

Peak Coaching Experiences

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Aim & Key Findings

This research paper aims to understand moments which are identified as the peak (strongest or most positive) by coachees. Semi-structured interviews with 18 managers of a large Czech bank were recorded and analysed. The experiences seen as a peak in coaching varied considerably. Four themes were identified as shown below:

- 1) aha-moments and moments of insight
- 2) relief and reassurance
- 3) awareness/ attentiveness/mindfulness moments and
- 4) exteriorisation of the problem.

This research shows that the key benefits of coaching might not lie only in what comes after coaching, but also in the positive experience coming from the coaching process itself.

Introduction

Originally, Maslow hypothesised that only self actualised people have peak experiences (Maslow, 1959), but later concluded that the vast majority of people have experiences they describe as peak (Maslow, 1962), calling the rest who avoid or suppress them as 'nonpeakers' (Maslow, 1970).

Maslow described peak experience in the whole life context as 'something like mystic experiences, moments of great awe, moments of the most intense happiness or even rapture, ecstasy or bliss' or 'pure, positive happiness when all doubts, all fears, all inhibitions, all tensions, all weaknesses, were left behind' or simpler, 'moments of highest happiness and fulfilment'.

Privette (1983) explains differences between three phenomena which are similar as they all represent a 'positive subjective experience' i.e. peak experience, peak performance and flow.

Maslow also described the 'plateau experience', which 'is serene and calm rather than a poignantly emotional, climactic, autonomic response'. The plateau experiences are also more closely connected with cognition. While peak experiences can be purely emotional (but they can involve cognition as well), plateau moments are cognitive and they can even be learned and experienced at will (Maslow, 1970).

We also pursue the importance of understanding the coaching process thoroughly to make sense of where most of the benefits come from. Furthermore, we also approach the subject from the lens of positive psychology. Moments which are positively perceived by clients/coachees are not only important for the outcome of coaching, but also for the positive experience of the process itself, which has its indisputable value.

Method

Research focus: This paper aims at understanding which experiences were perceived as peak positive by the coachees.

Sampling and context: The focus was on management development around organisational changes and department mergers. A cross section of participants selected based by their consent to participate which provided the research team with coachees names, names of their coaches, department affiliation and the number of coaching sessions. What's interesting is all women on the list were selected (there were only three) for gender balance. The coaches (four women and two men) were ICF certified coaches. They'd had 5 to 12 coaching sessions with the participants. The average being 8.8 coaching sessions and a median of 9.5.

Participants: In total 18 coachees. One of which worked in middle to higher management. Their ages ranged between 33 to 59 and they'd worked for the bank between 3 and 16 years. Overall management experience oscillated between 4 and 25 years with teams of 2 – 200 members.

Research procedure: in-depth interviews were held and recorded lasting between 30mins to 1hr 20mins. The interview script was constructed based on the Life Story Interview method (McAdams,2008), which is a narrative

method of qualitative data collection primarily focused on the whole life perspective. This method has been adapted for the coaching experience deals with the first chapter of the script, where the coachees were asked to talk about the peak experience in their coaching sessions, by comparing the original Life story interview which facilitates the coachee to draw upon a life narrative chapter by chapter describing high (peak) and low points. Recalling these points enables them to serve as a cue to reconstruct events' (Alea, 2018) or evaluate the moments they are reporting. This method has been adapted for the coaching experience and this specific paper deals with the first chapter of the script, where the coachees were asked to by method. The question was introduced was: 'Please describe a scene, episode, or moment in your coaching that stands out as above all the most positive i.e. 'peak experience'.

Results

Aha-Moments: What's clear is that some coachees perceived peak (experience) at the moment of insight, awareness, the Ta-Dah. Awareness described as reaching 'root cause' or reaching something previously unknown to the coachee, which has consequences in/for the future. All of which achieved through structured discussion, thus changing perception and in turn current and future behaviour a in some cases it was associated with strong emotion.

Moments of relief and calming down: Moments of insight provided the participants with relief of tension for the fear of feeling alone in their roles also alone and not a part of a team, plus the ability to influence or not due to circumstances/environment. Alignment to values, beliefs and role showed up and they're place in the company. For others capability and impact from personal input.

Awareness/attentiveness/mindfulness: Coaching brought about sensitiveness and levels of awareness improvements to a point of orientation shift for here and now. Learning that they are in control and methodologies and techniques that bring them to the moment and keep them on track and in a place whereby they're able to proceed positively and efficiently.

Exteriorisation of the problem: Brought about very strong emotions of how a view of one self is seen by self and others when their spoken words from structured questioning is demonstrated visually and or graphically. Impacting their future actions, thoughts and behaviours as realisation is brought about which then lead to feelings of contentment, relief and even joy.

Conclusion

The research concluded that 'critical moments' in coaching, identified as exciting, tense or significant moments. The most frequent critical moments in the study were personal realisations in terms of insight, new understanding or new knowledge. Aha-moments and moments of insight are not only significant, useful and peak, but also connected to positive emotions and highly enjoyable.

Relief caused calming down and a feeling of peace and reconciliation. This calming and soothing feeling was highly emotional and climactic. Which might be connected to the managerial level and background of the participants. Plateau experiences are also connected to cognition and can, differently from peak experiences, be experienced at will and learned through a technique. Other characteristics of plateau experiences are 'heightened awareness of the present moment, feelings of gratitude, and calmness and serenity of sentiments and behaviour. This also relates to another theme identified, awareness, attentiveness and mindfulness when the coach taught breathing techniques which resulted in a here and now orientation shift. More than half of the participants reported learning and growing experiences as the peak experience of their lives, they being, "aha-moments' and insight through exteriorisation. The research shows that the key benefits of coaching might not lie only in what comes after coaching (e.g. leadership style change, stress reduction or enhanced self-efficacy) but also in the experience of the coaching process itself.

Important to highlight the limitations of the study stemming from the qualitative method itself. These findings allow new insights into the way the coaching process is experienced. Due to a relatively homogeneous sample, some other potential peak moment categories could be left out or not mentioned. In a following study, a different sample might be used to show different possible peak experiences. Their findings gathered could be verified using a quantitative research design to determine its occurrence and spread.

Peak experiences also have certain triggers, which make them possible. Coaches who are able to work with this can enrich the coaching process with techniques which enable mindful awareness, insight and exteriorisation.