



# GREAT COACHES DON'T GET CHRISTMAS CARDS

WE LOVE TO RECEIVE THEM. THE MORE THE MERRIER. CHRISTMAS CARDS, THAT IS... FROM CLIENTS... EXTOLLING OUR VIRTUES AND PROWESS AS COACHES, ACKNOWLEDGING OUR GREAT WORK AND THE IMPACT IT HAS HAD...BUT IS THIS WHAT COACHING IS ALL ABOUT? ASKS **DECLAN WOODS**

This is the kind of feedback coaches dream of: 'You are challenging yet supportive; present yet relaxed; curious yet focussed on outcomes' – and now here's the evidence from our grateful clients in the form of their handwritten festive missives. We feel good. The client feels good. So far, so good.

But coaching is full of paradoxes and the tensions between them: the Hippocratic oath tells us *primum non nocere* ('first do no harm') yet clients (most of them, at least) say they want to be challenged. In the medical world, it is acknowledged that even a routine intervention or procedure carries a degree of risk with it – this is recognised and accepted. Yet in coaching, if the client (or worse, sponsor) balks then it tends to send us into a flat spin and we soften our approach. The result: coaching becomes too cosy, has insufficient impact and delivers little of value. If coaching appears to be offering limited benefit, clients become disengaged and may stop coaching. Clients vote with their feet, making it impossible for coaches to do any good (...and so fewer Christmas cards). The elephant on the couch for coaches then is that the very premise of doing no harm can actually itself be harmful.

So, if clients want neither comfortable nor confronting coaching, what do they want? The psychotherapy literature offers us some pointers (Castonguay *et al*, 2010). Clients reported they didn't want to be excluded by the process (where the therapist knows best and *does therapy to* the client), technical jargon or psychobabble. They do want to be listened

to, be heard and give voice to their hopes and fears (de Haan, 2011). Better not to put clients off with dis-affiliative coach behaviour. Better still not to forget the importance of Rogerian, client-centred principles in our work. Given all this, how do coaches know we are on the right track? Does anyone really know what works? Where's the evidence to back up our assertions? Evidence-based practice holds out many claims and high allure, yet can often be too much: too complex; too ambiguous; and, honestly, too tedious. McCormack and Allan (in their BMJ blog, 2015) argue the case for 'simply making the evidence simple.' This gets my vote. While there is evidence that talking cures work, there is less agreement on the so-called 'brand wars' i.e., which schools of coaching works for whom. Clients report they benefit – but by how much? Is there a placebo effect: any form of intervention delivering the same outcomes? As we can rarely be sure how an individual client will respond to a particular intervention (Fonagy, 2010), perhaps a better question is 'What works when?' In other words, which coaching approach do we use on what type of topic?

Many coaches use solution-focused (SF) techniques in their client work. Yet the 'miracle question'\* so central to de Shazer's (1977) SF approach was found to be irrelevant according to consumer research, with participants reporting actual distaste for it (Lloyd and Dallos, 2008). Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC) emphasises the primacy of cognition in mediating psychological disorder - it aims to alleviate distress by modifying cognitive content and





process, realigning 'faulty' thinking with reality. Yet a comprehensive review of component studies found little evidence that specific cognitive interventions significantly increase the effectiveness of the therapy. This rather challenges the contribution of thoughts in CBT. Beware 'good' science.

We rarely have a clear view of the course a client might have taken without coaching. If they show improvements and better results, might they have done so without coaching? If their performance worsens, might this have accelerated more quickly in the absence of coaching? Deciding what needs to work and what goals achieved and then examining these alone might give us a false trail of coaching effectiveness (Dimidjian and Hollon, 2010)

So, what evidence can we rely on? There is little doubt that some practitioners are better at their jobs than others – be it coaching or therapy (Huppert, 2001). Although unpalatable, perhaps we need to accept that some coaching coteries are harmful, some techniques are harmful and, dare I say it, some coaches are harmful (Berk and Parker, 2009). How do we tell, particularly since competencies – often used to gauge a coach's practice ability – are questionable and challenged (Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015)?

While not perfect, we argue that coaching competencies do have their place and usefully allow specific coach behaviours and interventions to be isolated and examined in a rigorous and consistent way. When used

dynamically and fluidly, competencies can play an invaluable role in developing effective coaching practice.

Cooper and McLeod (2010) helpfully remind us there is no one best way of coaching, and argue for a pluralistic approach, drawing on multiple disciplines and ways of working with clients. And that is what we see when assessing master coaches: 'A coaching approach that draws on a broad range of models, tools and techniques, tailored to individual requirements and demonstrated in action' and 'targeted coaching interventions used with great refinement.' [http://www.associationforcoaching.com/media/uploads/ac\\_coach\\_accreditation\\_overview\\_15\\_.pdf](http://www.associationforcoaching.com/media/uploads/ac_coach_accreditation_overview_15_.pdf)

We live in an imperfect world. While we need to continue questioning the evidence, and accept that our 'taken-for-granted' models might not be quite as solid as we once hoped, there is still a need for dynamic coaching that is flexible, responsive, draws from different domains and is client-centred. And it needs to be challenging too. This level of sophistication is achievable from both evidence-based approaches and feedback on specific coaching competencies whether as part of an accreditation process or your on-going coaching supervision. Leonard Cohen tells us: 'There is a crack in everything; that is how the light gets in.' Let your coaching light shine.

Now, how many Christmas cards will you get next year?

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