Enhancing goal self-concordance through coaching

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Objectives: *Research shows that self-concordant goals are more readily pursued, better achieved, and their attainment can lead to increases in well-being. This study assesses whether executive coaching in turn affects self-concordance.*

Design: *We hypothesised that the heightened awareness produced by coaching leads to changes in self-concordance (type of motivation) and commitment (a measure of the amount of motivation). A single group design with repeated measures was used.*

Method: *26 participants – all senior managers in business – identified three goals and then received a one-to-one coaching session focused on one goal, but received no coaching on the remaining goals.*

Results: *The hypothesis was supported, with significant changes (increases) in self-concordance and commitment for the coached goal. There were also significant increases in self-concordance and commitment for some of the other non-coached goals.*

Conclusion: *These results are discussed with reference to the goal attainment and coaching literature, and suggestions made for further research.*

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY (SELIGMAN, 1999), aims to apply rigorous psychological science to the study of optimal functioning and positive characteristic in individuals and organisations – as opposed to dysfunction and pathology. Since its inception, research into positive psychology has grown rapidly with the publication of hundreds of research papers, journal special issues, and books dedicated to the topic (Linley, Joseph, Harrington & Wood, 2006). Like positive psychology, coaching is also an area enjoying rapid growth. Yet this is occurring without any substantial research basis – at least to date. This project was designed to provide one small step towards an understanding of the processes through which coaching may be effective.

Coaching may be defined as 'a solution-focused, result-oriented systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of work performance and the self-directed learning and personal growth of the coachee' (Grant, 2001). Kauffman and Scoular (2004) reviewed coaching from a positive psychology perspective and found that many coaching methods could be traced to underlying psychological theory, (e.g. behavioural approaches, cognitive behavioural therapy, brief solution-focused therapy, etc.), but that despite the popularity and rapid growth of coaching, there was very little evidence of its efficacy. Grant (2001) examined peer-reviewed journals in psychology and found 1435 citations to coaching, but of these only 17 represented actual scientific studies of adult coaching, and many of these 17 were single-participant studies.

While evidence is beginning to emerge that coaching is effective (e.g. Green, Oades & Grant, 2006; Spence & Grant, in press), less is known about the mechanisms or processes through which coaching may have its effects. The possible link between self-concordance and coaching has been postulated (Linley, 2004) but has to date not been empirically tested. When people change their goals, they typically do so towards goals which are more self-concordant, and consequently experience increases in well-being and goal attainment (Sheldon, Arndt & Houser-Marko, 2003). Joseph and Linley (2004, pp.356–357) suggested that this evidence is part of a growing body of evidence for the actualising

tendency, and for the organismic valuing process (OVP) (Rogers, 1964). The actualising tendency implies that people can be trusted to know their own best directions in life, and the OVP refers to people's innate ability to know what is important to them and what is essential for a fulfilling life. From these premises, people are considered to be acting self-concordantly when they are pursuing the directions in life that are right and fulfilling for them. On the basis of the goal change literature (e.g. Sheldon *et al.*, 2003; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995), we hypothesised that one of the directions through which coaching may be effective is by enhancing intrinsic motivation and enabling people to follow more self-concordant goals.

The *Self-Concordance Model* of healthy goal striving and internalised motivation (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999) describes self-concordant goals as those that are 'consistent with our developing interests and core values'. The self-concordance model posits that when pursuing self-concordant goals, success is achieved through the greater sustained effort put into achieving them, and the greater well-being which follows when we achieve them (enabled by the satisfaction of basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness). In a series of studies, Sheldon and Elliot (1999) showed that their model provided a satisfactory fit to three longitudinal data sets and was independent of the effects of self-efficacy, implementation intentions, avoidance framing, and life skills. Hence, the self-concordance model would suggest that the more self-concordant a goal is, the more readily it will be pursued and achieved, and the more well-being will be experienced as a result. Given these apparent beneficial effects of (greater) self-concordance, and since coaching is commonly applied to assist individuals in working towards and achieving their goals, the question arises as to how coaching might affect self-concordance.

Sheldon and Elliot (1999) concluded in their studies of self-concordance: '… along with Rogers (1961), we believe that individuals have innate developmental trends and propensities that may be given voice by an organismic valuing process occurring within them. This voice can be very difficult to hear, but the current research suggests that the ability to hear it is of crucial importance for the pusuit of happiness' (p.495). In other words, if people can be helped to hear their inner voice, they will be better able to make more concordant goal choices, or to increase their degree of concordance for existing choices – with the beneficial consequences alluded to above. A primary focus of this study is to ask whether coaching might lead to changes in self-concordance through allowing this inner voice to be heard.

This study brings together the recent positive psychology approaches noted above, and coaching. The specific one-to-one coaching approach used was the **GROW** model (Whitmore, 2002), in which the first author has extensive experience. This approach assumes the existence of an actualising tendency that the coach calls forth. Whitmore (2002) suggests that 'we are like an acorn, which contains within it all the potential to be a magnificent oak tree. We need nourishment, encouragement, and the light to reach toward, but the oaktreeness is already within' (p.9). This fundamental assumption of the GROW model is consistent with the central premises of the self-concordance model and the actualising tendency view of human nature.

Within the context of an overall objective to raise awareness and reponsibility in the mind of a coachee, GROW is an acronym for the stages of the process: setting a clear **G**oal for the session; considering the current **R**eality; considering the **O**ptions thoroughly; and identifying what the coachee **W**ill do. This process, which is also characterised by following the interest of the coachee (and so allowing the inner voice to be heard), is intended to lead to a heightened level of awareness about the goals and their meaning and importance to the coachee, and specific actions to pursue them. This heightened awareness may lead to goals being changed or abandoned.

This study focuses on the extent to which coaching changes certain aspects of motivation: our hypothesis is that the heightened awareness produced by coaching (using GROW) will result in changes in self-concordance (type of motivation). In addition, given the nature of the GROW process, it is expected that there will also be changes in commitment (a measure of the amount of motivation). The study covers new ground in examining the effects of coaching on self-concordance. Drawing together these two promising new fields of research – self-concordance and coaching – may enable more options in the coach's repertoire.

We hypothesised that there would be a significant change (either positive or negative) in self-concordance measures and commitment measures in the coaching condition. A positive change would be indicative of increases in self-concordance and commitment (becoming more intrinsically engaged with a goal) and a negative change would be indicative of decreases in self-concordance and commitment (ultimately to the point of withdrawing from the goal). The direction of this change was not considered fundamental to the current research question, because our focus was on the change itself (i.e. shifts in self-concordance and commitment facilitated by coaching), rather than the use of coaching to increase self-concordance.

We did not specify directional hypotheses for the non-coached goals, because there were two equally plausible scenarios that we wished to test. First, the non-coached goals may not show any significant shifts in self-concordance and commitment, thus demonstrating the specific efficacy of coaching intervention. Second, the non-coached goals may show significant shifts in self-concordance and commitment, through the 'spillover' or practice effects of participants applying the coaching lessons from the coached goal to other goals in their lives.

Method

Participants

Participants were a convenience sample drawn from the business and personal network of the first author. Twenty-six individuals took part, all graduates or postgraduates, and all were senior managers in organisations of varying sizes. There were nine males and 17 females, with an age range of 27 to 84 years, with a mean age of 47.9 years for males and 39.3 years for females. (The 84-year-old was a male retired Chief Executive still with a number of active interests; the next oldest participant was aged 58 years.) Participants did not receive any incentive for participation other than contributing to research and gaining a one-to-one coaching session free of charge.

Measures

Self-concordance was measured using the *Perceived Locus of Causality* (PLOC) (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999, following Ryan & Connell, 1989). This enabled participants to rate (using a seven-point scale anchored by 1='not at all' and 7='extremely') their reasons for pursuing each goal in terms of each of four reasons: external, introjected, identified, and intrinsic. The external reason was *'because somebody else wants you to or because the situation demands it'*. The introjected reason was *'because you would feel ashamed, guilty, or anxious if you didn't'*. The identified reason was *'because you really believe it's an important goal to have'*. The intrinsic reason was *'because of the fun and enjoyment that it provides you'*. Following Sheldon and Elliot (1999), a composite self-concordance variable was created by summing the identified and intrinsic scores, and subtracting the introjected and external scores.

Alignment with Personal Values was assessed using the same seven-point scale with the question *'To what extent do you think this goal reflects your personal values?'*. This measure was included to give an additional perspective on self-concordance.

Commitment was assessed using the seven-point scale with the question *'How committed are you to this goal?'*.

Design

A single group pre-post design with repeated measures was used. The independent variable was the coaching condition which had two levels (A: one-to-one coaching, B: no-coaching). Participants identified three goals and then received a single one-to-one coaching session focused on one of the goals selected at random (condition A); but received no coaching on the other two goals (condition B). There was no specific intervention in respect of the two non-coached goals (apart from the fact that they belong to the same participant who was coached on the other goal). This raised the possibility of some spillover (or practice) effect onto the non-coached goals, which formed the focus of our second research question. All coaching sessions were conducted by the first author, who is a senior qualified coach.

Three dependent variables were measured before and immediately after the coaching session, for all three goals (i.e. for both conditions A & B): type of motivation (or *self-concordance*), *alignment with personal values*, and *commitment*.

Procedure

Preliminary testing. A trial run of the study with draft questionnaires was conducted by the first author, with a trained counsellor as a participant. This led to a number of refinements to the documentation and procedure. In particular, the number of goals was reduced from four to three, so that the coaching would be focused on one goal only (rather than two). This new format had the dual advantage of reducing the time spent on form filling for the participants, and also making the coaching process more realistic. In (real life) practice, coaching sessions are usually focused on a single goal.

Preparation for coaching (participants). Participants were invited by a standardised e-mail to take part in a study designed to examine the way in which executive coaching affects various aspects of motivation. The invitation offered a free one-to-one coaching session with a professional business coach, and also explained that the study would involve participants in setting goals, receiving coaching on one of them, and answering a few questions in connection with the goals at the session and on three occasions afterwards.

For the purposes of the study, a goal was described as being *'Something you think about, plan for, carry out, and sometimes (though not always) complete or succeed at'* (Little, 1993). The guidance note also explained that the goals selected should be not long-term or major life-changing endeavours, but *'the sort of thing you would normally expect to work towards over a period of two months or so'*. The guidance also contained examples of the sorts of goal that people might choose, and space to make an initial brainstorm list of possible goals. Participants were instructed to then select the goals that were most important to them, and for which they would potentially like to receive a coaching session. The coach then reviewed these goals to ensure that as far as possible they met the criteria for the study. This included a check to ensure that the goals were not simply restatements of each other.

The participant selected one of their three goals at random by selecting one of three folded Post-It notes on which were written (and hidden by the folding) the three numbers 1, 2, and 3 respectively, relating to their three goals. The coaching session followed, using the GROW model as a structure for the coaching, that is, employing a sensitive, considerate and client-centred ethos and checking with the participant on a couple of occasions that they were comfortable with the process and procedure so far, and that they were happy to continue.

The actual coaching sessions (all on a one-to-one basis) took place in a variety of locations including the offices of the participants, the office of the coach, and the homes of the participants. In all cases, the environment was appropriate for a confidential coaching discussion.

Ethical considerations. From an early stage of the study design, due consideration was

given to the relevant ethical considerations, and in particular the need to minimise the potential risk inherent in coaching, namely that depending on the nature of the goal, thinking and talking about a goal might lead to distress. For example, the coaching might lead to a realisation that the motivation for, perceived ability for, or opportunity to pursue, a particular goal is low, which might lead to the goal being abandoned, possibly resulting in distress. (On the other hand, such realisations might also, depending on the goal, lead to relief and gratitude in the participant.) Accordingly, suitable guidance to ensure that as far as possible only suitable goals were chosen was provided. All of the relevant ethical guidelines per the British Psychological Society were observed appropriately. This included participants being asked for, and giving, their fully informed consent to be involved in the study.

Results

Does coaching influence self-concordance?

Table 1 shows the summary statistics for participants both before and after the coaching intervention, and also for the difference score ('after' minus 'before'), for each of goals 1, 2, and 3. For goal 1, the goal for which the participant received coaching, the mean scores for self-concordance, alignment with personal values, and commitment, all showed an increase following the coaching intervention. The same pattern emerged for goal 2 and goal 3. Of further note is that the difference scores for goal 1 (the coached goal) are greater than those for goals 2 and 3 (the non-coached goals).

Using a series of Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests we examined the statistical significance of these differences. This conservative approach (rather than *t*-tests) was followed since scrutiny of the data suggested they did not fully meet the criteria required to use parametric tests. For *self-concordance* scores as measured before and after the coaching intervention: for goal 1, there was a significant increase ($Z=-2.38$, $p<0.05$, two-tailed test); for goal 2, there was also a significant increase ($Z=-2.27$, $p<0.05$, two-tailed test); but for goal 3, the increase was not significant at the five per cent level ($Z=-0.31$, $p>0.05$, two-tailed test).

For *alignment with personal values* scores as measured before and after the coaching intervention: for goal 1, there was a significant increase ($Z=-2.65$, $p<0.01$, two-tailed test); for goal 3, there was also a significant increase ($Z=-2.14$, $p<0.05$, two-tailed test); but for goal 2, the increase was not significant at the five per cent level ($Z=-1.79$, $p>0.05$, two-tailed test).

For *commitment* scores as measured before and after the coaching intervention: for goal 1, there was a significant increase ($Z=-3.58$, $p<0.001$, two-tailed test); for goal 2, there was also a significant increase ($Z=-2.01$, $p<0.05$, two-tailed test); but for goal 3, the increase was not significant at the five per cent level ($Z=-1.80$, $p>0.05$, two-tailed test).

Does coaching influence self-concordance? Qualitative responses

Participants provided comments as to why they thought their self-concordance scores had changed after coaching. The following qualitative comments provide insights into how coaching served to influence self-concordance: *'I now 'own' the goal – note change of description. I'm choosing it, before I felt it was something worthwhile to do*'; *'I have realised that it [achieving the goal] would make me happier, rather than be a chore – it really will help*'; and *'I am now excited about this goal and realise how much fun it is going to be to do.'* However, as we had expected, not all shifts in self-concordance were in a positive direction. One person noted that they *'Realised the goal was wrong. Not about doing it more, but about doing it better and as natural part of my work.'*

Correlations between measures

In order to assess whether the effects for the dependent variables were simply a reflection of the variables measuring the same underlying construct, we conducted Pearson's correlations. For measures taken *before* the coaching intervention, self-concordance

Table 1: Self-assessment scores for participants both before and after the coaching intervention.

	Condition A – Chosen Goal Condition			Condition B – Alternate Goal Condition					
	Goal 1			Goal 2			Goal 3		
Variable M (SD)	Before	After	Diff	Before	After	Diff	Before	After	Diff
Self-concordance	2.58 (4.37)	4.15 (3.95)	1.58* (2.97)	1.62 (5.25)	3.00 (4.72)	1.38* (2.28)	3.58 (4.37)	3.81 (3.71)	0.23 (4.24)
Personal values	5.19 (1.70)	5.65 (1.20)	0.46** (0.76)	4.77 (1.45)	5.15 (1.32)	0.38 (1.06)	5.42 (0.90)	5.85 (0.78)	0.42* (0.95)
Commitment	5.23 (1.21)	6.35 (0.85)	1.12*** (1.18)	5.15 (1.43)	5.73 (1.25)	0.58* (1.27)	5.77 (1.07)	6.12 (0.95)	0.35 (0.94)

Note: Difference scores computed by subtracting 'before' scores from 'after' scores. *$p<.05$ **$p<.01$ ***$p<.001$

correlated at $r=.37$, $p<.01$ with alignment with personal values and at $r=.35$, $p<.01$, with commitment. Alignment with personal values and commitment correlated at $r=.27$, $p<.05$. For measures taken *after* the coaching intervention, self-concordance correlated at $r=.37$, $p<.01$ with alignment with personal values and at $r=.34$, $p<.01$, with commitment. Alignment with personal values and commitment correlated at $r=.41$, $p<.01$. These findings indicate, first, that the variables were related but not substantially overlapping, and second, that the associations between variables were stable and consistent both pre- and post- the coaching intervention.

Gender differences

Gender differences were not a focus of the study design. However, analysis of the self-concordance scores (nine males, 17 females) revealed that the mean self-concordance score across all three goals, measured before the coaching intervention, was 3.29 (SD=4.54) for females and 1.78 (SD=4.76) for males. Although based on a small sample, these findings perhaps point to gender differences being a focus for future investigation.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that one of the mechanisms through which coaching may be effective as a goal attainment support process is through raising people's levels of self-concordance with their goals. Previous research has shown that self-concordant goals are more likely to be achieved and lead to better outcomes when they are achieved (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon *et al.*, 2003); these findings suggest that this may be at least one of the mechanisms of action of successful executive coaching.

Following a single one-to-one coaching session with a trained and experience executive coach, participants demonstrated significant overall increases in each of goal self-concordance, alignment with personal values, and commitment to the goal, in relation to the goal on which they were coached.

There were also spillover or learning effects that influenced the second and third non-coached goals. Scores for alignment with personal values increased for the third goal but not the second goal, and scores for commitment increased for the second goal but not the third goal. Given that the goals were randomly selected (in terms of which goal was coached), this pattern of findings is not meaningful, but does suggest that there are some spillover or practice effects of being coached even on a single goal, that then translate into effects on other, non-coached goals. However, we do note that the goals may not all have been fully independent of each other, which may to a degree mitigate

the extent of these spillover effects. This finding, although preliminary and in need of replication, suggests that there is a potential generalisability effect for coaching; that is, the positive effects of coaching may extend beyond the specific foci of the coaching session. Qualitative participant comments suggest the possibility of this effect, for example: *'Might be slightly more motivated all round as a result of working successfully on other issue'* (case 12).

Another potential explanation for these effects is that the three goals were in some way linked to each other. The qualitative comments obtained from a number of participants made this point explicitly, for example: *'Being able to see that all three goals were linked'* (case 11); *'Realisation that all three goals that I identified were interlinked and that by clearly defining what I want to achieve I can deliver on all three'* (case 18).

Turning to limitations and future research directions, there are a number of ways in which the current study can be improved upon. The current sample size is relatively small for traditional social psychological research, but equally more than respectable when compared to much extant coaching research. The fact that we were able to detect significant effects with this small sample size is indicative of potentially large effect sizes in the population (Cohen, 1992), which is encouraging for future coaching and motivation research.

The present study used only one coaching session, and did not use a control group, whereas coaching is more typically carried out in a number of sessions conducted over a period. However, with significant findings as a result of a single coaching intervention, it is possible that more extended coaching interventions would demonstrate even stronger effects. This should be a focus of future research, especially in relation to the stability of self-concordance over time. More fine-grained individual-level analyses of changes in self-concordance that lead to either enhanced or decreased goal commitment and goal attainment are also warranted, since although our overall findings demonstrated that coaching enhanced self-concordance on the mean level, there was individual variability in this between participants. Research into the effects of coaching on less self-concordant goals (e.g. goals imposed by organisational employers rather than selected by participants themselves) are also warranted. There is also scope for exploring the effect of coaching on other aspects of concordance – for example, Sheldon and Houser-Marko (2001) found an 'upward spiral' effect of increased well-being. Future research may wish to consider how this effect may be accentuated through coaching, both in relation to executive coaching and to life coaching (e.g. Green *et al.*, 2006).

The results of this study provide preliminary support for the view that coaching using the GROW model can lead to changes in goal self-concordance, alignment with personal values, and goal commitment. These findings suggest that one of the mechanisms or processes through which coaching may be effective is through enhancing self-concordance of the goals that people are striving to achieve. These findings add to the small but growing body of research into the processes that may underlie coaching, and indicate fruitful avenues for further research.

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