EMOTIONS

Once more with feeling

It's time to give greater voice to emotions in coach supervision, argue ***Peter Duffell*** *and* ***Carmelina Lawton Smith***

Emotions arise frequently in coach supervision, and it's important to investigate these as they offer valuable information, and to look for patterns across multiple events, suggests our latest research into emotions in the coaching space.

In our last article for this magazine (*vol 9, issue 3, 2014*), we highlighted the importance of emotion in the coaching space, concluding that the emotions a client brings into the room are a valuable resource requiring further exploration (*Duffell & Lawton Smith, 2014*) and suggesting ways to approach this. However, we were aware that emotions would also be encountered during coach supervision. In fact, we felt that coaches would be highly likely to bring issues invoking strong emotional reactions into supervision.

Further, we're increasingly seeing emotion being referenced in contemporary literature as something with value and which we should take note of (*Cuddy, 2016*). Consequently, we wanted to explore emotion further from a coach supervisor perspective.

To do this, we needed to revisit our earlier research and consider it from a coach supervision perspective, review what the literature says about what emotions might tell us, and undertake further research specifically from the coach supervision perspective.

RESEARCH

Following our original study of emotions in coaching, we concluded that emotion can inform coach and client in the sense-making of situations (*Duffell & Lawton Smith, 2015*). It can also be the vital motivator in goal attainment and help raise awareness of the real issues to be addressed. However, we also identified a number of key challenges:

- **Definitions** The coach and client may not define or interpret an expressed emotion in the same way. Therefore, both parties need to build a common understanding of the client's emotional experience. The coach shouldn't just assume that the personal experience a client has of a given emotion fully aligns to their own personal understanding of the emotion expressed.
- **Memory recall** When dealing with emotionally charged events there is a high cognitive workload. This can prevent us from noticing and interpreting what's actually

happening. This can lead to memory inaccuracies in recounting an event to the coach and may mean a very significant event at the time is given less salience in recall. As coaches we therefore need to understand which investigative strategies will help give maximum insight into the emotions clients bring.

- **Language** Coaches need to be careful in the language they choose to describe the client emotions they observe or encounter. As Loftus (*quoted in George, 2013*) suggests: "questions are a means by which memories get contaminated".

These are also important considerations for coach supervision. Emotion is as relevant in supervision as it is in coaching and it's important to acknowledge that the supervisor can only work with the issues, experiences and memories that the coach discloses. Consequently, supervisors should explore the emotion from the coach's perspective and use appropriate investigative strategies to do this.

WHAT MIGHT EMOTIONS TELL US?

The purpose of emotions and what they might tell us has been the subject of research for some time. From a coaching and coach supervision perspective, the most interesting conclusions are that:

- Emotions arise when something of importance happens to an individual (*Gross, 2002*)
- Emotions are intentional because they have an object (*Chamberlain & Broderick, 2007*)
- There are linkages between emotion and individuals being moved to action (*Gross & Thompson, 2007*)
- Specific emotions guide the coach to situations where people might be using behavioural strategies (*Bachkirova & Cox, 2007*)
- They're linked to intentional change because of their role in sense-making (*Cremona, 2010*)

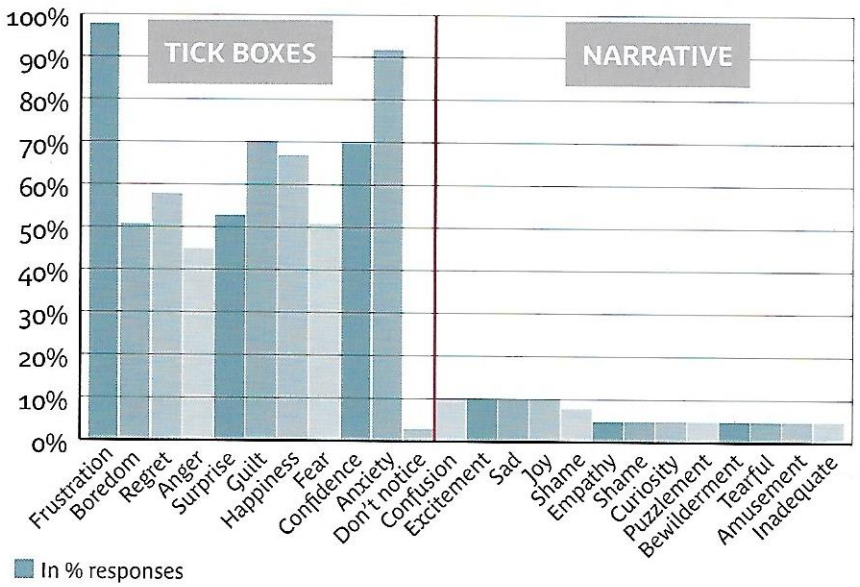

Figure 1: Emotions observed in more than 5% of responses

- There is a 'process' element to emotion (freezing, sweating) and a cognitive element to an emotion. To understand the individual's meaning of an emotion, one has to ignore the process and focus on the cognitive (*Le Doux, 2016*).

It's therefore quite clear that when emotions are encountered in coach supervision, exploration could be valuable. For example, recognising emotions might have an object (clear cause) means exploring them might lead to insight for coach and supervisor.

EMOTION IN SUPERVISION

An online quantitative and qualitative survey was carried out between January and April 2016 to help us investigate the emotions supervisors might encounter during supervision and their preparedness to investigate these.

Invitations for coach supervisor responses via professional bodies attracted 41 participants from both the UK and elsewhere in Europe. In the following, we summarise some of the responses, drawing out some of the most relevant themes highlighted.

- ***What emotions do you most often encounter in coach supervision?***

There were two parts to this question – a tick list of 10 'popular' emotions and a free format text box where respondents could write any other emotions frequently encountered not the tick list.

A graphic representation of the number of survey responses that mentioned a particular emotion (in %) is shown in *Figure 1* above. Hence, more than 97% of respondents advised that they had encountered frustration in the coach during supervision.

We only show emotions referenced in 5% or more of responses. Altogether, 58 emotions were suggested in the free format text box, so respondents were clearly happy to make suggestions. However, it's noticeable that there's a significant difference between the

CASE STUDY

A nagging doubt

When Julia reflected on her supervision session with Adam, she was troubled by the anxiety that had been apparent in their discussion. While Adam had conceded that some of the anxiety had been associated with his client's situation (secondary emotion), he felt that a lot of the anxiety was due to a nagging doubt he had about his own coaching practice (primary emotion).

Knowing that emotions have an object, Julia had helped him to unpick and understand why he'd experienced the primary emotions about his practice. Essentially, Adam relayed a situation where he'd been working with a client, who had some specific needs from the coaching. He remembered feeling that he didn't know what to do and had consequently felt troubled about his inability to help his client. During further exploration Adam mentioned that his anxiety had been preceded by feelings of inadequacy, especially when he'd contemplated upcoming coaching sessions with this particular client.

Having helped Adam to surface feelings of inadequacy, Julia had decided to explore this with him more deeply. After a long discussion, Adam blurted out his fears that he was not the perfect coach that he aspired to be. This seemed to be the 'object' of the emotion that Adam had brought into the room. Because Adam felt that his coaching practice was inferior to the expectations he set for himself, he felt inadequate. The more he felt that he didn't know what to do, the greater his anxiety.

Julia therefore spent some time helping Adam work through his developmental needs, specifically the action he might need to consider to help him progress towards being the coach that he aspired to be as well as developing strategies he could use with the clients he felt he wasn't fully serving.

During her reflection, Julia noted that the anxiety had an apparent cause in the feelings of inadequacy that Adam had about his coaching practice, specifically the difference between the coach he aspired to be and his beliefs about his practice.

However, knowing that emotions can be quite complex, she also reflected on the work she had read about shame in coaching (*Cohen, 2015*). She wondered if there had been an element of shame behind the anxiety Adam had experienced.

She also reflected on the anxiety that Adam had felt about the supervision process (*Bachkirova, quoted in Ellison 2015*) and if he'd been concerned about it being judgemental, given his beliefs about his coaching. Julia wondered about the things that Adam might not have brought in to supervision (*De Haan, 2016*) and if this could have also contributed to his anxiety.

She therefore made a note to ensure that she explored these possibilities in their next supervision session if Adam still reported feelings of anxiety.

10 emotions we suggested and the comparatively small responses associated with self-selected responses.

It could be, of course, that the responses are framed in terms of the way the question is asked.

Noting the very strong responses for frustration and anxiety, which received 97.5% and 92.7% of responses, respectively, we decided to enquire further into these specific emotions. How we might find value in exploration of anxiety is covered in the case study (*left*).

● ***How often are they encountered?***
First, it was found that 91% of respondents almost always encounter emotional reactions from coaches during coach supervision sessions. Respondents reported that emotion might be mildly presented at the outset, but with further exploration the underlying emotion could emerge.

Further, emotion is often surfaced by what the supervisor notices about the client in terms of tone and emphasis placed on emotive words, as well as what they directly experience during the supervision session in terms of emotions that the coach might display.

One respondent commented that her frustration was indicated by her tears as much as by the story she told.

● ***What is the importance of investigating the emotions that arise in supervision?***
More than 80% of respondents highlighted the importance of investigating emotion. Respondents commented that it was valuable to delve deeper with the coach into possible underlying triggers for the emotion, noting that the supervisor needed to go beyond presenting the obvious.

● ***How prepared are supervisors to investigate the emotions that arise?***
More than 75% of respondents were almost always prepared to investigate emotion in the coach during coach

supervision. Comments received from respondents as to why they would not investigate emotion ranged from feelings that focusing on the emotion would take away/divert focus from the issues which the coach had raised, or that the emotion doesn't always seem strong enough to warrant further focus.

When these findings were first presented for discussion at the 6th International Conference on Coaching Supervision at Oxford Brookes University in May 2016, attendees agreed that emotions are frequently encountered. They also agreed that supervisors should be prepared to investigate them.

An interesting aside that emerged during discussions was that with the exception of Gestalt-informed approaches, none of the participants could identify any training they'd received that might equip them to investigate emotion.

CONCLUSIONS

It's clear from our findings that emotions arise frequently in coaching supervision and that supervisors feel they are important to investigate. Supervisors should look for patterns across multiple events and not solely focus on emotions associated with single events. In addition, they should recognise that emotions are a valuable source of information, because they usually have an object of focus, but should avoid labelling them for the coaches they supervise.

However, coach supervisor training does not appear to consider emotion in any depth and seems to rely on a supervisor's innate understanding and personal experience of any emotion coaching might bring into the session.

Perhaps it's time to give greater voice to the role of emotions in supervision. This would better prepare new supervisors and the coaches they supervise for the discussion of emotionally charged events. It might also encourage training providers to offer more guidance for supervisors and coaches on how to maximise the value from discussions about emotions.

Coaches need to understand the value of bringing their emotions into the supervision space, and supervisors may benefit from more tools and techniques when dealing with emotions.

Currently, emotions are implicit. Our challenge is therefore this: isn't it time they became explicit in supervision practice?

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