

‘Great coaches don’t get Christmas cards’
Musings from a Master Coach over Christmas

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We love to receive them. The more the merrier. Christmas cards, that is... from clients... extolling our virtues and prowess as coaches, acknowledging our great work and the impact it has had -you’re challenging yet supportive; present yet relaxed; curious yet focused on outcomes – and here’s the evidence from our grateful clients in the form of their hand written festive missives. We feel good. The client feels good. So far, so good.

Coaching is full of paradoxes and the tensions between them: the Hippocratic oath tells us *primum non nocera* (‘do no harm’) yet (most) clients at least say they want to be challenged. In the medical world, it is acknowledged that even a routine intervention or procedure carries a degree of risk with it – this is recognized and accepted. Yet in coaching, if the client (or worse, sponsor) balks then it tends to send us into a flat spin and we soften our approach. The result: coaching becomes too cozy, has insufficient impact and delivers little of value. If coaching appears to be offering limited benefit, clients become disengaged and may stop coaching. Clients vote with their feet, making it impossible for coaches to do any good (not so good for receiving Christmas cards). The elephant on the couch for coaches then is that the very premise of doing no harm can actually be harmful.

So, if clients want neither comfortable nor confronting coaching, what do they want? The therapy literature offers us some pointers (Castonguay *et al*, 2010). Clients reported they didn’t want to be excluded by the process (where the therapist knows best and *does* therapy *to* the client), technical jargon or psychobabble. They do want to be listened to, be heard and give voice to their hopes and fears (de Haan, 2011). Better not to put clients off with disaffiliative coach behaviour. Better still to not forget the importance of Rogerian principles in our work.

Given all this, how do coaches know we are on the right track? Does anyone really know what works? Where’s the evidence to back up our assertions? Evidenced based practice holds out many claims and high allure yet can often be too much: too complex; too ambiguous; and, honestly, too tedious. McCormack and Allan (in their BMJ blog, 2015) argue the case for “simply

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making the evidence simple”. This gets my vote. While there is evidence that talking cures work, there is less agreement on the so-called ‘brand wars’ i.e., which schools of coaching works for whom. Clients report they benefit – but by how much? Is there a placebo effect with any form of intervention delivering the same outcomes? As we can rarely be sure how an individual client will respond to a particular intervention (Fongay, 2010), perhaps a better question is “What works when?” In other words, which coaching approach do we use on what type of topic?

Many coaches use solution focused (SF) techniques in their client work. Yet the ‘miracle question’ so central to de Shazer’s (1977) SF approach was found to be irrelevant according to consumer research, with participants reporting actual distaste for it (Lloyd and Dallos, 2008). Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) or cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC) emphasizes the primacy of cognition in mediating psychological disorder - it aims to alleviate distress by modifying cognitive content and process, realigning ‘faulty’ thinking with reality. Yet a comprehensive review of component studies found little evidence that specific cognitive interventions significantly increase the effectiveness of the therapy. This rather challenges the contribution of thoughts in CBT. Beware ‘good’ science.

We rarely have a clear view of the course a client might have taken without coaching. If they show improvements and better results, might they have done so without coaching? If their performance worsens, might this have accelerated more quickly in the absence of coaching? Deciding what needs to work and (goals) be achieved and then examining that alone might give us a false trail of coaching effectiveness (Dimidjian and Hollon, 2010)

So, what evidence can we reply on? There is little doubt that some practitioners are better at their jobs (be it coaching or therapy) than others (Huppert, 2001). Although unpalatable, perhaps we need to accept that some coaching coteries are harmful, some techniques are harmful and, dare I say it, some coaches are harmful (Berk and Parker, 2009). How do we tell, particularly as competencies – often used to gauge a coach’s practice ability - are questionable and challenged (Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015)?

While not perfect, we argue that coaching competencies do have their place and usefully allow specific coach behaviours and interventions to be isolated and examined in a rigorous and consistent way. When used dynamically and

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fluidly, competencies can play an invaluable role in developing effective coaching practice.

Cooper and McLeod (2010) helpfully remind us there is no one best way of coaching and argue for a pluralistic approach, drawing on multiple disciplines and ways of working with clients. And that is what we see when assessing master coaches: “A coaching approach that draws on a broad range of models, tools and techniques, tailored to individual requirements and demonstrated in action” and “targeted coaching interventions used with great refinement”.

http://www.associationforcoaching.com/media/uploads/ac_coach_accreditation_overview_15.pdf

We live in an imperfect world. While we need to continue questioning the evidence, and our taken for granted models might not be quite as solid as we once hoped, there is still a need for dynamic coaching that is flexible, responsive, draws from different domains and is client-centred. And it needs to be is challenging too. This level of sophistication is achievable from both evidence-based approaches and feedback on specific coaching competencies whether this be as part of an accreditation process or your on-going coaching supervision. Leonard Cohen tells us: "There is a crack in everything; that is how the light gets in." Let your coaching light shine.

Now, how many Christmas cards will you get next year?

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