

APPPC October 10, 2023. Introductions and Strengths Follow-up Notes

Considerations on Positive Psychology Coaching:

- *Positive psychology is a science.* As such, it is a dynamic system of knowledge. Results emerge, and our understanding changes. Perhaps this suggests that those who align with positive psychology have an obligation to know the research and keep up with developments in the field. There are currently no formal standards for what constitutes knowledge of the field or what it means to be current in that knowledge.
- *Positive psychology is a philosophy.* Positive psychology adds a focus on positive topics to the natural and pervasive focus on more negative topics. Where coaching is concerned, this might mean that we reflect on the relative attention we give to problems, complaints, and other negative topics. We might consider the relative merits or drawbacks of a positive focus for our clients.
- *Coach expertise.* Perhaps positive psychology provides frameworks, rather than prescriptive tools, for coaching. Coaches who know about positive psychology research might have a sophisticated vocabulary and understand links between concepts that help guide their questions and other coaching interventions.

Strengths in Coaching

All over the world, there are norms around humility and standing out that can interfere with an honest and open conversation about strengths. Engaging in meta-intervention—creating cultural norms within the coaching relationship that make later interventions more effective—can be helpful. One way of doing this, where strengths are concerned, is:

- To emphasize the distinction between being better than other people at a particular behavior and the idea that people all have the same fundamental worth
- To emphasize the idea that strengths are an opportunity to contribute and not to shine

The goal of strengths coaching, perhaps, is to have a conversation about strengths with the client. This might make them feel resourceful and empowered. This means there must be a mechanism for inserting strengths into the coaching session. Traditionally, coaches have used formal assessments such as the StrengthsFinder or the VIA assessment of character strengths for doing so. These are good for teams because they scale well and for research because they use standard metrics. That said, they are limited in the number of terms they attend to.

Strengths-spotting, an informal method, is good for 1 to 1 work because it allows the coach and client to co-create a strength label that really describes the client. Creativity might be a good general descriptor, but the client might love talking about their brand of creativity (improvisation or problem-solving, for example). Some points on strengths-spotting:

- Strengths-spotting breaks the long-standing commandment against using the coach's language rather than the client's. In my opinion, the coach has a much, much larger strengths vocabulary than does the client. If you ask "What are your strengths?" to a client, you will typically get a very limited list and likely only cover territory with which the client is already familiar. Using the coach's language as an opening volley allows for more divergent, surprising, and specific strengths. The coach offers these labels as tentative hypotheses only. Not as "labels."
- Once the coach offers a term, let the co-creation begin! The Gallup Organization, when they train strengths coaches, has a system called "name-claim-aim." This is the "claim" part of the conversation. Find out to what extent the client has this strength, how it might manifest for them, what label they prefer, and so forth. Some clients, for example, are reluctant to "own" a strength because they have a negative association with the label (e.g., "competition"). You also saw me briefly reference the concept of "strengths blindness" without ever actually using those words—"I think this might come so naturally to you that you overlook that it is a strength"—just sort of a soft challenge I slipped in to see how the client would react.
- You will note that opening the conversation naturally led to the client talking about other strengths. Once the door is open to a strengths conversation, there is a lot of potential ground to cover (how you use this strength, what your mindset toward developing this strength is, what the social impact of this strength is—who hates it and who loves it, how your relationship to the strength has changed over time, etc).
- Ultimately, in my opinion, strengths coaching is not undertaken to empower clients, to get clients to accept their strengths, or to convince clients that strengths are valuable. I see a lot of coaches do this (we should make clients happier, stronger, etc). I think, instead, that positive psychology topics are simply fruitful lenses for discussion. Talking about wellbeing, strengths, or self-kindness are tools for provoking greater self-awareness and insight in our clients. What they do with this new information is up to them.

I hope these notes help.