

Dealing with issues of the self-concept and self-improvement strategies in coaching and mentoring

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Abstract

This article aims to introduce five models of dealing with the self-concept applied by individuals in the process of personal and professional development and the method of using these models in the context of coaching or mentoring. The experience of using this method is discussed and suggestions are made for those who would like to adopt it for enriching their practice. The article draws practitioners' attention to the broader picture of their interventions in relation to individual developmental strategies and the implications that these have for the coaching and mentoring relationship.

Key Words:

Self-concept, Coaching, Mentoring, Individual development

Introduction

The way individuals see themselves inevitably influences their attitude towards themselves, their motivation for change and consequently for developmental strategies. A number of authors in the coaching field (Flaherty, 1999; Peltier, 2001; Whitmore, 1996) are quite explicit about the role of self-awareness and adequate self-evaluation in the coaching and mentoring process. There is also an established set of coaching and mentoring tools for assisting individuals in the development of the most realistic self-view such as 360-Degree Feedback, The Johari Window (Luft, 1970) and various well-known questionnaires, e.g. learning styles test by Honey & Mumford (1992).

Usually this self-understanding in coaching or mentoring is assisted by the focused assessment of the specific qualities and behaviours that affect an individual's performance at work. Then, typically, the coaching process may aim at eliminating negative qualities while enhancing positive ones. This does seem like a rational approach with which learners would agree and be willing to adopt. However, in some cases, this approach may not necessarily correspond to the overall view individuals have of themselves or to their self-improvement strategies. They, for example, may be quite accepting of themselves and see their set of personal characteristics as unique and valuable as it is. Or they may like to explore the assessment criteria and question the origin of these before embarking on the developmental process. These examples indicate the need for understanding the overall self-concept of individuals and their consequent developmental strategies that could be explicit or implicit.

Another issue related to the individual's self-concept and very often ignored in the coaching and mentoring literature is the issue of confidence and self-esteem. This issue is also 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. It could be explained by the view that because it is an

internal state of individuals it may not explicitly affect their behaviour and performance. This attitude could be reinforced by the fact that even in the psychological literature there is little agreement about the link between self-esteem and the performance outcomes. On the one hand there are studies that show that high and low self-ratings have weak positive correlation with actual performance (Baumeister et al, 2003; Goleman, 1999; Judge and Bono, 2001) and according to Bandura (1998) most talented people feel dissatisfied with their achievements. On the other hand there are studies (Forsyth and Kerr, 1999; Brunden, 1984; Mruk, 1999; Lent et al, 1986) that show that, on the whole, individuals report an increase in their performance and particularly in ability to work in groups and take initiative as the result of increased confidence and self-esteem. Baumeister et al also confirm that "in performance context, high self-esteem people appear to use better self-regulation strategies." (2003, p.15)

In any case if, during the coaching process, the client mentions the issue of confidence and self-esteem whether in relation to a particular aspect of performance or in its own right, it deserves the attention of the coach. However, the tools for working with these issues in the coaching and mentoring process are currently very limited. In fact, the only methods that coaches report as useful are support, encouragement and positive feedback. In the most difficult cases they could refer the learner to a counsellor or psychotherapist who would have a wider range of methods of working with this issue. The Self-Concept and Developmental Strategies (SCDS) Method that is described in this article may serve coaches and mentors as an alternative way of addressing the issue of self-esteem without examining the roots of the problem. At the same time it could allow practitioners to identify and compare the developmental strategy that they adopt with one or more strategies adopted by their learners.

Methodology

The models of working with one's self-concept and the method of applying these models were developed within a research project aimed at investigating the problem of lack of confidence in adult learners (Bachkirova, 2001). Since then the method has been actively used in various modules and courses related to the idea and understanding of the developing self. A number of people have applied this method in teaching, training, coaching and counselling context. Different groups of students and different individuals have contributed to the understanding of the whole approach through participation in the group exploration and applying it in other ways in their process of personal development. Their generous feedback and the author's further thinking on the topic have prompted an exploration of the method in the light of its increased capacities to aid understanding of the self and at the same time to discuss various issues that have become apparent particularly in relation to coaching and mentoring.

Working definitions

By *confidence* in this context we will understand a feeling of certainty in one's ability to perform a particular task. In contrast to Bandura's (1998) *self-efficacy belief* (belief in one's eventual ability to perform a given action), we emphasise the feeling component of this phenomenon because the lack of it is often reported by individuals (Bachkirova, 2001) as an emotional barrier or debilitating accompaniment of new and important (for them) activities. By *self-esteem* we will understand also a feeling but

of a more general nature – feeling good about oneself in some particular area of one's life. We believe that although it is based on cognitive evaluation it manifests itself as a feeling. There is also global self-esteem or *self-worth* that represents an overall cognitive and emotional attitude towards oneself as a person.

The *self-concept* in the psychological literature is described as an overall view on the self as held by an individual (Hamachek, 1994; Harter, 1999). It includes an *ideal self* – the kind of person they would like to be, *self-image* – the kind of person they think they are now and *self-esteem* – how good they feel about themselves based on their self-evaluation.

Description of the SCDS Method (Self-Concept & Developmental Strategies)

The SCDS Method could be used in small groups or individually in order to explore individual self-concept and developmental strategies.

Currently the Method includes:

1. An exercise to explore the discrepancy between the ideal self and actual self as an indication of the level of self-esteem
2. 5 models of working with the self-concept to provide examples of personal development strategies and as a basis for critical reflection
3. Structured and unstructured discussions about the result of applying the method
4. Mentoring and coaching strategies for using the models of working with the self-concept.

1. The exercise

The purpose of the exercise is to provide a background for the use of the models and to gauge any discrepancies between the ideal self and self-image as a predictor of the level of self-esteem.

Depending on the time available for the session, individuals or groups are asked to select 20 personality traits or self-attributes, which they find important when describing themselves or other people. To save time in group sessions, participants are sometimes given a list of 10 pre-selected characteristics (Table 1). First they are asked to substitute any characteristic with which they are not comfortable with another characteristic which makes more sense to them or which they use more often. It is made clear in the instructions that it is not important which characteristics they include in this table as long as they are meaningful for each individual and there is a mixture of 'positive' and 'negative' qualities in their lists.

IS	Self-attributes	SI	SE
	Sensitive		
	Open-minded		
	Stubborn		
	Lazy		
	Disorganised		
	Shy		
	Thoughtful		
	Moody		
	Reliable		
	Friendly		

Total: _____

Table 1. Indicative set of self-attributes for the initial exercise

Then, participants are asked to rank from 1 to 10, without repeating any number, the chosen set of self-attributes in the column labelled IS to describe their 'ideal self' (the kind of person they would like to be). Next, they are asked to cover column IS and to rank the same set of self-attributes in the column SI to describe their actual self or self-image (the kind of person they think they are). Then the differences are calculated between the ranks for each self-attribute in the column SE. The individuals sum up the discrepancies for the whole set and are given the meaning of each column (IS – ideal self; SI - self-image; SE – self-esteem). Obviously, the less the total in this exercise the higher the self-esteem of the individual. Individuals are then given then an opportunity to discuss the initial impression of the exercise and what sense it makes for them.

Although analysis of the quantitative data produced is not of paramount importance, it should be mentioned that usually learners find that their own results and those of others (who are willing to disclose them) are congruent with their own and group perception. The discrepancy between desirable image and self-image is seen as a cause of dissatisfaction.

2. *Models of working with self-concept*

The self-esteem exercise provides individuals with a somewhat tangible description of the ideal self and actual self and also with components for a possible graphical illustration of the relationship between them. If the time is limited the exercise could be skipped but individuals should be asked to imagine the above process in order to prepare them for the next step and to enable a visual representation of the relationship between the ideal self, self-image and self-esteem.

With the use of the graphical illustration (see Table 2) five possible models of balancing the self-concept are presented. The principle of the first two models is inspired by James's definition of self-esteem: "the ratio of our actualities to our supposed potentialities", from which it follows that equilibrium is achieved either by increasing successes (model 2) or by decreasing aspirations (model 1) (James, 1890). Models 3, 4 and 5 are qualitatively different from the first two. They all resulted from

my experience of teaching, counselling, coaching, supervision and observation of my own and other people's personal histories and development processes.

The underlying assumptions for the development of the following models imply that individuals with or without being aware of this process apply a particular general strategy of dealing with the discrepancy between their ideal and actual self in order to feel better about themselves and so to increase their self-esteem. Working on self-improvement or balancing one's self-concept implies that the balance between ideal self and self-image is rarely achievable. If this balance temporarily exists, one has the highest possible level of self-esteem and, consequently, does not need to invest in this work.

1. **Model 1. Rational Re-evaluation Model** or "Decreasing aspiration" (James, 1890), is seen as being applied after some clashes with reality, when self-image in general is not very rigid and the whole self-concept is, probably, at the beginning of formation. Then, standards, which are set too high for oneself, are questioned as unlikely to be achieved, and adjusted to a more realistic level.
2. **Model 2. Achievement Model** or, "Increasing Successes" (James, 1890), implies real actions in order to prove individual self-worth. The self-image 'improves' in proportion to closeness to 'supposed potentialities'.
3. **Model 3. The Self-discovery Model** is seen as quite different from the first two. In comparison with Model 1, re-evaluation of the ideal self is based not on the improbability of reaching that ideal, but on re-assessing the origin of the ideal in the first place. It often happens that the discovery that the ideal was instilled in us by others leads to an incentive to find our own values and meaning in life. Secondly, this discovery initiates the search for our 'true self', which can then be appreciated and loved as it is, without evidence of closeness even to one's own ideal. So, in a way, the ideal self and continuously discovered self are moving towards each other.
4. **Model 4.** This model was called the **Self-acceptance Model** with some hesitation, because this term is widely used within the personal development movement with an unequivocally positive meaning. With this model a person still has an ideal image and a self-image, but the discrepancy between them is ignored on the basis that the ideal is unachievable or the person is loved and accepted the way he/she is by his/her significant others. Other rational explanations are also possible, but the justification for ceasing to invest personal resources not only in self-improvement but also in self-understanding is common to all of them. Whilst this model appears to have some similarity with Model 1, in the case of the latter, the emphasis and energy is focused on re-assessing the ideal self. However, in Model 4 the emphasis is on accepting self-image, and energy is not seen as worth spending at all. In addition, if the Rational Re-evaluation Model is more easily seen at the beginning of self-formation in order to plan future actions in a more rational and effective way, the Self-acceptance Model is more likely to be applied to a person who is 'tired of life' in order to secure release from 'unnecessary' commitments.

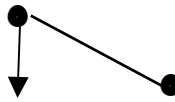
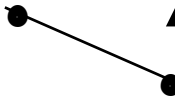
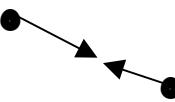
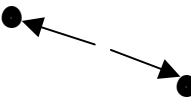
No Mod.	Diagram of the model	Name	Description	Sources of possible help
	Ideal self / Self image			
1		Rational Re-evaluation Model	Questioning your ideal. Becoming more realistic; setting achievable goals.	Books, general information; discussions with 'realists', rational thinkers.
2		Achievement Model	Acting on your goals; improving yourself, growing closer to your ideal.	"How to..." books, courses; coaching; what you get from teachers, trainers, mentors (support, knowledge, etc.).
3		Self-discovery Model	Re-evaluation of your values; search for <u>your</u> own ideal; appreciating and loving yourself as you are.	Personal growth field: books, courses, group work, developmental models of coaching, mentoring, counselling, therapy.
4		Self-acceptance Model	Breaking the connection between your ideal and self-image as unachievable. Settling down psychologically.	Like-minded friends, family.
5		Self-reduction Model	Trying to eliminate (ego) self, searching for a higher meaning in life.	Fields of spiritual philosophy, psychology; "New age" movement; religion.

Table 2. Models of working with one's self-concept

5. **Model 5. Self-reduction.** This model implies those who, as a result of any kind of ‘personal work’, grow to think that there is more to this life than can be seen on the surface. They are often engaged in a spiritual quest, sometimes with the intention of finding the ‘true’ or ‘higher’ self. The main intention however is to eliminate the ordinary self or ego through identifying with something significant, such as campaigns oriented towards various human values or religious symbols. It has to be mentioned at this stage that religious beliefs are not exclusive characteristics of the fifth model. Each model has its own features in relation to faith: for example, the second, Achievement Model may emphasise the commitment to be “as virtuous as God wants me to be”; the faith of someone living the Self-acceptance Model would probably emphasise that, “God loves us all as we are”; with the Self-discovery Model, we are looking for a ‘divine spark’ within ourselves; and so on. However, the specific feature of Model 5 is that the self or ego is seen as an obstacle or ‘ultimate illusion’ and is intended to be eliminated by some particular means. The methods may vary from the devotion to a special cause to a serious spiritual practice. It has to be mentioned here that in spite of the main intention of this model to transcend the self with its ‘ordinary’ desires and ambitions, it often remains logically and practically within the same dualistic trap of striving to become what one is not.

3. *Structured and unstructured discussions*

The structured group or individual discussion could be initiated with the following questions:

- Which model do I use now?
- How do I know that I use this model?
- Why do I use it? Is it my choice?
- How does this model help me in my development?
- How does this model restrict me in my development?
- Which model would I be interested to understand better?
- Which model would I be inclined to use in the future?

Unstructured discussion can be developed by exploring any of the above questions. The following discussion may give some additional ideas for further exploration relevant to the individual and context.

Discussion of the result of using the SCDS Method

The experience of using the method and the consequent discussions has shown that most learners usually agree on the following points:

- Although individuals have different dynamics of applying the models with or without awareness of this, it is evident that all individuals change them at different stages of their life
- With hindsight it is possible to observe the history of applying the models by the individual
- Sometimes different models are used at the same time in relation to different areas of the personal life of the individual, e.g. model 2 professionally and model 3 in personal relationships
- Each model has advantages and disadvantages in relation to the overall development process and well-being of the individual
- The succession of models for each individual suggests that the periods of balance and satisfaction are very short, probably because the components of the self-concept are also liable to fluctuation
- Conscious pursuit of enhanced self-esteem appeared to be quite a difficult and energy consuming task. Numerous examples were also found of the fragile nature of self-esteem, as described elsewhere (Bachkirova, 2001). However, the process of understanding the relationship between the components of the self-concept and the models of self-improvement expands the awareness of learners about the nature of their predicaments. It also elicits the alternatives to their strategies introducing greater options and so has an empowering effect.
- The method helps learners formulate their own concepts of the self and related phenomena. It enables them to explore and challenge assumptions about the Self and its development, which are taken for granted
- The discussions facilitate translation of these findings into personal strategies and everyday actions.

The process of using the SCDS Method shows that learners are very happy to identify with any of the models and to discuss them, possibly because the method does not carry any stigma attached to each of the models. Even in groups they willingly bring examples illustrating the use of the model and the consequences of it. Particularly fruitful are discussions about how each model helps and restricts their further development and influences their overall well-being.

4. Use of the models for coaching and mentoring purposes

Further analysis of the models inevitably leads to the realisation that differences in the self-improvement strategies have very important implications for the relationship between the developing individual and a coach or mentor. The following questions can facilitate the thinking of a coach or a mentor about these issues and possibly lead to a discussion of these with their supervisor:

- To what extent might your own model influence the person that you are coaching/mentoring?
- Are you aware of your preferred model of working with your clients? Does this always match their models?

- Do you need to have experienced all of the models to be able to coach/mentor different people?
- Which model in your view is most suited for mentoring and coaching purposes as currently understood?

Experience of working with the above questions has revealed several issues that coaches and mentors find it important to be aware of, monitor and discuss:

- It is useful for a coach or mentors to identify their preferred model and be aware of the changes. If unaware they might impose their developmental strategy unexamined without considering the preferred one of the client.
- If the strategies of the coach and client do not match this may become a barrier to effective working relationship between them. Ideally this issue should be dealt with at the stage of clarifying the expectations and establishing the goals and methods of working.
- The coach may or may not disclose their preferred model and developmental strategy according to the needs of the client. It could be helpful to do so in cases where there is an apparent blockage in the coaching process, the working alliance is not established or the client is in the process of changing his/her developmental strategy.
- If the actual use of the method is not appropriate in some particular coaching situations it is important for the coach to be able to identify the models and developmental strategies of their clients by their behaviours and disclosed perceptions on themselves and their actions. The following table presents some possible signs, which could be considered when trying to identify clients' models, and also some ideas of how each particular manifestation could be supported.

Model	Some signs in the learner's behaviour and perceptions for identifying the model	Ways of responding to each manifestation of the model
1	• Goals that are perceived unattainable • Feeling overburdened with life tasks • Lack of enjoyment in everyday activities	• Discuss how crucial is the achievement of such goals • Discuss if it all has to be done • Explore the meaning of life as a process
2	• Active involvement in lifelong learning • Report on successes as well as difficulties • Active questioning about what to do next • Changes in work life, career	• Showing genuine interest • Giving positive feedback • Exploring options • Examining outcomes
3	• Involvement in 'personal growth' activities • Tolerance to own 'mistakes' and 'failures' • Questioning the opinions of authorities • Giving oneself space for 'just being' • Self-initiated changes in personal life	• Showing genuine interest • Giving support • Joining in discussion • Supporting and encouraging • Showing acceptance
4	• Acceptance of the current situation • Diminished ambitions • Ironical about difficulties and own abilities to cope	• Giving support and exploring • Exploring the reasons for this • Discussing if the real feelings are being dealt with
5	• Focus on actual work rather than 'me at work' • Seeing a 'bigger picture' of events • Very critical about the nature of organisations • Lack of interest in image-enhancing activities • Decreased net-working activities	• Exploring and supporting • Exploring • Questioning and discussing • Questioning and examining • Challenging

Table 3. Mentors' strategies for using Models of working with self-concept

Conclusion

In this article the SCDS Method is presented and discussed. The long-term experience of applying the method in various contexts suggests the value of it in dealing with issues of confidence and self-esteem. It also suggests that knowledge of the models and following developmental strategies can help coaches and mentors to see a 'bigger picture' of their own and their clients' intentions in relation to their self-concept and self-development.

A number of new possible applications of the method could be envisaged, such as the role of the models in identifying the best match between a coach and a client and particularly the implication of the variations in developmental strategies for training of coaches and mentors and their continuing personal and professional development. This would imply that further research would be valuable.

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