Enhancing coaching skills and emotional intelligence through training

Anthony M. Grant

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to compare the impact of a long-term (13-week, spaced learning) with a short-term (two-day, block intensive) coaching skills training programme on participants’ coaching skills and emotional intelligence.

Design/methodology/approach – In the study 23 participants completed a 13-week coaching skills training course which consisted of weekly 2.5-hour workshops and action learning. In comparison, 20 participants completed a two-day “Manager as Coach” training programme, with a three-week action learning break between day one and day two. Both training programmes used the same coaching frameworks, with the two-day programme being more condensed.

Findings – Participation in the 13-week training course was associated with increases in both goal-focused coaching skills and emotional intelligence, whereas the two-day block intensive training was associated with increased goal-focused coaching skills, but not emotional intelligence. Further, the magnitude of the increase in goal-focused coaching skills was less for the two-day programme than for the 13-week programme.

Research limitations/implications – These studies used a quasi-experimental pre-post design, and the long-term effects were not measured. Future research should use control groups and random assignment to short- or long-term training.

Practical implications – The main implications of these findings are that, while short, intensive programmes may improve participants’ goal-focused coaching skills and emotional intelligence, organisations seeking to deepen the impact of “Manager as Coach” training programmes and improve the underlying emotional intelligence of participants should use a spaced learning approach over a number of weeks.

Originality/value – This is the first study to examine the impact of different approaches to coaching skills training and their impact on emotional intelligence.

Keywords Coaching, Emotional intelligence, Management development, Workplace training

Introduction
Coaching skills have become an indispensable part of the contemporary workplace. Managers are expected to be skilled at coaching their staff to enhance employee engagement, wellbeing and performance, and to facilitate organisational and personal change (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, 2004). Indeed, coaching skills are central to many contemporary models of leadership. For example, transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 2000) involves four factors that embody a coaching approach:

1. idealized influence (acting as an exemplary role model);
2. inspirational motivation (engaging and motivating others);
3. intellectual stimulation (facilitating creative thinking and innovation); and
4. individual consideration (acting as a coach and mentor to help others attain goals).
The notion of the leader as coach is also a key part of the popular situational leadership model (Hersey, 1984) and Goleman’s (2000) model of emotionally intelligent leadership. Good coaching skills have been found to be linked to enhanced organisational performance at both managerial (Graham et al., 1994) and supervisor levels (Ellingic et al., 2003).

In light of these issues, organisations are increasingly investing in training to develop the coaching skills of their managers (Wright, 2005), with at least one in five managers having received training in workplace coaching skills (The Work Foundation, 2004). However, the impact of coaching skills training programmes is rarely assessed; fewer than 30 per cent of such programmes are evaluated in any way at all (Lidbetter, 2003). This paper presents original research looking at the impact of long-term (spaced learning) and short-term (block intensive) coaching skills training on participants’ goal-focused coaching skills and emotional intelligence.

Goal-focused coaching and emotional intelligence

Goal-focused workplace coaching can be understood as a collaborative, solution-focused and systematic process that is aimed at enhancing performance, self-directed learning and well-being (Grant, 2003). The five key factors in successful goal-focused workplace coaching are:

1. coaching sessions that deliver an outcome which is of tangible value;
2. the development of a strong collaborative working alliance between manager/coach and coachee;
3. an emphasis on constructing solutions, rather than merely analysing the problem;
4. efficient goal setting; and
5. managing the coaching process over time and holding the coachee accountable for completing any agreed actions (Grant, 2006).

Although many commercial workplace coaching models are promoted as being complex proprietary methodologies, in fact the essence of goal-focused coaching is a straightforward change process in which an individual sets a goal, develops a plan of action, begins action, monitors his or her performance (through observation and self-reflection), evaluates his or her performance (thus gaining insight) and based on this evaluation, changes his or her actions to further enhance performance, and thus reach his or her goal. The role of the manager/coach is facilitate the coachee’s progress through this cycle.

Coaching skills are inextricably related to emotional intelligence. In order to purposefully move through the goal-focused coaching cycle, individuals have to be able to regulate their thoughts, feelings and behaviours so they can best achieve their goals. Such intelligent use of emotions is important for both the manager/coach and the coachee (David, 2005).

Emotional intelligence can be understood as having four key branches:

1. the ability to accurately perceive emotions in oneself and others;
2. the ability to use emotions to facilitate thought;
3. understanding how different emotions arise and change over time; and
4. the ability to use the knowledge from the first three branches to manage emotions and translate them into constructive action (Mayer and Salovey, 1997).

Emotional intelligence is an important factor in workplace performance (Abraham, 2005) both on an individual level, predicting individuals’ leadership behaviours (Byrne, 2004), and on a group level, with leaders’ emotional intelligence being associated with higher levels of group effectiveness (Stubbs, 2005).

Emotional intelligence can also be understood as being related to personality traits. Traits are underlying and enduring personal characteristics, and are therefore more difficult to
change than specific observable behaviours. From this perspective, coaching behaviours are, in part, a manifestation of an individual’s emotional intelligence. Therefore developing a individual’s coaching skills may well also enhance their emotional intelligence. However, little is known about how coaching skills training impacts on emotional intelligence, and the relationship between personality, emotional intelligence, goal-focused coaching skills is not clearly understood (Bryant, 2005). Figure 1 shows a generic model of the relationship between personality, emotional intelligence, and goal-focused coaching skills.

A dearth of research on enhancing emotional intelligence and coaching skills

Even though many organisations invest in attempting to enhance the emotional intelligence of employees (Goleman et al., 2002), there is surprisingly little published research showing whether or not emotional intelligence can in fact be enhanced. In one study Chapman (2005) found that emotional intelligence as measured by the Boston Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (BEIQ (Weisinger, 1988)) increased, following a leadership coaching programme specifically designed to enhance leaders’ emotional intelligence. Similarly, Kampa-Kokesch (2002) found that executive coaching could improve managers’ levels of transformational leadership, which are in turn related to emotional intelligence competencies (Srivastava and Bharamanaikar, 2004).

Similarly, although there is past research examining the impact of coaching on factors such as wellbeing (Green et al., 2006), goal attainment (Grant, 2003) and leadership style (Smither et al., 2003; Wasylyshyn, 2003), there are few published papers on the impact of coaching skills training on managers’ coaching skills. Using an interview-based methodology Graham et al. (1994) surveyed 87 account representatives who worked for 13 sales managers involved in a coaching skills programme, and found significant increases in follow-up ratings on five behaviours, including clarity in performance expectations, providing feedback, and rewarding performance. To date there has been no research that

Figure 1 Model of the relationship between personality traits, emotional intelligence and coaching skills
looks at the impact of coaching-skill training on both emotional intelligence and individuals’ coaching skills levels.

The aim of the present research was to extend previous research and compare the effect of two coaching skills training programmes, of the type often used in workplace settings, on participants’ coaching skills and levels of emotional intelligence. One programme was a 13-week programme, the other was a short intensive two-day training course.

**Method**

**Measures**

The Goal-focused Coaching Skills Questionnaire (GCSQ (Grant and Cavanagh, in press)) is a 12-item self-report measure of goal-focused coaching skills, which assesses the five factors of goal-focused coaching:

1. outcomes of coaching;
2. working alliance;
3. solution-focus;
4. goal setting; and
5. managing process and accountability.

The scale has been found to be a reliable and valid measure, distinguishing between novice and professional coaches, and correlating with actual observed coaching skills. It has a reported Cronbach alpha of 0.906 and test-retest reliability of 0.70 (Grant and Cavanagh, in press). The full scale is presented in Table I.

The Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS (Schutte et al., 1998)) is a self-report measure of emotional intelligence which is based on the model of emotional intelligence proposed by Mayer and Salovey (1997). Questions on this scale include items such as “By looking at their facial expressions, I recognise the emotions people are experiencing”, and “I can tell how people are feeling by listening to the tone of their voice”. The SEIS has been found to be a reliable and valid measure, with a reported Cronbach alpha of 0.87 and test-retest reliability of 0.78 (Schutte et al., 1998).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table I</th>
<th>The Goal-focused Coaching Skills Questionnaire</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facet</strong></td>
<td><strong>Item</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>My coaching is always effective in helping my coachees reach their goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>My coachees do not seem to value the time we spend having coaching conversations (R)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>I know how to create an environment in which coachees feel free to present their own ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>I purposefully use language that shows that I understand my coachee’s feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SF</td>
<td>By the end of a coaching session my coachees always have greater clarity about the issues they face</td>
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<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>The goals we set when coaching are always stretching but attainable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>The goals we set during coaching are very important to my coachees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>The goals we set during coaching are often somewhat vague (R)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>I am very good at helping my coachees develop clear, simple and achievable action plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SF</td>
<td>When coaching, I spend more time analysing the problem than developing solutions (R)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPA</td>
<td>I always ask my coachees to report to me on progress towards their goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPA</td>
<td>When coaching I find it difficult to address any performance shortfalls directly and promptly (R)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Notes:** O = Outcomes of coaching; WA = Working alliance; SF = Solution-focus; G = Goal setting; MPA = Managing process and accountability; (R) = Reverse scored; Free use of this scale for training and research purposes is permitted.
The 13-week coaching skills training programme

Participants

Participants were 23 mature age participants (seven men and 16 women, mean age 50 years nine months), who were studying goal-focused coaching as part of a postgraduate degree programme in management and psychology. Their occupations included human resources professionals, managers, and lawyers. Individuals enrol in this training programme because they wish to learn coaching skills for use within a workplace setting, or as professional development.

Design, procedure and the coaching skills training programme

This study utilised a pre-post design. Participants completed the GCSQ and the SEIS before and after the coaching skills training programme. The coaching skills training programme consisted of 13 weekly 2.5-hour seminars giving a total of 32.5 hours face-to-face training. The course details key coaching strategies in relation to common applications of goal-focused workplace coaching. Each weekly seminar included both theoretical and applied components. The theoretical topics covered ethical and professional issues in coaching, theories of communication, goal-setting theory and practice and applied solution-focused coaching skills. The applied components included the giving and receiving of feedback, structured coaching and communication skills practice, and actual coaching sessions.

Participants practised their coaching skills within the training sessions, conducting coaching sessions involving real-life issues with fellow participants, and received structured feedback on their coaching skills. In addition, participants conducted formal workplace coaching sessions outside of the seminar period, and then wrote a reflective and analytical case study based on their experience. It was hypothesised that participation in the training programme would be associated with increased scores on the GCSQ and the SEIS.

Results of the 13-week programme

Paired t-tests were used to examine the impact of the coaching skills training programme. Participants’ scores on the GCSQ significantly increased (t(22) = 2.78, p < 0.01) following the programme, from a pre-programme mean score of 55.43 (SD 9.52) to a post-programme mean of 62.73 (SD 8.21). Scores on the SEIS also significantly increased (t(22) = 2.11, p < 0.05) following the coaching programme, from a mean score of 125.61 (SD 10.11) to a post-programme mean score of 129.26 (SD 8.84) (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2 Coaching skills pre- and post-training
The two-day “Manager as Coach” training programme

Participants

Participants were 20 mature age middle-level line and sales managers from two industries, transport and printing. There were nine women and 11 men. Age of participants was not recorded. Participants took part in this training programme as part of their professional development.

Design, procedure and the “Manager as Coach” coaching skills training programme

This study utilised a pre-post design. Participants completed the GCSQ and the SEIS, before and after the “Manager as Coach” coaching skills training programme. The coaching skills training programme was based in the same framework and content as the 13-week course, but the material was taught in a far more condensed fashion. The programme took place over two-day long training sessions, with a three-week break between the first and second day, giving a total of 16 hours of face-to-face training. Details of this manualised programme are available from the author.

The course covered key coaching strategies in relation to goal-focused workplace coaching. The training sessions included both theoretical and applied components. The theoretical topics covered theories of goal-setting, communication and solution-focused coaching skills. The applied components included the giving and receiving of feedback, and structured coaching skills practice. As part of an action learning assignment, participants practised their coaching skills in the workplace in the break between day one and day two, keeping written case study records and analytical reflective action learning diaries. It was hypothesised that participation in the training programme would be associated with increased scores on the GCSQ and the SEIS.

Results of the two-day “Manager as Coach” training programme

Paired t-tests were used to examine the impact of the “Manager as Coach” training programme. Participation in the “Manager as Coach” training programme resulted in an increase in scores on the GSCQ, but not on the SEIS. Participants’ scores on the GSCQ significantly increased ($t_{19} = 2.06, p < 0.05$) following the programme, from a pre-training mean score of 54.85 (SD 4.44) to a post-training mean of 57.95 (SD 5.03). Scores on the SEIS did not significantly change, with a pre-training mean of 119.75 (SD 11.58) compared with a post-training mean of 120.50 (SD 10.25) (see Figures 2 and 3).
Comparing the results of the two training programmes

There were no significant differences between the 13-week group and the two-day group on pre-training programme scores for either the GSCQ or the SEIS; both groups were equivalent at the beginning. However, independent sample t-tests showed that post-training scores on the GSCQ in the 13-week programme (mean 62.73; \( t_{(41)} = 2.262, p < 0.05 \)) were significantly larger than for the two-day programme (mean 57.95), and post-training SEIS scores for the 13-week programme (mean 129.26; \( t_{(41)} = 3.009, p < 0.01 \)) were significantly larger than for the two-day programme (mean 120.50). In summary, it appears that the 13-week training programme was more effective and enhanced both participants’ coaching skills and their emotional intelligence. The two-day Manager as Coach training programme was effective in enhancing coaching skills, but was less effective than the longer 13-week training programme, and was not effective in significantly increasing emotional intelligence (see Figures 2 and 3).

Enhancing coaching skills and emotional intelligence

This is the first study to provide preliminary evidence that goal-focused coaching skills and emotional intelligence can be enhanced through training. At the beginning of these coaching skills programmes, there was no significant difference between participants on either measures. It is noteworthy that both goal-focused coaching skills and emotional intelligence significantly increased following the 13-week programme, but only goal-focused coaching skills increased following the two-day programme.

These findings are important because emotional intelligence was not specifically targeted (or even mentioned) in the coaching skills training programmes. There has been significant debate about whether emotional intelligence is a learnable skill or an immutable trait (Davies et al., 1998; Petrides and Furnham, 2001). The present study suggests that emotional intelligence as measured by the SEIS is indeed changeable, and can be changed by focusing on specific behaviours related to emotional intelligence such as coaching skills. However, it appears that long-term training is required to make changes in emotional intelligence. This result makes sense in that emotional intelligence can be understood as being closely linked to personality traits (see Figure 1), and traits are more difficult to change than specific behavioural skills such as goal focused coaching skills (Perez et al., 2005).

Practical implications

The practical implications of these findings are that organisations, consultants and trainers should be aware that, whilst short intensive programmes may well improve participants’ goal-focused coaching skills, longer term and repeated interventions may be required to improve emotional intelligence. This conclusion is supported by the literature on spaced learning. It has been found that short, repeated training sessions combined with feedback can be more effective than longer, but less frequent sessions (Janiszewski et al., 2003). As spaced learning can facilitate deeper learning processes, trainers and coaches who wish to enhance trait-like leadership skills and associated emotional intelligence competencies would do well to conduct training and coaching sessions in short blocks with several follow-up sessions, rather than in two day-long sessions with no follow-up sessions.

Such a programme could start with a one-day long introduction module in which participants were introduced to the theory and practice of workplace coaching. In order to maximise participant buy-in, it is vital that coach training programmes focus directly on real-life workplace issues that are considered by both the participant and the organisation to be important. Programmes should be theoretically grounded, but must have real-world

“Emotional intelligence can also be understood as being related to personality traits.”
application. As in the programmes used in the present studies, actual coaching sessions should be observed, and specific feedback given.

Although training sessions should be enjoyable, as adults learn best when they are actively engaged (Mancuso, 2001), the retention of information and transfer of learning back to the workplace requires that the learner actually expends effort (Hesketh, 1997); mere “feel-good” coaching skills training sessions may not produce real change. Following day one, participants should have weekly or fortnightly follow-up sessions of approximately 1.5 to 2.5 hours, with another full day-long workshop approximately half way through the programme to help consolidate learning, discuss any problems and share ideas. This time frame has been successfully used in workplace stress reduction programmes over an eight-week time frame; eight weeks possibly being a more acceptable time commitment for many organisations than the 13-week programme used in the present study.

With regard to limitations, it should be borne in mind that these studies used self-report scales, rather than objective measures, and the actual face-to-face contact training time for the groups differed. Furthermore, the studies used a pre-post design and the lack of a no-training control group means that the effects could have occurred naturally. In addition, the present training programmes used post-training measures taken shortly after the programme finished, and it is not known if these increases were maintained over time. Nevertheless, these studies provide useful evidence of the utility of the GSCQ, and suggest that training in coaching skills can positively impact on emotional intelligence. Future research should use follow-up measures in longitude research, and use training programmes of equal face-to-face time.

Leadership, emotional intelligence and good coaching skills are inextricably interwoven. Effective training in coaching skills may be a useful way for organisations to improve the leadership styles and emotional intelligence of their managers, thereby enhancing the performance, wellbeing and quality of organisational life.

References


About the author

Anthony M. Grant PhD is a Coaching Psychologist and the Director and Founder of the Coaching Psychology Unit at the University of Sydney, Australia. His teaching, research and coaching psychology practice focus on the use of evidence-based behavioural science in the enhancement of performance, wellbeing and organisational change. Anthony M. Grant can be contacted at: anthonyg@psych.usyd.edu.au