). Then fifty years after Maslow used the term Seligman and Csikzentmihalyi created Positive Psychology (2000), focussed on wellbeing and flow, all linked to strengths, becoming the expression of values put into action (Seligman et al., 2005).

Alongside psychology, theories of learning use values and influence coaching (Bennett & Campone, 2017). Knowles, Holton and Swanson show values as intrinsic motivators to learn (2015) when adult educators clarify students' values to enable new perspectives. Equally experiential learners seek to understand the values and assumptions driving their behaviour (theories-in-use) to reduce dissonance between these and their desired behaviours (espoused-theories) - as described in action science (Argyris et al., 1985).

Values' definition

Theories of psychology and learning along with coaching research and practice highlight the importance of values. As few consider what they are (Talbot, 2013) I looked for a definition. Dilthey countered psychology's focus on external explanations for phenomena with his concept of the formation of consciousness through mental processes and beliefs (1894). His student, Spranger extended this identifying six attitudinal values, beyond those required for self-preservation, that drive our behaviour (1922). Allport researched how an individual's behaviour impacts others creating group values (1928) and altogether these led to the first study of values aimed at measuring personality (Vernon & Allport, 1931). Allport considered patterns within personality including values which he defined as "beliefs upon which man acts by preference" (1937, p. 354).

Lovejoy proposed a set of "terminal and adjectival values to explain certain courses of conduct" (1950, p. 593). Having spent his life studying belief systems Rokeach "built on the previous fifty years of research" (1973, p. ix) to focus on values suggesting that

a value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite mode of conduct or state of existence...(1973, p. 5)

Similar to Lovejoy, he defined values as being "terminal – a desired end-state - or instrumental, a way of behaving to get to the end-state" (p. 7), a theme repeated in research since then (Burton, 2011). A more modern take comes from psychologists Wignall and Sewall who see values as "a north star" (2020, 13 min) giving an orientation for life when lost or uncertain.

In coaching a value is "a judgement regarding what is meaningful or that gives purpose to life" (Dryden, 2017, p. 11), or an important belief which affects us emotionally (Sale & Moynan, 2018). In coaching ethics, Iordanou, Hawley and Iordanou define values as "principles that guide our behaviour" (2017, pp. 11-12) which with cultural, organisational and professional values comprise our value system. However for my purposes Stelter's definition seems of most note - "values give us an orientation for our life and our work and are thus central to all types of coaching" (2017, p. 331).

Table 1: Methods of value identification

| Field | Tool | Source / Reference | Credibility of source | Self admin? | Potential application |
|--|---|---|---|-------------|---|
| Behavioural science | Values Study - 45 questions used to weight Sprange's six attitudinal values | Allport and Vernon - Kopelman, Rovenor, and Guan 2003 | Allport & Vernon's study was the 3rd most used measure of personality. Kopelman & Rovenor are Prof. of Management | Yes | With a prioritisation of six thematic attitudes towards values, this may begin a discussion but is very broad. |
| Social Psychology | Rokeach's Values Survey | Rokeach, 1973 | Much cited social psychologist and academic, winner of awards from American and International Psychology Associations | Yes | Two lists of 18 values to be placed into order. Easy to use, but self reporting without discursive validation |
| Positive Psychology | Values in Action - Inventory of Strengths. 240 item prioritisation of 24 strengths based on a self admin. test, now reduced to 15 minutes | Peterson and Seligman | Award winning Professors of Psychology, and among the founders of Positive Psychology - Peterson deceased 2012. | Yes | If strengths are values in action, knowing strengths may enable the coachee to work back to their values? But it seems light. |
| Behavioural science | Life Jet model - a journey to plan life, with a camera to focus on values / strengths, a compass to find direction, a map to plan steps | Oades and Crow, 2008 | Oades is a professor and author focussed on wellbeing; Crowe a published academic focussed on mental health and wellbeing | Yes and No | For third generation coaching, finding meaning in life, this may be relevant, but it is much broader than values identification |
| Coaching | Card Sorting | Kearney, 2010 | Professor focussed on leadership | Yes and No | May produce an initial list from which to discuss, but source of cards is random, and may be suggestive |
| Coaching | In the flow discussion | Rogers, 2012 | Award winning experienced coach of 30+years | No | Discussion about underlying behaviours when 'everything feels good'; when client is in flow they are aligned to their values? Lacks evidence |
| Career Coaching and Counselling | Value Focussed Questionnaire | Sheward and Branche, 2012 pp.81-83 | CBT therapists and practitioners, one working for the NHS the other teaching at Goldsmiths | Yes | Fifteen questions covering areas of life and work, with very broad examples of values |
| Coaching Psychology and Discourses | Reflection | Western, 2012; Crowe, 2017 | Western is adjunct Professor at Dublin, widely published author; Crowe is senior lecturer in psychology, Wollongong, Australia | Yes | Reflection is seen as essential to access slow thinking, memories, and subconscious - but recognised as challenging to practice, may require training or guidance |
| Education, Counselling and Psychotherapy | Values Clarification - a discursive process of values identification in counselling | Kirschenbaum, 2013 | Prolific author and Professor Emeritus, worked on values clarification for over 40 years | No | The closest process to my findings - discussing issues of conflict or uncertainty in safe, non-judgemental environment |
| Development / Education | Explanation of values, their relevance; 6 step process considering drivers for happiness, fulfilment and satisfaction, list of 144 values and process to prioritise | Mind Tools | A 25 year old learning hub with 17,000 paying members, and customer services who interact with negative and positive reviews on trust pilot | Yes | Context easy to understand. Process could be followed by a coach with a coachee or by a coachee alone |
| Coaching | A personal values identification process - comprising 73 values, a four step process with questions and a workbook in support | The coaching tools company | Author is an NLP practitioner, coaching for twenty years with published articles on coaching shown on Google Scholar | No | The process aligns to coaching's probing questions, discussion and reflection |

Finding your values

Through my review I found the following recommendations for values identification, summarised in Table 1.

Crowe (2017) suggests coaching enhances performance through values identification and Western (2012) proposes similar – neither suggest how this should be done other than through personal reflection. In graduate leadership development Lawrence et al (2018) propose a whole life focus, where coachees learn about their values using reflection to look inward but also fail to expound.

Sheward and Branche consider Csikzentmihalyi's flow to indicate value aligned behaviour (2012). Rogers suggests that discussing moments of flow enables the identification of coachee values in use at that time (2012), however, she does not offer supporting evidence. Csikzentmihalyi's flow model considers values as motivational drivers but does not identify them (2014). Sheward and Branche offer their own value focussed questionnaire (2012), similar to Seligman's VIA-IS questionnaire which he offers as an aid to coaches in value articulation (2011).

Spence and Joseph's post traumatic growth coaching (2017) focuses on values clarification using a Life Jet model (Oades & Crowe, 2008). Lawton-Smith's coaching for resilience and wellbeing builds on this, comparing their collaborative approach with the co-creation and growth focus that naturally occurs in coaching (2017), suggesting the Life Jet model may be relevant. Kearney uses a card sort to identify values when coaching leaders (2010) but does not suggest the source of such cards. Others suggest that values can be observed in meaningful functionings of the individual (Shpigelman, 2019), a process similar to Rogers' flow, critiqued earlier as lacking evidence; or that narrative coaches can hear values in the coachee's story (Perez, 2020) placing the burden of identification on the coach.

In reviewing social sciences several value identification methods emerge: Allport and Vernon's Study of Values (1931) was reconstructed in 2003 (Kopelman et al., 2003); Rokeach developed his Value Survey (1973), still considered the basis for many of today's studies (Tuulik et al., 2016); and Peterson and Seligman developed the Values in Action - Inventory of Strengths (2004) which while strengths focussed may still be useful for coachees working back to underlying values. Finally Simon, Howe and Kirschenbaum's seminal work on values with students (1972) has since been refined for use "In Counselling and Psychotherapy" (Kirschenbaum, 2013).

Table 1 offers more detail on these methods. Many are self-administered, creating a risk of confirmation bias and few are referred to in the many books and articles on coaching considered in the review other than where shown. Thus, while the use of values is commended in most forms of coaching, I found little to say how values are identified, creating the gap upon which my research question was based.

Methodology

Epistemologically my research sought to explain how coaching can enable a coachee to identify their personal values. The lack of existing theory led me to investigate three methodologies that could fill such a gap (Jackson & Cox, 2020). I discarded conceptual analysis for its tendency to be used to validate existing theories (Racine, 2015). I considered discourse analysis, as patterns in the data might provide contextual explanation of values identification (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), but found the specific claim that grounded theory discovers theory from data (Carmichael & Cunningham, 2020) most relevant to my research.

Philosophically I am a critical realist, believing the world to be absolute but our perceptions of it quite different. In contrast, for my research I needed to understand how coachees and coaches interacted and believed my interaction with my participants would create new knowledge suggesting a constructivist approach.

Combining my chosen methodology with an appropriate philosophy I compared three main varieties of grounded theory (Carmichael & Cunningham, 2020). Both Glaserian and Straussian approaches can be aligned to any philosophy and were thus plausible. However only Charmaz's interpretivist assumptions considered co-construction of knowledge and the involved nature of the researcher, so I chose her constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014, 2021). Charmaz considers her theory to be a set of flexible guidelines (Charmaz, 2014). In that spirit of flexibility I

combined her methods with those of Birks and Mills (2015), and with coding strategies from her mentee (Saldaña, 2021) to collect and analyse the data.

Data collection

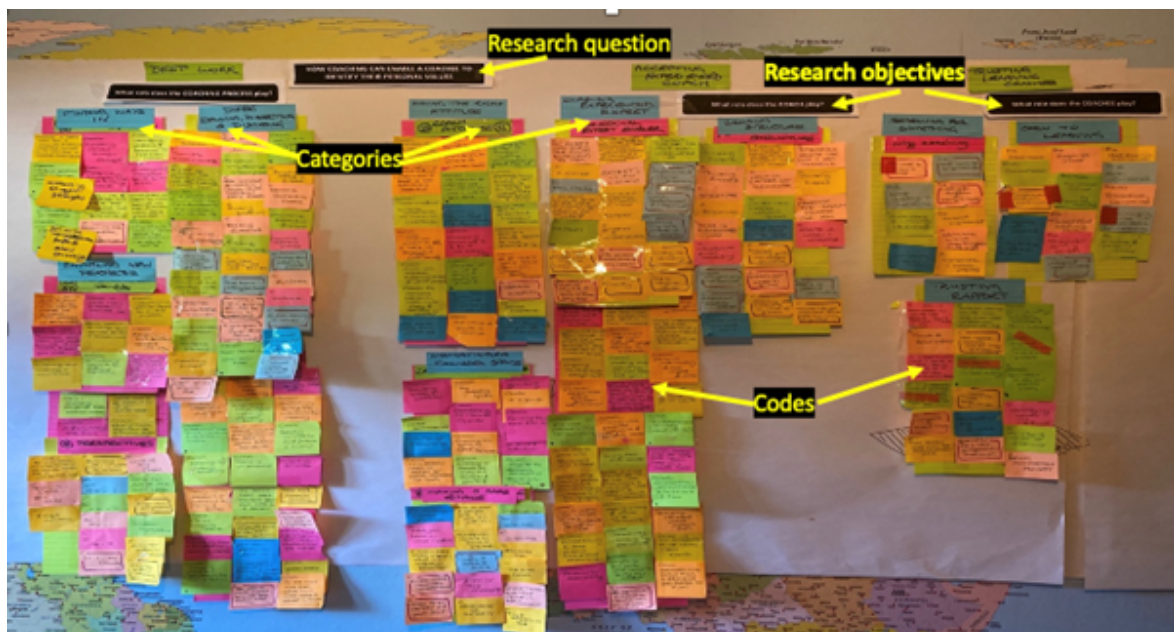
I used semi-structured video-conference interviews, with coaches and coachees who had worked on values identification. To make the data thick (Charmaz, 2014) I built rapport to remove perceived imbalances of power and establish mutuality. As all participants had chosen to be interviewed I tried to use a blend of intensive and informative interview styles (Gillham, 2007), with varying success.

Data analysis

I interviewed five coachees, manually transcribing each interview to become familiar with the data. I used in-vivo and process coding – the former using the participants' words to remain in the data, the latter using gerunds to identify processes. After coding each transcript, I compared with previous codes through memos. As coding progressed my memos identified code relationships, new interview questions or types of participants required to support what I saw as the emerging theory (Levitt, 2021). I repeated this until I felt after interview ten I had codes that “crystallised the experience” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 134) of the participants.

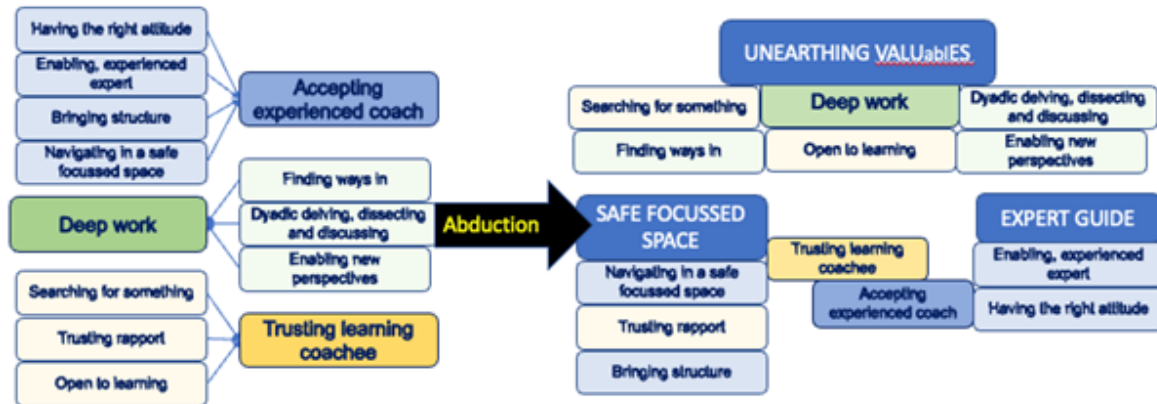
I tried using NVivo for my analysis but found it dull and distant on a computer screen. Charmaz codes with pencil and paper (2013), so I moved my codes to stickers, colour coded for each participant and put these on my wall. In moving the codes around I began to understand the relationships between them and sensed the emerging theory; focussed coding (Saldaña, 2021) highlighted the codes most relevant this. Through axial coding I rebuilt the data from fragmented codes into categories – bringing it into several themes aligned to my research objectives (Figure 1). I conducted four more interviews referencing the most significant codes seeking theoretical saturation.

Figure 1: Aligning categories to research objectives



Finally, in theoretical coding I found one overarching theme representing the experiences of the participants and the data, from which I could abduct a theory, shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Abducting a theory



The timing of grounded theory’s second literature review creates debate (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). I considered the methods identified (Table 1) may contaminate my research and did not investigate these until theoretical coding started. I used memos and reflexivity to manage their impact, along with that of my experience on the emerging theory as Charmaz suggests (Carmichael & Cunningham, 2020).

Findings

This subset of my findings addresses working with a guide to find your values, and how they may bring meaning to your life. Research participants are pseudonymised and to assist the reader where cited coachee names appear in lower case, COACH names in capitals.

Finding your values with an experienced guide

While only one of the nine coachees came to coaching to identify their values, all came looking for something they couldn’t find on their own and wanted a facilitator or an expert to help them. CIARA said

I would prefer them to do this kind of work with a coach.... having done it on my own and having done this work with clients... it took me so much longer, a year, compared to what I see my clients gaining

Enabling, experienced expert

The participants’ felt that identifying personal values was difficult - they needed someone to explain this to them

values work is deep work ... but people don’t understand, it isn’t everyday language to say, “What are your values?”. It’s our job as coach to translate that to things like drivers, motivators... they’re all linked to your values. It’s our role to help them bring it into everyday existence (MINA)

The “explainer” needs to know their own values, to be congruent with them, and needs first-hand experience of the values identification process. Coaches introduce the language of values and work through “identifying and discussing them so you can verbalize them” (Fliess). As the process was considered so challenging, it is important that coaches provide reassurance and support for example

if kindness isn't your core values you shouldn't worry - it doesn't mean you aren't kind, only kindness isn't as important to you as other values (ASTA)

Understanding values, being able to explain them, was part of what made the coaches experts in the coachees' eyes. However, several participants also wanted structure and thinking support. The coach's approach of question, discussion and summarising-back enabled coachees to put their thoughts in order, to think in a more coherent way. This relieved some of the anxiety that stemmed from the sense of being lost or not knowing their direction; as a result, many of the coachees use this more structured approach to thinking to this day.

There was also value in bringing structure to the subject of values. Values were not considered layman's terms, their terminology not widely used outside coaching or therapeutic environments. Adding structure gave Peter "a new framework, a new vocabulary", and Fliss "a new language". The coach's provision of this framework and language enabled the coachees to understand what values are and thus start work in identifying their own. It let Jeremy "find words for my values – I knew what they were I just couldn't write them down". The combination of a structured framework to explain values and a structured approach to thinking about these enabled coachees to "see things more clearly" (Vandra) and "to bring my values to life and to bring me out of my head" (Mina).

The final aspect of the experienced, enabling expert was the quality of the space they created for the coaching to occur. The concept of the coaching space is well known and referred to by most in my sample. Coaches spoke of creating a space in which coachees could reflect with support and encouragement, and coachees of having somewhere they could focus solely on themselves. However, the space also needed to be safe, for discussing values was variously described as being deep and complex, reaching into your very core, going into your subconscious, touching your identity, and requiring you to bring all aspects of yourself. For the space to feel safe the coachee had to trust the coach and had to feel not just that the coach was an expert but also that they accepted the coachee fully, just as they were – the coach had to have the right attitude.

This section of the findings has focussed on the value related skills required of the coach; the next section considers the coaching process, for which the coach is responsible.

Dyadic delving, dissecting, and discussing

When asked how values identification occurred, none of the participants cited exercises or tests; Vandra spoke of "being asked questions you don't ask yourself" and Mina of being helped to "question my unquestioned assumptions". Answering such questions often required a move from intuitive to reflectively thoughtful responses - for quick reactions were often found to elicit aspirational or introjected cultural / familial values. Deeper reflective responses, encouraged through probing questions, pauses and reflective statements accessed deeper memories and the subconscious where personal values were held. One coach used her understanding of transderivational searching, observing the coachee's eye movements as they searched memories and their subconscious for relevant information, to better understand the likely source and thus potential relevance of their response.

The use of narrative was also raised, moving coachees into an elaboration of their story with encouraging and varied questions to help them unpick each subsequent layer of themselves and go deeper into their core. Going deeper led to discussions on the subconscious. Some felt values to be fundamental drivers of behaviour, driving your unconscious response to events. Mina explained that as a coachee she realised how taking her values from her subconscious (pointing to her head) to her conscious (pointing to her mouth) helped her, and she now uses that in her coaching practice. Others cited verbalising thoughts as a way of enabling and then confirming this move into the conscious. Christopher gained "just from talking it out loud" showing the benefit of dyadic discussion and ASTA felt similarly "when you talk things become more real".

This was an iterative process during which values were identified and validated through experiences and brought back to the dyad for discussion and deconstruction. It took some many sessions, others many months or even several years. Continued dyadic delving and discussing helped “dissect my values and conclusions” (Vandra), “dig deeper into what they meant” (Fliss), and “understand myself by dissecting myself” (Mina).

Enabling new perspectives

The combination of an experienced expert enabling delving, dissecting, and discussing of the coachee’s experiences in order to identify personal values both requires and leads to new perspectives.

When a coach brings a new perspective into the dyad this can bring context to an issue – i.e., this helped coachees understand the contrast between values adopted from culture, family or work, and personal values. Coaches emphasised the need for values to be personal, to be owned and realised by the individual rather than being someone else’s. Offering a new perspective also seemed to have a positively jarring effect, for example

I think the ‘my god’ moment was when they explained that I didn’t have a value about having enough money - so it was someone else’s, I was putting everybody’s needs before mine (Fliss)

Coaches also enabled coachees to create their own new perspectives. JUSTIN aims to

help clients understand the difference between what they think their values are and how they actually experience them, which means enabling coachees to look at values through multiple lenses and perspectives.

He uses the coaching process of question, reflection, and discussion to support his coachees in finding these lenses. Similarly, LIZ coaches clients in

working around unpicking internalized oppression and senses of privilege.... we might together actually change values, giving them a new perspective or understanding

When discussing the feeling of being lost, several commented that if you want to know where to go, or what to do you have to know who you are, and this means creating new perspectives on yourself.

The iterative, reflective process of coaching, combined with probing questions encouraging elaboration and reflective thought seem to justify the coachees claims that they formed new meanings. These new meanings fostered greater self-awareness enabling the identification of their personal values, giving a new perspective on themselves. A coach bringing a new perspective adds value, as the coachees clearly said, but “enabling me to see things differently” (Mina) seems even more valuable for it is a skill that can be reused after the coaching is complete.

Searching for something

The drivers for the coachees coming to coaching were similar – feeling lost in their life or career and looking for guidance. Their coaching conversations covered purpose, direction, and identity for “I don’t know what my values are because I don’t know who I am” (Peter).

All participants spoke of the difficulty of identifying personal values, but once done said:

my values became my anchor point

tapping into my values was the first step in becoming authentic me

by the end I could answer the question 'what matters to you in life?'

I dissected myself, I understand myself

I was able to differentiate my values from those of my company and understand the issues I was facing

as humans when we are doing the things that are in line with our values...we are at our most congruent

it's getting to know yourself from the inside

If you want to know where to go, what to do - you have to start knowing who you are

While the coachees came to coaching looking for guidance in the form of a facilitator or expert, many left with a sense of that guidance inside them, like an inner coach, in the form of their values. New meanings were created by the coachees being offered new lens through which to view values, by them creating their own new perspectives and thus knowing themselves differently.

In describing how he started his values journey one of the coachees offered an additional perspective. On exhibiting what he and his family considered to be negative behaviours, and in discussing these they came to the underlying values driving his behaviours. He worked with his family to identify other behaviours that still honoured his values, to some success. Completing his values journey required the coaching we discussed, of which he said

once you get into values there are professionals (coaches) who will guide you how to do this properly, wording the question right or coming at it from a different angle

Thus, while he, along with the rest of my findings, show there is a significant role for coaches in this process of values identification, his initial experience suggests that at least some of the process can be done outside coaching. While my research was about finding personal values in coaching, if many are looking for meaning in life perhaps those seeking that would benefit from personal value identification too?

Discussion

Identifying your values is best done with someone who has identified their own, who understands their language and structure, and who through their attitude and expertise can create a safe space. Identifying values may mean accessing your subconscious and deeply held memories, and the guide enabling this may also introduce new perspectives to enable you to form your own. As the search for meaning increases so too may the desire to find values and it is thus increasingly important to understand the implications of this aspect of values identification for coaching practice.

New skills

There are certain attitudes, experiences, and skills a coach should possess to enable personal values identification. Guiding the coachee may be facilitating or directing - the latter has ethical considerations considered later. Requiring a coach to have identified their own values may seem reasonable or prescriptive; and a coach who is accepting seems more relevant to certain approaches or genres of coaching – what follows considers these two areas.

Coach's attitude

Coaches should like and be interested in people (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017b), which some consider an attitude. Coaching psychologists' attitudes comprise

openness, honesty / authenticity, integrity / confidentiality, non-judgemental / objective, enthusiasm / passion and commitment / motivation to help (Lai & McDowall, 2014, p. 130).

However, there is little other research on the attitude(s) required of a coach - perhaps because attitude relates to the type of coaching practiced and is not generalisable.

Coachees working on personal values want to feel accepted and free from judgement. In many genres of coaching, attitudes remain unspecified (Jackson & Cox, 2018; Tschannen-Moran, 2018), or narrowly specific (Machin, 2010; van Nieuwerburgh, 2017a). Only in person centred and humanistic coaching approaches (Joseph, 2018; Kemp, 2017) is acceptance consistently cited and commended. Accepting not judging, focussing on the whole person, and showing empathy are considered necessary attributes of the coach, suggesting values identification may best be done through a person-centred or humanistic approach to coaching, narrowing its applicability.

Experience of values

Coaching bodies require continuing professional development (AoC, 2021; EMCC, 2021; ICF, 2021) leaving the member to define this. The core skills required of a coach are soft and focus on process (Kimsey-House et al., 2018; Starr, 2016). As none of the participants in my research describe themselves as 'values' coaches – when do coaches need specific skills related to the subject on which the dyad is working?

For a coachee to identify their personal values the coach must have identified their own values, understand that process, what values mean and how to apply them. The coach needs to create a safe space, to be able move the coachee from quick conscious thinking, to slow thinking accessing the subconscious, and to understand when the coachee is doing that. This adds to the development requirements of a coach, and to their required behaviours, as trust is created when a coach is demonstrably congruent with their own values. The Global Code of Ethics states "members should be suitably qualified to work with their chosen client group" (2021, p. 5), so what my research may offer is an awareness of the skills required to work with values such that interested coaches develop this.

Accessing the subconscious

Accessing the subconscious, deeply held or formative memories, and the length of time taken to identify values all suggest this may be on the boundaries of coaching and therapy. This is less of an issue than before as recent research focusses on their overlap and areas of mutual learning (Lee, 2018) rather than their differentiation.

If it is the client's goals deciding which approach is most appropriate then coaches should have the reflective and assessment skills to recognise this (Crowe, 2017). Bringing the unconscious into the conscious and creating the psychologically safe holding environment needed for that is deemed appropriate where the client's agenda requires it (Lee, 2018). However coaches must be able to recognise clinical versus non-clinical coachee issues such that they can refer or discuss appropriately within supervision (Spaten, 2019).

Issues that may previously have warranted therapy, such as mental health and stress, are now researched and considered appropriate for coaching (Cartwright, 2021). In the absence of clearly defined boundaries, I situate my theory in the field of coaching, with transferability to therapy or counselling, with two comments. Coaches should be members of professional associations, from

which codes of conduct make clear the needs for supervision and continual assessment of relevant experience (Global Code of Ethics, 2021) ensuring an appropriate blend of coaching and therapeutic approaches. More importantly the boundary between coaching and therapy should be set by the ability and willingness of coach and coachee, along with the coach's perception of their competence (Maxwell, 2009) – that one coachee referred to this process as “real deep personal coaching” (Christopher) suggests this dual willingness is being considered.

The ethics of being a guide

Much of the data refers to coachees seeking guidance; definitions suggest guiding means leading the way or directing a course. Coaches introduced their own perspectives, helping coachees but also potentially directing them. While mentioned only briefly, some coaches introduced lists of values to give the identification process momentum but also potentially leading the coachee. If the person centred genre of coaching has “an attitude of non-directivity” (Joseph, 2018, p. 54), can the coach be a guide?

A coach can themselves be guided by codes, feedback, emotions, and the client's agenda (Cox, 2017; Lawton Smith, 2017). Coaches can seek guidance where specialised knowledge is needed (Parker, 2017) but rarely do they give guidance. The exceptions may be a gestalt coach guiding the raising of awareness (Bluckert, 2018), a career or skills coach guiding goal related experiments (Tschannen-Moran, 2018) and spiritual genres such as transpersonal coaching using guided imagery (Rowan, 2018).

Is a guide directive? Introducing a new perspective was described as reframing the issue for the coachee; introducing a list of values was only a starting point, from which coachees introduced their own values beyond those proposed; and the self-directed nature of the coachees suggests they could have declined either had they wished. Spaten's view of personal and life coaching describes the dialogic process as “guided discovery” (2019, p. 349) and I see my theory aligning with this perspective. That coachees wanted direction aligns with being guided. Providing the coachee is asked before being given direct advice, as a coach does when moving between coach and mentoring hats (Connor & Pokora, 2017) I propose that the expert guide in my theory fits well within the intent of existing practice.

Conclusion

Many coaching practitioners commend the use of values for their role in driving behaviour, creating motivation, and enabling transformation, and suggest coaches should know their own values. There is however little to show how to identify values, and especially how to disentangle our own values from those of family, culture, employers, or professions.

In explaining how to identify personal values in coaching I interviewed fourteen coachees and coaches and used constructivist grounded theory methods to analyse the data and abduct a theory. My theory suggests that values must be unearthed by someone experienced, in a safe focussed space, for while our values are core to us, they are often held in the subconscious and hard to articulate. Identifying personal values needs the support of someone who knows their meaning, language and location, an expert guide. The coachee must be willing to trust the guide, to be open and vulnerable. Through these qualities they co-create the focussed space in which the coachee feels safe enough to do the deep work required.

Implications for practice

Coaches wishing to work with values need first to understand their role and importance in behavioural change and creating meaning (Stelter, 2017) . Those coaches need to know their own

values and how to find them - as my research has shown that does not seem straightforward.

Most coaches understand the coaching process, the dyadic delving, dissecting, and discussing that both reveals thoughts and brings structure to those for their clients; they will also be familiar creating a coaching space in which to work. However, both of these require additional skills. For the coaching space to be safe, the coach should be congruent and authentic to create trust in the coachee (Lee, 2018; Spaten, 2019). For values to be found the coach should understand how to enable the coachee to access memories and thoughts in the subconscious, leading to deeper reflective responses. This seems more than the typical coaching process, and may be achieved through the use of probing questions, pauses and reflective statements (Lefton & Buzzotta, 2004).

Creating new perspectives with the client is likely to involve transformation and critical reflection (Mezirow, 2009); having an attitude of non-judgemental acceptance should be made clear during contracting, and suggests a person-centred, humanistic approach. These skills and attitudes may not fit within the existing practice of many coaches and thus need to be acquired.

Finally, a coach working with a coaching process situated near the boundary of coaching and therapy needs to feel sufficiently qualified. This is likely to require therapeutic or psychological understanding, and reviews or confirmation of that through appropriate supervision.

Continuing the research

My theory needs testing. If coaches need to identify their own values before they can work with values in their practice, then perhaps coach can support coach in testing the theory to achieve both of these aims.

Researching the validity of the tools shown in Table 1 is likely to enrich the process of values identification and broaden it. Similarly, while lists of values have grown - on cards or questionnaires - have they really changed from Rokeach's 36 (1973), or are there just ever more varieties? What should we offer to coachees to get them started?

Creating trust is needed to create a safe space. This seems to warrant a combination of authenticity (De Haan & Gannon, 2017) and the use of positive emotional attractors (Mosteo et al., 2021), the latter a relatively recent recommendation.

There is more to be researched than can be detailed be here, but I hope that if meaning is recognised as being needed that the values underpinning that will justify an increased interest in doing that research.

Reflections

I had accepted some actions in my life as being inexplicable. Thorough my work on values, I now understand what drove those actions, and what I need to have meaning in my life, to feel fulfilled and content. If this type of meaning is being increasingly sought then continuing research on values supports that by extending the work Stelter started with third generation coaching, for as he says (2017, p. 331)

Value reflections can be seen as a fundamental basis for human meaning making and a general orientation in life... especially important in the hypercomplexity of modern life and the challenges it presents

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