Needs Supportive Coaching & the Coaching Ripple Effect: Elevating Individual & Whole System Engagement

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Abstract

Organizations operate in times of unprecedented uncertainty, complexity and change. To meet these challenges, they are seeking out new and efficient ways of effecting change at the individual, team and organizational level. Drawing on Self Determination Theory, Positive Psychology and the Coaching Ripple Effect, this paper identifies ways to apply theory and evidence base to practice, aiming to expand a coach's capacity to facilitate whole person and whole system engagement. Through leveraging the significance of autonomy, competence and relatedness, through the contagion of positive emotions, while considering the network connectivity of organizations, coaches may support individual and systemic impact through needs supportive coaching.

Keywords: Needs Supportive Coaching, Self Determination Theory, Positive Psychology, Coaching Ripple Effect.

Introduction

We operate in times of unprecedented complexity, uncertainty and change. Turbulence is becoming part of our everyday experience, causing greater demands to do more, to a higher quality, with less. To remain competitive, and to ensure long-term sustainability, organizations need to effect positive change that can support and enhance engagement at multiple system levels. Coaching, while no panacea, is a modality of change that may have some further utility to support leaders and organizations in this systemic-based endeavor.

Despite the exponential growth in the amount of coaching research over the past ten years, there is still a lack of awareness regarding the relevance of different bodies of research and how they might be incorporated into an

evidenced-based coaching practice (Grant, 2016). There is even less evidence supporting the systemic utility of coaching alongside specific applications of useful change and motivational theories.

This paper provides a brief overview of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and outlines how it may enhance coaching practice through its focus on the psychological processes active in coaching, and the psychological factors that impact human motivation. The concept of Needs Supportive Coaching (NSC) is introduced, alongside its links with Broaden and Build Theory (BBT), in order to demonstrate how the development of autonomous motivation may support positive coaching outcomes and enhance whole person engagement.

Finally, drawing on research into the Coaching Ripple Effect (CRE), the connections with SDT, positive emotions and emotional contagion, this paper attempts to demonstrate how coaches may take a multidimensional perspective on the coaching process in support of both whole person and whole system engagement. Implications for coaching drawn here will hopefully assist coaches in developing the capacity to better facilitate change at the individual, group and system levels. Through this, coaches may help support leaders looking to meet the requirements of a new era in organizational complexity.

A brief overview of self-determination theory

SDT is a theory of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) that provides a practical framework for understanding the factors that promote motivation and healthy psychological functioning. SDT is a highly cited theory in psychology with a broad evidence base across industries. Diverse applications of SDT include within education (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991), healthcare (Ng et al., 2012; Ryan, Patrick, Deci, & Williams, 2008), well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000), sport, goal setting (Deci & Ryan, 2000), organizational development (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017; Gagné & Deci, 2005) and more recently, coaching (Spence & Deci, 2013; Spence & Oades, 2011).

SDT identifies the three psychological needs of Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness. We act autonomously when we believe our behavior is volitional, owned and self-endorsed rather than controlled. Competence is experienced when we use our capacities to achieve outcomes we value. Relatedness refers to the need for caring, warm and mutually supportive connections.

Research suggests that social contexts such as workplaces can provide support for, or thwart, the satisfaction of these needs (Stone, Deci, & Ryan, 2009). When an individual perceives these needs as supported, they: 1) are more engaged, motivated and satisfied in their work; 2) have higher levels of self-esteem, performance, psychological and physical wellbeing; 3) have lower levels of anxiety, stress and emotional exhaustion; and 4) are less likely to suffer burnout and work-life conflict (Stone et al., 2009). Coaching may form an important component in the socio-cultural context outlined by SDT, providing needs support that allows for the emergence of higher levels of motivation and engagement (Spence & Deci, 2013). While coaching research has largely ignored the potential for systemic influence of coaching there is a great deal of potential utility particularly when considering how the supportive climate coaches can provide for leaders (Spence & Oades, 2011) may encourage leaders to positively impact organizational climate for others (Ekvall, 1996). This can occur through both providing an effective model of positive climate impact or through providing a positive environment for creative approaches to emerge which a leader can then apply in their context. This relationship between the coachee, coach and coaching context and that of the employee, leader and organizational context suggests that coaching may well provide a methodology for applying SDT at a systemic level.

SDT proposes that motivated behaviors vary in the degree to which they are autonomous or controlled. Deci and Ryan (2000) developed a continuum of reasons for acting from extrinsic to intrinsic (Extrinsic – "because I have to", Introjected – "because I should", Identified – "because I want to" and Intrinsic "for the love of it"). Across a variety of important life domains, supporting psychological needs and autonomous motivation are associated with higher levels of: task persistence - more sustained effort over time; task performance and goal attainment (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004); task interest, enjoyment, and creativity (Hon, 2012); relationship quality (Deci & Ryan, 2014); psychological wellbeing; and physical health (Ng et al., 2012). Given the clear link between many factors important to workplace experience, autonomous motivation is critical in considerations of workplace engagement.

Importantly, satisfaction of the three psychological needs also facilitates a process known as "internalization". That is, the process of endorsing important behaviors even though they are not enjoyable or inherently satisfying. The theory proposes that we move towards more self-determined action over time via the process of internalization and integration of these previously extrinsic behaviors. It is through this process that the external can be integrated into our

sense of self, potentially creating alignment with the broader system of experience.

Motivational underpinnings greatly impact how much effort and energy we direct towards goal attainment. This is important in the context of coaching as coaches may be able to facilitate helpful shifts in the coachee's underlying motivation towards external goals (Spence & Deci, 2013), such as organizational or system-level goals, through exploration of the deeper relevance of those goals, and how they might represent the values and interests of the developing self - thereby supporting whole person engagement and supported adaptive self-creation. This process may simultaneously encourage alignment or at least an acknowledgement of potential relevance, with the goals of their teams, groups and organizations. Through this potential adaptive shift in individual-level perspective, coaches can encourage systemic-level thinking while also providing a needs supportive environment for growth and adaptive change.

Importantly, simple changes in the behavior of the leaders and managers within an organization can lead to significant changes in an individual's perception of "need support." These behavioral changes may be small, but their impact can be far reaching.

The broaden and build theory

Interventions that enhance positive emotions such as NSC, positive leadership and effective management can potentially help undo the effects of negative emotions, broaden cognitive and behavioral capacities, and build our personal resources.

Fredrickson's (2001, 2009) BBT posits that positive emotions: 1) Broaden our thought action repertoires; and 2) Build our enduring personal resources. While there is not the capacity for a full literature review here (see, Fredrickson 2004; 2009 for a more complete review) research has found that positive emotional experiences build:

- *Intellectual Resources* - enhancing learning, problem solving, creativity, accuracy of judgment, decision-making and performance on complex tasks, increasing possibilities for effective action, and expanding our view of the world, our relationships and interactions.

- *Social Resources* - enhancing interpersonal effectiveness, interconnectedness and co-ordination, solidifying and helping us make new bonds, increasing social connections and social support.

- *Psychological Resources* - building resilience, optimism, goal striving and enhancing coping strategies.

- *Physical Resources* - developing coordination, increasing strength, improving cardiovascular health, sleep quality, immunity from illness and disease.

Further, when the coach facilitates the expression of positive affect as an integral part of the coaching dialogue, emphasizing strengths and possibilities, and solutions and strategies, this increases wellbeing, enriches relationships, enhances performance and increases productivity, goal setting and hope (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

Research shows that positive emotions are contagious (Bono & Ilies, 2006). Emotional Contagion is a type of social influence in which a person or group influences the emotions (positive or negative) of another. As identified in Fredrickson & Joiner (2002), in their research with college students on the relationship between coping and positive affect, shared positive affect can trigger a beneficial upward spiral of positive emotions. This upward spiral then increased cognitive flexibility and higher connectivity, which in turn, were linked to more productive outcomes and optimal functioning (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002).

Given this process of emotional contagion and the relationship to constructs important to organizational function, leaders and managers hold a privileged and important position of influence in the sociocultural context, that holds a great deal of potential utility. Leaders as potential climate engineers have the potential to create emotional spaces that bring out the best in their people, promoting human flourishing. Human flourishing is characterized by exploration, excitement, creativity, and the use of intuition, the building of social connections, enhanced knowledge and increased levels of resilience. All of which are important organizational considerations for dealing with complexity and adapting effectively to change. These identified points of utility may all be considerations for coaching based interventions, aimed at supporting leaders to both enhance their positive organizational impact and the quality of the climate of a given system more generally for the benefit of others.

Positive emotions facilitate the stimulation of ideas, encourage trust, and support the achievement of shared goals. They broaden the scope of one's self-perception, which blurs the distinction between self and others (Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006). When we broaden our thought action repertoires, we literally take in more information, we look at the bigger picture – this not only affords us more opportunities for effective action, but importantly it helps us think in terms of "we" not "I". This can result in feeling a greater alignment with, and for, our organization and its visions, purpose, goals and strategies. Importantly, positive affect assists the concordance of personal goals and values with the emerging outcomes of a group, while boosting personal meaning and transcendence so that strengths and goals are enacted in the service of something bigger than self (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) thereby supporting whole system engagement. The coaching engagement itself can provide the positive environment that allows the opportunity for these broader thought action repetoires to emerge. Coaches can then work to reinforce these more creative perspectives, taking advantage and reinforcing this thinking as it emerges in session, increasing the chances of longer term organizational alignment.

Broadening our attention, thinking and action, and building physical, intellectual and social resources, can then, fuel workplace success, enhancing organizational effectiveness and fostering employee growth. Indeed, research findings indicate that positive workforces perform better, and have a material impact on business outcomes, including profitability (Cameron, Bright & Caza, 2004).

SDT identifies the individual components of autonomy, competence and relatedness, and their importance in relation to motivation and growth that can be influenced by the needs supportiveness of a given context. BBT and the related evidence base provides an argument for the importance of positive emotions in relation to flourishing and performance. Both of these theories can easily be applied within a coaching process. While the relationship to system approaches, whole person and whole organization engagement has been alluded to, particularly with regard to emotional contagion, there is still a component missing. Specifically, the application of these theories through needs supportive coaching for systemic level influence or engagement. We turn now to a discussion of the coaching ripple effect (CRE) and systemic thinking in order to provide more specific implications and application of needs supportive coaching for multi-systemic level engagement.

The systemic-level importance of the coaching ripple effect

When organizations engage coaching as a change methodology, there is often a focus or need beyond individual level change. Organizations are often looking for climate or cultural change, or at least, are hoping that through supporting their leaders to develop, they will be simultaneously supporting the staff that they work with. While the impact of coaching beyond the leader coached might be assumed, there is very limited empirical evidence supporting this position.

Organizational coaching research conducted by O'Connor and Cavanagh (2013) employing systemic level measurement through social network analysis, found that when coaching a number of individuals in a given system, the impact of positive change in the leader, has an effect on those most connected to those coached. This change was identified to occur through direct measures taken of the positivity of leader interactions with the coached individuals going beyond direct reports and spreading systemically through informal networks of organizational relationships. The increase in wellbeing of others was found to be directly related to the number of coached leaders a given individual was connected to in the system, as well as the frequency and positivity of their interactions and shows a direct systemic contagion effect over time.

The implication of the research into the coaching ripple effect (CRE) suggest coaching would seem to provide the space for leaders to develop, increasing their autonomy and competence with regard to leadership. This translates to changes in the interaction and positivity that they exhibit in a given system, which allows them the capacity to support and encourage the development of others. This shift, in turn, creates greater organizational relatedness and encourages others to identify opportunities for autonomy and competence, allowing basic needs to be met at a systemic level, through interactions that support continued shared growth and organizational engagement. From this perspective leadership development through coaching creates a basic needs supportive environment through the positivity and emotional contagion of interaction in the system.

Through establishing a climate that supports positive interaction and encourages growth, leadership coaching can provide a process through which autonomy is encouraged in others. This allows these autonomous individuals to further spread the impact of change through the self-directed nature of their engagement with the system. Through their autonomously driven positive interaction, they create relatedness, which from a systemic perspective, creates

positive behavioral attractors, increasing wellbeing in others, and supporting further spread of positive change that in turn, allows for greater organizational engagement.

This spread of change, supportive of wellbeing and engagement through coaching and leadership, may be further enhanced by including a specific focus on the basic need of competence. Developing competency around network and system thinking, and the ability to accurately identify important connections in systems, allows leaders to strategically consider the impact of their interactions in supporting the needs of those they interact with, from a more holistic perspective. It is important to consider how they change processes, encourage interaction, and support initiatives that allow for high levels of positive interaction increasing the spread of change. A focus on competence is also a leverage-able process that may increase wellbeing, contributing further to the needs supportive systemic climate.

While enhancing leadership through NSC allows for greater opportunity for autonomy and competence, both in the leaders the coaches work with, and those the leaders are connected to, it is the positivity and quality of interaction that allows for greater connectivity and relatedness throughout a system (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2013). This facilitates the emergence of positive upward spirals creating the CRE, and positively shaping organizational climate, workplace engagement and performance. This provides a clear link between how through understanding SDT and the importance of creating Needs supportive environments, coaches can support leaders to impact emotional experiences within systems as supported by the broaden and build theory of positive emotions. If strategies are employed that focused on the positivity of leadership interaction in the system, these NSC approaches may lead to a coaching ripple effect, with the potential of broader systemic impact.

Implications for Coaching Practice

While there are a number of implications more broadly for organizations, educators and researchers, given the scope of the current paper, the focus of implications here is on coaching practice in particular. It is the current researcher's intention to explore these broader implications in a separate article so that they can be covered in more detail.

In the current complex, uncertain and rapidly evolving organizational context, in order to remain competitive, and sustainable, organizations are required to effect positive change that enhances motivation and engagement at

multiple system levels. This creates both a challenge and a tremendous opportunity for executive and leadership coaching.

There has been an exponential growth in the amount of coaching-specific and coaching-related research over the past ten years (Grant, 2011). Despite this, coaching practice and research have advanced without specifically drawing on relevant and established theories of human motivation.

Coaching is concerned with the enhancement of human functioning, the success of which depends on how well coachees can manage their feelings, thoughts and actions (Grant & Cavanagh, 2011). The process of personal and professional change may be challenging and as such, coachees may be ambivalent, even resistant, to development. Personal autonomy and motivation are critical because "positive and lasting results most likely occur when a client becomes actively engaged and personally invested in change" (Ryan, Lynch, Vansteenkiste & Deci, 2011, p. 194).

It is critically important for coaches to understand and work with psychological processes that have an impact on motivation and readiness to change. SDT provides a useful set of ideas for guiding coaching practice. Many of these ideas have been extensively researched, and their utility established across a range of contexts. NSC underpinned by SDT, aims to support the development of autonomous motivation and facilitate the process of integration and internalization that may enhance whole person engagement.

NSC also provides a mechanism for the experiencing of positive emotions, which in turn leads to many positive outcomes, not least the capacity for optimum functioning and human flourishing. Through the process of emotional contagion, coaches may also facilitate wider system change and or influence.

Despite the fact that coaching is an established and increasingly popular change methodology used to facilitate individual and cultural change, published research has tended to focus heavily on individual level outcomes. The impact of coaching at the level of the group, team, organization or system has largely been ignored. The research on the CRE (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2013), provides an empirical foundation and potential pathway for further exploration into the systemic impact of one-on-one leadership coaching on the broader organizational context.

Separately, SDT, BBT and the CRE offer scientifically rigorous approaches to coaching that are based on strong theoretical footings. Taken together, they are uniquely placed to make a significant, evidence based contribution to the development of a systemic approach to coaching that not only facilitates whole person and whole system engagement, but simultaneously supports individuals, groups and organizations to positively transform and change.

Coaching for a needs-supportive climate requires that coaches are both supportive of the needs of their direct client in the context of coaching session and engagement, while also understanding that those they are coaching are connected to and have impact on the organizational climate. This concern in itself will help coaches to develop a more network based systemic thinking that can serve as an example to help their coachees develop in this way too.

From research within BBT and the coaching ripple effect we understand the importance of positivity, positive emotions and emotional contagion. Given this, coaches should be able to use their own emotions directly with their clients to provide climates supportive of growth. Coaches may also equip their coachees to harness the effectiveness of positivity for the benefit of those they are connected to, enhancing the potential for whole system engagement and effective system-wide development.

From a systems perspective, and considering the BBT and SDT findings, relatedness and the network of connectivity coachees are embedded within become a direct concern and area for active intervention for coaching engagements. Coaching can assist leaders to develop a systemic competency through collaborating in change design. If this includes the structure of connectivity, for the benefit of individuals and the organisation more broadly, it also provides an opportunity to extend the systemic utility of coaching.

Conclusion

Needs supportive coaching can utilize both SDT and BBT to provide adaptive approaches to coaching that support growth and development. While further exploration and research is needed in this area there are a number of supported applications that can be useful to coaching aimed at supporting leaders and organizations in these complex times.

Moreover, the findings on the CRE highlight a number of important implications for the way we design, target and measure coaching in an

organizational context. There are also important implications for how coaches, leaders and managers think and behave when embedded in complex evolving networks. Understanding these implications can assist coaches to support leaders in meeting the requirements of a new era in organizational complexity.

Coaches in working closely with leaders would be well placed to consider the needs supportive environment they create in their coaching sessions as well as how that translates to the impact the leaders they work with can have on the organization climate. These approaches to organizational impact are then likely to have lasting benefit for both the system and system members. Another important conclusion is the importance of autonomy and competence as potential conduits for engaging system members with the systems they work in. Through effective leadership coaching intervention design, these systemic-level effects may be enhanced as leaders focus on supporting these needs within the systems the lead.

Furthermore, by combining our understanding of the benefits of autonomy, competence and relatedness in how leaders develop organizational climates supportive of growth and engagement (SDT), with the known contagion effects of positive emotion (BBT), and the importance of the pattern of interactive relationships for influencing systemic change (CRE), coaches are well equipped to construct innovative needs supportive leadership interventions. These innovative approaches may then allow broader system impact representing an evidence-based approach to effective systemic coaching that elevates the individual and encourages whole system engagement.

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