

## Coaching and positive psychology

MARTIN E. P. SELIGMAN

*Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA*

### Abstract

Coaching is a practice without limits on its scope, lacking theoretical foundations and meaningful accreditation, one that has yet to develop a significant empirical base. The discipline of positive psychology can provide coaching with an evidence-based framework and a defined scope of practice. Further, positive psychology can provide a range of valid measures, evidence-based interventions and a reference point from which to develop meaningful training and accreditation processes that will help set the boundaries of responsible coaching practice.

Coaching is a practice in search of a backbone, two backbones actually: a scientific, evidence-based backbone and a theoretical backbone. I believe that the new discipline of positive psychology provides both those backbones. Positive psychology can provide coaching with a delimited scope of practice, with interventions and measurements that work, and with a view of adequate qualifications to be a coach.

As coaching now stands, its scope of practice is almost without limits: how to arrange your closet, how to arrange your memories in a scrapbook, how to be a more assertive leader, how to inspire the volleyball team, how to find more flow at work, how to fight dark thoughts, how to have more purpose in life. It also uses an almost limitless array of techniques: goal-setting, affirmations, visualisation, massage, assertive training, correcting cognitive distortions, aroma, feng shui, meditation, counting your blessings, and on and on.

People who call themselves coaches and get paid for coaching have an enormous range of academic qualifications from none at all to bachelor's degrees in almost anything, to masters degrees in counseling, education, social work, or positive psychology, to doctorates in psychology, medicine, and philosophy (Grant & Zackon, 2004). Some have taken face-to-face or tele-courses in coaching, but many have not. Some are "accredited" by the self-appointed

International Coach Federation and by other rump bodies, but most are not. The right to call oneself a coach is unregulated. And this is why a scientific and a theoretical backbone will help the practice.

First the theory: positive psychology is the study of positive emotion, of engagement, and of meaning, the three aspects that make sense out of the scientifically unwieldy notion of "happiness". Positive psychology attempts to measure, classify, and build these three aspects of life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Practising exactly these three endeavours may bring some order into chaos by limiting coaching's scope of practice.

Second, the science: positive psychology is rooted in empirical research. It uses traditional methods of psychometrically established measurement, of experiments, of longitudinal research, and of random assignment, placebo-controlled outcome studies to evaluate whether interventions work. It discards those that do not pass these gold standards as ineffective and it hones those that do pass (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Coaching with these evidence-based interventions and psychometrically established measures will help set the boundaries of responsible coaching practice.

Finally positive psychology can help guidelines for training and accreditation. One need not be a licensed psychologist, or even a psychologist, to

practise positive psychology or to practise coaching. Positive psychology is not intended to be an umbrella for yet another self-interested guild. People who are adequately trained in the techniques of coaching, in the theories of positive psychology, in valid measurement of the positive states and traits, in the interventions that work, and who know when to refer a client to someone who is better trained will be, by my lights, bona fide coaches of positive psychology.

## References

- Grant, A. M., & Zackon, R. (2004). Executive, workplace and life coaching: Findings from a large-scale survey of International Coach Federation members. *International Journal of Evidence-based Coaching and Mentoring*, 2(2), 1–15.
- Seligman, M. E., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5–14.
- Seligman, M. E., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60, 410–421.