

# Resilience in coaching

**Amanda Bouch** examines the need to be able to bounce back



**C**oaching is continuing to grow in popularity: the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's *2011 Learning & Talent Development Survey* shows that 86 per cent of companies responding used coaching in some form<sup>1</sup>. Forty three per cent of this is in supporting performance management, 33 per cent leadership development and 21 per cent in supporting L&D. In two fifths of organisations line managers have the main responsibility for coaching, in one third it is internal coaches and in one fifth it is external coaches.

Coaching demands a unique response in each situation and companies report wide disparities in the nature and quality of coaching delivered: "The coaching field is filled with contradictions. Coaches themselves disagree over why they are hired, what they do and how to measure success."<sup>2</sup>

Take, for example, coaches employed in a call centre and focusing on helping team members achieve high call quality. This is typically a task-orientated performance coaching approach, where the coach has expertise in this area, and the team's call metrics will provide evidence of the success of the coaching. Senior managers in that same organisation may choose to work with executive coaches to develop and transform their leadership style. The evidence here is longer term and may only show up quantitatively in 360° feedback and employee surveys.

Both will have an impact on the performance of the company. There are different demands placed on these coaches in terms of their capability and their support needs may be different, but both are working closely with individuals and will benefit from supervision to develop their coaching practice. →

## References

- 1 <http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/survey-reports/learning-talent-development-2011.aspx>
- 2 Kauffman C, Coutu D HBR Research Report: *The Realities of Executive Coaching* (2009)



### References

- 3 [www.associationforcoaching.com/about/about02.htm](http://www.associationforcoaching.com/about/about02.htm)
- 4 [www.janekeep.co.uk](http://www.janekeep.co.uk)
- 5 Johnstone C *Find Your Power* Permanent Publications (2010)
- 6 Burton K *Live Life, Love Work* Capstone (2010)

The coaching field ranges from qualified professional coaches, who are signed up to a professional code of ethics and understand the criteria for effective coaching practice, to managers who may simply have undertaken a short coaching skills training course and be using a coaching style in how they manage performance in their teams. In the example above, it is quite possible that the call centre coach is someone who has been given the position as he was a high-performing agent and has been promoted to the coach role, so the training he received for this role may vary from on-the-job to a coach training programme.

This range of qualification and skill is one of the challenges for the coaching industry as standards and support can vary hugely. The demands on people and organisations are constant and pressure for performance can lead to a stressful environment, which requires people to demonstrate resilience – to bounce back after setbacks and keep on working productively. Coaches need resilience for their own well-being and to help their clients enhance their well-being.

The Association for Coaching Code of Ethics<sup>3</sup> has as its first point that the coach must be personally in good health and fit to practice; if not, they should withdraw from coaching until they are in good health and fit to resume. This fundamental factor means that coaches must be aware of their physical state, their own level of resilience and when they are in-balance or off-balance.

There is a question about ‘manager as coach’ and their responsibilities in this area; we would like to distinguish between a manager who can call himself a ‘coach’ and one who simply uses a coaching style of management (ie uses questioning and listening to support a team member in working out how to perform well, rather than telling them what to do). Manager as coach is a particularly delicate way of working due to the overriding role of manager and the psychological and practical contract of that relationship. It is difficult to have a completely open coaching relationship with someone who conducts your annual performance appraisal





and influences your pay and rewards. Where the manager does operate as a coach to direct reports, it is particularly important that he adheres to the ethics of coaching practice and pays attention to his fitness to coach.

For the purposes of this article, we will focus on external and internal 'professional' coaches, ie qualified coaches, who are engaged in a coaching programme with individuals (this may be one-to-one or in groups or teams).

### What is resilience?

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines resilience (of a person) as: readily recovering from shock, depression, etc; buoyant. At the AC conference on resilience for coaches and their clients in July, Jane Keep<sup>4</sup> provided a definition as a result of her research into the topic: "Resilience = the agility to remain steady and consistent, whatever is going on." Put 'resilience' into the search on Amazon.co.uk and you get more than 2,000 books, showing this is a 'hot' topic these days. Descriptors such as "how to manage change, face adversity and bounce back from whatever life throws at you" illustrate why it is a hot topic.

At the AC conference, Dr Chris Johnstone spoke of every person's story. The story has the pattern of 1) a character, 2) a call to adventure/change, 3) facing adversities, 4) seeking helping resources, 5) a turning point and 6) the hoped-for outcome. It is the helping resources that are core to our resilience. Johnstone identified health as particularly important and used the analogy of travelling in a boat – when the water level is high, the journey is smooth but, when the water level is low, we are likely to crash into a rock<sup>5</sup>. Coaches need to be aware of their own personal water level and the likely effect that will have on their work.

Take the example of Susan. She had recently been confronted with two different major issues in her personal life that she had found difficult to deal with and that had drained her physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. She recognised that this was affecting her self-belief and self-confidence; she was starting to doubt that she could do things for which she had an excellent reputation, and was worried about being able to cope with a potential new contract. Her 'water level' was low and she was even seeing rocks that weren't really there. Fortunately, Susan could sense the danger she was in and sought coaching help.

However, imagine what could have happened if she had gone ahead and entered into that contract from a position of low water-level. As an external coach, there is a chance she may not

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have passed the 'chemistry' session as she would have shown less confidence and may have been weak in expressing how she could work with the individual to help them make progress. However, let's say that she did get through this stage; when she works with the coachee, the quality of her practice is likely to be compromised as she will be using a lot of energy in dealing with her own issues, rather than focusing fully on the state and potential of the client. The chances of hitting a rock are high.

Susan's example illustrates why it is important to be aware of your level of resilience and self-awareness, and that it is an essential competence for coaches, who need high levels of emotional intelligence as managing themselves in the relationship is critical to the success of the coaching. So when the coach needs to address his insecurities and vulnerabilities, it is important that he doesn't suppress that need, but finds the right opportunity to voice these challenges, learn from them and then move forward. This can be done through reflective practice and coaching supervision.

### Building resilience

A skilled and experienced coach may be able to use reflective practice individually and rebuild his strength and resilience; however, for many, the added depth to the experience achieved through working with a coaching supervisor or mentor adds significant value and results in enhanced self-awareness and self-management. It is the objectivity a supervisor or mentor brings that allows them to challenge the coach in a way the individual is unlikely to do for himself, which makes a worthwhile difference. A much-quoted Chinese proverb – "the fish is the last one to learn about the sea" – illustrates the fact that, when you are immersed in something, you can't 'see' it and therefore your learning is limited.

A structure that Johnstone suggests for reflection, which could be used in individual



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reflective practice or with the support of a supervisor/mentor, is to think of a time you faced something difficult and got through it in a way you now feel good about, and to identify a) what strengths you drew on, b) what strategies you used, c) what resources you turned to and d) what insights made a difference. Then you can map these helping factors across to the difficulty you are facing now and see how you can apply them to get through it.

Other techniques that were discussed at the AC conference on resilience include:

- practising mindfulness
- practising meditation, Tai chi, etc regularly
- developing a habit of seeing things from different perspectives
- pausing to take deep breaths to calm down
- deepening your self-observation and self-awareness in your daily work to guide your discernment of your choices and taking those choices with responsibility
- how you organise yourself – using planning and time management wisely
- creating a balanced lifestyle ‘scorecard’ and monitoring your actions for sustainability
- recognising the triggers that send you off-balance and developing methods to stop them taking hold, so you bounce back more quickly
- managing your energies – mental, physical, emotional and purposeful<sup>6</sup>
- drink more water, eat healthily, exercise and pay attention to your health.

### **How does working with a coaching supervisor/mentor help?**

Hawkins and Smith define coaching supervision as “a structured formal process for coaches, with the help of their coaching supervisor, to attend to improving the quality of their coaching, grow their coaching capacity and support themselves and their practice. Supervision should also be a source of organisational learning”<sup>7</sup>.





In the same way that there are many models of coaching, so supervision in coaching can take various forms. Here we will simply look at some of the principles of supervision that can help coaches build their emotional intelligence and resilience, so they are ready to deliver quality practice more of the time.

The first principle is that supervision provides a safe space, where the coach can explore his vulnerabilities and develop ways to overcome any challenges. This is confidential space, where the coach can be open, honest and, therefore, in the right place to address any issues, learn from them and enhance his practice. This is important space for all coaches and particularly so for internal coaches, who are more exposed to their clients in the general working environment and who may have to play more than one role in the organisation.

Supervision focuses on developing the coach's skills and capacity, not on judging and disciplining him, which may be a connotation of the word 'supervision' for some from the work environment. Where people perceive the supervisor as someone who allocates work and judges performance, they may shy away from coaching supervision. This is a wholly inaccurate interpretation in the coaching world, where the word is used more in the sense of someone who can offer supervision, being removed from the situation itself in order to help the coach take different perspectives and learn from it.

Hawkins<sup>8</sup> identified coaching supervision as having three main functions – developmental, resourcing and qualitative. Developmental is about building the coach's capability in the profession; resourcing is about recognising and validating the resources he has and those available to him, and qualitative is about the quality of his practice. Hence, this is the space in which the coach can address any personal challenges he faces that will affect his work. By working with a supervisor or mentor, he has immediate access to greater knowledge and resources, which is particularly relevant and helpful in his development.

Take the example of Joseph, a coach trained in solutions-focused coaching and relatively new to coaching. He has had success in using this approach, but found he got stuck when a client wanted to explore his personal strengths and life's journey in depth to understand who he was and what he stood for as a leader. Joseph's training and experience to date left him feeling exposed and unsure of how best to respond to this need. He took the challenge to his supervisor and was

supported in working on it at three levels: 1) he developed ways to handle the immediate client issue; 2) he gained access to his own and others' resources to see him through, and 3) he identified his own development needs and planned how to address them.

In this way, coaching supervision supports the development of the coach's practice as well as acting as a quality check. The supervision environment can be very helpful in supporting the coach in making the most of the continuing professional development he undertakes, both in helping him identify his learning needs and focusing him on relevant learning opportunities, and in making sense of and supporting the application of the learning.

Another aspect of coach supervision that was featured in Dr Christian van Nieuwerburgh's session at the AC conference was ethics in coaching practice. Ethical 'moments of choice' may be significant challenges for coaches and put them under pressure. What if you are an internal coach, for example, and your client wants to use the session to discuss his career planning, which turns out to be focused on finding a new job outside the company? Or, as an external coach, you're invited to work with a manager in a company that makes products you are morally against? When coaches face such challenges, supervision can help them to think through the 'moment of choice' in a structured way and can provide expert input, such as referring to the code of ethics, to help the coach understand and apply his responsibilities.

New coaches benefit particularly from coaching supervision in situations such as these and they will find the wider coaching practice issues discussed in supervision can help them fast-track their development.

### Summary

In today's fast-paced working environment, where change is the norm, both coaches and their clients will find they need to 'stay steady and consistent', whatever life throws at them.

There are various techniques that the coach can apply for themselves, many of which are particularly useful in prevention by enhancing the individual's health and well-being. Working with a supervisor or mentor deepens the coach's learning and is most useful in building resilience, when he is faced with adversity or ethical 'moments of choice' that need to be worked through to resolve a current issue.

Engaging in coaching supervision is considered best practice and is recommended for all coaches. **TJ**

### References

- 7 Hawkins P, Smith N *Coaching, Mentoring and Organisational Consultancy* McGraw-Hill (2006)
- 8 Hawkins P, Smith N *Coaching, Mentoring and Organisational Consultancy* McGraw-Hill (2006)

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