

Coaching as a route to resilience and wellbeing

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Abstract

This article brings together our current state of knowledge about how coaching might support resilience. It reviews relevant research and summarises some of the alternative approaches that may be applicable to coaching for resilience.

Keywords: Resilience – Coaching – Coaching models

Abstrait

Cet article rassemble l'état actuel de nos connaissances sur la façon dont le coaching peut soutenir la résilience. Il examine la recherche pertinente et résume certains des autres approches qui peuvent être applicables à l'encadrement pour la résilience.

Mots clés: Résilience – Coaching – Coaching de modèles

Resilience and wellbeing have become salient topics in the UK in recent years and the government now collects data on wellbeing with a view to informing public policy (Office for National Statistics). Internationally, research such as the The Happy Planet Index measures 'sustainable wellbeing for all (Happy Planet Index <http://happyplanetindex.org>). It tells us how well nations are doing at achieving long, happy, sustainable lives'. Wellbeing is often felt to be supported by high levels of personal resilience, which is described as the capacity to maintain or recover high levels of wellbeing in the face of life adversity (Ryff et al., 1998). There has therefore been increased focus on resilience and how to enhance it.

Personal resilience has been researched in a number of contexts. Much work has come

from the developmental arena identifying what supports children to achieve their potential despite facing early adversity (Benard, 1993; Masten & Reed, 2005) and this has led to resilience programs in schools and for older students (Smeets et al., 2014). The psychotherapeutic literature adds to this body of knowledge, often with a focus on posttraumatic stress disorder (Bartone, 2006) and the sports arena has also contributed with 'Mental Toughness' (Clough et al., 2002, van Nieuwerburgh, 2012).

In the organisational context, much work has focussed on the military and medical worlds (Jackson et al., 2007, Johnson et al., 2014, Foureur et al., 2013, Olson et al., 2015) where individuals face significant pressure, but the concept has now attracted wider organisational interest. As the world

wide organisational context has become increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, known as VUCA, (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014), many experience adversity, and for some the strain is too much resulting in burn-out or 'derailment'. The cost in financial and human terms is high with an estimated 11.7 million working days lost due to work-related stress, depression or anxiety, which averages 24 days per case in the UK alone (Health & Safety Executive, 2015-16). This impact and higher profile has brought resilience and wellbeing to the attention of organisations and some have started to provide resilience training programmes (Kent & Davis, 2010). However, an alternative strategy might be to use coaching to support the resilience of individuals. We know that coaching can help individuals deal with stressful situations (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2006) so there may be a wider role for coaching as a preventive strategy. Since coaching is often delivered one-to-one, it might also minimise the potential exposure or embarrassment that may be implicit in attending a course with peers or colleagues on a sensitive issue such as stress and resilience.

Coaching provision has been growing with the CIPD reporting that over three-quarters of organisations now use some form of coaching (CIPD, 2015). Although, much of this is delivered by managers or peers, with far fewer offering coaching by external practitioners. By contrast, much of the research on resilience coaching to-date has been based on using external coaches (Grant et al., 2009, Lawton-Smith, 2015) so it is unclear if internal coaching would offer similar benefits and this remains an area for further research.

From existing research we know that coaching does have the potential to enhance resilience. Lawton-Smith (2015) found that leaders who had been coached felt their resilience had been supported in five ways. Firstly, it helped them re-claim their self-belief, constant challenges affected their inner confidence, leading to self-doubt and a loss of the self-belief. Coaching helped rebuild that self-belief. Secondly, leaders explained how much they learnt, not only in terms of ideas and techniques, but also about themselves. Third, they valued the ability of the coach to widen their perspective and provide new ways of seeing things. The supportive relationship provided by the coach was the fourth factor highlighted as valuable in supporting resilience. Leaders often feel that they cannot share thoughts or feelings in the working context and may not want to burden friends and family. The coach met this need by becoming an independent sounding-board. Finally, leaders expressed the value of just having time and thinking space. Coaching gave them

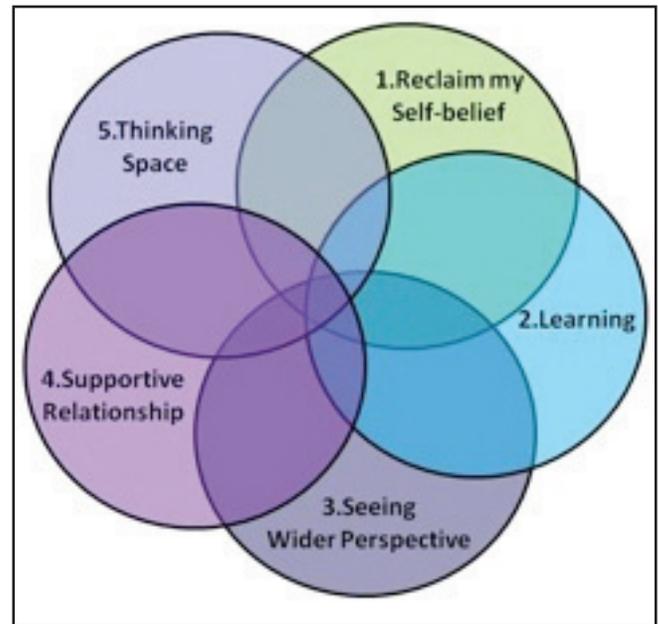


Figure 1: How coaching helps resilience (Lawton-Smith, 2015)

'permission' for focussed reflection and they valued being able to vocalise concerns, emotions or thoughts. All five areas showed overlap and interactions represented in Figure 1.

Support for these findings come from Timson (2015) who evaluated a structured coaching programme to address the resilience of managers. This study also identified five themes. Participants highlighted the pressured environment under which they were working and the value of the tools and techniques that they had learnt which helped them move forward. This group also mentioned the value of the time and space that the coaching sessions gave them, and how important the independent supportive relationship with the coaches had been. What is interesting from both these studies is that the factors identified might be common to many forms of coaching, it does not appear that resilience needs to be addressed from only one coaching paradigm, rather many alternative philosophical approach can offer benefits.

A number of authors have identified how alternative coaching models can be used to address resilience (Pemberton, 2015; Green & Humphrey, 2012; Cooper et al., 2013, Neenan, 2009; Lawton-Smith, 2017) and many studies highlight the efficacy of alternative methodologies.

Grant et al. (2009) found that a 20 week cognitive-behavioural

solution-focused approach enhanced manager resilience and others propose the use of tools such as ‘Resilience Enhancing Imagery’ (Palmer, 2013). Sherlock-Storey et al. (2013) also reported increased resilience following a Brief Coaching intervention with middle managers in the public sector during organisational change. Among the skills addressed in this structured programme was Explanatory Style, a concept drawn from the work of Seligman (2011) and positive psychology. Seligman (2011) proposed wellbeing is made up of: positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A), known as PERMA. The PERMA framework has been the basis of wellbeing programmes in schools (Kern et al., 2015) together with the Penn Resilience Programme (PRP) (Brunwasser et al., 2009). The PRP has shown significant success in reducing occurrences of depression in schools (Gillham et al., 2007) and in military contexts (Reivich et al., 2011) using cognitive behavioural principles to teach the ‘skills’ of resilience. These and other positive psychology models have therefore been suggested as valuable for coaches working with resilience.

An alternative paradigm for coaching might be Self Determination Theory (SDT). Spence and Deci (2013), explain that “human beings have a set of universal, fundamental psychological needs, the satisfaction of which are essential for healthy development, vital engagement, effective behaving, and psychological wellbeing” (p.90). The three basic psychological needs are:

- Autonomy – the need to feel one’s behaviour is freely chosen
- Competence – the need to feel one is capable of operating effectively in their environment
- Relatedness – the need to feel well connected to others

SDT has been proposed as a guiding framework for enhancing wellbeing in coaching (Gabriel et al., 2014) and Spence and Deci (2013) also detail how a coach can support autonomy, competence and relatedness with clients.

Further research is emerging on the value of Mindfulness in the coaching context. A comprehensive review of mindfulness-based coaching was completed by Virgili (2013) and coaching specific texts are available (Hall, 2013). Numerous studies show that even brief mindfulness programmes can reduce perceived stress (Klatt et al., 2009), improve burnout symptoms and life satisfaction (Mackenzie et al., 2006) although this requires significant personal practice that is not always completed by participants (Foureur et al., 2013). Data from the coaching context is more limited although Spence et al. (2008) were able to

combine mindfulness training with coaching and established that mindfulness training had more impact when delivered before, rather than after coaching.

Conclusion

This short review has identified that coaching can be a valuable approach to increasing resilience and that many alternative coaching philosophies can show positive outcomes. One common factor may therefore be the coaching relationship, which transcends philosophy and supports the building of resilience. This might add weight to the hypothesis that the ‘coaching alliance’ is in fact a critical element in effective coaching (O’Broin & Palmer, 2009). The coaching relationship itself may be a vital factor that training programmes struggle to emulate by providing the time and space for non-judgemental conversations in a supportive and private space.

While research is at an early stage and mechanisms are still unclear, we can offer coaching as a viable and evidence based intervention to support resilience. ■

Citation

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Biography

Dr Carmelina Lawton-Smith is an affiliate with Oxford Brookes University Business School and delivers consultancy projects as part of the International Centre for Coaching and Mentoring Studies. She is a member of the British Psychological Society and the Association for Coaching. She is a member of the Editorial Board of the *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching*, Consulting Editor for the *International Journal of Stress Prevention & Wellbeing* and a member of the Oxford Brookes University Supervision Conference Academic Board.

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