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What to Work on: Self-Confidence or Self-Esteem?

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Abstract:

This article aims to show the value in coaching of focusing on self-confidence rather than on self-esteem as a healthier and more productive approach. It offers some insights for coaching practice.

Key words:

Self-esteem, self-confidence, self-acceptance, self-compassion.

Introduction

Self-esteem and self-confidence are both concepts related to how individuals perceive themselves.

Whereas self-esteem, or sense of self-worth, is the value people place on themselves, self-confidence is a belief held by individuals that they possess the necessary resources to carry out an action with the desired result.

Of course, those two elements are linked. The more people see themselves positively, the more they are likely to have confidence in their personal abilities.

Many personal development programmes and self-help books have been based on the premise that increasing self-esteem is the key to success in the private and professional domains.

However, some researchers argue that the development of self-esteem has in reality little positive impact on performance, well-being or even inter-personal relations (Baumeister et al., 2003). Trying to boost self-esteem can even have some downside effects including dysfunctional behaviours, vulnerability to setbacks, egocentrism (Crocker & Park 2004).

This raises the question whether in coaching also, the quest for self-esteem might not be the appropriate answer.

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Drawbacks of Self-Esteem in Coaching

Seeking Performance

High self-esteem encourages persistence after failure, enhances initiative, and contributes to happiness (Baumeister et al., 2003).

But when our self-esteem depends largely on our investment in specific domains such as professional success, it undergoes major fluctuations according to our failures or successes. In fact, failure has a greater negative effect on self-esteem than the positive effects success may bring (Crocker & Park, 2004).

To avoid failures and therefore preserve their self-esteem people often engage in a series of inappropriate strategies: dismissing negative feedback and discounting their mistakes, blaming others, avoiding and procrastinating (Crocker & Park, 2004), for example putting things off until they are “feeling in better shape”, or “are more concentrated”.

They may even go as far as self-sabotage aimed at protecting their self-image from the risk of failure (Crocker & Carnevale, 2013). For example, they may arrange a full schedule of meetings on the eve of a presentation in order to have a ready-made excuse for a perceived poor performance: “I had no time to prepare”.

Even when successful, people with low self-esteem find it difficult to recognise their accomplishments. They have a tendency to minimise their successes (“anyone could have done it”; “they are exaggerating my contribution”).

In such a context, there is a danger that performance coaching may trap them in a vicious circle where searching for ever greater success in a domain strongly identified with their sense of worth ends up making them more vulnerable.

The Pitfalls of Perfectionism

This concern to constantly perform better can take the form of perfectionism which goes beyond the search for excellence and leads to permanent dissatisfaction as the result achieved is never good enough.

Pushing oneself harder can be rewarding in terms of performance (and can therefore become addictive) but it impairs the well-being of the individual in the long term. It can also lead to poorer performance when deadlines are not met or when activities are avoided.

Even a request to “work” on perfectionism can be complex: “I would like you to help me to be less of a perfectionist” is clearly a paradoxical request since the improvement

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asked for actually corresponds to the initial problem: constantly wishing to perform better to increase a sense of self-worth.

If the coaching process is not sufficiently well framed, it may offer an excuse to keep working on the same flaws, while the coach can be at risk of becoming an alibi for the problem (reinforcing the perfectionism).

Conforming to the Expectations of Others

In a corporate coaching process, all stakeholders have expectations about the professional development of the coachee. Their vision of what the results of the coaching path should be is coloured on the one hand by their own personal functioning and their values, and on the other by the function they occupy in the organisation (human resources, manager, etc.). It can happen that the coachee shares these expectations to a greater or lesser extent.

Committing to a coaching path may thus increase pressure on the individuals and lead them to:

- link their self-worth to the opinion others have of them
- conform to the expectations of the others through a need for recognition.

Indeed, “when regard from others is conditional on one’s performance or other extrinsic qualities, people are likely to be triggered into pursuing self-esteem goals” (Rogers as cited in Crocker & Park, 2004).

Instead, coaching should strengthen the individuals’ ability to derive their self-evaluation from the way they put their own values into practice and the efforts they themselves have made in their accomplishments.

Self-esteem and Comorbidity

Self-esteem issues can be of varying degrees of gravity and may be associated with other problems such as depression, anxiety or personality disorders (Fennel, 1998).

Embarking on a coaching path on self-esteem could delay a decision on a therapeutic solution which would be more effective. Some key indicators should therefore lead the coach to propose a different process than coaching:

- Low self-esteem involving clearly expressed suffering and/or a significant impact on the quality of life of the person.

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- Difficulties which suggest associated disorders (sadness, fears, worries, sleeping or eating disorders etc.).
- Chronic problems: Issues of self-esteem not linked to a recent event.

Even if self-esteem offers some benefits (persistence, happiness), when it is staked on success in specific domains, its pursuit creates significant costs in learning, relatedness, autonomy and self-regulation (Crocker & Park, 2004).

Shifting the Focus from Self-Esteem to Self-Confidence

Assisting coachees to shift their focus from validating or increasing their sense of self-worth to finding their resources through greater self-confidence to help them achieve what they want may therefore prove to be a more beneficial way to build well-being and performance.

Unlike self-esteem, which is a rather abstract concept, self-confidence can be readily observable in the willingness to act when facing a challenge.

Repeatedly taking on tasks leads to mastering them and enhances competencies.

In coaching, empowerment and acceptance & caring are two powerful processes to increase self-confidence.

Empowerment (strengthening the ability to act)

Coachees may very well possess excellent abilities and skills without actually being convinced that they can mobilize them to perform well. When they doubt themselves, they may hold back from action through fear of having to face up to their imagined shortcomings. Although the immediate benefit of avoidance is real (no need to deal with those fears), in the long run it acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy, only serving to reinforce their doubts about their own capabilities.

Working with clients to switch from “how can I be better” or “give a better image of myself” to “what do I want to accomplish” or “who do I want to be”, helps coachees to free themselves from the difficulties arising from self-judgement.

They can set the goals that will lead them to a more meaningful and richer professional and private life. Without the need to prove their worth to themselves or to others, energy expended on anxiety or on avoiding failure can be invested more positively in motivation to action. In this way they benefit from a wide range of experiences whose results they are able to analyse objectively, examining the different external and internal factors which contributed to the result.

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They take note of their resources which enabled them to strengthen their performance.

Failure thus becomes a learning opportunity and success improves self-confidence.

Acceptance and Caring

Acceptance contributes to empowerment, as it is the opposite of resignation. It allows us to direct our energy where it is more useful, to take responsibility for our behaviours and actions and to learn.

In coaching, acceptance is about:

- Letting go of what is outside our control.
- Recognising the person we are with our strengths, flaws and limits.
- Acknowledging that our limiting beliefs influence the way we perceive situations, our feelings and behaviours.
- Being present to our thoughts, feelings and emotions without necessarily trying to avoid and suppress them or struggle against them.

Looking at ourselves with acceptance as a caring friend would, thus opens the door to self-compassion: “treating oneself with kindness, recognizing one’s shared humanity and being mindful when considering negative aspects of oneself” (Neff & Vonk, 2009).

Self-compassion offers the same benefits as self-esteem without the pitfalls and is associated with psychological health and a more stable sense of self-worth (Neff & Vonk, 2009). According to Neff’s studies, self-compassion is linked to well-being, correlated with less anxiety, stress, perfectionism and fear of failure, and with more life satisfaction, happiness, coping skills and responsibility.

Conclusion

Instead of aiming at boosting self-esteem, which is not a panacea, coaches have at their disposal an array of techniques to help coachees become better observers of themselves. Focusing on strengthening confidence in their capacity for effective action is a better lever for achieving performance and well-being. And the result may then very well be an increase in self-esteem!

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