

From Aha to Ta-dah: insights during life coaching and the link to behaviour change

COACHING: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THEORY, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE, 29 SEPTEMBER 2017, VOL 11, ISSUE 1, PAGE 3-15. TRACY ROBINSON, DON MARROW & MOCHAEL R. MILLER (2018) <https://doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2017.1381754>

Background

Coaching has become a popular and practical strategy to manage change in organisations and wellness strategies (Rock & Page, 2009). Evidence on the efficacy of coaching is currently supported by over 40 randomised controlled trials (Passmore, 2014).

Few studies have looked at the relationship of insight to behaviour change. A phenomenological study on insight within a life-coaching programme found that behaviour change following a moment of insight was related to the depth of emotion and importance of the topic (Longhurst, 2006). Longhurst (2006) also recognised that moments of insight during coaching signalled an important transformation.

The purpose of the current study was to build on the naturalistic studies of insight and the link to behaviour change.

Aim of the Study

To discover and establish if the intervention of coaching supports the realisation of insight i.e. aha moments resulting in behaviour change, the Ta-dah! The researchers hypothesised that moments of insight during coaching would represent breakthroughs in a topic of personal and emotional significance, resulting in a new perspective and sustained behaviour change compared to non-insight. Insight represents a cognitive leap in understanding that is distinct from other types of problem-solving.

Research Design & Methodology

Data collection took place from September 2015 to March 2016. A total of 11 people from Women Together who offer subsidised coaching to low-income women. Participants were approached for the study and eight consented, along with their coaches. Two participants withdrew during the programme, resulting in a final cohort of six participants and six coaches that completed all study requirements.

The programme featured 9 one-to-one coaching sessions. Consent was obtained from all concerned and the ethics approval for the study was attained through Western University's Office of Research Ethics. CALC structure and the Wheel of Life are used for initial assessment. Coaches and clients were asked to complete a feedback form after each session.

Key Results

1. Moments of insight during coaching (Figure 1)

Every participant reported at least one instance of insight (ranging from 1 to 9) during the coaching intervention.

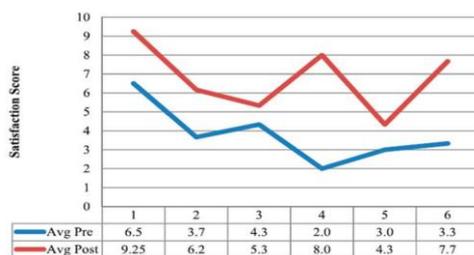


Figure 2. Wheel of life[®] satisfaction before and after coaching on priority goals for participants (N = 6).

2. Linking insight to behaviour (Table 1)

There was a clear pattern between the shift in perspective and new behaviour. During moments of insight, participants experienced a characteristic emotional charge and a change in perspective. Overall moments of insight could be directly linked to goal-progress for 93% and behaviour change in 56% of the cases.

Table 1. Goals and related insights mapped to insight characteristics and behaviour change.

Goal	Impasse	Moment of insight	Emotion/important topic	Change in perspective	Change in behaviour
Career enjoyment	My career was the big thing because I was having a real problem where I am working right now. I was definitely stuck in the poor me and what am I going to do?	It was an eye opener. What happens if I lose my job, is that the end of the world or is it a good opportunity to move on and do something else?	I was freaking out	I think it was about changing how you look at things, is the glass half empty or half full?	And right now for the first time in a year, I'm over a 100% in sales. I'm not really sure what's working but whatever it is I am doing it
Building resilience	It was good because I was struggling with it for a really long time	I do feel like I was able to have an aha	It was scary and sort of terrifying and then also it was liberating	I started to realise that I was separate from them (ugly voices) and I was able to acknowledge when certain ones spoke that that wasn't necessarily me	... feels much more manageable. It gave me the foundation I was looking for to feel a little more grounded and to take the steps that I was thinking about taking anyways

3. Moments of non-insights (Table 2)

Fewer non-insight sessions were reported (n=12), where participants described working through emotions or events that were not attributable to insight but supported their goals and related to the primary goal of sustained behaviour change. Three examples in the narrative were found to support this.

Table 2. Non-insights.

Goal	Problem	Non-insight response	Behaviour
Meaningful relationship	I would date someone and it just wouldn't work out and I didn't really understand why. So I took a step back so I wasn't working on it for awhile	Girlfriend and I met a couple and kind of adopted them as our vacation mom and dad. The lady was very maternal as well. I think I gravitate towards that. And she introduced me to her son. I wasn't even looking for it	I'm spending time with (her son) this weekend so it should be interesting.
Work and family balance	I had a real struggle with my first son when he was born and the first year of his life	Having a child really can make people vulnerable, it cracks your heart open	Today I wrote the blog about the why for the business
Career enjoyment	I was having a really tough time with it	My manager changed. So that was a huge thing too	That eased things off a bit, but it was still that I just had a couple more months

4. Coaches Role (Table 3)

Where coach feedback could be matched to participant feedback (n=9), session summaries were mirrored. Agreement on evidence of moment of insight when experienced documented in both feedback.

Table 3. Insights evoked by coaches and coaching practice.

Goal	Impasse	Insight evoked	Emotion topic importance	Change in awareness	Change in behaviour
Quit smoking	(In the past) I would have a puff of smoke and feel really guilty and think I screwed up. I might just as well become a smoker again	(My coach)* said you put so much pressure on yourself like - who has the rules of the quitting book - is the way she put it	So I made the (quit) date my mom's fbirthday, so I felt accountable for it	I think it really got in my head if I slip up it doesn't mean that I've failed completely	A big one was to quit smoking and I have to say I have been successful with that
Putting myself first	(My coach) guided me in connecting with my inner leader	The moment that I realised that I have an inner leader and that I'm not alone	It was a moment of comfort and confidence	I started to feel a strength that has been missing for a while	(unspecified)
Work alignment	(My coach) coached me in digging deeper and always bringing it back to the person I am and want to be	I had a moment of sudden insight when we started to describe the values as a '10' vs. where I was in them right now	Fairly emotional	It made me realise that I can take steps to get to that '10' and that they will fluctuate	I am getting a bit better just having the boundaries ... and saying no to the things that I don't want to do
Love myself	(My coach) played a large role and kept me accountable for my actions	The thing that amazed me was the shift in energy and belief when I talked about myself in the third person vs. the first	It was a lot harder to talk about myself in the first person	It was a good exercise in starting to come from a place of strength and positivity and build out on my best version	(unspecified)

Comments & Limitations of the Study

This study reflects data from 9 women (started with 11 and 2 left the study) from low income families with some sessions done in person, some over the phone and some in a group setting. A controlled study where participants contain a mix of people that represent different age, sex, race and income would be even more insightful on the connection between coaching, insight and sustained behaviour change.

Despite the limitations of this study, it is evident that coaching facilitates individuals with a level of self-awareness providing clarity, a new way of thinking and perspective. New perspective derived through coaching brought about the 'aha' moments coupled with emotion(s) attached to the moment, which then evoked action (plans), commitment and accountability, the 'Ta-dah'!

The technology behind Neuroscience is a great win for coaching as it provides and substantiates tangible scientific results (ECG) which could be argued to be more acceptable to those who subscribe to more than a feeling. Klein and Jarosz (2011)ⁱ sampled 120 reports of insight, qualified by a sudden shift in perception and subsequent change of perspective on the problem. Their naturalistic inquiry of spontaneous insights examined the mechanisms that shaped subsequent behaviour. They found a strong relation for noticing contradictions (82%) and willingness to explore these contradictions (93%) and reported that 46% of the insights resulted in a new behaviour (Klein & Jarosz, 2011).

What's important, is that coaching an intervention proven to generate insights and behaviour change.

ⁱ Klein, G., & Jarosz, A. (2011). A naturalistic study of insight. *Journal of Cognitive Engineering and Decision Making*, 5(4), 335-351. doi:10.1177/1555343411427013