

# The challenges of working with emotion in coaching

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*The role of emotion in coaching has attracted significant recent debate and this article summarises three potential perspectives that coaches may be using in respect of emotion. It then goes on to highlight a number of potential issues that need further exploration. Firstly, defining emotion remains a complex area of debate and without a shared understanding with clients of what is meant by 'emotion', coaches may find it hard to work with effectively. Secondly, dealing with emotion in the coaching interaction often relies on the recounting and recalling of a previous event and is therefore subject to memory. The coach is working with the account of the event from memory, rather than the event itself. This has implications for the role of the coach in dealing with the subsequent client meaning making of emotional events. Lastly, the limitations of language may influence the coaching interaction when discussing emotions, leading to unhelpful consequences. Some suggestions are made to help inform coaching practice when working with emotion.*

**Keywords:** emotion; coaching; memory; language.

**T**HE ROLE OF EMOTION in organisational coaching has attracted significant interest in recent years (Bachkirova & Cox, 2007; Cox & Bachkirova, 2007; Cox & Patrick, 2012). In this article we will summarise three prevailing perspectives in relation to emotions in coaching and go on to highlight remaining challenges for coaches when working with emotions.

## Introduction

Approaches to emotion in coaching could be categorised into three potential perspectives.

The first perspective potentially held by coaches is that emotion is a topic to be *ignored* because emotion has no place in the organisational context, and the main aim of the coach is to enable rationality to prevail (Cox & Bachkirova, 2007), or to refer the client to alternative support. Such views may be pertinent for internal coaches or when coaching is provided for a defined area of performance. The second approach accepts the significance of emotions but takes the perspective that they are *inconvenient* and need to be managed and controlled. This

view is characterised by the growth in Emotional Intelligence resources (Goleman, 2013), and by coaches who aim to help clients recognise and manage their emotional reactions. The third perspective, emerging as a stronger force in recent years, regards emotions as *information* that can be valuable in the coaching process, (Cremona, 2010). This review will expand on each of these perspectives and highlight some remaining issues for coaches when working with emotion.

## Emotions are to be ignored and are irrelevant or unhelpful

Historically, emotion was treated with caution in the coaching field, with some arguing that the emergence of difficult emotions often signalled a transition across the counselling boundary. Cox and Bachkirova (2007) highlight an early view from the International Coaching Federation (ICF) that 'Coaching assumes the presence of emotional reactions to life events that clients are capable of expressing and handling their emotions. Coaching is not psychotherapy' (p.183). This infers that

coaches would potentially have considered referral in situations that generated strong emotions. Askew and Carnell (2011) suggest coaches might be wary of 'trespass', so tend to distance themselves from emotion. However, the ICF has since changed its perspective on this point and now advises that coaches should be able to work with strong emotions (ICF, 2013). It has also been suggested that lack of emotional investigation may negatively impact the coaching relationship (Patrick, 2004) resulting in a less effective engagement, hence 'Emotion work' (Cox & Patrick, 2012), is now seen as important within the coaching field. Cox (2013) advocates that an aversion to dealing with emotion in coaching 'should be seen as misplaced since feelings are the initial mechanisms through which understanding is ultimately achieved' (p17).

It may, in fact, be almost impossible to operate as a coach without dealing with client emotion leading to suggestions by Cox and Bachkirova (2007), that emotion be considered in coach training. In their study, none of the coaches involved appeared able to avoid working with emotion in their practice. However, a number of those coaches still reported that emotions were considered 'unhelpful' to the coaching process and some would still refer any client expressing painful emotions. Yet even when coaching is clearly performance based, such as sales or presentation coaching, emotional reaction can often block improved performance, so attempts to ignore client emotion may limit the effectiveness of coaching.

### **Emotions are inconvenient and need to be regulated**

The second coaching perspective to difficult emotions regards regulation as the required approach. This is characterised by Emotional Intelligence psychometrics (Bar-On, 2000) often used by coaches to draw attention to emotions that the organisation, or the individual, might prefer to be managed or suppressed.

Richards and Gross suggest that there are two forms of emotion regulation; 'response focused regulation mops up one's emotions; antecedent-focused regulation keeps them from spilling in the first place' (2000, p.1308). These strategies are also referred to as reappraisal (response-focused) and suppression (antecedent-focused). Since suppression is a preventative emotional regulation strategy it requires continual self-monitoring and self-corrective action throughout a potentially emotional event (Gross, 2002). It is suggested that such monitoring requires a continual outlay of cognitive resources, reducing the capacity to process events, which can affect future recall. Reappraisal, by contrast, is reactive, therefore does not require continual self-regulatory effort during the emotional event. The type of regulatory strategy employed might therefore have an impact on the memory of the emotional event, with suppressed events being harder to recall in detail. This has clear implications for how the event may be relayed to a coach some time later. A client who is struggling to remember the detail of an emotional event may have genuine difficulty in recalling the detail which can make it hard for the coach and client to explore the event meaningfully. Alternatively the coach may mistake this as a signal that the event was not significant and fail to investigate and challenge, thus denying the client the opportunity to work with the coach to make sense of strong emotional signposts that could support development.

Encouraging suppression strategies therefore will increase the cognitive load, thus reducing the resources clients have available to remember and subsequently make sense of their emotional experiences as a source of learning. Consequently, if emotions are treated only as something to be monitored and regulated the client learning may be limited.

### **Emotions are information to be to be accepted or analysed**

Employing suppression means that emotions are never accepted or analysed, despite the potential for these emotion to provide valuable insight. Emotions arise when something happens of importance to an individual (Gross, 2002). By uncovering the object of that emotion the coach and client can gain awareness of deeply held principles and existing behavioural strategies to deal with that emotion (Bachkirova & Cox, 2007). There are indications that knowledge of client emotions may be helpful in coaching (Cremona, 2010; Grant, 2012; Gyllensten et al., 2010). Some suggest that approaches such as Rational Emotive Behavioural Coaching can help clients 'understand both their values and their emotions' (Fusco, Palmer & O'Riordan, 2011). Gestalt coaching based on the 'paradoxical theory of change' (Beisser, 1970) would also suggest that awareness and acceptance of powerful emotion can be the trigger for change. Emotions can, therefore, provide a 'signpost' to core principles or values that the client has not acknowledged or is unaware of. High emotion often results when a deeply help principle is violated, so, for example, a client who describes anger at a change of reporting line may benefit from understanding the main reason behind that anger. For some it may be that the decision was taken without consultation, for another the anger may result from a perceived loss of power. Understanding the focus, or the object of the emotion can, therefore, aid self-knowledge.

Since emotions have an object they are described as intentional (Chamberlain & Broderick, 2007), this is in contrast to a 'mood' that is often free flowing with no clear object as the focus of that mood. Emotions frequently arise when comparing expected progress, against actual progress towards a goal (Carver, 2006) and are particularly relevant when the goal is of significant importance for the individual (Koole, 2009). This may reflect a disparity in what an indi-

vidual feels 'should happen' vs. what they perceived 'did happen' such as the duty of consultation, where none was used. However, the resulting emotion can impede or promote progress towards the goal. For example, an individual seeking promotion who experiences failure and disappointment may feel negative emotion which diverts energy and may impact the motivation to work towards the desired goal. The fact that an emotion exists and creates the desire for regulation (Thompson, 2011) can provide valuable information in the coaching context and raise client awareness. In a situation where a client claims that a promotion was not important but reports anger at how the interview was handled, could benefit from working through this incongruence in a coaching context. Exploring such incongruence can help the client identify a more fundamental problem that may underlie the reaction, possibly revealing competing commitments (Kegan & Lahey, 2009) of which they were unaware.

Incongruence between inner feelings and outer behaviour may also be the result of using suppression, which if engaged long term, can make people feel inauthentic and negative about themselves (John & Gross, 2004). Coaches are well placed to explore such feelings of incongruence and inauthenticity in the confidential client space. Therefore emotions can be a valuable source of information to both the coach and the client, often indicating the presence of significant issues that need to be surfaced to enable awareness and sense-making. However, using emotions in coaching as information to be accepted and analysed, while valuable, presents a number of issues for practicing coaches. Below we detail three key problems that coaches need to be aware of in coaching practice when working with emotions.

### **The definition problem**

Despite the interest and long research history, there is as yet no agreed definition of emotions. This is problematic in coaching,

because when we talk about emotion it would be valuable for both the client and the coach to share a mutual understanding. In fact, the definition of emotion is described as one of the 'perennial problems in the field of emotion' (Frijda, 2008, p.68). The question of what is an emotion is not an abstract one, as in marketing the emotional impact of advertising on consumer behaviour has significant consequences backed by extensive research (Chamberlain & Broderick, 2007). There appear to be two main issues. Firstly, emotions are deeply personal with multiple-emotions often experienced at the same time (Plutchik, 2001). Whilst everyone is familiar with emotion, each individual may have their own experience of it (Ekman, 1992). Secondly, Le Doux (1998) comments that 'emotion is only a label as it does not refer to something the brain has or does' (p.16). This infers that emotion is merely a construct for talking about brain and mind. In addition, since emotion is hard to gauge or measure, especially in other people, it is described as 'the most vexing problem in affective science' (Mauss & Robinson, 2011, p.209).

Kleinginna and Kleinginna addressed this 'vexing problem' and concluded that 'emotion is complex and can give rise to affective experiences, cognitive processes, physiological adjustments or behaviours' (1981, p.355). This broad scope means that theorists focus on different elements, resulting in numerous, divergent definitions (Frijda, 2008). Mauss and Robinson, note that there is no 'thing' (2011, p.14) that defines emotion because of the multiple variables. However, despite numerous approaches, there is some common ground in the literature, with six areas emerging as consistent in theoretical thinking about emotion:

1. *Conscious and unconscious appraisal:* Fredrickson (2001) outlined a broadly affective definition proposing that emotion begins with an individual's assessment of the personal meaning of an event. She expanded this, suggesting

conscious and unconscious appraisal processes might trigger cascades of response tendencies resulting in things such as cognitive processing. Other authors support this view, referencing affective phenomena, multi-component response systems and conscious or unconscious appraisal (Chamberlain & Broderick, 2007; Garland et al., 2010).

2. *Physiological responses and behaviour:* Emphasises physiological definitions that emotions are short-lived experiences producing co-ordinated changes in thoughts, actions and physiological responses (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Emotions are also suggested as exerting sweeping influence on behaviour (Koole, 2009).
3. *Positive and negative emotion:* Fredrickson (2003) highlights the lack of differentiation between positive and negative emotion. This idea is developed further by other authors who suggest that there is positive and negative affect in emotion (Gross & Thompson, 2007), and that they can co-exist (Zembylas, 2008).
4. *Evolution:* Fredrickson (2003), for example, refers to evolutionary reasons for negative emotion (fight or flight) and that it is possible that the body is pre-disposed to particular emotions in certain circumstances.
5. *Cognition and motivation:* More recent research suggests that some emotions, such as fear, are easier to trigger, whilst others require more cognition (Brown & Brown, 2013), with several authors suggesting that emotion and cognition are inseparable (Baker, 2007; Le Doux, 1991).
6. *Fast and slow thinking:* That there are two different mental processes involved that work at different speeds (Kahneman, 2011). This accords with earlier thinking that emotions allow us to begin to deal with fundamental life-tasks, without elaborate planning (Ekman, 1992).

These areas are not mutually exclusive, for example, Howard (2006) suggests that

emotions help us to quickly assess what is going on in our social and physical environment, informing reactions that promote survival and well-being. This neatly combines thinking on evolution and fast and slow thinking. Consequently, what we tend to see in the literature are more practically rooted definitions that combine elements from each of these areas. For example, Fredrickson and Cohn (2008), who refer to emotions as being about some personally meaningful circumstance, which are typically short lived, and occupy the foreground of consciousness. These more limited definitions may be valuable to coaching by providing aspects of focus for the coach. Hence they direct the coach towards the conscious emotions, physiological changes or cognitive impacts that their clients have experienced. These can be areas that may provide valuable insight for the client. Bringing painful emotions into conscious awareness is proposed to be an important aspect of the coaching process (Cox, 2013). Despite the lack of definition coaches can focus on each of the six areas described above to help clients' sense making. They can discuss the degree to which the client reaction is conscious or unconscious and the physical reactions and behaviour cycle that may often be the result of a valuing process that labels the event as positive or negative.

Insight can also be gained from evaluating the degree to which emotions are the result of fast (automatic) or slow thinking and relating this to evolutionary processes to help gain understanding.

### **The memory problem**

It has been suggested that using a 'suppression' regulatory strategy creates a higher cognitive load which may result in poorer recall of an emotional event. Research by Richards and Gross (2000) supported this, finding that events subject to strong emotional regulation are more poorly recalled some weeks later. This means that a client wanting to discuss a past emotional event with a coach may struggle to fully recall

the situation, so the coach may gain an incomplete account of what was happening for the client at the time. This brings the paradoxical situation that the strongest emotional events that a client may want to unravel and discuss, may be subject to the poorest recall containing reduced descriptive details that necessarily limits the deconstruction and analysis that is possible in the subsequent coaching interaction. Both coach and client are effectively working with partial information.

Furthermore, it is suggested that what people remember is related to their personal commitment to a remembered event, and that they rationalise what they remember by modifying it into something with which they feel comfortable (Foster, 2009). Foster contends that when we remember past episodes, some elements are easily recalled whereas others may be re-constructed rather than reproduced. Hassabis and Maguire assert that 'well-known memory errors and inconsistencies, such as misattribution provide further tacit evidence for constructivist views of episodic memory' (2007, p.300).

So there is a danger that personal constructivism completes imperfect memories in order to make sense of the fragments that are contained in memory. This reconstruction may rely on autobiographical self-knowledge which leads to plausible but inaccurate recollection of past experiences (Koriat et al., 2000). The client who gives a very different account of an altercation with a colleague, to the briefing the coach received from HR, may be demonstrating a genuine recall issue, rather than lack of awareness or concealment.

Of further concern is that when our memories are put to the test, individuals do not discriminate well between true events and reconstructions used to make sense of the event (Henriksen & Kaplan, 2003; Loftus & Ketcham, 1996). It is also suggested that people may bring fragments of memory together and actually construct rather than re-construct a memory (George, 2013; Gross, 2002). There are further suggestions that

memories are normalised and that questions associated with memory are answered with a level of generality (Koriat et al., 2000) which may reduce their intensity and quality.

These findings, plus the potential impact of suppression strategies suggest the most stressful and cognitively demanding events may be those remembered with least saliency so may with time become very 'forgettable' and as a result what might be considered critical incidents, may not be brought to the coaching space at all. Barrett (2004) proposes that if we want to know something about how a person is feeling, we should ask. Yet the memory problem suggests asking may be a very poor reflection of the true emotion at the time. Cox (2013) draws attention to how coaches employ this 'episodic memory recall' with such tools as visioning and suggests this construction of events should not present an issue as it can be a 'powerful way of embodying past experience and bringing it into the session, thus enabling any obvious bias or internal inconsistency to be articulated and challenged' (p.21). In addition, when we ask clients to recall and discuss an event 'the event does not come back to the client as it was experienced, it comes to the client afresh, with new insights' (Cox, 2013, p.21). This could be negative or positive for the coaching interaction. While the memory may have elements that have been reconstructed and, therefore, are not reflective of the event at the time, it may also include reflection that brings new insights. In either case, the coaching is working not with a contemporary record, but with a post-reality construction.

Coaches, therefore, need to be mindful of the limitations of memory in three ways. Firstly during strongly emotional events, recall and recollection may be impaired resulting in more limited detail of the event when subsequently recounted to a coach. Secondly, the events that are brought to coaching may not be those that were most salient at the time as the high emotion during the event may have reduced the scale of the event in memory. Thirdly, the emotion

itself may be re-constructed with new meaning making following the event that was not evident at the time (Loftus, 1997). The coach should, therefore, be circumspect about dwelling on single emotionally charged events and consider multiple events over a period of time to better inform client sense making. A client who is asked to continually analyse and discuss a single emotional event may become more entrenched in their view that the memory is complete and, therefore, less open to challenge and re-evaluation. Continued focus in the coaching interaction may, therefore, re-enforce an erroneous view the client may have of an emotionally charged event.

### **The language problem**

When conveying information about an emotional event the client construction will be affected by memory, but it will also be bound by the client cognitive frame. The meaning of words such as 'suffering' or 'sadness' may take on a very different conception depending on the personal 'frame' of the speaker. Frames are the mental structures and personal constructs that encode a feeling into language (Lakoff, 2004; Wine, 2008). The coach will similarly evoke their own frames in the questions that they ask and in decoding the words used by their client, creating the potential for significant misunderstanding. This may not manifest in terms of overt discussion but might inform how the conversation progresses. Coaches, therefore, need to be wary of how the use of language colours their work with a client. Clean Language (Tompkins & Lawley, 1997) tries to address this issue but may not be favoured by all coaches or clients. Coaches, therefore, need to be mindful of how emotions are conveyed in language. For example, the tendency to categorise emotions as either positive or negative can be an unjustified automatic response. Lazarus (2003) highlights that emotions often seen as positive, such as Hope, might also have a negative side, which equates to anxiety. Emotions are, therefore, experi-

enced as complex phenomena that may not be adequately reflected through the use of existing words in a linear structure and some tools are now available to help clients articulate their felt experiences (Duffell & Lawton Smith, 2014).

In addition, the language used by the coach has the potential to influence the client and the subsequent interaction. Steel and Aronson (1995) demonstrated how a 'stereotype threat' can affect performance on a task for ethnic minorities. The language used to introduce an ability assessment task was found to affect the ultimate results in line with general stereotypes. Participants effectively fulfilled the stereotypical label that they applied to themselves.

We can also refer to the Principle of Consistency (Yeung, 2011), when people hear themselves being described in a certain way, they may unconsciously seek ways to behave consistently with the description. Therefore, if a coach were to paraphrase an emotion as 'anxiety' it may cause the client to in some way adapt and behave in a way consistent with the description that has been introduced by the coach. So paraphrasing, or clarifying understanding with new words, may not be a helpful intervention and could impede development. Therefore, the coach needs to be aware of the implications of language and be alert to maintain the role of investigation and challenge, of both themselves and the client.

Coaches, therefore, need to beware of the way they use language with the client descriptions of emotion. For example, a coach may conclude that a client is describing a situation that was 'frustrating' for the client, based upon the coaches' personal categorisation of this emotion. This may not align with either the clients' categorisation or emotional description of how they felt. Self-confident clients may be quite happy to correct the coaches understanding, but there is a risk that the client adopts the coaches' 'label'. In either case, the subsequent coaching conversation will not be authentic to the clients' original emotional experience.

## Conclusion

Emotions in the coaching context are often viewed in one of three ways by coaches. They might be seen as irrelevant to the organisational context or as an inconvenient attribute to be regulated and controlled. Both these seem limited strategies for the coaching relationship because emotions can be the source of a wealth of information that can inform both the client and the coach. It is clear that emotions arise when something of significance happens to the individual (Gross, 2002). We therefore contend that emotions are an important and valuable aspect that can provide information and be the focus for analysis that can inform and support effective coaching.

However, working with emotions in coaching remains problematic due to three key issues:

Firstly, while emotion as a subject is well studied, it suffers from practical and theoretical definitional issues. To address this potential problem we suggest working with six key areas that appear to be common to most definitions of emotion in order to avoid distraction by semantic concerns and build a shared understanding.

A second issue for coaches is that the emotion a person feels, at the time of an event, is very difficult to measure and may not be accurately recalled later because of the impact of an emotion regulation strategy or because of inaccuracies in memory. Memory of events may be limited by the cognitive overload at the time or be constructed to re-interpret experiences, after the event. This means that a coach may find the recall of the most significant events is limited or subsequently dismissed as less important than it was at the time. Coaches also need to be aware that they may be working with a re-construction of the event that is subject to both new information and to perceptual bias influenced by a number of processes. Coaches might, therefore, need to treat with caution the client narrative of emotional events. This may require an attitude of interested curiosity, rather than

adopting the recollection as a matter of true record. Coaches can also try to avoid excessive focus on a single event that may otherwise cause further strengthening of the construction.

Lastly, emotions remain a very individual experience that is bound by the personal constructs and language of the individual. How far the coach can really appreciate the personal meaning making and semantic frame used by the client may have implications for how they work together. Coaches need to maintain awareness of how their own language and interpretations might influence emotions. The Clean Language approach deals with this explicitly but there may be ways for coaches to adopt some of the ideas without becoming 'Clean Coaches'. Awareness of their own language and a curiosity about what clients infer in their choice of words can go some way to avoiding assumptions of meaning. Coaches might therefore reflect on four key questions about their practice:

- How can I help the client see emotions as valuable and informative?
- How can I build a common understanding of the emotional experience with my client?
- What investigative strategies will help gain the maximum insight to minimise the memory problem?
- How might my own language be influencing our interactions?

Emotion and its associated processes can be very informative for both coaches and clients, however, further research is needed to support coaches who wish to work with emotions in coaching. Many potential impacts remain unexplored and while awareness and curiosity are valuable assets, coaches would benefit from further empirically based advice of how to address emotional aspects of coaching.

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