

An exploration of the experience of self-doubt in the coaching context and the strategies adopted by coaches to overcome it

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Abstract

This study explores the experience of self-doubt in coaching, and strategies adopted to overcome it. A phenomenological approach is used to explore the lived experience of self-doubt with eight participants. Four of the participants are clients who have been coached in self-doubt, and four are coaches who have worked with clients in addressing issues of self-doubt. Key results include the suggestion that self-doubt is a work-related phenomenon; that it is an emotional experience based on a perception of lack of abilities to perform at work to a satisfactory level; and that men raise it later in their coaching programme than women. The results also suggested that an important element in coaching clients in overcoming self-doubt is the expression of warmth and positive support from coaches, and that coaches benefit in a similar way from being in supervision. The implications of the findings for coaching practice are discussed, and a description of self-doubt is proposed.

Keywords: Coaching; coaching supervision; self-doubt; self-confidence; self-belief

Introduction

In the six years I have been coaching, I would estimate that about fifty percent of my clients have raised self-doubt as an issue of concern, often alongside other problems they want to discuss. They do not necessarily use the expression self-doubt; sometimes they might describe it as lack of self-confidence or self-belief. Clients see it as negative, and sometimes feel that it holds them back at work. I considered that if my clients are expressing these concerns to me, then other coaches might be having similar experiences with their clients. I also reflected on what appears to be a wider interest in the subject; a perusal of the shelves in any bookshop indicates that there are many self-help books available to people on building confidence and overcoming doubt. This may suggest an interest in the subject in the population as a whole.

I felt that exploring the experience of self-doubt in the coaching context might help my effectiveness as a coach, in that it would give me the opportunity to learn from the experience of others. I also hoped that by sharing the results of the study it might help other coaches working in this area as well. The aim of the study therefore was to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of self-doubt, and also identify strategies to help both clients and coaches to overcome it.

To research the phenomenon from more than one perspective I decided to involve both clients and coaches in my study. The context for my study was work, although not in any specific organisation. Similarly the coaches I interviewed were all independent coaches, and the clients I interviewed were all coached by coaches external to their organisations.

There were eight participants: two male coaches and two female coaches, and two male clients and two female clients. The coaches and clients were not in a coaching relationship together, as I felt this might result in an evaluative, rather than exploratory, study.

Literature review

The purpose of the literature review is to set a context for the research, and enable the researcher to build on what has gone before. Reviewing the literature can also help to shape the methodology. My sources were academic and practitioner books, journals and papers accessed either through libraries or via the internet, in the fields of coaching, psychology, counselling and education. I broadened my search by including other terms such as self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-worth, limiting self-beliefs and negative affirmations.

I was addressing the following questions:

- How do people experience self-doubt in the coaching context?
- What strategies have coaches adopted to overcome it?

Self-doubt does not appear to feature strongly as a topic in coaching literature. Downey (2003) refers to lack of self-confidence as an obstacle to performance, and Rogers (2004) discusses the effects of limiting self-beliefs. Zeus and Skiffington (2000) include recognising and challenging limiting self-beliefs as part of their six-step model for executive coaching. However, with the exception of Bachkirova (2004), whose paper focuses on dealing with the self-concept and self-improvement strategies in coaching and mentoring, there seems to be little addressing the area of self-doubt as a proper subject of coaching in its own right.

Limiting self-beliefs, which are in effect judgements about oneself that are not necessarily connected to reality, also feature in the psychology literature as an important aspect of self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as a person's belief in their capacity to achieve a desired outcome, suggesting that "people's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true" (p.191). The higher the sense of self-efficacy, the greater the effort, persistence and resilience, and the quicker the recovery in the face of a set-back.

It seems, therefore, that positive beliefs about oneself may augment performance. Taylor and Brown (1988) surveyed a number of research studies into psychological state and performance that indicate excessively positive self-evaluation, inflated perceptions of mastery and unrealistic optimism are characteristics of normal individuals, and these illusions appear to lead to productivity and creative work. Seligman (1990) and Bandura (1977) both point to studies that show that a moderate amount of positive illusion has significant benefits for emotional well-being and performance. Benabou and Tirole (2002) grasp the important consequence that if self-confidence augments an individual's motivation, it provides an incentive for anyone with a vested interest in the individual's performance to build up and maintain their self-confidence and self-esteem.

The literature also suggests that self-doubt and self-esteem are at different ends of a continuum, with self-doubt reflecting concern over one's abilities, whilst low self-esteem is more connected with a negative evaluation of oneself as a person. This indicates that issues regarding self-esteem may be seen as "deeper", relating to fundamental feelings of self-worth. For example, Hermann,

Leonardelli and Arkin (2002) found that if doubts about one's abilities are not addressed, then damage to self-esteem can follow. The implication is that whilst self-doubt may start as questioning one's abilities, it can develop into a negative evaluation of oneself at a more profound level, and therefore potentially be more damaging.

In relation to the consequences of self-doubt, Brookfield (1995) discusses the implications of lack of confidence in what he terms the "impostor syndrome" in teachers, and the effect this may have on reluctance to innovate or experiment. Kets de Vries (2005) describes the dysfunctional perception and behaviour that can accompany high achievers who believe they are complete fakes (the "neurotic imposture").

Regarding strategies to overcome self-doubt, Downey (2003) emphasises the importance of learning, in that when a client is fully focused, fear and doubt are forgotten and the natural ability to learn comes to the fore. Zeus and Skiffington (2000) and Rogers (2004) describe the importance of taking time to challenge the client's limiting self-beliefs. Brookfield (1995) suggests that the way to deal with it is to deal with the feeling of impostorship that self-doubt can create, is to make it public. "Once impostorship is named as an everyday experience, it loses much of its power." (p. 233). Kets de Vries (2005 p. 8) points to the responsibility of the boss in this respect. A good boss should point out "...that *everyone* in a responsible job occasionally feels unequal to the task and needs time to adjust and learn the ropes" and "...a fear of failure is normal and need not be debilitating".

There appears to be little literature to guide the researcher in the area of self-doubt, particularly in relation to coaching at work. Therefore it seemed to me that researching the phenomenon needed to start with understanding the meaning of self-doubt from the perspective of people who had experienced it, in terms of how it felt, what caused it and also what helped to overcome it. In essence I needed to focus on self-doubt as a lived experience, and this perspective influenced my choice of research methodology.

Methodology

Robson (2002) makes the point that the research strategy and the methods employed must be appropriate for the question to be answered. The first purpose of my study was to try and make sense of how people define and experience self-doubt. This suggested that the approach I needed to take with the research would fit within an interpretivist paradigm that is based on the view that people create a social world through what they do and the interpretations they make. This influenced my decision to adopt a phenomenological methodology, which seeks to describe the meaning of lived experience about a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). I also decided to qualify the phenomenological approach further. Reading Smith & Osborn (2003) helped me to identify an approach, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which emphasises sense-making by both the participant and the researcher. It is a particularly suitable approach when the research is focused on how individuals perceive the specific situation they are facing, and how they are making sense of their world.

Taking this approach meant that I needed to be aware of any prejudgements that I had about the topic I was investigating. My own subjective experience, values and judgements were likely to influence every aspect of the study, not just the interpretation of the data, but the questions I asked, the way I asked them and the conclusions I drew. Recognising and addressing one's own subjectivity is an important part of this approach, and it led me to make some decisions about

how I conducted the research. I decided that I needed to provide clear evidence for the interpretations I made, thus leaving a clear audit trail.

It also means that I need to introduce myself, so the reader will gain some understanding of my perspective. I am a white middle-aged, middle-class woman, who is married with two adult sons. I am a business psychologist and my work mainly involves coaching, supervising other coaches, psychometric assessment, career counselling and team development in organisations. I am in supervision, and meet with my coaching supervisor every four to six weeks.

The method I used for collecting data was by semi-structured interview. Seidman (1991) suggests that gathering personal narratives, opinions and stories from those intimately involved is the only way of getting near the 'truth', while Drever (1995) refers to the flexibility provided by the semi-structured interview, which also allows for a degree of standardisation (Gilham 2000). The participants were either people I knew personally, or were referred to me through my professional network of other coaches. They had all either been coached in, or had carried out coaching, in the area of self-doubt. I put a lot of effort into building a good relationship with the participants. This was partly in line with my values that people are treated with sensitivity and respect, and also for a more practical reason, emphasised by Chenail (1995), Seidman (1998) and Smith and Osborne (2003), that trust and goodwill are important resources in helping the researcher gather valid information.

The themes that I had identified from the coaching literature and my own experience of self-doubt, both as an individual and in coaching other people, formed the basis of two different interview schedules; one for the interviews with coaches, and the other for interviews with clients. With the coaching clients I was looking at their own experience of self-doubt. With the coaches I was looking at their experience of coaching clients who have raised issues of self-doubt during sessions. The coaches were also asked an optional question (which they all answered) regarding their own experience of self-doubt as coaches.

Although there were some differences in the schedules, they broadly covered the following areas:

- Recent experience of coaching
- Understanding of the term 'self-doubt'
- Experience of self-doubt.
- Triggers for self-doubt
- How it manifests itself.
- Ease of raising it with the coach
- Effect on work performance
- Strategies adopted in overcoming self-doubt and their effectiveness

Four coaches were interviewed for the research project: two men, Simon and Philip, and two women, Helen and Julia. Four clients were also interviewed: two men, Tony and Graham, and two women, Angela and Anne. Their names are pseudonyms which they chose themselves. The interviews were recorded on an audiotape and transcribed for analysis.

The interpretative phenomenological approach I used for data analysis meant that the emphasis is on the content and complexity of meaning. I paid particular attention to the metaphors used by the participants. Tompkins and Lawley (2002) suggest "our personal metaphors and symbols help us make sense of the world" (p. 6). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe the essence of

metaphor as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p. 5). By exploring the metaphors that the participants used to describe their experiences, I hoped to understand their psychological world more fully.

In addressing the nature of validity in qualitative research, Robson (2002) describes it as “being something to do with it being accurate, or correct, or true” (p. 170). These are difficult areas in qualitative research, and Wolcott (1990) suggests that validity in qualitative research can distract from understanding the described experience. For this reason I have been guided by Creswell (1998), who suggests using the alternative term “verification”, as a way of establishing the credibility of the study through trustworthiness and authenticity. Therefore alongside the data analysis, I carried out a number of verification checks to address the issue of bias by triangulating my findings with both the participants and professional colleagues.

Limitations

This was a small study involving eight participants. Although the research was carried out with the intention of making it replicable, it must be acknowledged that a different researcher with different participants on a different occasion may uncover different results.

Findings and Discussion

The themes that I identified emerged in two ways during analysis of the data. Certain of the themes were quite explicitly stated by the participants, and therefore one may assume were within their level of awareness, although they may have been prompted into consciousness by the interview questions. These themes include self-doubt as work-related, self-doubt as an emotional experience, and self-doubt as a belief. However, it was mainly through analysis of metaphors that the themes of feelings of lack of control and the hidden nature of self-doubt were identified.

Each participant is referred to in the text as Coach (name) or Client (name).

Self-doubt as a work-related phenomenon

One of the findings from the study is that, although people may experience self-doubt differently, they seem to perceive it as work-related. Both clients and coaches identify certain work situations as triggers for self-doubt. This seems to be connected to transition in some form: a new role, a change of boss, a new organisational structure. In such situations people may perceive their existing skills and abilities as inadequate to carry out their work effectively in the transition into a new role, and this may affect their performance adversely.

Coach Helen observes:

To me it means people who have lost confidence in something, often because they've been promoted and they don't believe they're worthy of that promotion, and they're frightened about whether they'll be able to fulfil what the job description is and perform to their own satisfaction as well.

Client Angela describes self-doubt as:

...those moments where you don't believe that you have what it takes to do something that you want to do...

She also says:

...I tend to have it mainly at work. It's mainly a work-driven emotional reaction for me...

Just as clients experience doubt in new situations, the early days of coaching can create self-doubt in terms of whether one was able to be an effective coach, as Coach Simon describes:

So I think to begin with working with people I had all sorts of doubts about, did I have enough experience and did I have enough knowledge ... There was a whole bag of stuff to begin with.

It also appeared that working with certain clients can instigate feelings of self-doubt, as Coach Helen described:

... there was one particular very senior Chief Executive ... who I had to coach and he was very challenging person, nasty bit of work, and I found it quite difficult to handle him in a way that I could be constructively helpful, and I did start to doubt whether I could actually be effective with people at that level...

The results of the study also suggest that self-doubt is connected to feelings. The effects are mostly described in emotional terms. An emotion is not necessarily a logical response to a situation, and the facts may be overlooked or ignored. This is well-recognised in the literature: Bandura (1997) for instance, states that people base their actions more on beliefs than what is objectively true.

Client Graham sees self-doubt as:

...a concern that I don't have the skills or the knowledge or the experience to cope with the situation successfully. And that in some way I will be - any such lack would be exposed...

Hermann, Leonardelli and Arkin's (2002) findings show that if feelings of self-doubt are not alleviated, then self-esteem may suffer, may be reflected, for instance in the experience of Client Tony, who described the effect of a boss who continually criticised his work:

It ultimately gets to you and you can't help it but you start to transfer that to your home life, because you carry it with you. It's something that's inside you. I had some fairly long periods where I was really not happy. In fact I was quite ill at one point.

Self-doubt also seems to be linked to feelings of lack of control. This may be because the person does not feel their abilities are up to the job, and therefore feels vulnerable, or that other people they are comparing themselves with seem all powerful and they feel inadequate.

Client Angela makes a comment about feeling that she wrong person for the job:

I think back to last year when it was going through all this changeI remember at that point just feeling very low and easily moved to tears at home, and my poor husband thinking 'What am I doing here?' And then I said 'Look it's not you I'm just....I feel very frail at the moment like a child, so I think a bit of a feeling of vulnerability, which I don't like feeling. I like to be in control...

Although Client Angela explicitly states her need to be in control, most of the references to control came from metaphors. The participants describe themselves as feeling "thrown up in the air", or on a "slippery slope", or "pushed into a situation where your self-confidence is eroded" or "it wasn't going in the direction I wanted", or "a reversion to childhood". They express feelings of being "very small, insignificant, invisible", or "moving back into your shell". Understanding that there may be a link between self-doubt and feelings of lack of control could help in addressing it.

Self-doubt as hidden

It appears that men and women may differ in how open they are prepared to be about discussing self-doubt. It seems that women may be more inclined to raise it earlier than men, and this may be because of the expectations that society places on the way men behave. However, for both it may need to be teased out, as it may not be expressly presented.

Coach Julia makes the point that:

Females, in my experience, volunteer it much more readily and usually very quickly. Men skirt around it. God, I do hate generalising but it does tend to be true. I think again a woman would often volunteer it, some do even at the first session, whereas a guy would tend to take two or three.

Client Graham, for example, was reluctant to discuss it, and there is a sense that initially he was not fully aware that it was an issue for him. It surfaced in response to careful questioning by his coach, who did not understand why he was presenting an issue to her that she felt he could address without her help:

It was sort of almost as if I had been found out, my self doubt had been discovered and there was a sense of oh blimey, and I think I actually said to her, (*laughing*) 'God preserve me from perceptive people', cos I did feel found out. So then we got into what the real issues were...

The metaphors in this extract reflect self-doubt as hidden, it was "discovered", "found out". There is also a sense of shock ("oh blimey"), and although Client Graham was amused at his recollection of the event, there is also an indication in his comment "God preserve me from perceptive people" that he was not too comfortable with it being brought into the open.

From a number of perspectives the hidden nature of self-doubt is not surprising. For example, Goffman (1959) uses the metaphor of theatrical performance to explore how people present themselves and their activities in social situations. He describes how people attempt to guide and control the impressions others form of them. Revealing that one is experiencing feelings of self-doubt may damage the perception of how one is performing (or feels one ought to perform) in a given role. In such a situation it may be considered best to keep it hidden.

Another perspective on self-doubt as a hidden phenomenon may be seen in how Client Angela's coach advised her to manage her feelings of self-doubt in the workplace:

My next coach was much more prescriptive and much more direct in saying things like, you know, most people have self-doubt, whether you choose to share it with other people is up to you. And she was effectively saying, and it was a wonderful piece of advice, you know, just because you had the self-doubt don't share it, because that exacerbates the issue. So that's...I've made quite, some quite big changes in that respect, which has been interesting.

Client Angela's coach was in effect advising her not to disclose the self-doubt, but to keep it hidden. Client Angela regarded this as a "wonderful piece of advice" because she put it into effect, with the result that:

When I stopped saying things like, oh you know, I'm a generalist I'm not very strong on development, I....when I stopped saying that, I felt better, I don't know if other people did, being on the receiving end of it, but certainly you just feel you're giving a very different impression of yourself and your capability. So people come to you for help and they are more likely to ask you for advice.

How one manages emotion at work is an important area, and it is interesting to note the results from a study by Kramer and Hess (2002) that examines communication rules that govern emotion management in the workplace. It shows that maintaining professionalism is central to appropriate emotion management, and that in particular, the appropriate display of negative emotions typically means masking those emotions. Kramer and Hess suggest that knowing the communication rules for emotion management is important for individuals to understand organisational culture and ultimately to achieve career success. So displaying self-doubt at work may be seen as inappropriate.

This contrasts with the view of Brookfield (1995) and Kets de Vries (2005) who support open acceptance of self-doubt as a commonly experienced phenomenon. However, a useful distinction might be made between acknowledging that self-doubt may be a common experience, and openly admitting to having it oneself.

The role of the coach in helping clients overcome self-doubt

The strategies used by coaches to help their clients overcome self-doubt were mainly those that they would use in coaching generally. This included developing an empathic and supportive relationship, using questioning, helping the client identify their own resources, challenging their beliefs.

From the clients' perspective, the objectivity of the coach was important, and they connected this to the fact that they were external to the organisation. Client Tony expressed it thus:

You need somebody to take a step back and be very objective about you as an individual and just understand that every individual has a number of positives which are actually quite difficult to find if you try to do it yourself.

Organisations are seen as political places and it may not be safe (or appropriate) to discuss negative emotions such as self-doubt with others. Given that self-doubt has already been identified as hidden, it seems that the time spent with the coach is seen as a safe place where these deeper aspects of one's emotional experience can be shared. As Client Tony suggested, it may be difficult to address self-doubt on one's own, and a skilled helper may be needed to provide another perspective.

The clients were clear in their perception of where the real benefit of coaching lay for them, and that was in the positive and supportive role of the coach. Given that it seems that self-doubt is connected with feelings, and that it is unsafe to express it at work, it is perhaps not surprising that clients value the emotional support of their coach. Therefore the relationship with the coach in itself appears to help the client feel more positive about their abilities. This is in line with Flaherty's (1999) observation on the key part the relationship plays in coaching. Bachkirova (2004) also observes that support, encouragement and positive feedback are the most useful means of helping clients overcome self-doubt.

Client Angela describes her relationship with her coach:

P didn't do anything as I say, anything overt, didn't tackle the issue, but her whole language and her whole affirmation of me.... I would leave every time thinking I could conquer the world if I wanted to.

What the clients seemed to value most was the nature of their relationship with their coach and their view of coaching as a safe environment. They felt that the coach saw them in a positive light and believed in them. It seemed that an important element of the coaching (perhaps **the** most important) was that the coaches positive affirmation of them as people resulted in the clients feeling positive about, and valuing, themselves.

Regarding the coaches strategies for dealing with self-doubt, the responses suggested that they take it to supervision. Coach Julia, for example, in describing difficult coaching situations with clients, says:

...I feel OK about that and I know I've got my supervisor to go to.

However, for Coach Simon, self-doubt is not something he specifically brings to supervision:

I'm thinking of stuff I take to supervision which is not about self doubt so much as to getting another opinion on something ...So we actually put it on the table, turn it round and look at it, but I don't see that as self doubt so much as self awareness and self questioning and challenging...

The strategies used by coaches in coping with self-doubt to an extent mirror those adopted by the clients. They see the value in the supervisory process, because it gives them the opportunity to discuss and review their work with another experienced practitioner. In this way they receive professional support, which may help address and pre-empt feelings of doubt about their abilities.

Implications of the findings for coaching practice

This is a small study and although I carried out a number of verification checks whilst I was analysing the data, it is limited in scope and therefore care must be taken in drawing implications from the findings. One of those limitations is my own subjectivity. Another researcher working in this area may find very different results.

The organisation

In relation to performance at work, Bachkirova (2004) suggests that the issue of confidence and self-esteem is “considered to be of marginal concern in the organisational context, judging by the lack of attention to it in the literature on management and organisational behaviour” (p.29). Yet employees’ performance at work must be seen as crucial to organisational achievement, and evidence emerges from a number of perspectives linking feelings of inadequacy and work performance.

Employees might benefit if organisations were prepared to acknowledge more openly that self-doubt can occur at certain times, and be prepared to do something about it. From an organisational perspective, it would make sense to have coaching available during times of transition. Research suggests that people are more effective when they feel more positive about their capabilities. There is evidence that transition may affect work performance, and as Benabou and Tirole (2002) point out, organisations have a vested interest in shoring up a person’s self-esteem. However, a fine balance may need to be struck between helping clients feel more positive about themselves, because it enhances performance, and the greater self-awareness needed for personal growth.

The value clients saw in the coach as external to the organisation may have implications for the use of internal coaches, at least for helping clients manage transition.

The relationship between coach and client

As discussed earlier, the relationship between coach and client is always seen as critical to the success of coaching. In this respect coaching clients with issues of self-doubt is no different from coaching in other scenarios. However, the positive affirmation that the clients experienced from their coaches in situations where they felt negative about their abilities, suggests that in coaching clients with self-doubt it may be particularly valuable for the coach to communicate their empathic understanding and positive support clearly and explicitly. The objectivity of the coach and the experience of a safe environment were also considered important and the coach may need to emphasise that aspect of the coaching relationship.

Control

This seemed to be an important aspect of feelings of self-doubt, in that in explicit terms, and also in the metaphors used, the clients felt that they lacked control or were powerless in some way. In coaching, it may be possible to explore with the client whether this is a realistic assessment of the situation, or is it based on a belief, in which case it could be challenged. It may also be possible to examine areas where the client has control and discuss options to increase this.

Expressing feelings of self-doubt

This aspect of self-doubt has implications not only for the creation of a safe space where the client can fully express their feelings of self-doubt, but also in the coaches skill in drawing out what may be underlying issues in this respect. The coach may also need to be aware that men

may take longer to express their feelings of self-doubt, and gentle probing may be needed. However, the coach may also need to be sensitive to the dangers of projecting self-doubt on to a client, particularly if it is something they experience themselves.

Keeping self-doubt hidden

It may be that the coach needs to explore with the client how they express their feelings of self-doubt in the workplace. The consequences of revealing negative emotions could be discussed in the light of how organisations expect employees to behave, and the possible effects on career progression.

Listening to the metaphors that clients use

The clients used rich metaphors in describing their experience of self-doubt. By listening carefully to the metaphors that clients use, the coach may gain greater insight into the client's felt experience. It may also be possible to help change the clients' thinking by suggesting they use metaphors to reframe their experience in a more positive way.

Coaching supervision

From the coaches' perspective, it seemed that supervision could help them address their own feeling of self-doubt. To an extent the value of the relationship between coach and supervisor mirrors the value of the relationship between client and coach.

A description of self-doubt

One of the aims of the study was to attempt to describe self-doubt. I considered what I had learned whilst exploring this field, so that any description of self-doubt would reflect the findings. It seemed that self-doubt was work-related, and also an emotional response to a subjective evaluation of one's abilities. Because it is subjective it may not be grounded in reality or true. It may not relate to all aspects of a person's job, just certain aspects of it. Bearing all this in mind I developed the following description of self doubt as:

Negative feelings associated with evaluating one's abilities and perceiving them as inadequate to carry out a piece of work effectively.

Conclusion and suggestions for further research

This study has explored the experience of self-doubt in coaching and strategies for overcoming it. The results suggest that self-doubt is a work-related phenomenon which may affect performance at work in an adverse way. It may be more prevalent in times of transition and if it is not addressed, it may lead to low self-esteem. It seems to be hidden, and the tendency to hide it may be more prevalent in men than in women. It may be linked to feeling a lack of control over what is happening, and clients may express this indirectly through the metaphors they use.

The objectivity of the coaches' perspective seems to have been particularly valued by the clients, and the experience of having a safe place where they could express their emotions as freely as they wished. Most importantly, the quality of the relationship between clients and coaches, and the positive affirmation and encouragement they received from them, seems to have made an important contribution to overcoming feelings of self-doubt.

For coaches, coaching is work, so it follows that this is where they may experience self-doubt. The support that coaches receive from their coaching supervisors in addressing feelings of self-

doubt seems to mirror to an extent the support their clients receive from them, and they value the experience in a similar way.

From an organisational perspective, the results suggest that the support companies give to employees during times of change and uncertainty may be important, particularly as self-doubt may affect performance adversely. The value placed on the objectivity of the coach indicates that there may be times when a coach external to the organisation is more appropriate than an internal coach. It may also be helpful for organisations to acknowledge that people may experience self-doubt, even if on an individual level people may not want to admit to it.

From a coaching perspective, the hidden nature of self-doubt (especially amongst men) has implications for the coach's awareness of deeper issues which may need to be explored, particularly if the coach knows that the client is experiencing change. This suggests that the coach needs to be alert to the language clients use, particularly the metaphors. Helping the client to identify where they have control, and the possibilities around extending it, may encourage them to feel more powerful, and thus address feelings of self-doubt. However, the highest value is likely to be given to the clearly expressed empathic understanding and positive support given by the coach to the client.

The small scale of this study means that the conclusions that can be drawn are necessarily limited. A replication of the research with a larger number of coaches and clients may validate, modify or contradict the findings. Other possibilities for research might focus on the relationship between self-doubt and performance at work, and the return on investment of organisations employing coaches during periods of transition. Research into evaluating coaching strategies that help individuals address self-doubt might also yield useful information. Finally, research exploring how the coaching supervisor may help the coach manage their own feelings of self-doubt may help us understand better the value of supervision.

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