

What is Relationship Coaching?

First steps towards a coaching methodology for
singles

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Introduction

This paper will make the argument that coaching singles to enhance their success at finding a life partner requires a nuanced coaching methodology, which is currently lacking a firm theoretical and professional basis. This paper will therefore propose a tentative but comprehensive theory of relationship coaching.

I have argued elsewhere (Ives, 2008, 2012) that approaches to coaching are usefully categorised into three paradigms: goal-focused, developmental, and therapeutic. This paper argues that relationship coaching, and relationship coaching for singles in particular, does not fit suitably in either category, and is, in fact, a fusion between elements of goal-focused and developmental forms of coaching. For this reason, relationship coaching is a distinct approach, focusing on a combination of the coachee's attitudes and skills.

In this paper, relationship coaching does not refer to the coaching relationship itself, but instead refers to an external relationship sought by the coachee. It is also worth clarifying that by relationship is meant romantic relationships that will be sustainable and typically result in a life partnership (not, say, a person's relationship a parent, sibling, colleague or boss).

Additionally, while many element of relationship coaching apply equally to singles and couples, this paper focuses mainly on singles. It should be noted that there are key difference between singles and couples coaching, mostly stemming from the fact that the latter has a permanent other in the mix.

Almost all my singles work has been with 'young professionals', which I loosely define as university educated individuals between the ages of 27 and 40 who are trying to be but are not in a long-term relationship and who are looking, and have previously tried, to enter into a permanent relationship. Many singles are not only keen to enter into a lasting relationship, but moreover they have invested significant effort, time and money to achieve this aim and their lack of success in this area is for them a cause of great frustration and distress.

What is relationship coaching for?

Based upon my experience working with coachees from Britain, USA, Belgium and Israel, I have tentatively concluded that in many (if not most)

instances the coachees are struggling with unhelpful attitudes or core relationship skills. I therefore also tentatively suggest that relationship coaching should provide a semi-structured framework for reflection, learning and experimentation.

In my analysis, although many singles claim that they can't find suitable partners, in fact the main issue is to do with attitudes and perspectives. Many young professionals have formed views of life that get in the way of relationship success. Mezirow (1990) explains how people's meaning perspectives or habits of mind can be distorted, and how through critical reflection they can be transformed. Additionally, it would seem that many young people are bringing poor awareness of who they are, what they want out of a relationship and what it means to be in one – inadequacies that wreak havoc in their romantic lives.

My experience thus far suggests to me that the issues singles face often fall into well established and clearly identifiable categories. It is therefore comparatively easy to bring these issues to the awareness of singles and to help them to develop more adaptive approaches to relationships. If this analysis is correct, it would suggest that singles do not typically require extensive and deep therapy, but rather would benefit from a challenging interaction that helps them to become more self-aware and adjust their attitudes toward dating and relationships.

Clearly, some singles – as in any population group – are struggling with more serious psychological issue, in which case some form of therapy may be needed. Therapeutic coaching or counselling may be a prerequisite if, for example, the coachee is full of anger. However, it is my perception that singles would typically balk at the idea of therapy to address their issues and that in most cases this would be an unnecessarily draconian response.

While extensive research is needed to clarify the many issues surrounding singles and relationships, this paper makes the argument that singles could, in the meantime, benefit from a coaching intervention that supported them to identify the one or more inhibiting attitudes about themselves or their relationships, or which helped them to remedy a key relationship skills deficit.

Attitudes – While each coachee is unique and the issues that arise in coaching are always distinct, in my analysis there are five general attitudes or perceptions that singles are struggling with, some of which might affect the coachee before a relationship is formed (failure to establish) and some after

forming a relationship (failure to sustain): 1) Conflicting or confused priorities in what is being sought from a partner, such as rare to find or implausible personality combinations, or seeking someone who is both similar to and different from themselves. Such singles struggle to prioritise their most valued qualities and let go of others. 2) Misunderstanding another's likely reactions to their personality or behaviour through poor self-awareness, resulting in negative reactions from potential partners. 3) Inflexibility and compromise are difficult issues for some singles who are fiercely protective of their independence, even though relationships require a transition to interdependence. 4) Failure to cope with disappointment when imperfections in another become apparent leading to the relationship unravelling, and some singles feel that any concession means 'settling for second best'. 5) Poor conflict management when miscommunication, conflicting or unexpressed expectations, or the odd moment of foolishness pose a threat to a potential relationship.

Skills – Much has been researched and written about relationships skills, but far less consideration has been given to the relationship skills required by singles to form and secure successful sustainable relationships. Extrapolating from couples work, however, it would seem that singles would benefit from a range of communication skills that would reduce or manage conflict and enhance satisfaction in the relationship. For example, the extensive work by John Gottman (1994) on conflict management could be used to inform singles on how to spot unhealthy patterns of arguments and how to manage disagreement in a manner that leads to the improvement of the relationship and prevents its deterioration. Similarly, the popular work of Gary Chapman (1995) on love languages enables singles to understand how they experience love and what gives them most relationship satisfaction, as well as focusing on understanding the same in a potential partner. The interesting ideas in non-violent communication by Marshall Rosenberg (2003) would offer help to singles in expressing their needs in a non-confrontational manner and to better understand a potential partner's real needs, as well as how to venture a suggestion in a manner that keeps the conversation open.

I therefore propose that relationship coaching should work with the coachee to identify where there are gaps in their relationship attitudes or skills, and which therefore afford an opportunity for personal development. A relationship coach requires a robust understanding of the kind of relationships issues summarised above, for otherwise the coach won't be able to help identify the problem nor direct the coachee towards a solution.

Given the above description of the aims and remit of relationship coaching, I would suggest that its primary methodologies are encouraging the experiential learning of new attitudes and skills. As an informal adult learning situation, this is not an abstract, academic type of learning, but one directly related to an exploration of the coachee's own experience and prior knowledge (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005).

Combining goal-focus and development

Given that the coachee comes to the relationship coach for help with a clear aim – a lasting relationship – the coaching approach needs to harness the strengths of goal-focused coaching. However, as explained above the assumption of relationship coaching is that there is usually a requirement for reflection and learning, which therefore suggests that relationship coaching should also harness the strengths of developmental coaching. This section will describe the elements of goal-focused and developmental coaching that should be incorporated into an effective relationship coaching methodology.

Goal-focused coaching – Goal-focused coaching has been defined as “A systematic and collaborative helping intervention that is non-directive, goal-focused and performance-driven, intended to facilitate the more effective creation and pursuit of another’s goals” (Ives & Cox, 2012). Its primary function is fostering the coachee’s self-regulation, “helping individuals regulate and direct their interpersonal and intrapersonal resources to better attain their goals” (Grant 2006 p. 153). The primary method is assisting the coachee to identify and form well-crafted goals and develop an effective action plan (Ives, 2008). The role of the coach here is to stimulate ideas and action and to ensure that the goals are consistent with the coachee’s main life values and interests, rather than working on helping the coachee to adjust his/her values and beliefs. In this conception, coaching primarily aims to raise performance and support effective action, rather than to address feelings and thoughts, which it is assumed will be indirectly addressed through actual positive results (Grant, 2003). It aims to achieve results in a comparatively short space of time and normally focus on a relatively defined issue or goal. Goal-focused coaching does not attempt to stimulate psychological change (Cox, 2010) nor is it driven by a desire to eradicate psychological dysfunction (Bachkirova, 2007), but is a tool to improve performance. While psychological change may occur, in goal-focused coaching it is a by-product (Ives 2010).

Unlike many approaches to coaching (e.g. Stober, 2006; Gray, 2006), goal-focused coaching does not advocate a holistic approach to achieve its purpose, but focuses on stimulating effective action. It does not focus on stimulating internal change (Hudson, 1999), but works to integrate change processes into daily modes of behaviour. Goal-focused coaching adopts a forward focus, directing attention towards practical steps to move the coachee forward. Doing this leads to a reduction of anxiety, makes the task seem more manageable, and enhances buy-in by rendering goals more real, thus energising the coachee (Ives & Cox, 2012). My research (Ives 2010) has found that applying a forward focus through goal setting and action planning engender acceptance of self-responsibility, encouraging the coachee to focus on trying to improve what he or she can, rather than complaining or making ineffective demands on his or her organisation. In Goal-focused coaching, negativity is addressed by redirecting attention towards something more concrete, focusing on a small, practical desired outcome (Szabo & Meier, 2009). By setting a clear goal, coachees will be focused on attaining the goal and are less likely to engage in marginal activities that distract from its attainment.

The forward-focus in goal-focused coaching is not to the total exclusion of considering the past, and looking for solutions is not at the expense of gaining a proper understanding of the problem (Bachkirova 2007). However, the main focus “is on the coachee’s present and preferred future” (O’Connell & Palmer 2007, p. 280). Initial action by a coachee, even if small, is necessary to create the platform for progress, and the coachee’s “self-efficacy is built upon previous successful experience” (Cox 2006 p. 204). Small, concrete actions (what Rogers (2008) calls ‘quick wins’) create positive experiences that ultimately will lead to more positive choices of action (Parsloe & Wray 2000; Berg & Szabo, 2005).

Developmental coaching – By contrast, developmental coaching focuses on self-development rather than self-regulation. Numerous coaches (Chandler & Kram, 2005; Fitzgerald & Berger, 2002; Berger, 2006; Laske, 2006a, 2000b) have based their approach on adult development theory which adopts a more holistic approach towards the growth and maturity of the coachee, rather than a strict focus on performance. Personal development can refer to the growth of the whole person into all that he or she could be. However, in practice, developmental coaching can focus on a specific aspect of the person. The parameters of the developmental coaching should depend on the requirements of the coachee and the situation.

Any kind of personal development coaching is based on the belief in human capability and potential, and it provides opportunities to develop that capability and potential. As Cox and Jackson (2010 p.) argue, “To be developmental the coaching also has not merely to focus on problem solving but also to ensure that client capacity is built through that problem solving.” Development generally refers to ‘growth and change over time’, what Cox and Jackson call the ‘progressive’ element. According to Cox and Jackson (2010 p.) “Developmental coaching approach, which, as well as addressing immediate needs, takes a longer term, more evolutionary perspective.” Similarly, Berman and Bradt (2006, p. 245) suggest that a personal development intervention tends to be “relatively long-term.”

Developmental coaching requires a greater amount of time because internal psychological progress is at the heart of the process. This approach to coaching is more open to learning from the past and using previous experiences as a platform for personal development. Developmental coaching is less interested in quick wins and short concrete progress, and instead aims for significant new awareness and growth opportunities. Cox and Jackson (2010 p.) suggest that development “must involve progress and expansion of some kind.” Depending on the approach or target of development, the progress and expansion would be either very broad or quite narrow.

The developmental coaching approach has two strands. The first is rooted in lifecourse development theories and is well described by Palmer and Panchal (2011). This approach takes account of how motivation changes across the lifespan and suggests that coaches need to be aware of this and other lifecourse issues. The second adult development approach is based on constructive-developmental theories, which claim that as people develop they become more aware of and open to a mature understanding of authority and responsibility, and display greater tolerance to ambiguity. Coaching from this perspective is predicated upon the idea of stages of development and it suggests that coaching at each stage needs to focus on stage-of-development related issues (Bachkirova 2011; Bachkirova & Cox, 2007, Berger, 2006). It is this latter type of development that mostly informs relationship coaching.

So what is relationship coaching?

Relationship coaching, I suggest, incorporates goal-focused coaching’s emphasis on establishing a clear goal and creating an effective action plan for

achieving the goal. Moreover, relationship coaching embraces many other features of goal-focused coaching, such as the need to brainstorm for creative solutions and the requirement for the coachee to obtain the requisite skills and strategies. In orientation too, relationship coaching is broadly forward focused, although it gives greater weight to understanding the lessons from past experiences. However, unlike goal-focused coaching, relationship coaching is also highly developmental insofar as it does not adopt an incremental approach but rather aims to foster personal development and attitude change in addition to skills development. In keeping with a developmental approach, the focus is also on sustaining results over time, rather than achieving a 'quick fix'. Yet whereas personal development is generally not instantaneous or even discernable, relationship coaching needs to achieve clear progress pretty quickly; for whilst development is gradual and organic, relationship coaching cannot be a lifelong process.

Relationship coaching is cognitive-behavioural insofar as it aims to facilitate self-awareness through an exploration of internal dialogue and automatic thoughts; the development of sustainable thinking skills and the imperative to look at different perspectives. RC coaches may also draw on specific cognitive-behavioural techniques such as the exploration of the client's beliefs and the consequences of holding those beliefs if they have been unproductive in the past – activities not associated with goal-focused coaching. I would argue that relationship coaching could be suitably termed 'transformational coaching', as it aims to help the coachee to think and act differently in response to a dilemma. Whereas goal-focused coaching involves informational learning – whereby the coachee acquires information to better serve the pursuit of the goal – relationship coaching is more developmental and encourages transformational learning.

Whilst goal-focused coaching aims to modify people's actions (external), relationship coaching aims to change people's attitudes (internal). This distinction is akin to Peltier's (2001) bifurcation of coaching into two main categories: executive coaching (internal, attitudinal) and a day-to-day management activity (external). It also shares some similarity with Summerfield's (2006) division between 'acquisitional' coaching (acquires a new ability) versus 'transformational' coaching (undergoes personal change). Goal-focused coaching is essentially about raising performance and supporting effective action, whereas development coaching focuses on addressing feelings and generating deep reflection (Ives & Cox, 2012). Goal-focused coaching primarily aims for a level of operational change, rather than psychological restructuring (Hall & Duval 2004); its foremost intention

is to promote immediate enhancement of productivity, rather than personal transformation of the coachee (Stewart, Palmer, Wilkin & Kerrin, 2008).

By contrast, relationship coaching embraces an exploratory style that is more in line with developmental coaching and is less pragmatic (Snyder, 1995). Hudson (1999 p. 20) similarly separates 'coaching for being' and 'coaching for performance' – inner versus outer work. In the same vein, Brockbank (2008 p. 133) distinguishes between coaching that is functionalist and operational (equilibrium) versus transformative and engagement (disequilibrium). The former seeks "to enhance performance in a given function" rather than seeking to achieve fundamental change. By contrast, 'transformative' coaching involves radical change, and looks to question fundamental assumptions and prevailing discourses. Relationship coaching shares with goal-focused coaching an interest in analysing and solving a problem, but it also recognises that the route to a positive outcome travels through personal development territory.

Personal development in relationship coaching

Whilst a great deal of development coaching is based on the literature on life span development, chiefly the work by Erikson (1974) and Levinson (1978), for relationship coaching the work by Kegan (1994) into cognitive development is more relevant, as it focuses explicitly on how personal development affects our ability to foster effective relationships. Bachkirova and Cox (2007 p. 331) argue that Kegan (1982) offers "the most comprehensive description of underlying structures that give rise to the natural emergence of the self in relation to others."

Kegan's (1982, 1994) work is key to understanding the kind of healthy approach to relationships that relationship coaching is aiming to nurture. As a person matures they find it possible to interrelate in a more sophisticated manner, displaying enhanced autonomy and 'separation' so that the pursuit of a relationship is not burdened by a high level of dependence, yet also displaying a tendency to relatedness and 'inclusion' whereby the coachee is adept at fostering intimacy with another. While seemingly contradictory, Kegan's work shows that they are in fact interdependent. The more a person is able to feel secure in themselves, the more that will be able to foster true intimacy.

Kegan further shows how people's perceptions of relationships are determined by what they take to be self and what they take to be other and the relationship between them – what he terms 'subject-object relations'. As Bachkirova and Cox (2007 p.) explain: "Things that are 'subject' in this theory are by definition experienced as unquestioned, simply a part of the self. Things that are 'subject' cannot be observed because they are a part of the individual, they cannot be reflected upon – that would require the ability to stand back and take a look at them. While things that are 'subject' *have* us, we *have* things that are 'object'".

Things that are 'object' in our lives are 'those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalise, assimilate, or otherwise operate upon' (Kegan, 1994: 32). The more individuals can take as 'object', the more they can examine and act upon more things. To be subject is to 'see with' rather than to 'see through'. As Drath (1990 p. 486) explains: "We see with our culture-bound norms and expectations, accept them as given, and cannot examine them for what they are – that is, we cannot see through them." Whitmore (2003) similarly argues that, "I am able to control only that of which I am aware. That of which I am not aware controls me." Therefore, the ability to reflect on experiences and raise awareness of the dynamics of one's life are essential to making effective decisions and choices. In developmental coaching raising awareness not only helps one see things that were previously overlooked, but moreover to look at these things through different eyes.

In a similar vein, relationship coaching aims to help the coachee to be able to approach their relations as 'object', in order to be able act upon the way they handle relationships instead of being in the thrall of their preconceptions. As Fitzgerald and Berger (2002: 31) say: 'one of the most powerful interventions coaches can provide is simply help to keep critical insights alive for their clients'. A key role of the relationship coach is to show understanding of the coachee as he is, but also to show an understanding of the coachee as he/she could be and is becoming (Kegan, 1982).

There are two way of approaching relationships. The first is the 'simple way', which is generally how people enter relationships when they are young and flexible. The second is by entering into it more consciously, which is typical of older singles. Then issues cannot generally be ignored, but rather they need to be addressed. Relationship coaching is about enhancing the coachee's ability to stand back and take a more objective look at this aspect

of their lives, as unquestioned assumptions in an era of enhanced sophistication may spell disaster.

What does relationship coaching seek to change?

A key element of developmental coaching is that it seeks to affect some permanent change. Cox and Jackson (2010 p.) perceive this to mean that “that the solution should extend beyond the presenting trigger and create some greater, sustainable capacity in the client.” In relationship coaching this means that while the coachee is looking simply to form a lasting relationship, the coach recognises that this may require issues to be addressed that are not the declared reason for the coaching. It is likely to be necessary to address one or more ‘secondary’ issues in order to attain the principle goal.

In developmental coaching, and relationship coaching likewise, something needs to shift – and rarely will it be a small technical alteration. Even if the resolution manifests itself in minimal outward change, usually more significant internal awareness would have occurred for the change to be sustainable and result in the desired outcome.

However, whilst in many forms of developmental coaching the coaching addresses wider personal development, in relationship coaching the focus remains on the presenting issue as much as possible. Where the benefits extend beyond the issue of relationships, this is a bonus and an unintended consequence. In this respect, relationship coaching is relatively goal-focused. Relationship coaching does not deliberately target a wider impact on the maturity and development of the coachee, but the literature suggests that the systemic and integrated nature of the human psyche means that this is invariably the case.

For the same reason, relationship coaching does not explicitly seek cognitive-structural change, which is a long and evolutionary process. Developmentalists themselves recognise the diverse ways in which people develop (Bachkirova, 2010); thus, cognitive structural change is not the only way maturity occurs; progress can occur without it involving change to an entirely new level of development (although there is no denying that reaching a higher level of development renders the person more functional).

Relationship coaching is intrinsically tied with reflection on and improved human interaction, by helping the coachee to be better attenuated to

nuances in social interaction that may previously have gone unnoticed. Early understanding of the social realities that affect them is something that increases as cognitive development occurs. In relationship coaching, success is measured by “sustained application of coaching development, specifically the knowledge, skills, attitudes and other qualities acquired during coaching” (Stewart, Palmer, Wilkin & Kerrin, 2008 p. 32).

Hall and Duval (2004), drawing on the work of Argyris and Schön (1974), argue that there are different levels of change: modifying existing skills and behaviour, learning new behaviours and beliefs, changing identity or sense of self, and experiencing a whole new way of living. These ‘levels of change’ correctly represent the different approaches to change within coaching. Goal-focused coaching operates at the first level of change, whereas developmental coaching helps the person learn new behaviours and beliefs. Put somewhat differently, goal-focused coaching fosters regulation *by* the self, whereas developmental coaching fosters regulation *of* the self. Whereas goal-focused approaches are satisfied to focus on ‘overlying’ issues, developmental coaching addresses ‘underlying’ issues (Jackson & McKergow, 2008) – and relationship coaching in this respect is very much developmental.

However, while relationship coaching looks for lasting change, it does not seek to achieve a new fixed level of personal development. On the contrary, it works with the person as he or she is at present. Several traditions in psychology and philosophy (e.g. Gestalt) claim that transformation of the self is possible only when a person is fully oneself as he or she is now. It is argued that the intention of becoming someone that you are not can lead to creating an abstract ideal that because of its attractiveness may justify lack of full engagement in the process of understanding the self as it is. Krishnamurti (1991: 160), for example, calls pursuing an ideal ‘an accepted and respected postponement’.

Furthermore, coaching in all forms must be led by the agenda of the coachee. In relationship coaching, the coachee does not come for personal development but for help in pursuing a relationship. It is not for the coach to decide to impose personal development upon the coach even if motivated by the best of helpful intentions. As Kegan (1982 p. 295) wisely notes: “among the many things from which a practitioner’s clients need protection is the practitioner’s hopes for the client’s future, however benign and sympathetic these hopes may be.”

Thus, relationship coaching is not about trying to elevate coachees into a new state of self, but to work with them as they are in their existing level of maturity and development. Explicitly pursuing personal development is not a part of relationship, although by stretching the coachee within a relationship framework such progress is a likely and welcome development.

As in all forms of coaching questioning and listening skills are the key instruments of the coach. However, in relationship coaching questions are meant to be more reflective, probing and challenging than in goal-focused coaching. Questions focus on thinking processes and not merely on ascertaining facts. They seek to uncover not just what the coachee is doing but how and why (Sheldon, 2002). How the coachee came to a conclusion is as important as the conclusion itself. Similarly, listening is more proactive than in goal-focused approaches insofar as the coaching is sniffing out possible issues. Listening is also more diagnostic in that the coach is actively seeking to interpret what the coachee is saying to formulate an hypothesis of where the problem lies so as to test those insight with the coachee.

A relationship coaching model

Based the foregoing discussion, I tentatively propose a model of relationship coaching based on the acronym RELATE. As is true for most coaching models, the stages are not strictly linear and, depending on the situation and the style of the coach, some stages may overlap and interact. In almost all scenarios, coaching is an iterative, cyclical process, in which the various stages repeat themselves as the coachee progresses towards achieving his or her goal.

R – Reality	Understanding the current state of play and what has gone on in the past
E – Exploration	Gaining a deeper understanding of the coachee’s experiences, perspectives and attitudes
L – Lessons/ learning	Teasing out what has and what can the coachee learning from this
A – Action plan	What the coachee can now do differently and upon which to create strategy
T – Take action	Implement new strategy
E – Evaluate	Review and analyse whether progress has been made

A brief description of each stage now follows:

Reality – Relationship coaching is a non-therapeutic intervention, therefore it focuses on the past only to a sufficient degree to work out what is best done in the future. It does not delve into the past beyond what is required to form a coherent picture of the coachee's challenge. However, because relationship coaching is a learning approach, it is based heavily on understanding the lessons to be gained from passed experiences, so the coaching begins with a thorough fact finding activity to clarify what has gone on until the present. The 'reality' stage serves several vital purposes: It brings key information to the fore for the coachee, it directs attention towards facts and away from negative emotions, it enable the coach to get a reasonable understanding of the coachee's situation and, crucially, listening carefully and without judgement to the coachee's story build trust and rapport which sets the platform for the important coaching work to follow (Whitmore, 2003).

Exploration – Once the current reality has been established to a reasonable level of clarity, the coach will be looking to ask probing and challenging questions to access the possible underlying reasons behind the coachee's choices and key events in his or her relationship life. Instead of brainstorming for options, as we have in goal-focused coaching (Whitmore, 2003; Ives 2010), in relationship coaching we brainstorm for lessons from past experiences. This is what Goodman (2002 p. 138) calls 'asking for meaning'. Some coaches will find that some way through the reality stage, they already are finding useful and meaningful 'exploration' questions to ask. I would recommend, in keeping with many other coaching texts, to allow for the reality stage to be given due time before pushing forward with the more invasive and robust exploratory questions. As already noted, by showing interest in the coachee's story trust is build, as the coachee experiences the attention and commitment of the coach. Additionally, some initial thoughts may arise in the mind of the coach, but without the complete picture these could turn out to be entirely wrong. As will be explained in the next section, in coaching the order is always: listen, then ask.

Lessons/learning – Whilst the exploration stage may throw up numerous interesting and valuable areas for growth and change, it is the purpose of coaching to zoom in on where the 'issue' lies. The coach is looking to work with the coachee to understand where the 'blockage' is. According to Peterson's (2006) constraint model, development bottlenecks along the pipeline impede progress towards the coachee's goal. Coaching aims to unblock these constraints, to ensure continuous progress. So the learning at this stage needs to be deep and thorough, and it needs to have practical

implications. Very abstract learning, highly theoretical insights into life may struggle to find their way into practical change. Thus this stage may in reality involve several iterations if the conversation begins at a very philosophical level. The learning is not limited to exploring past experience, but also future learning that is fostered by the coaching. For example, the coach may ask the coachee to maintain reflective and observational logs, experimenting with problem-solving or communication patterns. Flaherty (2005, p. 9) argues that the role of coaching is alter the coachees “structure of interpretation”. However, the coaching must ultimately inform the practical reality of the coachee in real and tangible ways.

Action plan – The aim of relationship coaching is not enlightenment; it is enhanced capability to form and secure a lasting relationship. Thus, the most important stage is creating an action plan which specifies what changes in attitude and behaviour the coachee can make. The plan may include additional reading and learning or skills development, as well as practical steps. As explained earlier, this is an experimentation process whereby ideas are tested ‘in the field’ and the learning is fed back into the coaching process. Many coachee’s, if not guided towards a forward-focus, will direct all their attention towards moaning about how usefulness men or women are, which leads to nothing positive. Working towards and on an action plan reflects the strong commitment of the coaching to prioritise envisioning and acting to create a better future, and not being dragged down by past frustrations. Determining what goes into the action plan is the task of the coachee, but the coach can assist in several important ways. Firstly, change is rarely easy and when it comes down to practice the coachee may be reluctant to commit to the hard work. The coach can provide encouragement by reminding the coachee of why this action point was considered important and by providing general support (Ives, 2010). More importantly, the coach can provide insight into creating an effective action plan. Effective goal pursuit involves a combination of distal and proximal goals (Latham, 2007). Short-term planning is essential to ensure proximal goals are appropriate to prevailing circumstances (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007), whereas distal goals provide consistency and direction. Goal setting theory suggests that short-term goals cannot be planned too far in advance as the chances of change are too great, but rather they need to be considered much closer to their actual execution: “Thus, it makes sense to plan in general terms, chart a few steps, get there, reassess, and plan the next bits” (Carver & Scheier, 1998 p. 256).

Take action – By this point, the coach should have established a high level of credibility and trust. The coach must hold the coachee accountable for the actions he or she is committed to in the action plan. Clearly, often the

coachee will fail to implement the plan as agreed or will do so only in part. The role of the coach is not to become despondent, but rather to view this as a further learning opportunity and to support the coachee in finding more effective ways of succeeding in implementing the plan (Rogers, 2008).

Evaluate – Coaching needs to measure progress against some benchmark of success. The coaching should address whether the coachee is making the desired progress, whether that is in terms of awareness, new skills or greater relationship success. Furthermore, it has been my experience that the coachee will often want to come back to the coach to review the situation. If they are still single, they will discuss further strategies, and if in a relationship they usually wish to discuss matters that are worrying them. This would be the opportunity to revisit previous attitudes to explore how they may have changed and whether any adjustments or skills have been sustained.

Conclusion

This paper takes some first steps towards developing a theoretical basis and practical guide to relationship coaching focused primarily on singles. It suggests that relationship coaching needs to fuse key aspects of goal-focused coaching and developmental coaching to formulate an approach to coaching that focuses on a defined issue – seeking a lasting relationship – through fostering greater awareness and personal growth. While relationship coaching does not seek to change the person per se, it recognises typically that the coachee needs to address some underlying issues. The main purpose of relationship coaching is to ensure that the coachee has the requisite attitudes and skills for relationship success. This was distilled into a new six-part model for relationship coaching.

Relationship coaching is therefore somewhere in middle of the idealised forms of goal-focused and developmental coaching. It is forward focused but still emphasises learning from past experience; it is non-directive insofar as the coach is not an advice giver but it does contain an element of diagnosis; the coaching alliance is not in itself the solution (as say in therapeutic forms of coaching) but a strong coaching relationship is vital to support the challenging developmental work.

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