

Managing Emotions at Work: How Coaching Affects Retail Support Workers' Performance and Motivation

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Abstract

Working with people invariably involves managing emotions. This qualitative study examines a coaching intervention designed to help a group of retail support workers in one mobile communications organisation in the UK to articulate and manage their emotions more effectively in order to improve workplace relations and motivation. The paper discusses the concepts of emotion work, emotional contagion and emotion regulation in order to frame an action research study of a coaching intervention. Findings from the study suggest that following the intervention employees dealt with emotional situations in a calmer more measured way and that this impacted both individual motivation and working performance in the organisation.

Key Words: coaching, emotional labour; emotion work; emotional contagion; group-coaching, retail support workers

Introduction

Employment involving working with people entails learning to manage one's own emotions in order not merely to continue to operate, but also to arouse desirable responses in other people. Gross and Thompson (2007, p.4) highlight the important roles that emotions play as they "ready necessary behavioural responses, tune our decision making, enhance memory for important events and facilitate interpersonal interactions."

However, where research has focused on the role of emotions in workplace interactions it has tended to look at customer facing or sales settings where emotional labour is predominant. The employees in this study were not customer facing, but rather support staff. As Strauss (1993) confirms support staff often have to deal with 'fall out' from customer facing employees. In fact, these employees frequently find themselves caught in an emotionally charged middle ground where they are close to front line problems and the emotions that these arouse and yet they do not have the power to resolve them. Also, they are closer to management concerns, but again feel impotent in relation to decision making. To operate effectively requires an invisible skill set involving emotional awareness, understanding, regulation and communication. The action research described here attempted to make the normally imperceptible articulation of these skills more visible to employees so that they could better manage their emotional responses.

In addition, with the exception of Grant, Curtayne and Burton's paper (2009) there is little exploration of how external coaching can be used with employees at lower levels in organisations, especially to increase emotional awareness or other personal attributes that benefit working practices. There are potentially three reasons for this. The first is an historical view of emotions as non-rational, disorganised interruptions of mental activity that are out of place in an organisational context (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Fineman, 2000). Although this perception is outdated in terms of the research, it still pervades some parts of organisations. The second reason is that, as Davis (2009, 60S) points out, a relatively narrow focus on the risk of negative emotional health could have "diverted attention away from the exploration of the potential health benefits of positive emotions." Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, it could be that there is a lag between the growing complexity and expectations on workers, and the amount of employer investment in developing emotional awareness and resilience for their employees to support that complexity.

This paper then, describes an action research study of a combined individual and group coaching intervention that took place over a period of 12 months with a group of 15 retail support workers employed in a large mobile communications company in the UK. The aim of the paper is to report on how the intervention reached its objectives in helping these employees: i) identify counter-productive emotional responses; ii) improve their ability to handle the emotional aspects of interactions and iii) develop a stronger 'presence'. Presence in this context meant achieving the motivation and effectiveness necessary to take control in difficult situations.

The paper is divided into four sections: the first outlines five areas of relevant literature, four relating to the theoretical underpinning of the problem: emotional labour, emotion work; emotional contagion and emotional climate, and one pertaining to the proposed resolution: combined coaching and group-coaching. In section two, the action research methodology is explained and is followed in section three by a description of the coaching and group-coaching intervention. Findings are discussed in section four.

Literature

Emotional Labour

In all jobs there are inevitably situations where either the stimulation or suppression of emotions could be in conflict with actual felt emotions. However, there is some debate around whether the recognition and management of emotions is emotional labour or something else. Hochschild (1983) introduced the term 'emotional labour' to describe the roles particular workers play in order to create appropriate emotional responses as part of their employment function. She identified sales, clerical and service work as jobs that call for 'emotional labour' - jobs where normal personal emotions are modified or countered in some way in order to enable employees to influence others, handle complaints, and resolve issues and discrepancies. Emotional labour has since been recognised as a potential hazard to the well-being of a range of different working populations. Research into the effects on police, nurses, mental health and care workers, for instance, has indicated that the consequences of worker-customer/client interactions can have considerable effects on the health and well-being of workers (Wharton, 1999). This in turn affects organisational effectiveness and profitability.

The issues that arise in jobs that involve emotional labour mainly refer to the roles people play in order to create appropriate emotions and the conflict this creates between surface acting and deep acting (Van Dijk & Kirk Brown, 2006). Surface acting can arouse alienation between the self of the employee and his/her actions (Hochschild, 1983). Thus emotional labour has been conceptualised as an act of pretence that results in emotional dissonance which can be damaging, causing stress and burnout.

Emotion Work

By contrast, emotion work refers to a more general emotion and feeling management process, and is defined as the quality of interaction between employees and the people with whom they interact in the workplace (Zapf, 2002). Payne (2009, p.350) explains how emotion work is different from emotional labour in that employees display “genuine feelings towards customers and clients,” rather than playing a role. In the literature on emotion work, the skilled management of emotions is seen as valuable in all working situations where people are involved, not just those in the front line.

Some commentators even argue that emotion work should be considered as a form of skilled work with workers becoming ‘truly multi-skilled social actors’ (Bolton, 2004, p. 33). This complexity is recognised by other authors, such as Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2008:147) who suggest that “coping with emotion work is a complex process that will likely vary by the episode (dealing with an angry customer is likely a different process from dealing with a co-worker who made *you* angry)” (author emphasis). Emotion work is also discussed by Strauss (1993), who introduced the term ‘articulation work’ to describe the coordination and integration needed to bring together or ‘mesh’ the various contexts, tasks and clusters of tasks that constitute the workplace. Fjuk, Smordal and Nurminen (1997) later describe articulation work as facilitating the intersection between actors’ meanings (beliefs, attitudes, perspectives and emotions), tasks, responsibilities, obligations, commitments and conceptual structures, as well as time and space. More recently, Hampson and Junor (2005, 2010) have described how service workers perform ‘articulation work’ that uses a blend of emotional, cognitive, technical and time management skills to solve customer problems. It is this articulation of skills that forms the basis for the intervention described in this study.

Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2008) further suggest that the emotion regulation processes inherent in emotion work can have an impact on affective states, including discrete emotions, and can result in increased work satisfaction and performance and decreased workplace deviance. They explain (2008:147) that coping with emotions is multifaceted, involving both internal and external acts. Similarly Ashkanasy (2000, p.59) has described how people can regulate their emotional responses at various points in the emotion process: externally, at the level of the problem, by removing themselves from the emotional situation; internally, by some form of cognitive regulation that changes their appraisal of the situation; internally, by responding differently to the emotional arousal itself (taking time out for example); or externally, by modifying their ultimate response (smiling at someone instead of punching them). Regulation of emotion is also discussed by Tugade and Fredrickson (2007) who suggest that regulating positive expression of emotions can be effective for coping with negative experiences and can, in turn, increase resilience.

Very little empirical research has been undertaken to explore how training and other interventions can support employees involved in emotional labour or emotion work. Schweingruber and Berns (2005) however, do describe how a door-to-door sales company trains salespeople to engage in emotion management. They report how the company engages in emotion mining, the search for and development of potential emotional capital in salespeople’s biographies and uses that as an emotional bridge between the salesperson’s current self and the self that is supposed to be developed for the job. This article emphasizes the reflexive relationship between emotion management and the self, but does not mention workplace initiatives to develop such management.

Emotional Contagion

Whilst being mindful and empathetic of others’ emotional states can be seen as a good, ‘intelligent’, attribute, taking on others’ negative emotions could be seen as detrimental. George and Brief (1992) for example, showed that group emotions can influence work outcomes. Barsade (2002, p. 670) too has found

that emotional contagion plays a significant role in work-group dynamics and that group members experience moods at work that “ripple out and, in the process, influence not only other group members’ emotions but their group dynamics and individual cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors as well”.

Such emotional contagion has been defined by Hatfield and Rapson (2004, p. 131) as “the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person and, consequently, to converge emotionally” and they confirm there is evidence from researchers looking at transference and counter transference in a variety of settings, that people tend from moment to moment to ‘catch’ others’ emotions (2004, p.135).

Elsewhere, Hatfield *et al.* (1994, p.99) have suggested that an “awareness of the existence of emotional contagion may prove useful in understanding and perhaps advancing various areas of interpersonal communications.” If employees become conscious and understand how they ‘catch’ emotions from each other, then they are better able to intervene and respond appropriately to those emotions and to help others to do the same. Further, as Saavedra comments (2008:436) “influencing the contagion process could produce dramatic organisational results”.

The literature suggests that the ‘catching’ of negative affect could interfere with productivity as well as with the wellbeing of a work group or individual staff members. However, despite the importance of this phenomenon in the workplace, and the known capacity of coaching to raise people’s awareness, no research has been done to explore how coaching interventions may affect employees’ ability to resist or generate emotional contagion.

Emotional Climate

The benefits of improved emotional climate in the workplace have been studied by Vallen (1993), who suggested that the creation of a more supportive and participative work climate may reduce withdrawal and increase productivity and De Rivera (1992) has argued that ways in which emotions are expressed and received within a work-group will define its emotional climate. Research also indicates that a strong emotional link between workers can increase their satisfaction: co-worker solidarity is associated with greater job satisfaction and good relations with management (Hodson 1997). Similarly, according to Hartel, Gough *et al.* (2008:30) workers who like each other and have good relationships with each other are more likely to have good peer communications, greater job satisfaction, and good relations with management. Based on their findings, Hartel, Gough *et al.* moved away from the idea of emotional competence, based on the concept of emotional intelligence, and now propose a model of positive and negative emotion management skills that affect others’ emotions and the emotional climate. In order to encourage positive emotions and reduce negative ones our intervention focused on the development of these self-directed emotional management skills.

Coaching and Group-coaching

In the coaching literature, Peltier (2001 p.85) suggests that it is the coach’s role to help clients become aware of the “styles, patterns and specific thoughts that cause negative emotions and problem behaviour, substituting effective thoughts and patterns instead,” and Lee (2003:28) incorporates emotions as a key element of his ACE FIRST model, suggesting that it is an important part of self-awareness to be able to identify feelings. Lee argues (2003) that encouraging managers, for instance, “to notice, name, accept and understand their emotions is a key aspect of leadership coaching, since emotions – and particularly unconscious emotions – are an important potential block to change” (2003:31). A limited amount of research has been carried out in relation to how coaches deal with emotions in their clients (Cox & Bachkirova, 2007), and some into coaching and emotional awareness (e.g. Grant, 2007). However, there is almost no research undertaken with workers at lower levels in an organisation. In their recent review of management coaching literature, Nielsen and Norreklit (2009) found that coaching below

executive level usually involves control and direct monitoring. This suggests that individual, non-directive coaching, such as that used in our study, is unusual for this group of employees.

It has also been noted that coaching literature fails to recognise that individual coaching is often not able to proceed effectively without group cooperation especially when the individual goals of members of a single organisation overlap (Ives & Cox, 2012). Clutterbuck (2010) too argues that group coaching is indispensable where external factors have a significant impact the individuals and in such circumstances, according to Hudson (1999), individual coaching has limitations and group coaching can be a more appropriate coaching option. Haug's (2011) research with a project management team in Germany appears to confirm this. She found that team dynamics can lead to ineffective and even destructive behaviour, but that coaching the team seems to mitigate this tendency. Similarly, Woodhead's (2011) study with professional multi-disciplinary teams in the National Health Service, shows how coaching supports team-work by providing: "a forum for dialogue and thereby improving communication, giving focus and clarity of shared goals, increasing trust and collaboration that allows participants to see beyond each other's professional image, and enabling a systemic understanding and approach to problem solving, decision making and commitment to achieving collective outcomes" (p.114).

Although there are synergies with team coaching, group-coaching is also similar to groupwork, which has been described by Shulman (2008) as a 'mutual aid system' that seeks to help people to help each other. Crucially, groupwork is concerned with the ways in which individuals and groups can build more fulfilling lives for themselves and for their communities. Shulman (2008:306) also suggests that a combination of individual and groupwork can be beneficial: "rather than robbing the individual work of its vitality, group discussion often enriches the content of the individual sessions. As clients listen to issues and understand how others experience problems, they may be put in touch with feelings of their own that were not previously evident." In an earlier empirical study, Olivero, Bane, and Kopelman (1997) had used task-specific outcome measures to assess the impact of training and coaching. They found that the combined use of coaching and training was more effective than training alone.

Methodology

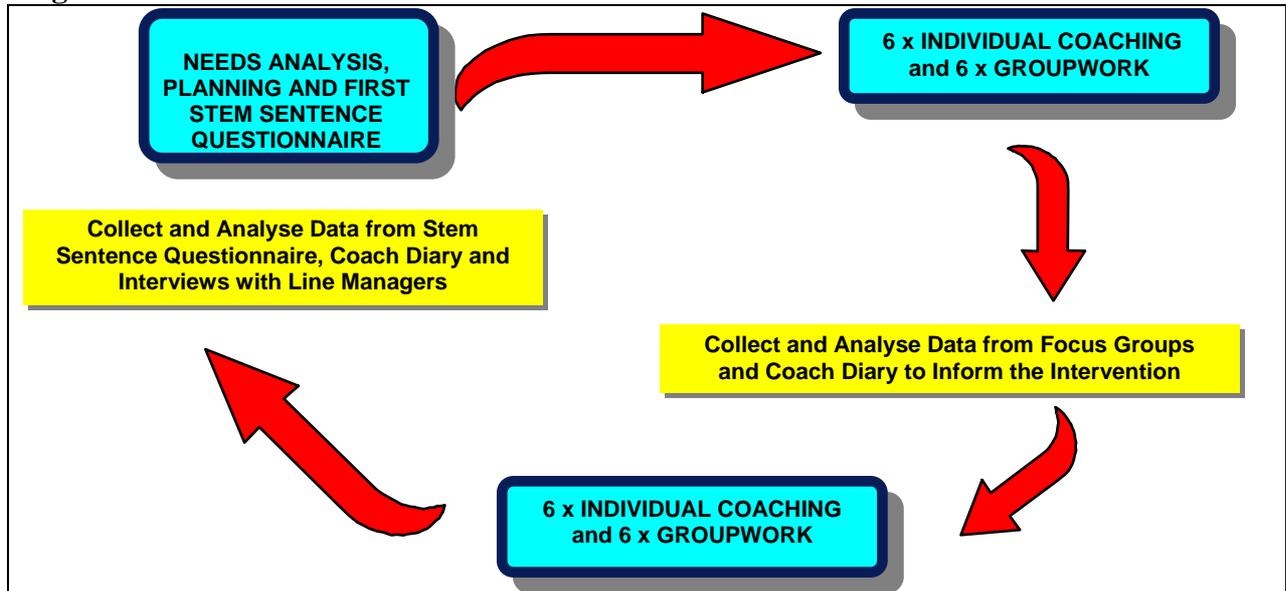
An action research approach was taken to explore a year-long combined coaching and group-coaching intervention in a retail support setting of a UK based mobile communications firm. After a pre-Christmas audit, the company's performance goals for a particular work-group were published. These were identified as: learning to identify and replace counter-productive coping strategies with more effective responses; generating a greater sense competence and confidence; improving abilities in handling the emotional aspects of interactions in self and others. Thus the specific objectives of the research were set as: 1) Devise and implement a coaching intervention to generate emotional awareness; 2) Carryout action research to monitor the achievement of the organisational goals.

Action research is particularly suited for situations where no data is currently available and learning via an intervention is planned. The action research approach adopted most resembled the Industrial Action Research (IAR) described by Kemmis and McTaggart (2007:275) which is "humanistic and individualistic rather than critical" and is typically consultant driven, but includes collaboration between researchers and members of different levels of the organization.

Many action research studies are undertaken solely by an individual practitioner-researcher in collaboration with the research participants. In this study however, there were two researchers, only one of whom acted as the coach-practitioner. This overcame one of the criticisms of action research, namely that respondents may give the practitioner-researcher only positive feedback on the intervention (Denscombe, 2007). Two cycles of intervention were planned in line with customary action research

practices (Reason and Bradbury, 2006) and there were three distinct phases of data collection as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Action Research and Data Collection Process



The work-group comprised 15 retail employees, including the core support team and a number of closely allied employees, all of whose work involved co-ordinating and organising timely deliveries to over 800 retail outlets. Ages ranged from 18 to mid 40s and there was a mix of males and females.

Underpinning the intervention and the chosen action research methodology is a social constructivist epistemology that believes that reality is constructed through individual action: our employees created meaning through interaction with each other and their workplace. Thus, like most coaches, we accepted that meaningful learning is a social process that occurs through our dealings and relationships with others. Our choice of data collection methods also reflects this: i) a stem sentence questionnaire, ii) focus groups, held part way through the intervention; and iii) a reflective diary maintained by the coach. The timing and purpose of each method is set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Data Collection Process

| Method | Timing | Purpose |
|--|------------------------------------|--|
| Stem sentence questionnaire to 15 respondents | Before the intervention | Identify current coping strategies |
| Coach Diary | Throughout intervention | Monitor how aspects of the intervention best enable identification and management of emotional issues and make adjustments to the intervention as appropriate. |
| 3 Focus Group – 5 respondents in each | Six months into the programme | Explore how employees’ ability to handle difficult emotional situations had changed over the first half of the intervention. |
| Same stem sentence questionnaire to the 15 respondents | After the intervention (12 months) | Explore how employees’ awareness and ability to handle difficult emotional situations had changed over the whole period of the intervention. |

Sentence Completion Questionnaire

Sentence completion has been used for a number of years as a clinical diagnostic method and consists of having a person finish an incomplete sentence with the first ending that comes to mind (Rotter & Rafferty, 1950, Cox & Bachkirova, 2007). The appeal of this procedure is as Grice *et al.* explain (2004: 2) that it “generates idiographic information in a highly efficient manner. In a sense, it is like a structured interview that forces an individual to cull the ‘essential’ verbal statements from his or her larger narrative response.”

Employees were given 18 unfinished sentences, designed to engender spontaneous and possibly emotional responses. Crotty (1996, p.278) has explained that the stem sentence method is an invitation to “open ourselves to the phenomenon as the object of our immediate experience”. This was thought to be particularly appropriate for this group of employees as sentences would invoke immediate, gut responses. Each of the researchers then used thematic analysis to examine the sentences across case, pre and post intervention, and the findings were compared. Stem sentences from collection 1 were compared with those from collection 2 to look for correlations and exceptions within case.

Focus groups

Focus groups are useful for gathering insights that might not be generated without the interaction found in a group (Morgan, 1993). Focus groups are consistent with the social constructivist underpinning of this study, since meaning was created socially in the group. Three separate focus groups were held, each with up to five group members present. The focus groups were recorded using digital recording equipment and both researchers listened to the recordings several times and noted the emerging themes from each. These themes were amalgamated and compared with those emerging from the sentence completion data.

It was recognised that emotional contagion could be evident in focus groups and in order to minimise the risk of a unified voice, the researchers asked employees to be particularly honest and open in their responses. Also, since the employees had built a good relationship with the coach over time their responses may have been biased towards the coach. To reduce potential bias the non-coaching researcher led the process.

Coach/Researcher Diary

The coach kept notes following each coaching or group session so that there could be a record of interactions. This supported her in following up and tracking changes. Notes were made of coach tasks and content and also covered actions agreed. For example one extract reads: “the next established guided review session will include the immediate boss to give feedback on group behaviours that need to change following discussions with him and a statement he made to me (‘it feels like walking on eggshells, they don’t want to upset each other so they don’t deal with things’). I have asked him to repeat this verbatim so we can examine the comment in the next session.” Details of the models and tools used were also noted together with any ‘real time’ interventions made throughout the programme. The coach’s diary was analysed using thematic analysis.

The Intervention

The individual and group-coaching intervention was designed to encourage the healthy regulation and expression of emotions. In addition employees needed to be able to identify and resist, or at least manage, emotional contagion and to express emotions appropriately in work situations.

Whilst the programme was organised for the group as a whole, small group and individual coaching sessions were designed to meet individual needs. However, the nature of the workplace required the

coaching to be structured in a way that would minimise impact on ‘business as usual’ for the organisation. Thus, as is common practice, the coaching was complemented by practical activities such as the use of learning logs and work based tasks, which provided useful learning and reduced disruption. The intervention processes are discussed separately below drawing on notes from the coach’s ongoing diary:

Individual coaching process

The task of defining personal goals was set at the first session, following which employees sent their proposed goals to the coach. The following group session then began with sharing of personal goals followed by coach led deconstruction; this meant that individual coaching tasks could be co-constructed. This process supported individuals in reaching useful conclusions. The coach’s diary notes that she used the term ‘useful conclusions’ in contrast to self-theories that tend to reinforce existing limiting beliefs and serve only to maintain the status quo. The process displaced many of the fixed labels individuals had for themselves and turned the ensuing discussion into a more dynamic process. This led in turn to situational conclusions based on a specific set of circumstances, events, moods and feelings prevalent at that time. Limiting generalisations were filtered out and always challenged in order to raise consciousness about how limiting self-theories might be developed then reinforced.

One to one coaching sessions also enabled employees to revisit the individual goals they had set and examine how they were achieving against these. An evaluation based on the organisations’ goals was devised by the coach and each employee then reported against each action they had taken. Creating documents such as this helped the manager, worker and coach to stay on track and introduced accountability and enough positive tension to maintain focus.

Group-coaching process

At the outset the coach met the employees in small groups of three or four for 90 minutes. Each session began with a brief review and everyone was invited to comment in turn. Collective sessions involved self-examination of a theory/model or tool often used for personal development. For example, locus of control theory was often invoked to consider where attention was located and how this made employees feel (Rotter, 1966). Following every session each group member had a task to complete in the working context; sometimes tasks would be devised during the deconstruction exercise at the beginning of each session. The coach’s diary describes how many tasks were personalised in this way.

The coach noted that one of the main factors that facilitated change was an increase in self-efficacy triggered by employees listening to each others’ experiences and aided by the coaching tasks. One exercise that appeared effective in this regard was entitled ‘Hug the Monster’ (Miln Smith and Leicester, 1966), whereby employees were invited to embrace their fears through a cognitive-behavioural exploration. The aim of this exercise was to push personal boundaries, make the invisible more visible and so ultimately aid performance.

The influence of emotional contagion on group behaviour had also been noted and the coach felt that this certainly had implications for the group-coaching process. As a result line-managers helped decide who would be in each group with some input from the coach. For example, it was suggested that the father and daughter in the group should be in different small groups so they could be free to speak in confidence.

Findings

This section presents the main themes emerging from the data analysis: the first captures the changes in counter-productive coping mechanisms; the second reports how resisting emotional contagion

increased emotional competence and confidence, while the third theme reports on the perceived changes to the emotional climate of the work-group.

Changes in counter-productive emotions

At the start of the intervention the stem “Those who express their emotions at work are ...” produced responses that revealed the different views that people hold in relation to the normality of expression of emotions in the workplace. Some employees felt that emotions were negative and indicated problems in colleagues; they were perceived as “stressed” or “looking for help”. Others thought that displays of emotion are good and are signs of confidence, strength and well-being or that they show that people care about what they do.

The dichotomous view that emotions are either positive/normal or they are problematic was echoed in the responses to the stem “Emotional reactions by my colleagues make me ...” which included: “*feel uneasy*”; “*nervous*”; “*feel like them*”; “*feel emotional too*”; “*want to see if they are OK*”; “*ask them if they are OK*”; “*want to walk away*”; “*feel nothing*”.

In these reactions we observed that many employees feel nervous when colleagues show their emotions and appear to respond in one of two ways: flight or fight. Table 2 shows examples of answers to three sentence stems which are illustrations of this phenomenon.

Table 2: Initial stem sentence responses revealing flight/fight

| Sentence stem | Flight Response | Fight response |
|--|---|---|
| 1. When, if my colleagues get angry I ... | ... get anxious (R2) ... walk away (R4) ... go quiet and stay out of the way (R7) ... stay quiet and mind my own business (R8) | ... need to know why (R3) ... ask what is the matter (R9) ... try to understand why (R12) |
| 2. Emotional reactions by my colleagues make me ... | ... nervous (R1) ... feel uneasy (R2) ... want to walk away (R10) ... feel nothing (R3) | ... think, what’s wrong (R8) ... want to help them (R9) ... ask if they are OK (R11) |
| 3. When colleagues get angry or emotional I usually respond by ... | ... hiding (R2) ... staying quiet (R8) ... mind my own business (R11) | ... listening to them and giving my opinion (R3) ...saying it will be OK (R10) |

Thus there are two different types of response: there are respondents that want to walk away, claim they feel nothing or who are uneasy. They could be seen to be moving away from the emotion (in flight from it). Secondly, there are those that want to help the colleague and make sure they are OK. These workers are moving towards the emotion (they want to fight it or overcome it in some way). There was a similar response to another stem, which consolidated respondents’ views: “if I feel a strong emotion when handling a complaint, I ...” This provoked answers such as “*try to back off*”; “*try to hide it*” and indicate flight, whereas responses such as “*make sure the other person knows what I think*”; “*fight*”; or “*get defensive*”, suggest a fight response.

Flight/fight reactions have been well documented (Cannon, 1931, Taylor *et al.*, 2000, Neenan and Dryden, 2002) and Slaski and Cartwright (2003, p.234) have further described how such reactions are considered to be adaptive, since they “protect the individual from physical harm and facilitate maintenance of self-identity in social settings.” Since, the approach by organisations to emotion in the

workplace has until recently sustained a view of emotions as irrational and dangerous (Bachkirova and Cox, 2007), it is not surprising that the initial responses to emotional phenomena by these employees appears motivated by fear and is either to fight it (solve it quickly) or flee from it. Overt admission and examination of emotions in workplace settings has not generally been encouraged.

At the end of the twelve month intervention responses to the same stem sentences appear to suggest an increase in what was categorised as ‘deliberate calm’ (see Table 3). Whereas responses before had been motivated by fear and lack of understanding, after the intervention the responses indicate either deliberate calm – standing back and reflecting - or intentional intervening and getting to the bottom of things.

Table 3: End of intervention stem sentence responses revealing deliberate calm

| Sentence stem | Response |
|--|---|
| 1. When, if my colleagues get angry I ... | ... try to understand why they are angry and calm them down (R1) ... go over and see what the problem is and see if I can help (R2) ... try to see the reason they are angry (R4) ... try to calm them down (R6) ... tend to leave them to it for a bit then ask what’s up (R11) |
| 2. Emotional reactions by my colleagues make me ... | ... distant, but concerned (R2) ... step back and think about their reactions (R5) ... want to see if they’re OK (R11) ... want to know why (R3) |
| 3. When colleagues get angry or emotional I usually respond by . | ... trying to help them or offer support (R1) ... listening to why (R3) ... finding out where the anger or emotion has come from (R4) ... listening to their view and letting them cool down (R5) ... talking them through the problem (R6) ... trying to calm them down and get to the root cause (R14) |

This analysis of stem sentence data is corroborated by findings from focus groups. In all three groups (FG1, FG2 and FG3) employees clearly expressed the difference in approach before and after the intervention, as the following examples suggest:

Before we got on with it without stopping and thinking or sitting and reflecting. Now I stop and think about it. I look a few steps ahead. (FG1)

Before if someone said something I just snapped at them, now I can just sit there and listen to what they say and then answer them back later – I haven’t got to answer back straight away. (FG2)

I’ve listened to people, tried not to let people wind me up [pause] I also ask for help. (FG2)

What I used to do was not calm down and then give a reaction. Now I’ve started to think, no I’m not going to go there – go back and calm down and then if need be I can give a reaction – or not give one at all. Angry feelings have calmed down. (FG3)

In addition, when the group were asked how they perceived that each other had changed in the workplace, they made comments such as:

[name] (addressing colleague directly), *you've just calmed down a bit. (FG1)*

People didn't want to approach her before, but she's chilled out. (FG2)

The increase in emotional awareness of self and others that was engendered through the intervention appears to have transmuted previous flight responses into something more like resilience and the previous fight responses have become a more informed type of empathy.

The following response is typical: the employee set a goal at the start of the intervention that involved not reacting to provocation, but now demonstrates increased awareness:

One of my main goals was to hold back. I try and think about a situation before going in to it. Before, I thought I was right and that was it and now I have started to think about other people's points of view and how they might be feeling. (FG3)

Transferability of the new calmer approach to emotion was also evident: talking about whether the learning had transferred to the home environment, focus group members confirmed this shift:

Before, I would argue and argue and argue, but now I listen to him [partner] more.

I'm now letting my sister 'step on my head'.

Resistance to emotional contagion

Another counter-productive response to emotions that can be identified in this data is the tendency towards contagion or infection. The emotions of colleagues are, unconsciously, 'rubbing off' on to the employees who indicate that they "feel like them" or "feel emotional too".

Part of the problem of working in a group day to day, is the propensity to feel other people's emotions. If employees get too close to colleagues' problems and bound up in their emotional reactions this appears to have an adverse effect on their confidence and their ability to function in the workplace: it complicates the need to manage emotions. Saavedra (2008, p.435) suggests that, in particular, negative emotions are exceptional kindling for the fire of contagion. However, despite the fact that there is a propensity for employees to automatically mimic their colleagues' emotions through emotional contagion, how they then deal with those emotions is a very individual matter. Worker 'A' may 'catch' an emotion from 'B', but whereas colleague 'B' had expressed it in a seemingly healthy, open response, worker 'A' may feel the emotion and suppress it, especially if he or she doesn't understand its origin. Such suppression may be unhelpful. In addition, we would argue, the tendency towards suppression or healthy expression may itself be contagious, as seen in many work settings and families.

There is evidence that the coaching and group-coaching together generated a sense of autonomy and self-regulatory competence for the employees. They were helped to recognise and name their emotions, acknowledge the cause and examine the effect by bringing them into the open – thus avoiding naïve emotional contagion, where a lack of awareness leads to what might be called an automatic infection from the emotional dis-ease.

Stem-sentence responses illustrate some significant changes in levels of contagion picked up from others' emotions. At the start of the study, many employees completed sentences with comments that suggest contagion: *feel like them; tend to get sucked in as well; feel emotional too; get anxious too; it tends to rub off on me.* According to the coach's diary, respondent 5 was particularly affected, but this employee at the end of the project was more engaged, and personal boundaries were not so blurred. In addition there was increased assertiveness and a positive acceptance that emotions are normal and

transient: they are not allowed to trigger self-doubt. All other employees also increased their reasoning in relation to emotions and worked confidently and productively towards changing their states. Focus group data confirmed that activities, such as ‘Hug the Monster’, and the coaching and the group-coaching all contributed in different ways to the changes.

It could be argued that understanding and overcoming emotional contagion and so becoming better at emotion work is an advanced skill that is perhaps not available to lower paid clerical workers like the 15 respondents in this study. Indeed Payne (2009, p.356) has surmised that being a “sophisticated social actor or skilled emotion manager has a good deal to do with ‘middle-classness’”. In the context of this study, we could praise this organisation for taking the responsibility for providing necessary support for this group of employees in order to increase their capacity for emotion work, and perhaps, in the light of Payne’s arguments, helping them overcome their seeming class (or, in some individual cases, cultural and educational) handicaps.

Changes to the climate, performance and motivation of the workgroup

Changes in the operation of the workgroup as a result of the intervention were most often reported in focus groups and in interviews with managers. Two sub-themes emerged: i) group cohesion; ii) performance and motivation

i) Group cohesion

Analysis of data suggests an increase in the trust and psychological safety of the group, which was generated mainly through the group sessions and the common bond that this created. These sessions were seen as important because everyone had something in common to talk about and in particular, the homework tasks gave workers a focus that was not directly work related. The bonding in turn increased the amount of trust, but they also recognised its fragile nature, suggesting that “trust is a very important thing which doesn’t just happen”, and confirming that “the group experience has built some trust – through the tasks” (FG1).

The coach’s diary records that when the group were deconstructing individual experiences with the coach they sometimes got upset. The response of the others in the group was to try and intervene and feel compelled to move towards a solution. The coach, however, would assume that individuals were resourceful enough to solve their own issues and would encourage them to keep communicating. Subsequently, this new problem solving behaviour appeared to be being transferred to the workplace, as suggested by these focus group comments:

People have started to talk to each other – even though they might have issues, they are a bit more mature. If anyone has issues they don’t let it affect work, they decide to put it on one side.

If someone’s got an issue with someone else, then we can tell them. They say how they feel and others are more responsive to feelings, more open.

Seeing what they are doing differently helps you understand what you should be doing.

If some people are prepared to give a little, then you make an effort.

Several focus group members commented on the better working environment. One claimed that “it is easier to joke around” and yet another summed up the general mood of the group, confirming that “it feels like it’s a better place to come to work.”

Workers also recognised that the changes had been “a gradual thing,” but some were afraid of what might happen after the programme had ended: “*I’m scared that it’ll finish and in a year we’ll be back where we were*”.

From outside the group the changes were also noticeable:

People on the programme have changed and everyone is ... they all appreciate each other and the efforts they have made are evident.

People think about what they are doing.

It’s a pleasant atmosphere when you walk in there now.

As can be seen from these comments, the handling and self-regulation of emotions for individuals in this group of employees appears much improved. There is much greater awareness of emotional issues and self-management techniques leading to greater calmness and personal responsibility. This increased sense of agency, has had an effect on working relationships. In addition, elements of group cohesion have been noted by respondents who were not directly inside the core support team.

Comments from several employees also demonstrate that they experienced an increase in articulation work and performance:

I deal with external companies and I am following things through more. So for example, if they tell me a deadline by when something should be done, and it’s not being done and they have not contacted me, I chase them up. I’m contacting people a lot more. Now I chase things up as much as I can myself. (FG2)

When someone was angry and upset and didn’t want to speak with me, I didn’t give up and go to [Manager]. I handled it. (FG 3)

These findings can only be tentative and exploratory. A further longitudinal study would be needed to explore measurable impact of such an intervention, particularly on productivity.

ii) Performance and motivation

At the start of the intervention employees appeared initially to be unconscious of the way in which their emotions were impacting others. Following coaching over a period of time there was evidence that performance and motivation had changed. Employees were able to stand back and assess emotional situations, accept responsibility and make considered responses. They demonstrated a greater sense of agency and self-regulation, particularly in relation to handling complaints. For example, at the start of the programme they gave the following responses to the stem “When handling complaints from others, I ...” “*get very defensive*”; “*get on the defensive*”; “*I try and help solve any problems*”; “*get agitated*”; “*get embarrassed*”; “*tend to take it personally*”; “*beat myself up*”.

Responses later on, confirmed the shift: “When handling complaints from others, I ...” “*empathise with their position*”; “*take it in calmly*”; “*obtain all the facts*”; “*would try to agree an outcome*”; “*listen and take comments on board - if I have offended them unintentionally then I apologise*”; “*try to be objective and find out why the complaint has been made, and if it is justified.*”

It was also recognised at the outset that emotional responses could affect motivation. Employees suggested emotions do this by: “*either giving it a boost if I’m feeling good, or giving it a huge drop if I’m feeling down*”; “*changing my mood*”; “*knocking my confidence if emotions are negative*”; “*either making me want to work or not, depends on the emotion*”. Responses after the intervention were more positive and suggested that the greater understanding of emotions and the processes involved can increase motivation.

The consequences of disaffected employees are as significant for employees as they are for employers. In stem 16, employees were asked “If I don’t feel enthusiastic about my work, I ...” and most of the comparative before/after findings demonstrate an increase in motivation. For example: R03 shifted from “*switch off*” to “*get on with it*”; R04 moved from “*am not motivated*” to “*try to motivate myself*”; R05 reported “*tend to feel down, not very confident*” and then “*still love being here*” and R14, at the start responded “*don’t want to come in*” and at the end of the intervention, “*would take a step back and gather my thoughts*”. These four responses are examples of a noticeable shift towards better self-motivation. Other responses may have been less pronounced, especially if the employees concerned were better able to manage emotions at the outset, but even four significant shifts in a workgroup can alter the working dynamic.

Conclusion

Findings have been presented from a qualitative action research study of a year long coaching intervention undertaken with retail support workers. Self-report data were collected to find out whether coaching can build emotional awareness and impact the emotional climate of the workplace and so impact performance and motivation.

Research using a qualitative approach to examine emotions in relation to performance has sometimes been criticised due to the potential influence of researcher bias (Antonakis, 2004). However, our study was not directly about performance, it was about relationships and attitudes, with improved performance seen as the by-product of the intervention. Our belief was that people’s perceptions drive their behaviour, as argued by Steers and Porter (1991). More recently, Lindebaum (2009) has confirmed that attitudes precede behavioural responses and that behaviour is the external expression of an internal evaluation. This suggests that a qualitative exploration that looks at attitude change is a valid method of assessing potential behavioural change and that using self-report methods for data collection should be seen as appropriate for reporting responses to a developmental intervention. So, although the size and scope of this study is a limitation in relation to generalisability, findings are still useful in that they provide a rich understanding of the outcomes of this unusual coaching intervention.

The findings from the study suggest that the coaching was instrumental in enhancing employees’ awareness to their own counterproductive work behaviours (Penney and Spector, 2008) and would likely reduce such behaviour in the future; although further longitudinal research would be needed to assess this claim. The findings also indicate that workplace conflicts and problems facing the group have been ameliorated through the combination of coaching and groupwork interventions. In particular the naïve, almost negative, flight or fight responses of the employees prior to the intervention were superseded by a more positive, emotionally literate approach to emotion in the workplace. Findings suggest that employees were better able to regulate their emotional responses in the ways suggested by Ashkanasy (2000) and to recognise and influence emotional contagion (Saavedra, 2008), with significant personal and workplace results. In the study, it was also noted how employees had been given power over their own feelings and this had resulted in increased freedom from the previous emotional turmoil evident in this workplace. Emotional resilience had been strengthened and this had implications for personal relationships as well.

From a management perspective, releasing employees at this level for coaching might be problematic, but this study has shown that even in an intervention involving only one hour a month, there were significant improvements in the reported attitudes to relationships, work performance and motivation for these employees. Like many service workers and others employed at lower grades, those involved in this intervention lacked development opportunities. The foresight of the organisation who commissioned the intervention has meant that this group of employees can carry forward their new understanding of themselves and others into all areas of their lives. We would argue that there is therefore an opportunity for employers to provide specific training or coaching support that enhances or in some cases replaces learned rules relating to emotion management (Seymour & Sandiford, 2005), especially where employees are charged with handling telephone complaints, resolving issues associated with logistics or liaising with both external and internal supply chains. Findings from this study therefore, could be useful across the retail support sector.

One of the strengths of this study is the customisation of the intervention month on month, based on employee needs. However, this could also be seen as a weakness because of the idiosyncratic nature of coaching. The coach drew on the whole range of her previous coaching experience in order to respond to employees' needs in the one-to-one coaching and also moment to moment in the group sessions. But, a different coach may achieve different results, or the same coach may achieve different results with a different group of employees. Similarly, the focus on just one group within one organisation is a limitation and it would be useful to undertake similar research with other groups, across other organisations and sectors. A further limitation of the study is that we cannot tell which element of the programme was most effective. The literature suggests that coaching is more effective when one-to-one meetings are combined with group coaching and the employees in this study confirmed that the groupwork and the coaching were beneficial in different ways. It might be that, in this context, the combination of groupwork and coaching is more powerful than the two can ever be when delivered separately. Further studies would be needed to ascertain this and also explore the nature of the contribution of each.

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