Behavioral Change Process in Coaching Relationship
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Numerous books and articles are being published on the topic of coaching. These writings are based on practical experiences of coaches, research or studies conducted by individuals or organizations associated with coaching profession, or by coaches while promoting specific coaching practices. While coaching theories and practices borrow heavily on concepts and techniques from counseling and psychotherapy, it is critically important to realize the premise of coaching in behavioral terms. There is also a need for coaches to understand the coaching process in the context of the underlying concepts of behavioral change process, which ultimately will help the coaches to increase the effectiveness in many coaching situations. This article endeavors to examine certain concepts in the behavioral sciences that have direct relevance in the coaching process and also to illustrate why an understanding of these concepts is important for all coaches, irrespective of their niche areas of coaching or their academic or professional backgrounds.

DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS OF COACHING

Let us examine some definitions of coaching provided by different experts in the field of coaching. Let us also explore whether there are some common fundamental threads or concepts in coaching that have not been addressed explicitly in coaching literatures.

Whitmore (1998) (in Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 1998) said, “People come to coaching for lots of different reasons, but the bottom line is change.” Kofodimos (2007) defined executive coaching as a one-on-one consulting relationship dedicated to improving the leadership capability and performance of high-level managers. The ultimate goal of executive coaching is to effect sustained change in an executive’s behavior that impacts performance.

Kristine Vickers, Clinical Psychologist at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota (USA), mentioned during an interview in 2005 with The Wellness Councils of America, “that behavior change is more complex than just telling someone to behave differently or handing them a pamphlet. And that is why I think coaching is going to be very important part of bringing about lifestyle change” (Vickers, 2005).

Marshall Goldsmith (2005) stated, “All the behavioral coaches that I work with, use the same general approach. We first get an agreement with our coaching clients and their managers on two variables: (1) what are the key behaviors that will make the
biggest positive change in increased leadership effectiveness and (2) who are the key stakeholders that should determine (one year later) if this change occurred.”

Perry Skiffington of the Graduate School of Master Coaches (Skiffington, 2005) believes that for leaders to become or remain successful, it is required that they are able to self-manage and change their behavior at one or more of the following three levels:

1. Intrapersonal level
2. Interpersonal level
3. Organizational level

In the class notes of International Coach Academy [ICA] (2007), it is stated, “Coaching is about being in action. The clients hired us because they want to move forward and need to make changes to get different results.”

**Behavior and change**

While going through all these definitions, the immediate query that tickles the mind is what is meant by the words ‘behavior’ and ‘change’, and what contribution these two words make in the coaching process. Hence, the study starts from the comprehension of these words and then goes on to explore related concepts, which may have some relevance in the coaching process.

The basic unit of behavior is an activity, and in fact, all behaviors are a series of activities. Any behavior is generally motivated by a desire to satisfy a need or set of needs. Motives are the “whys” of behavior. Motives are concerned with the needs that drive behavior. Motives may be conscious or subconscious. In coaching, the coach encourages the clients to identify steps to be undertaken to achieve their goals. The activities the client undertakes to achieve the goals are the behaviors of the client. Principles of behavior modification suggest that a complex pattern of behavior can be modified by first breaking it down into smaller behaviors. When the client does goal setting, the coach encourages the clients to break the large goals into sub-goals, and identify activities or actions or sub-activities to be undertaken to achieve sub-goals or intermediate goals.

Behaviors that are steps toward a final goal need to be reinforced and established first, with rewards given for partial accomplishment, if necessary. Reinforcement theory is based on the basic premise that consequences influence behavior. If the client wants to increase a behavior (say make it more frequent) the coach may provide a positive consequence (or reward) when the behavior is shown. Rewards can be extrinsic (like receiving praise and encouragement from the coach or other people or receiving a gift) or they can be intrinsic (like experiencing a feeling of accomplishment or gratification from attaining a personal milestone).
It is important to note that extrinsic rewards may not be reliable for sustained long-term change. If the client wants a behavior to decrease (make it less frequent), the coach may provide a negative consequence (or punishment) when the behavior is shown. As a coach, we may facilitate the client to extinguish a behavior by providing no consequence (ignoring the behavior) when it is shown.

Do the coaches use reinforcement theory during the coaching process? The answer is yes. Acknowledgment, celebration, and enthusiastic responses to the client are some of the positive reinforcement techniques used by the coaches. On the contrary, when the client does not keep his commitment to turn up for coaching on time, then the coach uses negative reinforcement to decrease the late coming behavior of the client, maybe by closing the session at the predetermined time instead of extending the coaching session. When the client tries to go into a trap about past experiences or frequently tells unconnected stories to get undue advantage or praise from the coach, the coach uses extinction technique by ignoring the behaviors demonstrated by the client. Normally, the situation of punishing a behavior may not arise in coaching context. The following case study illustrates an application of positive reinforcement principle in coaching situation.

**Case Study One**

Client M was working as Vice President (Operations) with a mid-sized knowledge-based company in India. During a coaching session, he mentioned that People Management is one of the areas wherein he has strong managerial competence. During a subsequent session, the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation-- Behavior (FIRO-B) instrument was administered, and the result highlighted that he had very low interpersonal need. His inclusion score was particularly low, which is typical of a “loner.”

Client M reflected on these findings and agreed that he would like to change his interpersonal behavior in the workplace because he felt that his managerial effectiveness is largely dependent on his interpersonal competency for the present role. To improve this competency, a detailed action plan was drawn, mainly covering frequency of interactions with all his subordinates and peers, mode of interactions, and areas of interactions (whether job-related or related to the well-being of his subordinates).

After a week, I collected random feedback from his subordinates as to whether or not they noticed any change in the behavior of their boss. If yes, what was the change and what difference had it made to them. A majority of them noticed that Client M tried to reach out to them and they felt good about it. I shared these data
with Client M in the next coaching session. Client M was happy on this feedback. He also shared how he felt during these interactions and how seriously he tried to change this behavior.

**COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AND BEHAVIOR CHANGE**

According to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), there is a tendency for individuals to seek consistency among their cognitions. Cognition may be thought of as “a piece of knowledge.” The knowledge may be about an attitude, an emotion, a behavior, a value, and so on. Dissonance occurs most often in situations where an individual must choose between two conflicting or incompatible cognitions. The greatest dissonance is created when the two alternative cognitions are equally attractive. Whenever there is cognitive dissonance, there is an uncomfortable tension within the person, which needs to be released either by changing his behavior, or by justifying his behavior by changing the conflicting cognition, or by justifying his behavior by adding new cognitions.

Dissonance is most powerful when it is about self-image. An important consequence of the theory of cognitive dissonance is that people are motivated to work at a level consistent with their self-perceptions of competency toward the task they are undertaking. If the coach encourages a feeling of competency in task areas as well as general feelings of competency in the mind of the client, the motivation to work toward the goal, in general, will be increased. Clients can be helped to develop a belief that they can make a change. In this situation, the coach encourages the clients to reflect on the major changes they have already undergone in life, thereby creating an awareness of their inherent skills or talents Another approach the coach may use is to enhance the self-efficacy of clients by improving their perception of self-competency using strengths inventory assessment process or asking them to remember situations when they had successfully accomplished similar tasks.

**Case Study Two**

Client C was born in Madrid but went to live in Venezuela with her mother. She was married twice and divorced. After her second divorce, she started her own furniture rental business alone in Spain with “no money”. After 18 years, having owned a showroom in Madrid and Barcelona and 23 employees, she sold the business and migrated to the United States. In the United States, she started working as a personal assistant to a property manager.

During the coaching conversation, it emerged that she would like to plan an alternate future in Spain. She was not sure about her future goals and she was expressing a sense of despair and helplessness during coaching session. During subsequent sessions, the focus of coaching shifted to a value-based goal-
setting process. One of her goals was to go back to Spain and start a small venture. During the process of identifying possible roadblocks and resources required to achieve the goal, she was not feeling confident about herself in achieving this challenging goal and it was noticed that her self-efficacy was very low.

The next stage in coaching (discovery) was focused on her self-efficacy. I helped her to look back on her accomplishments to date. Initially, she could not list even three major accomplishments. To assist her in the reflection process, I shared with her what I had observed to be some of her major accomplishments, such as starting a furniture rental business from nothing to having two showrooms now, settling in the United States at the age of 54 and bringing up three children as a single parent. With this feedback, she realized her strengths and started feeling confident about herself.

To continue this process, it was decided that she would ask ten acquaintances to relate good and positive aspects about her, which they had observed. She was successful in getting eight responses out of which four observations surprised her because she was not aware of those personal qualities which they had noticed. She shared in the subsequent session how this process had helped her to see herself in a different perspective and how she had started feeling confident about herself.

Another form of cognitive dissonance may surface in the coaching process if there is misalignment of individual values with the goals a client would like to achieve or when more than one contrasting but attractive or compelling perspective emerges while reframing. If the coach observes that the client is not taking action, or has lost interest in the goal they had chosen, it is important to explore whether or not this is due to any cognitive dissonance and if so, how the dissonance can be reduced or removed. Clients then may either re-evaluate their personal goals in the light of the new information or perspectives, or still decide to continue to achieve their earlier set goals with more clarity even if there is a misalignment with their own values.

Force-field analysis (Lewin, 1951) is helpful when determining if there is a discrepancy between what is actually happening and what the client would want to happen in a given situation. In other words, which factors are assisting in the change effort (driving force) and which factors are blocking this effort (restraining force). If the driving forces far outweigh the restraining forces, the change efforts can often overpower the restraining forces. If the reverse is true, there could be different choices. The change efforts may be given up. Our client realizes that it is too difficult. The change efforts may instead be continued by changing each restraining force into driving force or somehow immobilizing each of the restraining forces.
or focusing on driving forces and simultaneously reducing or immobilizing restraining forces. Motivation for change occurs when people perceive a discrepancy between where they are and where they want to be (Miller, Zweben, Diclemente, & Rychtarik, 1992). Coaches may like to develop situations, wherein the client examines the discrepancy between their current behavior and future goals. When the clients perceive that their current behavior is not leading toward some important goals in life, they become more motivated to make important life changes.

During goal setting, the coach encourages the client to identify what strengths or favorable factors the client possesses to achieve their goals as well as the factors that may hinder clients from achieving their goals. One of the most important aspects of any coaching process is to help the client to move forward. The coach facilitates the client in overcoming restraining forces in the journey of achieving their goals using the force-field analysis techniques.

Whitworth and associates (1998) said, “People come to coaching because they want things to be different. They are looking for change …” Whether it is executive coaching, life coaching or any other niche areas of coaching, the bottom line is change. Hence, it is imperative to understand the behavioral change process in coaching process so that the coaches can navigate the clients effectively in the change journey.

It is important here to recognize that a client also uses coaching for different purposes, e.g., as a platform for brainstorming or to identify block areas. Conceptual models of change, based on over 20 years of research suggest that behavioral change does not happen in one single step. Rather, people tend to progress through different stages on their way to successful and sustainable change. The “Transtheoretical” or famous six “stages of change” model used in the health sector, as proposed by Prochaska, Diclemente, and Norcross (1992).

**STAGES OF CHANGE**

Prochaska and Associates (1992) offer a useful model for coaches who wish to understand the change process. According to the authors, individuals experiencing health problems can be categorized into discrete categories (stages) on the basis of their current and past efforts to change their behavior and their intentions to change in the future. The “stages of change” model includes:

1. **Pre-contemplation:** In this stage, people are not thinking seriously about a change and are not interested in any kind of change. It may be that people do not see themselves as having a problem.
2. **Contemplation:** Acknowledging that there is a problem but not yet ready or sure about making a change.
3. **Preparation:** People have committed to make a change and start gathering information on what resources are
needed, what strategies to work on, etc.

4. Action: People believe that they have the ability to change their behavior and get actively involved in taking steps to change their behavior.

5. Maintenance: To maintain the new behavior by avoiding temptation to go back to old behavior by practicing new behavior until new behavior becomes second nature.

6. Relapse: Returning to old behavior and abandoning the changed behavior.

When any client joins in a coaching relationship with a coach, the coach uses different methods or processes to understand at what stage the client is and initiates the coaching intervention on the basis of the client’s readiness and motivation to change. Table 1 summarizes all the concepts mentioned in this article within the coaching context for taking a holistic view of coaching. The following two case studies briefly illustrate the different stages of the change process.

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Case Study Three

Client V was the Vice President of service function of a large dealer of construction vehicle manufacture of India. He was managing this job for the last two years. However, he did not have any formal education in automobile engineering. During the initial exploratory phase, it emerged that he had a very high stress level, his work life balance was exceptionally poor and he was highly concerned about his job security. His family members were insisting that he quit the job. He was virtually working 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

During the coaching sessions, each issue was analyzed, different perspectives were examined, and small steps were identified by Client V. The progress was reasonably good, the stress level was reducing and the client was positive about the benefits of coaching. He was in the pre-contemplation stage of change. During subsequent session, it was decided that he would collect feedback from his key subordinates on two simple topics: “what he should stop doing” and “what he should continue doing.”

V discussed the feedback he had received during the next coaching session. He focused on feedback regarding ‘delegation’. While discussing the message he was getting from this feedback and how he felt about it, V concluded that he was not sure how much delegation was required from his end. Though discussion was focused on the impact of low delegation on his overall effectiveness and his role of developing subordinates, V was not sure of why, whom and how much he should delegate. This was the contemplation stage.

At that point, it was suggested that he assess his managerial style. He was open to this suggestion. The Managerial Transactional Style Inventory was administered. The results from this assessment highlighted the Regulating Parent Ego state (i.e., prescriptive style). V’s score was much higher than the norm. After this intervention, followed by further enquiry and discovery, V was convinced that he was continuously trying to be at the command of his function, trying to do many things himself. He was not focusing on key issues due to the resulting time pressure.

We explored what he could do to reduce this dysfunctional behavior and strategies were developed. This is the preparation stage. He agreed to take action: not to be prescriptive to his subordinates and to encourage them to find solutions by themselves. Even if they approach him for solution, he would try to resist giving solution at the first instance. This was the action phase.
Case Study Four
Client T was a middle level HR executive with a large corporation in India, having 18 years of professional experience. He was a talented individual, sincere and dedicated to his profession. He had a strong belief in Karma, a desire to make a difference and a philosophical approach to life: “… what is happening is good.” His professional growth was limited, and he came to coaching to get assistance in making decisions regarding his career issues. During the discovery phase, value clarification, wheel of life and inquiry / questioning tools were used to clarify the issues on which the client would like to focus during the next four to six months at coaching sessions (this was the pre-contemplation phase of change).

During the awareness phase, the coaching process was focused on visioning, gap analysis and reframing of perspectives, in which he was deeply engaged. Using force-field analysis techniques, the client was encouraged to reflect on his existing behaviors and its consequence against the future vision he was formulating. The client became aware that his existing way of life would not be enough to reach anywhere near his vision. It also emerged during this process that he was lacking in self-belief, had a fear of failure, and held a sense of complacency. He also acknowledged that procrastination was another dysfunctional behavior he could not eliminate, which resulted in general laziness in all of his activities. There was visible commitment demonstrated by him to change the behavior of procrastination (he was in the contemplation phase of the change process).

During the preparation process of change, the strength inventory assessment was deployed to create a sense of self-efficacy. Value-based goals were formulated. A detailed action plan was drawn, which included milestones as well as identification of resources that were needed. The goal-setting exercise was more focused on specific actions up to the last details. One important action point was to have weekly and daily “to do” lists.

During the action phase, T took the steps that were decided in each session and shared the actions he could take and could not take, as planned. In general, the performance level was around 60%. But, the main focus on subsequent coaching discussion remained focused on “to do” lists, specially how to improve on performance level as well as to explore whether there was a lack of planning or the action plan was too stretched. Throughout the remaining period of coaching, planning and actions taken were the focus of conversation— to ensure that this became part of his life. The client commented in his testimonial on this aspect: “At another level, structured approach to coaching with emphasis on actions enabled me to be more action oriented. I can see the visible gains as a result of this.”
CONCLUSIONS

Coaching is largely a change process that leads toward a predetermined destination of goal achievement. The coach is to facilitate the clients through the process wherein they move into action to achieve their goals. The effectiveness of the coaching will primarily depend on the knowledge and expertise of the coach in the application of coaching skills, process skills and related concepts of behavior change process during the coaching intervention. The client may not be interested in the techniques or tools or process that the coach may use in the coaching intervention; however, coaches who have a clear understanding of the behavior change process will be more effective in facilitating the change journey inherent in a successful coaching process.

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