

It is an important principle of action research that participants are involved in shaping the study (Herr and Anderson, 2005). Action Researchers are criticised for failing to make explicit the extent of participants' involvement (Hayward et al., 2004, Dick, 2015). Participants provided criteria against which I evaluated claims to knowledge. Their feedback shaped all three steps of the coaching model. Time constraints meant it was not feasible to involve participants in the data verification process, so I discussed findings with my supervisor and with peers on my Master's course who acted as critical friends (McNiff, 2002).

Methods

Five types of data were collected to enable validation of findings (Bryman, 2012). During each coaching session, I made field notes of my thoughts and observations. I recorded and transcribed all sessions, with participants' consent. Immediately after coaching, I asked the volunteers to complete a written questionnaire of what had or had not worked for them and how the model could be improved. Then I interviewed them in order to understand their comments in more depth. I recorded my reflections on how to improve the model and on the assumptions underpinning this study in a research diary.

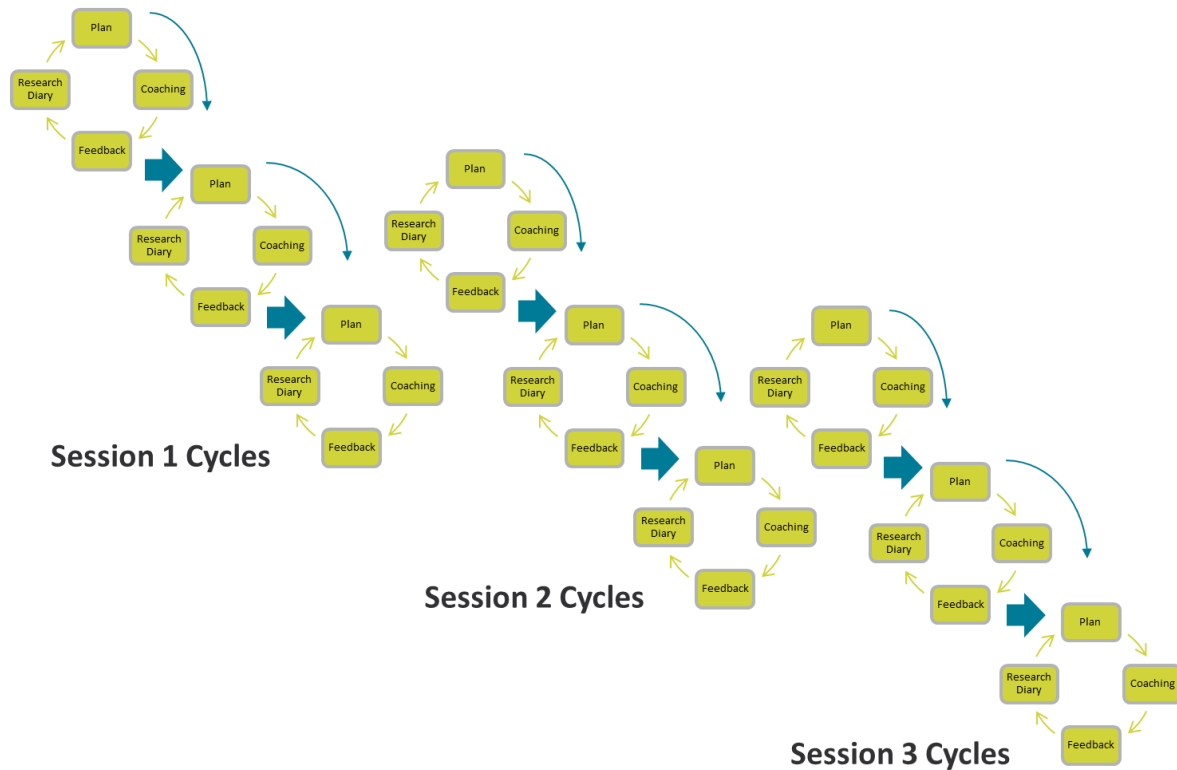
My review of relevant literature found that, in order to handle conflict well, executives needed to develop self-awareness, other-awareness and communication skills. I devoted one coaching session to developing each of these areas. I evaluated each coaching session three times, once with each volunteer. For example, I held coaching session one, on self-awareness, with Pam. Afterwards, I reflected on her feedback and my observations of how the session had worked and tweaked the session for the second participant, Ben. This formed the first cycle (Figure 1), which follows Kolb's learning cycle (1984).

Figure 1: Single Action Research Cycle



This process was repeated using Ben's feedback and my reflections to adjust the session for Dan. After Dan's feedback, I concluded session one's development and did the same for sessions two and three, evaluating each session three times (Figure 2).

Figure 2: All Action Research Cycles



Data Analysis

There were two phases of data analysis. The first took place during each action research cycle and focused on how to improve each step of the model. After coaching finished, I performed thematic analysis because it is compatible with an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm and participatory methodology and is relatively easily for new researchers to learn (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Chen et al.'s (2017) systematic review of Action Research methodologies found that 75% of studies did not specify their data analysis method. I responded by being explicit about my choice of thematic analysis and reflecting critically on its impact. This enables readers to judge validity for themselves and allows researchers to replicate the study, which strengthens validity (Bryman, 2012, McNiff, 2002).

Validity

There is debate amongst researchers as to how to ensure validity in action research. Heikkinen et al. (2007) argue that validity has no place in action research narratives due to its positivistic connotations. They offer five criteria by which to judge a report's quality. Good action research narratives should contain: historical context to the action, the researcher's reflexivity, dialectics (multiple voices and interpretations), workability, and evocativeness (of emotions and memories). These were valuable guides as I wrote up findings. However it is insufficient to assess whether the report is a good account of participants' feedback, the research methodology must be robust (Feldman, 2007). The authors concede this point (Heikkinen et al., 2012). Despite this debate, there is consensus that researcher reflexivity is key to validity (Winter, 2002, Feldman, 2007, Heikkinen et al., 2007, 2012). Therefore I subjected all methodological decisions to critical reflection and provided my rationale for each decision (McNiff, 2002).

Limitations

Acting as coach and researcher may have affected the executives' willingness to give honest feedback, especially as Ben was an acquaintance. I sought to mitigate potential bias (Bryman, 2012) by seeking written feedback in case using a different method helped interviewees share more honestly. I encouraged them that constructive criticism was welcome and challenged them with questions like, "might you have done that anyway, without coaching?". For me, acting as a researcher and participant is a strength of action research, as it gives the researcher direct access to the coaching experience and enables the generation of new knowledge and improvement in practice (McNiff, 2002, Herr and Anderson, 2005, Dick, 2015).

This study's three participants were white British executives, who might handle conflict according to their own cultural norms. Further research should explore how coaching helps executives from other cultural backgrounds. Whilst one cannot generalise from this small study, its findings may benefit executives in conflict, organisations, the coaching industry and Action Researchers, as I discuss in the conclusion.

The subjectivity that is inherent within the research paradigm was handled by:

- i. Using multiple data sources to allow triangulation of viewpoints to check the consistency of findings and reduce the potential for bias (Patton, 2002).
- ii. Actively seeking evidence which contradicted my assumptions (Dick, 1993)
- iii. Reporting findings that did not fit within the pattern and any lack of consensus on themes emerging from narratives (Patton, 2002).
- iv. Critically reflecting upon the assumptions which underpinned this study.

Findings - Action Research Cycles

There were two phases of data analysis. I begin with the analysis that took place during each action research cycle. Later I discuss the findings of a thematic analysis.

After each coaching session, participants completed a questionnaire which asked whether, as a result of this coaching, there had been any change to their: self-awareness, other-awareness or conflict communication skills, and if so, what? They were also asked how the coaching could be improved. I analysed all data sources: interview transcriptions and audio recordings, participants' questionnaire responses, my field notes and reflective diary. Each coaching session formed one research cycle so I discuss each session in turn, integrating discussing throughout, and conclude my learnings at the end of each session.

Coaching approaches

In the first and second awareness-building sessions, the use of psychodynamic approaches helped make unconscious material conscious (Nelson-Jones, 2011), as did reflective questioning and listening at multiple levels (Kimsey-House et al., 2011). As a coach, I used myself as a tool. Noticing my perceptions and sharing observations raised coachees' self-awareness (Downey, 2003). In Session 2, Transaction Analysis (Nelson-Jones, 2011) offered insight into relationship dynamics. In the third session, Gestalt chairwork (Bluckert, 2006) and the SAYS approach helped coachees practise communicating in a safe environment.

Session 1 – Self-Awareness

Coaching Session 1 aimed to develop the executives' self-awareness. All three participants discovered something about themselves which they found useful and I concluded that it had been valuable to focus on self-awareness. Participants did not request any changes to Session 1.

The literature showed that disputants needed self-awareness to handle conflict well, although it did not always make explicit why (Brinkert, 2006, Picard and Siltanen, 2013, Goleman et al., 2013). These findings show that self-awareness enabled the executives to notice their own role in conflict:

When it all happened I [thought], "he's been an idiot". He's got some character traits that can be difficult... but I have as well... In telling the story of it, your own role becomes more apparent to you. (Ben)

All three executives discovered they had helped produce conflict. Literature shows that humans commonly practise self-delusion to shield themselves from unpalatable information (Dunning, 2006). Perhaps Ben preferred to view himself as a victim of another's faults rather than a disputant in his own right. Challenging self-deception improves the quality of perception and is a key role of coaching (Bachkirova, 2011).

I used several different approaches to develop self-awareness and concluded that the eclectic approach is the model's strength, as it gives coaches flexibility to find the best fit for the individual (Bachkirova et al., 2010). All three participants asked to apply the model to personal as well as professional situations. Moreover, they applied the model to task and process conflicts, rather than solely to relationship conflicts, as I had planned. This suggests that the 3-step coaching model has wider application beyond professional relationship conflicts. Literature supports the importance of task conflict, which can escalate into relationship conflict (De Dreu et al., 2003, Tjosvold, 1998).

Session 2 – Other-Awareness

Session 2 aimed to develop empathy and awareness of other perspectives, which I called other-awareness. I selected from a range of potential coaching approaches following my intuition.

Coaching increased executives' awareness of the other disputant's feelings, which fostered greater respect:

You got me to think about what was in his mind as he was walking towards my desk... something I'd not ever thought of. That made me realise that actually he was feeling pretty nervous as well. So I think that has built to me having more respect for him, and realising he's just as human as anyone else. (Pam)

Imagining her boss's nervousness helped Pam empathise. Literature emphasizes the need for emotional intelligence in order to handle working relationships well (Goleman et al., 2013, Schlaerth et al., 2013). Pam's comment demonstrates how coaching can challenge assumptions which distort one's view of others (Bachkirova, 2011).

Coaching using Transactional Analysis offered insights into relationship dynamics (Nelson-Jones, 2011). Both Dan and Pam noticed they related to their bosses as a Child to a Parent. Dan discovered he was agreeing to all his boss's suggestions for fear of displeasing him. This resulted in a lack of boundaries such as work-life balance, which he noticed was impacting his health and family. Creating awareness led Dan to start delegating more to others, which has been found essential for wellbeing (Rock, 2008). Awareness led him to adopt an Adult-to-Adult approach with his boss, as I discuss later.

Session 2 seemed even more powerful for participants than Session 1. It is argued that 70% of therapy's effectiveness derives from the relationship between therapist and client (De Haan, 2008). If the same holds true of the coaching relationship, this could explain the increasing benefit. Therefore I recommend coaches work hard to establish trust throughout coaching. The personal stories I shared with participants seemed particularly effective at rapport-building, and I would use them again. Sharing my vulnerabilities seemed to encourage them to share openly, which is key to successful coaching (Flaherty, 2011).

All participants reported increased other-awareness and self-awareness from Session 2, which strengthened my view that they are linked (Goleman et al., 2013). Participants wanted to act on their insights and asked for practical guidance. Therefore I would be more flexible in future about which of the three steps we explore during each session as long as we cover all three during the coaching programme.

Session 3 – Conflict Communication Skills

The temptation to avoid difficult relationships was noticeable, as I discuss in the Thematic Analysis findings. However, avoidance prolonged conflict, making it imperative to act quickly when potential conflict was identified.

At the outset, participants told me they might know their conflict-handling skills had improved if they were able to have a constructive conversation with their fellow disputant by the end of our coaching sessions. I developed the SAYS approach to conflict communication between Sessions 2 and 3 based on participants' feedback and my understanding of their needs, combined with my experience of helping previous clients. I introduced the SAYS approach in Session 3 on a hand-out and used it to prompt discussion about how to approach the other disputant.

Figure 3. The SAYS Approach to Conflict Communication

Start - What's your opening line? Reassure them of your good intentions.

Ask - Ask: How do you see our relationship? What can I do differently to help you?

Your perspective - Explain your perspective. Give specific examples.

Steps forward - What would you like them to do to help you give your best? What will you do to help them give theirs?

All three participants found Session 3's practical guidance useful:

I prepared for the conversation using the [SAYS] template Sarah provided. This allowed me to listen to his reasoning and gave me time to stop and think before answering. Did it go perfect? – No, however lessons were learnt for when we picked up the following week. We came to a good conclusion for both of us. (Pam)

Literature supports the importance of communication in conflict resolution (Tidwell, 1998). The SAYS approach's preparation stage generated particular insights by helping the participants clarify what they wanted from their working relationship. At Pam's suggestion I updated the SAYS handout to emphasize the importance of leaving time to prepare for a conversation. SAYS required and developed participants' self- and other-awareness, which fitted well with the overall structure of the 3-step model.

Coaching using SAYS helped Ben find positive language to express his needs:

Finding subtle ways to say "we'd really like to discuss this", rather than, "this relationship's not working, you're not doing this". Putting it in terms of what we need rather than what they are not delivering. (Ben)

Discovering a way to rephrase a negative thought using positive language shifted Ben's view of conflict communication and made the difference between approaching and avoiding conflict. Given his initial reluctance to approach conflict, this was significant.

Dan used Session 3 to planned how to challenge his boss's adoption of a Parent-Child relationship and shift into an Adult-Adult conversation (Nelson-Jones, 2011). Hay (2009) warns that the Parent ego may resist this shift, which could trigger conflict. Dan believed the potential gain from an Adult-Adult relationship exceeded the risk, so we discussed how he might handle any conflict. In the event this proved unnecessary, as his boss reacted well to the Adult-Adult conversation. However, executives wanting to adopt an Adult-Adult relationship should note the potential for conflict and carefully assess the risks and benefits beforehand.

Summary

Trust and openness were crucial to the coaching relationship (Flaherty, 2011). The model's strength is its eclectic approach, which gave me flexibility to select the most appropriate approaches for the individual (Bachkirova et al., 2010). The 3-step coaching model could have filled more sessions, had time permitted. Therefore, I recommend that coaches and executives using this approach seek four to six coaching sessions. That said, the restriction on the number of sessions reflected participants' availability and commercial realities, in which time and financial constraints may limit the number of sessions available to executives (Cox and Jackson, 2010).

Participants applied the 3-step coaching model to professional and personal relationships and it helped them in both settings. The 3-step model had a wider application than originally foreseen, and I will certainly use it in future. Participants said they will too. Dan intended to share his learning about Transactional Analysis with his team and Ben planned a conversation with his father-in-law. As a result of the study I produced the SAYS tool, which is a lasting outcome.

Findings - Thematic Analysis

Next I summarise the findings from a thematic analysis of interview transcriptions and participants' questionnaire responses. I do not repeat the findings that coaching raised awareness of oneself and others, which I discussed in the previous section.

Emotions in Conflict

Coaching raised the executives' awareness of how their emotions drove conflict. Dan discovered how strongly fear of losing his job drove his behaviour:

I've created my own hostage environment in my head [by telling myself:] this [job] is the only thing I've got. If I don't work for [my company]... I'm going to lose everything. That fear and... what you would be prepared to do to retain those things... is quite extraordinary. (Dan)

The hostage metaphor shows how strongly Dan feared negative outcomes of conflict with his boss and avoided conflict at a high cost to his health. This important self-discovery enabled him to re-evaluate his value to his employer and notice he was not as powerless as he thought. Literature agrees that that emotions like fear arise from an individual's cognitive appraisal of a situation (Jones and Bodtker, 2001) and that strong negative reactions can have serious health implications (Dijkstra et al., 2012). Organisations should therefore address conflict quickly.

Coaching helped executives manage their emotional reactions. Pam described a new process she had learned from our coaching:

And then [I told myself] “OK, stop! Think! Is what I’m feeling true? Is it just my normal jump-in-and-react? What’s the evidence?” That’s when I went back to the email. And in this instance I knew that I had blown it all out of proportion. (Pam)

The approach to managing emotions varied by participant. For Pam, it meant pausing before reacting, which allowed her to interrupt the fight / flight response and manage her emotions (Rogers, 2012). SAYS also involved forgiving and letting go of grudge, which Pam found particularly valuable: “I could spend three hours preparing, if I still haven’t forgiven, then it’s a wasted three hours”. She realised that without forgiveness, she would enter the discussion holding a grudge that could cause resentment and affect her ability to talk constructively.

Literature argued that conflict and emotions are inextricably linked: emotion helps disputants recognise they are in conflict; emotional reactions may *trigger* conflict (Bodtker and Jameson 2001, Nair, 2008). My findings partially support this. For Pam, emotions were a clear indicator of conflict and a trigger, whereas Ben was not aware of his emotions during conflict until we discussed them. This reinforces the importance of raising disputants’ emotional awareness and helping them reappraise their interpretation to encourage resolution (Schlaerth et al., 2013).

I re-evaluated my 3-step coaching model in the light of this finding and noticed a discrepancy between my espoused theory and the theory-in-use (McGonagill, 2002). In practice I spent considerable time exploring emotions with all three participants during coaching, whereas my original model defined self-awareness cognitively as an appreciation that one’s perspective is subjective. I amended 3-step model to reflect my practice and share it in the Conclusion.

Conflict and Self-Esteem

One unexpected finding was the coaching seemed to boost executives’ self-esteem. Dolan argued that business environments ‘can often produce ‘attacks’ on people’s self-esteem’ and lead to conflict (2007, p. xiv). This aligns with this study’s finding that threats to status may be perceived as an attack and generate a fight or flight response that can trigger conflict.

There is debate about how to define self-esteem. I follow the definition of self-esteem as one’s sense of one’s worth and competence (Mruk, 2006). During coaching Dan noticed incongruence between his low evaluation of his own worth compared with his seniority and longevity at the company. Coaching helped Dan find a more balanced perspective of his value to his employer which released him to set boundaries around his work to allow more family time:

Remember that we talked about avoiding conflict to appease because I wanted to progress...? It’s changing... If you don’t take me for who I am, as someone who delivers results, then... I’d rather not have the job. Don’t get me wrong, I am ambitious, I’d love to sit on the Executive, but not [as a] consequence of having to sell my own values. (Dan)

Dan’s recognition of his own competence and worth suggest higher self-esteem. Maslow’s influential hierarchy deems self-esteem a vital human need (1954). If this 3-step coaching model helps develop self-esteem, it makes a potentially important contribution to executives experiencing workplace conflict. Whilst one cannot generalise from the findings of this small study, further research into conflict coaching and self-esteem would be interesting.

Avoidance and Approach

Coaching raised executives’ awareness that avoiding conflict was a problem:

The first trigger point where we actually conflicted...came well after we realised there was a potential problem. And I didn’t do much in the time between... I avoided him a bit, probably

because I... didn't click with him... and... because subconsciously there was competition between us. (Ben)

This is an example of relationship conflict, which literature defined as a personality clash (Jehn, 1995). Ben's response illustrates how relationship conflict can progress from inner discomfort to a verbalised argument - and the peril of avoiding it during the latent stages. Perhaps he hoped it would disappear if he ignored it. Subconsciously he rationalised avoidance on the basis that his colleague's work was inferior. This supports literature's findings about the need to challenge one's assumptions to facilitate change (Mezirow, 1990). Literature agrees that avoidance, competition and collaboration are common ways of approaching conflict, but it warns that only collaboration leads to a good outcome (Kilmann and Thomas, 1975, Rahim, 1983). Ben's comment suggests that avoidance may prolong conflict. Perhaps avoidance is an indicator of conflict. This underlines the importance of acting as soon as the potential for conflict has been identified.

Coaching gave executives a new way to handle conflict by seeking opportunities to collaborate:

In the heat of the conflict neither of us really worked together until our manager made us... write a plan for the programme together... Since then...it has been a lot more constructive. (Ben)

Ben's comment shows the power of collaboration to build relationship – and of good management. I suspect collaboration offers a means to approach the other disputant and challenges the urge to avoid one other.

Summary

Coaching raised executives' awareness of how their own assumptions and behaviour fuelled conflict and of the other disputant's perspective. It increased executives' awareness of how emotions drove their behaviour and how to manage their emotions. Unexpectedly, coaching seemed to increase executives' self-confidence, although this finding merits more research. Furthermore, coaching raised executives' awareness that they had avoided the other disputant, thereby prolonging conflict. Coaching gave executives a new approach to handling conflict by seeking opportunities to collaborate with the other disputant and finding positive language to express their needs. Finally, this 3-step coaching model produced the SAYS approach to conflict communication. This helped executives prepare for a conversation with the other disputant about how to work together most effectively, and is a lasting benefit of this study.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that coaching is an effective way to help executives handle workplace conflict. It addressed the lack of evidence-based practical guidance for coaches by developing and evaluating a 3-step model for use with executives who are experiencing workplace conflict. This model was grounded in theories of coaching, mediation, adult development, psychology, management and organisational behaviour, which addressed the gap for theoretically-rooted coaching models. The amended 3-step model is below.

Handling conflict well requires:

- i. Self-Awareness: to recognise one's own contribution to conflict.
- ii. Other-Awareness: empathy and appreciation of other perspectives.
- iii. Conflict Communication Skills: to manage one's emotions and approach conflict constructively.

The findings may benefit the following groups:

Executives: Workplace conflict is common and can have substantial negative effects for individuals and organisations including weaker morale, lower productivity and higher absenteeism, all of which can impact organisations' profitability (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Ayoko et al., 2003, Dijkstra et al., 2012). By contrast, executives receiving coaching using this 3-step model could benefit from stronger morale, greater job satisfaction, productivity and wellbeing.

Organisations: The potential benefits to an organisation's bottom line should prompt consideration of how best to equip employees to handle workplace conflict. Good management helped moderate the negative effects of conflict and therefore conflict-handling skills may have particular value to senior staff.

Coaching could be particularly valuable in the 50% of mediation cases when only one disputant is present (Tidwell, 1997). However, if coaches work with only one disputant, other disputants may remain unchanged, potentially resulting in continued disputes. In such instances, organisations could consider team coaching (Kets De Vries, 2014).

Coaching Industry: This study strengthens the coaching industry by offering an evidence-based model to guide practitioners (Grant and Stober, 2006). Linking coaching practice with relevant theory enriches coaching interventions and enhances the profession's credibility (Bachkirova and Cox, 2005).

Given that all three executives in this study applied their conflict handling skills to their personal and professional lives, the model may benefit Life Coaches and their clients, as well as Executive Coaches.

Action Researchers: This study offers a critique of McNiff and Whitehead's (2011) approach to Action Research, which has been widely used but received little published critique. Their approach's flexibility was helpful, although novice researchers may appreciate more specific guidance on data analysis and how to evaluate claims to knowledge.

Future research could explore:

1. How the 3-step coaching model could help:
 - a) executives from other cultures handle conflict.
 - b) individuals working in the public sector or third sector.
 - c) in team coaching, when organisational structure has created conflict.
2. The relationship between conflict and self-esteem, which emerged as an unexpected finding of this study.

This study demonstrated that coaching using this 3-step model is an effective way to help executives handle workplace conflict. It offers coaches an evidence-based, theoretically-grounded 3-step model for use with executives who are experiencing workplace conflict. The need for this approach is growing. Working remotely from home or whilst travelling is increasingly common and leads to more online communication, which is prone to trigger conflict (van Oort and Meester, 2012). Faced with this trend, the need to help executives handle workplace conflict is pressing so that they, and the organisations they work for, flourish.

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