Abstract

This paper demonstrates application of the principles of: (i) cognitive-behavioural psychology; and (ii) solution-focused brief therapy to enhance practitioner well-being and performance in a school setting. An individual case presentation allows the specific methods used to be captured and linked to coaching psychology theory/research. Reflections and implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords: Cognitive-behavioural coaching; CBC; solution-focused coaching; SFC; performance; well-being; coaching in schools.

Introduction

Cognitive-Behavioural Coaching (CBC) utilizes the theories, principles and practices of cognitive-behavioural psychology to support coachees to achieve their goals (Palmer & Szymanksa, 2007). Key principles include:

~ A person’s feelings about a situation are not caused by the event itself, but rather that individual’s thoughts and interpretations about the event (Beck, 1967, 1976; Ellis, 1962). Helping coachees to develop insight into the relationship between their thoughts, feelings and behaviour can enable them to understand and manage their reactions to situations.

~ Individuals can experience ‘thinking errors’ that can distort their interpretation of reality and impact negatively on both feelings and behaviour. These include e.g. all or nothing thinking (things are either ‘excellent’ or ‘terrible’ with no shades of grey), personalization (“This is all my fault” or “It must be because of me”), catastrophizing/awfulizing (“It’s a disaster!” or “That would be awful!”), or demands (rigid or inflexible demands of self or others articulated as ‘shoulds’ or ‘musts’). In workplace contexts these can be considered to be ‘Performance-Interfering Thoughts’ (PITs) or ‘Stress-Inducing Thoughts’ (SITs) (Palmer & Cooper, 2000; Palmer & Szymanksa, ibid).

~ Thinking errors can be transformed into more adaptive thoughts through the process of disputation and the application of thinking skills (Curwen, Palmer & Ruddell, 2000; Ellis, 2006; Palmer & Cooper, ibid; Palmer & Szymanksa, ibid; Seligman, 2003). This then impacts on feelings and behaviour.

~ Individuals may have poorly developed systematic problem-solving skills or may fail to apply their skills when under pressure or stress (Palmer & Szymanksa, ibid).

Palmer & Szymanksa (ibid.) assert that CBC can improve performance, increase psychological resilience, enhance well-being, prevent stress, and help to overcome blocks to change.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) evolved principally from the clinical work of the team at the Brief Family Therapy Centre in Milwaukee, particularly that of Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg (de Shazer, 1985, 1988; Berg & De Jong, 2002). The principles and practices of SFBT are outlined by e.g. O’Connell (2002), and in the context of Solution-Focused Coaching (SFC – O’Connell & Palmer, 2007) include the following:
‘Problem-free talk’ at the beginning of sessions.

Exploring ‘pre-session change’, i.e. positive changes that may have happened between first contact and the actual coaching session.

An explicit interest in successes, strengths, and what is going well, rather than focusing purely on problematic elements of the coachee’s situation.

Exploration of the coachee’s preferred future (as opposed to exploration of the origins of the coachee’s problems).

A search for ‘exceptions’ (times when the problem is not as bad or aspects of the preferred future are already happening).

Harnessing the coachee’s strengths to help them to achieve their goals. This reflects Milton Erickson’s principle of utilization, i.e. mobilising any aspect of the coachee’s experience which could usefully contribute to solving the problem (Lankton, 1990).

Use of scaling questions to help coachees to recognize the nature of what is already working, identify goals, and set small-step targets towards them.

Encouraging the coachee to do more of what is working.

This case study demonstrates the successful application of elements of both CBC and SFC to improve performance and enhance well-being with a practitioner in a primary school.

Context
The piece of work being examined took place when the author was working as a Specialist Educational Psychologist for a traded service that sold coaching services to schools. In this particular case the coach was contracted to work with a school’s newly-appointed Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo), the primary aim being to provide the practitioner with emotional support to complement the practical support she would receive from other sources. The practitioner (L) was new to the SENCo role but had worked in the school for several years and had earned a reputation as a capable and confident classroom teacher. However, she was now stepping outside of her comfort zone into a demanding role that presented fresh challenges.

Case Presentation
The details of the sessions are described below, with headings used to identify the specific techniques applied:

Agenda-setting
After a preliminary meeting with L to clarify the scope of the work and to respond to her queries about the process, the first session began with coach and coachee negotiating an agenda. This provided structure and direction to the session (thereby enhancing the likelihood of the time being well-used) while ensuring that L’s needs were covered (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). This first session gave L an opportunity to prioritize some of the many new demands she was facing, while allowing a rapport to develop between coach and coachee. L left the session with an action plan, and the next meeting was arranged.

At the beginning of the second session L admitted that she was “not feeling great” about her new role. Further discussion clarified that this was perhaps something of an understatement, and that she had found herself experiencing some anxiety and a lack of confidence at work. She had previously enjoyed the sense of being good at her job - in fact, she stated “I like to be good at what I do, and I like others to think I’m good at what I do,” - and her new role was causing her some discomfort in this respect.

‘Macro-’ and ‘micro-analysis’
‘Macro-analysis’ and ‘Micro-analysis’ are two techniques that can be used to analyze coachees’ experiences. ‘Macro-analysis’ involves coach and coachee noticing recurring patterns in behaviour, while ‘micro-analysis’ places one particular incident under the microscope to look in detail at the sequence of events, thoughts, feelings and behaviours that occurred (Palmer & Dunkley, 2010).
The first step was to elicit further details about the situations that L had encountered that had contributed to this anxiety. L recounted a number of situations, a common theme being where other practitioners had approached her to ask questions to which she did not know the answers. It seemed that it might be helpful to conduct a micro-analysis of one of these situations. L chose to focus the discussion on a situation in which another practitioner had approached her with a query about a child’s reading intervention. In this situation a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) had asked L: “Should I move this child up a level on the reading scheme?” Feeling ‘on the spot’ and not knowing ‘the answer’ to the question, L had responded (somewhat defensively): “I don’t know because I’ve never worked with that child. If you think they’re ready, move them up.” She knew that this was an unhelpful response and worried how the LSA would have perceived her as a result. L, while being an effective classroom teacher, was now learning how to deal with requests from others for support and advice.

Exploring the relationship between thoughts, feelings and behaviour

To explore the relationship between their thoughts, feelings and behaviours, coachees can be helped to complete an ‘ABC’ framework (Ellis, 1962) in which they are helped to record: The Activating event that triggered the emotion; the Beliefs that they had about the situation; and the emotional/behavioural Consequences of those beliefs. The ‘Belief’ may be e.g. an automatic thought, an intermediate belief, or a deeper, core belief (Curwen, Palmer & Ruddell, 2000). In this particular case, a modified version of the ABC framework was used with the terminology changed to the less esoteric language of ‘observations’ (Activating event), ‘thoughts’ (Beliefs), and ‘feelings and behaviour’ (Consequences). L’s stated ‘goals’ (to both ‘be competent’ and ‘be seen as competent’) were also incorporated, since these contextualized the encounter (Ellis, 2006). The framework was drawn to help L to understand the model, and was constructed collaboratively. This diagrammatic format also allowed the reciprocal and interactive relationship between thoughts, feelings and behaviours to be represented:

**Figure 1.** Diagrammatic representation of the relationship between L’s thoughts, feelings and behaviours in the situation identified.

**Goals**: I want to be competent  
I want others to see me as competent

**Observation**: Practitioner approaches to ask a question

**Thoughts**: “Will I be able to answer this?”  
“What will they think about me?”

**Behaviour**: Defensive reaction  
**Feelings**: Anxiety, worry
At this stage, the beliefs identified were the ‘surface’ automatic thoughts L experienced that led to her feelings of anxiety and subsequent defensive reaction.

**Involving the coachee**

Having completed this exercise, the coach was conscious of different routes that the conversation might follow. For example, the discussion could focus on further exploring the underlying beliefs that led to the automatic thoughts and anxious feelings; or, alternative behavioural responses could be generated. In such situations it is helpful to involve the coachee in determining the direction of travel (Schein, 1999), and so the possibilities were presented for L to consider. L chose to focus the remainder of the discussion on generating alternative behavioural responses.

**Shifting to a ‘future-focus’**

When coachees have described a ‘problem situation’ they would like to address, it can be helpful to ask them to imagine and describe what their preferred outcome would be in similar situations in future. This ‘future-focused’ approach is underpinned by principles of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (Berg & De Jong, 2002; de Shazer, 1985, 1988; O’Connell, 2002) in that the emphasis is shifted from exploring the problems of the past to talking about imagined successes. Inquiring about the coachee’s preferred outcome can elicit helpful detail regarding coachee goals and, furthermore, can transform the emotional climate of the discussion from one of despair and difficulty to one of optimism, hope and possibility. There are various questions a coach can use to this end, for example:

- Imagine the next time you encounter that situation, and it goes as you would like. What happens?
- What are your best hopes for such an encounter in future?
- How would you like that situation to go? What would the outcome be?

How would you like things to be different?

When asked what her best hopes would be for such an encounter in future, L identified that she would like the LSA to walk away thinking “Great, she’s answered my question, I know what to do next.” At this point the coach suspected that L was experiencing a pressure common to many practitioners who are new to a ‘helping’ role, i.e. a perceived need to provide answers to the queries one is presented with. This can be driven by an unhelpful belief that ‘competence’ or ‘being helpful’ equates to ‘knowing the answers’ and ‘being able to provide the answer’.

**Guided discovery and Socratic questioning**

As described by Palmer & Szymanska (ibid.), guided discovery is a process where the coach and coachee work collaboratively to view the world or particular problem differently. Socratic questioning (Padesky, 1993) is a key tool for promoting reflection and challenging thinking in this process, in which the coach asks questions of the coachee to guide their exploration. This approach was used throughout the remainder of the dialogue.

**Shaping goals**

Sometimes the goals that coachees wish to achieve can themselves be barriers to change, e.g. if they are overambitious, unmotivating, woolly, or narrowing. In this case, L’s espoused goal was partly focused on one strategy, i.e. being able to give the answer to the practitioner’s questions. As this would not always be possible, it seemed important to broaden the goal to something more realistically achievable:

Coach: Okay, so you’d like her to walk away thinking ‘She’s answered my question, I know what to do next.’

L: Yes.

Coach: So there are two elements there. You answering her question; and her knowing what to do next.

L: Yes.
Coach: I’m wondering: Will it always be possible for you to answer their questions?
L: Hmmm…. Well, probably not… But I’d still like to be helpful in some way and for her to know what to do next.
Coach: Okay. So, I’m wondering if it might be helpful to revise your best hopes to reflect that…?
L: Okay, my best hopes would be for her to walk away thinking ‘Great, she’s helped, I know what to do next.’

This represented a subtle but important change in L’s goal. Instead of being focused on one narrow strategy, the goal was now phrased as a desired outcome. L wanted to be seen as having been helpful to the person, and wanted the person to know what to do next. This opened up other possibilities as to how to achieve this beyond her having ‘the answer’ herself.

Activating the coachee’s strengths and resources; exception-seeking
At this point the coach hypothesized that drawing on the coachee’s strengths and resources might prove helpful in finding a way forward (Berg & De Jong, 2002; de Shazer, 1985, 1988; O’Connell, 2002). Since L was a capable classroom teacher it was likely that she had a whole toolbox of strategies that she used with children to help them know what to do next when stuck, and experience of having performed successfully in such situations (‘exceptions’). These hitherto untapped resources then became the focus of the conversation:

Coach: I’m thinking it might be useful to further explore what it means ‘to be helpful’ when someone asks you a question…?
L: Okay…
Coach: …Starting from a place where you feel comfortable and confident. So, when you are in the classroom, teaching… I don’t know, pick a subject.
L: Maths.
Coach: Okay, imagine you are in the classroom, teaching Maths, and a child is stuck on a problem. They put their hand up and ask you a question.

How do you help?
L: Well… I might talk them through what they have to do.
Coach: [Noting down the idea on a mind-map] OK. That’s one possibility. What else might you do?
L: Give them some praise and encouragement.
Coach: [Adding the idea to the map] OK. What else?
L: Tell them what their next step is.
Coach: OK. What else?
L: [Thinking]
Coach: Would you tell them the answer to the question?
L: [Emphatically] No! That doesn’t help them to reach the answer for themselves.
Coach: So what might you do instead?
L: Ask them some questions to help them think about it.

The coach could sense that, having drawn upon her experience, the coachee was close to finding a way forward. It was now important to try to help her link her discovery to the problem situation:

Coach: So being helpful can mean asking someone questions to help them think about what to do.
L: Yes.
Coach: I’m wondering if that might help you in situations like the one we are focusing on. What questions might you have asked that practitioner in that situation?
L: I’m not sure…. [pause]
Coach: [Realizing the need to ‘come back’ closer to the coachee’s experience having jumped too far ahead] Okay. If you had to make a decision yourself about whether or not to move a child up on their reading scheme, what questions would you ask yourself?
L: Do they meet the criteria for the level they are on? Do they feel secure in that level? Are they consistent at that level?

Coach: [Noting L’s responses for her to see] Useful questions. What might happen if you asked the LSA those questions, do you think?

L: [Smiling] It would give her the confidence to make the decision herself.

Coach: Does that sound like a helpful way forward?

L: Yes! Definitely.

Trawling the learning; action-planning

Having guided the coachee to a change of approach, the next action was to review the session so as to ‘trawl’ the learning that took place. L was asked to think back over the course of the conversation to pick out key learning points and use them to inform an action-plan as to her future approach (Egan, 2002; Miller & Rollnick, 2002). She identified that in future situations she would think differently when approached by a practitioner, replacing the thought of “Am I going to be able to answer this?” with “I don’t need to know the answer, I can help them to think it through.” This reflected a shift in L’s underlying beliefs about what it meant ‘to be helpful’ and ‘to be competent’ when asked a question by another practitioner. L suggested that this change of mindset would help her to feel less anxious, while her ‘defensive’ behaviour would be replaced with the more helpful behaviour of asking the practitioner guiding questions. At this point the coach returned to guided discovery to highlight what was thought to be another key learning point:

Coach: Where did the solution come from?

L: [Smiling] Me.

Coach: How?

L: I used my experience. The things I know.

This seemed to be an empowering realization for L, who had previously underestimated the value of her past knowledge and experience when faced with a seemingly ‘new’ problem.

Reflections and Conclusions

This case presentation has demonstrated the value of applied psychology for improving practitioner performance and well-being, while highlighting a number of valuable principles and techniques that can inform future coach practice. These include: (i) macro- and micro-analyses of behaviour; (ii) using structured frameworks to help coachees to explore the relationship between their thoughts, feelings and behaviour; (iii) shifting to a ‘future-focus’ when coachees are considering problem situations; (iv) guided discovery and Socratic questioning; (v) shaping goals; (vi) activating the coachee’s strengths and resources through exception-seeking; and (vii) trawling the learning at the end of a coaching session.

The case demonstrates the ‘dual systems’ nature of CBC (Palmer & Szymanska, 2007) in that sessions can focus on practical problem-solving as well as developing insight into the relationship between thoughts, feelings and behaviour. In this example the coachee chose to focus the session on generating alternative behaviours that she might practice, whereas she may have elected to further examine the underlying beliefs that were contributing to her anxiety. This indeed occurred to some extent later in the conversation when L’s belief about what it meant to be helpful was challenged and re-evaluated. However, one might also speculate on the extent to which L’s initial thoughts were underpinned by demands (e.g. “I must be competent”), perhaps linked to other performance-interfering thoughts (e.g. “I must be competent otherwise I can’t stand it.”) Although this was not pursued in this particular conversation, the coachee could have been helped to uncover and challenge such PITs, using disputation techniques to generate alternative, more adaptive beliefs and an effective new approach (Ellis, 2006; Palmer & Szymanska, ibid.).

The author modified the classic ABC framework to use less esoteric language (observations, thoughts, feelings, behaviours). The disadvantage of this approach is that, given that the elements do not form an acronym, it may be harder for coachees to remember the model in the early stages of subsequent independent application. This is in contrast with the more
memorable ABC framework and e.g. Edgerton & Palmer’s (2005) SPACE framework (Social context, Physiology, Actions, Cognitions, Emotions) which some coachees may prefer. Nonetheless, this adds another ‘tool’ to the coach toolkit that might be drawn upon when guiding such reflection.

It is notable that the eventual solution was not a new behaviour taught by the coach, but rather an existing strategy that L had used successfully in other circumstances. Reflecting a key principle of the solution-focused approach, L had essentially determined to simply ‘do more of what works’. The specific strategy came to light through reflection on experiences where L had been asked a question and had been able to respond helpfully and in a way that she was satisfied with. This illustrates the value of ‘exception-seeking’ in problem-solving, i.e. searching for examples when the coachee has faced a similar problem or situation and experienced a more positive outcome. It was particularly noticeable in this case how L seemed to grow in confidence having realized that she did in fact have strengths that she could draw upon to tackle new problems – it was just a case of thinking how they might be applied in unfamiliar situations. The author is reminded of Baruch Shalem’s assertion that “There’s nothing wrong with you that what’s right with you couldn’t fix” (as quoted in O’Connell, 2002, p.19).

The case also illustrates the value of coaching in schools, and the broad applicability of psychological principles and practices. L was not a ‘struggling’ practitioner; on the contrary, she was skilled and capable, but even so she experienced anxiety and a lack of confidence in her role. One might speculate how many people this applies to, and how many might benefit from occasional opportunities to reflect on their performance and well-being with a coach. Those who are new to roles might particularly benefit from coaching to support them in e.g. overcoming performance obstacles or generalizing and applying previous skills and knowledge (see also Young & Anderson, 2011). Of course, coaching often requires an investment of both time and money, and the potential return on this investment (ROI) needs to be considered (see e.g. Skiffington & Zeus, 2003). In this particular case the ROI could be represented as in Figure 2, which demonstrates how improvements in one practitioner’s performance can have a ripple-like effect on others, eventually resulting in gains for both the school as an organization and, crucially, the children within it. If schools are prepared to invest in providing effective support for practitioners, it is ultimately to the benefit of the children and the organization.

References:


**Biography:**

Mark Adams (MISCP Accred) is a Chartered Psychologist who is passionate about applying psychology to help others move forward. He works as an Educational Psychologist for Bristol City Council (a role with a variety of functions including the provision of consultation, coaching, and training services to schools), and has recently launched an independent coaching/support service.

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Figure 2. Return on Investment from Coaching L.

- L develops insight into thoughts, feelings and behaviour. L learns new behaviours for tackling situations.

- L feels more confident in her role; has skills to perform more effectively; has tools for solving other problems in future.

- L is more effective at supporting the x other practitioners she works with.

- The x other practitioners are more effective in their work with children.

- The children and the organization benefit.