
How do you bring a positive, strengths-based approach to coaching?

Since the publication of the first edition of the Leadership Coaching Guide, the broad field of positive psychology has grown considerably in scope and influence. Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania has been leading the way but other scholars in related fields – David Cooperrider and Appreciative Inquiry, Barbara Fredrickson's work on positive emotion and Marcus Buckingham's strengths-based approach are all contributing to the growing knowledge and interest in these areas. Since these fields of study are all exploring ways to optimise human performance they have much to offer the field of coaching.

The good news is that effective coaching approaches, including our *GROWTH* model, are already heading in this direction. New research and scholarship in these emerging areas provides solid evidence for the efficacy of this approach and helps add a sharper edge to the way various techniques and strategies can be applied in coaching conversations.

In the section below we outline 4 foundation concepts of these positive, strengths-based approaches and suggest ways in which these principles can provide a greater edge to your coaching so that your coachees are moving confidently towards goal success.

Future Images Influence Current Behaviours.

"People change in the direction of their images of the future," claims Cooperrider arguing that the future is as much an influence on the present as the past. And positive images lead to positive futures becoming, in effect, self fulfilling prophecies. Positive images beget positive actions.

The *GROWTH* model leverages this principle with its focus on creating a positive image of the future in the form of a richly articulated, emotionally engaging goal it stimulates people to set. The more these images of the future can be embellished using the whole range of sensory imagery the more powerfully they act as magnets pulling people towards that direction.

Here are some ways you can apply this principle:

- Use the **ISMART** mnemonic – outlined earlier – as a checklist for defining outcomes: **I**nspiring, **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **R**esults Driven and **T**ime Bound
- Build a repertoire of **powerful questions** to help your coaching partner articulate this outcome. Some you might start with include:
 - *What specifically do you want to accomplish? How would things be better for you when that happens?*
 - *How will you know when you have achieved it?*
 - *A month from now what changes would you like to have in place around this?*
 - *What would you be hearing others say when you achieve this outcome?*
 - *Paint a picture of what's happening when these changes are in place. Who will be involved?*

We are each made and
imagined in the eyes
of one another.

David Cooperrider

-
- *What are the worst things happening now? What is the opposite of that?*
 - *Who do you know that is already getting the results you want? What do those results look like?*

- Use a 1-10 scale to precisely identify the end point your coaching partner is wanting to get to in the time period identified. Visualise ways of representing the gap from the current reality to the preferred future to provide a way of seeing ‘the light at the end of the tunnel’, a way of measuring progress and a way of building motivation to close the gap.
- Specifically explore what it will feel like to achieve the outcomes being considered and what it will feel like if the situation remains unchanged 6 months from now. The emotional dimension has a big impact on the level of commitment generated.

Ask: *“What benefits will you enjoy as a result of achieving this goal?”*
“What negative consequences will emerge if nothing changes here?”

Tease out these ‘benefits’ and ‘losses’ in some detail to increase the tension between all the good things associated with success and all the less desirable things associated with non achievement. Thomas Chalmers a 19th century Scottish philosopher/theologian, argued for what he called the “...expulsive power of a new affection.” When we set our focus strongly and clearly on some new ‘affection’ it serves to expel the old, helping to make change possible.

- Always **capture the goal or outcome on paper**. Write it down so it can be read and or seen – better still have your coaching partner write it down. You can do this in whatever form works best – sentence form or diagrammatically as in a Mind Map. Making it visual is a helpful step on the way to bringing it into reality



Nobody exceeds beyond his or her wildest expectations, unless he or she begins with some wild expectations.

Ralph Charell

Positive Beats Negative

Much more than the power of positive thinking or mere ‘happiology’ this principle argues that the focus on positive strengths and past successes provides the energy for sustained change. And making change happen and sustaining it requires large amounts of positive energy.

Barbara Fredrickson’s work on positive emotion has advanced thinking in this area through her ‘broaden and build theory.’ In essence Fredrickson’s research led her to conclude that certain positive emotions are not simply pleasant feelings but play a role in helping people ‘broaden’ thinking – creating more possibilities – and ‘build’ enduring personal resources that develop resilience and overall wellbeing. This increased resilience helps people bounce back from stresses and disappointments more quickly and more completely.

We end our 8 Steps of Coaching Model with Celebrating Results but in truth this **celebration of results occurs throughout the process** as every movement towards the goal is acknowledged. Focusing on celebrating success and building on all that is currently working helps build confidence and resourcefulness for change.

Here are some ways you can apply this principle:

- Focus on the future and the positive things that you are moving towards, especially any positive emotions that will be experienced when the goal is achieved
- In assessing current Reality always encourage reflection on what IS working as well as the barriers to success. This perspective highlights current positives and creates a sense of resourcefulness
- Begin each coaching session with a question that focuses on what has been working since last time. Ask: *What's been a highlight for you from the last week? What is the most interesting thing that has happened since we last met?* This focus helps to get the session started on a positive energy level and that can become self-perpetuating
- Intentionally celebrate any 'win' or progress at least verbally.
- Help coaches **reframe** challenging situations so that other perspectives can enlarge the positive dimensions of any situation. You can help coaches reframe situations in a number of ways by helping your coachee consider the issue from the **time** perspective – “What will this look like in 10 years?” from the **viewpoint of others** – “How would this look through your manager's eyes? To others in your team? To your friends?”
- Be present and listen at a deep level – it is one of the most affirming things anyone can do for someone
- Use humour and maintain a 'lightness of touch' in your coaching sessions
- Maintain a high positive energy level
- Believe in your coaching partner!

Change your questions,
change your life.

Marilee Adams



Words Create Worlds

One foundation concept of the change theory known as Appreciative Inquiry is that language and how it is deployed is central to the way we make sense of the present and create the future.

“Through conversations we form and reform our life experiences and events; we create and recreate our meanings and understandings; and we construct and reconstruct our realities and ourselves. Some conversations enhance possibility; others diminish it.”

Jackie Helm, Appreciative Living

This concept highlights the fundamental importance of our questions and the other language structures in the coaching process, especially as we help people articulate Goals and explore Reality and Habits. Our skill in handling language and its structures will have a direct bearing on our effectiveness as coaches. Some ways you can more potently manage language in your coaching conversations include:

- Take time to build and tweak your repertoire of impactful questions. (Later sections in this guide provide a way to start doing this.)
- Bring some intentionality to the structure of your questions – open and/or closed; How and What questions not Why.

In language we build our
identities, our relationships
with others, the countries that
we live in, the companies
we have, and the values we
hold dear. With language we
generate life.

Fernando Torres

-
- Include metaphor in your coaching conversations in order to give coachees new ways to conceptualise their issues
 - Consider the tense you use. Subtle distinctions can make a big difference. For example it can be helpful to talk about a problem in the past tense. Instead of “You *have* problem XYZ” say “You *have had* problem XYZ for a while and now you do things differently”. Similarly it helps to state goals about describing a preferred future in the present tense – as if they are already in place
 - And remember to be succinct – too many words can reduce the impact of your question or comment.
-

Leadership is about creating an alignment of strengths making people's weaknesses irrelevant.

Peter Drucker

Leverage Strengths

Marcus Buckingham's work in this area has had a big impact and is based around extensive research. In the influential book *Go, Put Your Strengths to Work* he presents research arguing that people grow most in the area of their greatest strength, not the opposite, as is commonly assumed. He goes on to argue convincingly that working on strengths and managing around weaknesses is the most effective way to grow and develop.

Some ways of applying this principle include:

- Help people identify what their strengths are. Many are unclear or confused about this. One helpful way to do this is to have your coachee complete the VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire which is available free from the following website: <http://www.viastrengths.org/>
- Ask your coachee to think more intentionally about their strengths and how they have used these in the past. Ask:
 - *Describe your three greatest accomplishments to date?*
 - *What strengths contributed most to these achievements?*
 - *Who have been your major positive role models and what did you learn from them?*
 - *What would be five adjectives that describe you at your best?*
 - *What prevents you from being at your best?*
 - *What energises you? What saps your energy?*
- Consistently seek to have the person you are coaching use their strengths as they seek to progress their current goals. Ask:
 - *How can you use your strengths here to develop some specific approaches to achieve your goal?*
- Help your coaching partners design their weekly activities so that they are based around using strengths

This article is an extract from the book – *The Leadership Coaching Guide: growing you and your organisation*. For more information or to order call growth coaching international (02 9411 2755) or visit: www.growthcoaching.com.au