Practicing POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY COACHING

Assessment, Activities, and Strategies for Success

ROBERT BISWAS-DIENER

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PRACTICING POSITIVE

Psychology Coaching

CHAPTER ONE

Education to Empowerment: An Introduction to Applying Positive Psychology Coaching

In 2007 an extraordinary thing happened to me: I published my first ever book, *Positive Psychology Coaching*.[1] It was a defining moment, much like getting my doctorate or the birth of my children. Holding the book—the actual book—in my hands represented a huge accomplishment and marked a turning point in my life. We all know about Steven Covey's time matrix: People are likely to continue putting off those tasks that are important but not necessarily urgent. Well, I was lucky enough not to fall into that trap. I was one of those folks who took this lifelong dream—writing a book—off the back burner and made it happen. The book was written with my coauthor Ben Dean over the course of a year, and it was the result of countless hours of phone calls, interviews, reviews of the research literature, and even a couple of international trips. Those grueling hours of lonely writing under the emotional pressure of looming deadlines had all paid off. It is difficult to describe the intense mix of relief, accomplishment, pride, and fatigue I felt. I was, at long last, a published author. I had a small book launch in England, received the occasional letter of thanks from strangers in places like India and Australia, and was invited to give talks and coaching demonstrations. My star seemed to be on the rise.

And then a funny thing happened. A few months after the publication of the book, Ben and I received a scathing review on Amazon.com. The author of the review, which ran about 1,200 words—the length of a short magazine article—clearly did not like the book. He referred to Ben and me as "academics with no writing skills" and, at one point, said, "This book was so bad, in so many ways, it's hard to know where to start." The review included stinging phrases like "a shallow rehash" and "I don't know which was more painful: their condescending prose, or the glee with which they seem to think they've said something useful." The reviewer concluded with a list of books people should read instead of *Positive Psychology Coaching*. Again, it is difficult to describe the overwhelming emotions I felt while reading this review. I was crushed. This book had been the major project representing a year of my life. It was the very activity to which I chose to commit myself precisely because I felt it was so worthwhile. I instantly thought of every instance that I told my son "I'm sorry I can't play with you right now, Daddy's working on his book." Would I have been better off to abandon the writing project in favor of more family time?

What other opportunities had I missed while I was—arguably—wasting a year on a useless book? For the first time since I had begun working on the project I began to question the wisdom of my decision and the quality of the product I had produced.

What followed, as you might expect, was a period of depression. I had very definitely been knocked out of my saddle. I quit working on research projects and quit writing magazine articles. I went into each coaching session shaky and uncertain of my own abilities. I wondered if I was really a laughingstock to others and just didn't realize it. And it wasn't just me: The book sales dipped sharply after the review appeared online. Dozens of people on Amazon.com reported that the review was helpful to them and one even took the time to comment: "Saved me reading the book." I wondered what type of person I was that people had to be saved from me and from my best efforts. Even now, more than two years later, I find writing about these events painful.

Fortunately, the depression didn't last. After a couple weeks of floundering I bounced back. I began to see that, between the harsher criticisms and strong opinions about tone and language use, the reviewer was correct on many points. In fact, I should go on record here saying that I really bear the reviewer no personal ill will. It might surprise you to learn this, but he and I have exchanged some very friendly e-mails in the time since his review was published. He apologized for the tone of the review, which he said was written largely for effect and that, upon further consideration, he thought was disrespectful. I accepted his apology and believe he meant it sincerely. Despite all that, I have to acknowledge that the reviewer made some legitimate points and illuminated the differences in expectations I had as a writer from those held by many of my readers. I had thought that, as an expert positive psychology researcher, I would introduce coaches to the fascinating new science of positive psychology. I further expected that readers would simply want to take this information and create their own interventions in their own ways, appropriate to their own coaching practices. These ideas, as I later learned, were somewhat off the mark. In my experience with coaches since that time, I have found that most are eager for ready-made interventions and are principally interested in research results when they are couched in terms of "next steps," "practical skills," or "applications." That is, as an academic I have always been excited by ideas, and I realized, all too late, that coaches are generally excited by action.

What the reviewer wanted—and I think he was right to want this—was practical next steps: clear suggestions for translating the research into workable questions, assessments, and interventions for use with coaching clients. His review expressed, if nothing else, his frustration with what I had done with *Positive Psychology Coaching*. I had discussed many studies but rarely mentioned the relation of these exciting research results to coaching. As an expert, I failed to accept the mantle of leadership and offer clever ways to spin the straw of positive psychology into coaching gold. For my own part, I had assumed that my initial mission of merely educating readers about positive psychology would be enough. The interesting aspect of all this was that it was not the harsh review that changed my thinking—although it certainly presented a red flag that suggested my thinking needed to be changed. What really turned me around was conducting workshops with coaches. I began standing in front of groups of coaches in places like Iceland, Turkey, Canada, and Denmark, and they all wanted the exact same thing as my reviewer: They wanted tools, not

concepts or ideas. Over the course of many workshops my attitude evolved from one of wanting to educate people to one of wanting to inspire people to one of wanting to empower people. And here, at last, is the heart of my critic's comments: a plea to be empowered.

I want to be clear, up front, about my goals for this volume. I do not apologize for my earlier book—indeed, I do not believe there is anything to apologize for. I am quite proud of it. Nor do I write this book as a means of compensating for failures related to the first book. Finally, I do not write this book as a defense against my earlier critics. Instead, I wanted to write an additional book that represents my own personal growth. My goal for the first volume was to educate people about the emerging science of positive psychology, and my goal for this book is to present a wide range of useful tools based on that science. As the title of this book implies, I am interested in strategies for assessing and applying positive psychology within the coaching context. To the extent that you, the reader, can walk away from this book with new ideas that you can immediately put into practice in your own coaching, this will have been a successful endeavor.

Why Are You Reading This Book?

It may sound like an unusual question, but I would like you to stop and think about why you are reading this book. Are you hoping to learn something about the science of positive psychology that you didn't know before? Are you hoping to walk away from the experience with actual tools that you can use with your clients? Are you hoping to breathe new life into your existing coaching practice by adopting a new philosophical orientation? Are you hoping that this book will, itself, serve as a sort of coaching education? The answer to the question of why you are reading this book is important because it sets up expectations for the book's contents and its usefulness to you.

It may help you to think about the two coaching books I have written—this volume and the earlier *Positive Psychology Coaching: Putting the science of happiness to work for your clients*—as I do: as a single book divided into two volumes, one intended to present a foundation of science and the second written with the purpose of expanding on this foundation in practical ways. This process, which I call "education to empowerment," reflects the same approach I use in my international workshops. I begin with a seed of knowledge (education), introducing participants to a new idea such as the notion that developing strengths might lead to success more than overcoming weaknesses. From there I move to inspiration, in which I show that this knowledge can be used in exciting ways to improve performance. Using the strengths example, *I demonstrate my ability to accurately spot strengths in strangers using very little information*. In truth, my ability to spot strengths is not some prodigious talent I have, but rather, it is the result of countless hours of practice. Even so, my workshop participants find this inspiring, to watch someone who is masterful at a skill. Psychologists know much about inspiration, which we sometimes call "elevation."[2] Elevation is an emotional reaction related to awe at the performance of another person. This emotional engagement is just what the "education" piece often lacks, and is exactly what my critic was complaining about. Moving people into

an elevated state, however, prepares them for action. From here, I try to shift from inspiration to empowerment. There is a subtle but critical difference between seeing that something is possible and realizing that you, yourself, can achieve it. When we watch Olympic athletes perform, for instance, we are amazed at what they are able to do, but we do not for one second think that we could accomplish the same level of mastery. The trick in workshops, coaching, or even book writing is to show people what is possible and then wake them up to the idea that they have the personal resources to enact this change in their own lives. Going back to the strengths example, I show my workshop participants that they, too, have the ability to easily spot strengths in action, even in strangers.

The "Education to Empowerment" Model

Education: Developing strengths might lead to success more than overcoming weaknesses.

Inspiration: Demonstrate my ability to accurately spot strengths in strangers using very little information.

Empowerment: I show my workshop participants that they, too, have the ability to easily spot strengths in action, even in strangers.

Example of the Education-to-Empowerment Continuum

1. Education ----------	2. Inspiration ----------	3. Empowerment
"Spotting strengths is a useful skill."	"It is possible to spot strengths."	"You, yourself, can learn to spot strengths."

■ The Two Questions That Inform This Book

In a recent issue of *Choice* magazine, a publication for coaches, I wrote an article about the relationship between coaching and positive psychology.[3] For the uninitiated, positive psychology is a relatively new movement—about a decade old—within the field of psychology. Positive psychology is an emphasis on the scientific study of what is right, rather than what is wrong, with people. It includes research on hope, happiness, strengths, resilience, courage, and other positive aspects of human functioning and flourishing. To be sure, positive psychology owes much to its many intellectual forebears including figures in classical Greek thought, the humanistic movement, and even religious studies. Positive psychologists are not the first to suggest that there is tremendous traction in looking at when people are at their best or discussing how people might achieve their highest potential. Positive psychologists do, however, have the most sophisticated empirical methods of studying these topics. By relying on the virtues of the scientific method, such as representative samples, advanced analytic technique, and controlled laboratory studies, positive psychologists are able to arrive at insights that were previously out of bounds to faith, intuition, reasoning, and logic. It doesn't take much to see that positive psychology and coaching are natural bedfellows. Both professions

are principally about helping individuals and groups to perform better and live more satisfying lives.

Positive Psychology in a Nutshell

1. Positive psychology looks at what is right with people, focuses on when people are at their best, and attends to individual and group flourishing.
2. Positive psychology is not the focus of the positive at the expense of the negative. Positive psychologists recognize negative emotions, failure, problems, and other unpleasantries as natural and important aspects of life.
3. Positive psychology is, first and foremost, a science. As such, it is principally concerned with evidence, measurement, and testing. That said, positive psychology is also an applied science, and there is a common understanding that research results will lead to the creation of real-world interventions that will improve school, businesses, governments, and other aspects of individual and social life.
4. Interventions produced by positive psychologists are, by and large, positive interventions. Positive interventions are ways of working with people where the focus is not on alleviating pain or restoring a person to normal functioning from substandard function, but, rather, on promoting superior functioning. Positive psychologists often talk about this in terms of helping clients go from "+3" to "+5."

For many people, coaching is the natural choice for being the applied arm of positive psychology. In fact, many people with an interest and education on positive psychology open coaching practices. Although positive psychology is, itself, an applied science, there is, as yet, no coherent or consistent methodology for delivering positive psychology services. There are people, such as my colleagues at the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP), who use strengths science as the centerpiece of their organizational consulting work. There are others who integrate tenets of positive psychology into their psychotherapy practices. And there are many, many others who turn to coaching as a means of putting positive psychology into practice.

▶ What Can Positive Psychology Do for Coaching?

This raises the first, most important, and most obvious question that forms the foundation of this book: What can positive psychology do for coaching? There is an unspoken maxim that holds that, as a science, positive psychology is well poised to inform the coaching profession and help elevate the standards and tools of practice. Indeed, positive psychology has provided a number of empirically validated interventions that might be of interest and use to coaches of all stripes. For instance, researcher Fred Bryant at the University of Chicago has conducted studies of the emotional consequences of using pieces of memorabilia to "positively reminisce" (that is, to savor the past).[4] This has all sorts of practical ramifications for coaching. Just imagine using positive reminiscence with organizational leaders, teams, couples, or individuals seeking more meaning and happiness at home or at work. This is simply a variation on the coaching technique of visioning, but with a retrospective

focus instead of a future focus. Positive psychology has produced a number of these types of interventions that, taken together, form the corpus of a scientific toolbox that coaches can add to their existing practices. Positive psychology also has produced new and often counterintuitive insights. Just consider a few of the following: studies show that people are generally poor predictors of how well they will adjust to future situations;[5] that too much satisfaction actually appears to undermine performance;[6] that fantasizing about the future can undermine motivation;[7] and that managing to strengths can produce better performance at work relative to managing to weaknesses (don't worry, I'll talk about all of these later on!).[8] These insights can help coaches approach common client dilemmas with new ideas, appreciation, and ways of working. Positive psychology also provides new assessments of which coaches can avail themselves. There are well-validated surveys of strengths, optimism, life satisfaction, work style, and many other topics that are directly relevant to coaching.

Taken together, the specific set of intervention tools and assessment rooted in the science of positive psychology form the corpus of positive psychology coaching. Interestingly, positive psychology coaching, as an endeavor distinct from other approaches to coaching, is fairly poorly defined. It is unclear who should reasonably call him or herself a positive psychology coach. Should there be some formal certification process by which such coaches can evidence their mastery of both positive psychology and coaching? Should positive psychology coaching be viewed as additional, advanced coach training, in the same way that—say—psychiatric residency is specific training undertaken beyond the basics of medical school? Most readers who are experienced coaches will be familiar with the ways in which these uncertainties mirror the evolution of the field of coaching as a whole. In the early days of coaching, a few brave and visionary pioneers went about the business of motivating others to help them achieve their goals. To transform a loose collection of motivational practices into a coherent profession, however, took time. Professional organizations such as the International Coach Federation have been invaluable in establishing coherent standards for training, practice, and ethical behavior. Researchers such as Anthony Grant and his peers at the Coaching Psychology Unit at University of Sydney have been instrumental in establishing the validity and effectiveness of coaching interventions.[9] Independent coach training schools and university-based programs have been vital in acting as the front lines of creating the profession by balancing market needs with responsible practices.

It is my strong recommendation that positive psychology coaching should be considered with equal gravitas. I am, to be honest, concerned about the number of people who hang up shingles and market themselves as "positive psychology coaches" with limited knowledge of both standard coaching techniques and the science of positive psychology. This is, to some extent, a profession-wide problem, but it is one that concerns me as a practitioner of positive psychology in particular. At the heart of my concern is the fact that positive psychology is a science and, as such, is both technical and dynamic. Although the topics of positive psychology, such as happiness, appear at first glance to be straightforward concerns, the scientific exploration of them is far from simple. A technical understanding of positive psychology, including the ability to critically consume the research literature, effectively use relevant assessments, and create interventions that are within the bounds of the field, is a critical component to being an effective positive psychology coach.

Equally troubling is the fact that, as a science, positive psychology is ever changing. I'll give you an example: In 2002 a collaborator and I published a frequently cited article reviewing the existing research literature connecting income with happiness. Among our reported conclusions was the idea that—at the national level—as income goes up over time happiness stays level.[10] In the United States, for example, household incomes have grown dramatically across the decades, but the average level of happiness appears to have remained flat. This casts doubt on the idea that increasing national wealth, consumption, and infrastructure actually translates to a higher quality of life. This finding, called the "Easterlin Paradox" after the UCLA economist who first reported it, is important.[11] It could, for instance, help policy makers create laws and programs that balance economic concerns with the well-being of citizens. The problem is, it might not be true. In the years since 2002 a number of scientists—economists, sociologists, and psychologists—have published articles (based on data and sophisticated analyses) refuting the Easterlin Paradox.[12,13] It turns out the story of money and happiness might just be a bit more complicated. It could be that the Easterlin Paradox exists in certain countries but not others. If this is the case, then the next logical step would be to identify the factors that lead toward or away from this flattening effect of happiness. An alternative explanation might also be that the Easterlin Paradox depends a little on what type of happiness in which a person is interested. It could be that the Easterlin Paradox holds true for feelings of happiness but not cognitive evaluations of happiness such as life satisfaction judgments.[14] As more research is conducted the story will continue to unfold. Did my collaborator and I misreport? No, we reported conclusions based on the best available data at that time. But as new studies are conducted our conclusions will necessarily be modified. In this spirit of dynamism it is vital that those calling themselves positive psychology coaches have a mechanism for regularly updating their knowledge of the field.

■ Some Suggestions for the Creation of a Formal Positive Psychology Coaching Profession

Following I have listed six core areas that I believe to be crucial for the professionalization of positive psychology coaching as a subdiscipline of both positive psychology and coaching. In addition, I make specific recommendations concerning each of these core areas:

1. Credentialing

   Just as the International Coach Federation has established standards for training and credentialing coaches, I believe that those using the professional label of "positive psychology coach" ought to have formal training in positive psychology. At this time, there is no set standard for the type or duration of this training, and I am not so presumptuous as to think that my opinion can be the sole voice on this topic. While one obvious type of credential is a doctorate degree, there are a variety of other types of training programs as well. Here, I suggest a number of types of programs and Internet information for each (current as of the time of this writing).

   Master's Degree Programs in Positive Psychology: The advantage of these programs—and there are only two in the world that I am aware of—is that they