There’s nothing as useful as a good theory: Coaching with self-determination in mind

4th Australian Evidence-Based Coaching Conference

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11th June 2010

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Three key points about SDT:

1. Articulates key features of a fundamental challenge of human experience
2. Highly relevant theory for understanding what happens in coaching & why it works
3. Yields useful tools that can be used in coaching to deepen self-understanding, enhance self-regulation & well-being
Firmly grounded in humanistic psychology
Takes a positive view of human nature - views people as possessing positive tendencies towards growth
If these tendencies are supported, people naturally seek out experiences that promote growth & development
However, it is far more usual for the socio-cultural environment to thwart these innate tendencies
The organismic-dialectic

Brief overview: Four mini-theories

- Basic Needs Theory
  Proposes the existence of 3 fundamental human needs: autonomy, relatedness & competence
- Cognitive Evaluation Theory
  Focuses on intrinsic motivation & how it can be diminished in the absence of supportive conditions
- Organismic Integration Theory
  Describes the developmental process of internalisation & integration of extrinsically motivated behaviour
- Causality Orientations Theory
  Describes different ways people interpret events & respond – with either an autonomous, controlled or amotivated orientation
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*Deci & Ryan (2000, p. 229)*
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Deci & Ryan (2000, p. 229)

Basic Needs Theory

SDT proposes that human beings have three basic psychological needs:

• **Autonomy**: The need to engage in interesting, valued activities with a full sense of choice
• **Competence**: The need to use one's capacities & achieve valued outcomes
• **Relatedness**: The need to feel close & well connected to significant others
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The SDT view of the self

- Does not see the self as a fixed, rigid core residing somewhere deep inside the person (i.e. “self-as-object”)
- Rather, the self is seen as an active processor of experience
- A dynamic psychic structure that continuously seeks to make meaning of one’s experiences & integrate them in to a unified sense of self (i.e. “self-as-process”)
- SDT argues the “processor” works best under certain conditions – conditions that satisfy one’s basic needs
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Applying Theory to Practice

- SDT can usefully inform coaching practice at two levels:
  - At the macro level is provides a theoretical account of the growth tendencies, innate psychological needs & socio-cultural forces that shape human personality, behavioural self-regulation & well-being
  - At the micro level it can help practitioners appreciate that the way one relates to clients in coaching can create optimal conditions for growth & development
Within sessions
(what happens in coaching)

- Conditions can be created in coaching that help invigorate a client’s natural tendencies towards growth & development
- Sessions provide opportunities for basic needs to be met in ways that help client’s ready themselves for the challenge of satisfying these same needs outside coaching
- For some client’s, coaching may be the only place they get these needs met!
- A good case conceptualisation will help to clarify that

Basic need satisfaction in coaching

- Relatedness:
  Use of person-centred micro-skills (e.g. active listening, empathy, unconditional positive regard, authenticity) builds a warm, trusting, supportive relationship squarely focused on the client’s salient concerns
- Competence:
  Use of solution-focused, strengths-focused approaches orients client’s towards what they are doing well, what is working, personal strengths & ways in which their personal strengths can be put to best use
- Autonomy:
  Coaching frameworks (like GROW) encourage client’s to take ownership of what happens in coaching & to exercise choice about the course of their development
**Between sessions**
(what happens in the world)

- SDT is useful because it gives a coach a way of understanding the quality of a client’s life experience (through the lens of psychological need satisfaction)
- To what degree is the client managing to get their needs for autonomy, relatedness & competence met in the outside world?
- The goal(s) a client brings to coaching often provides an answer to this question...

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**Goals, goals, goals**

- Striving to complete the City to Surf
- Striving to become a partner (in a law firm)
- Striving to write a book
- Striving to be the best I can be!
- Striving to get into medical school
“The doctor says I need to lose 10 kilos”

“Steve wet himself laughing when I told him I was doing this. Stuff him!”

“My new boyfriend will be so impressed with this”

“I should set a good example for the kids”

“The wedding is only 2 weeks away!!”
SOURCE: Sheldon & Elliot (1998)
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Striving to complete the City to Surf

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### Autonomy Support

- Once a regulation is internalised, individuals are left to integrate it (i.e. “How does this fit into my self-concept?”)
- Until this is resolved, behaviour remains non-integrated
- Greater ownership (autonomy) over behaviour has been found to result from autonomy supportive practices:
  - Providing a meaningful rationale
  - Acknowledging conflicting feelings (empathy)
  - Maximising choice by minimising pressure
Integrated goals

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Creating autonomous motivation

- Stone, Deci & Ryan (2008) propose 6 pathways to fulfilling core psychological needs & enhancing autonomous work motivation:
  - **Asking open questions & inviting participation**: Generating supportive dialogue provides people with conditions that satisfy core needs
  - **Active listening & acknowledging employee’s perspectives**
  - **Offering choices within structure**: Involves setting up parameters & allowing people the opportunity to decide how they act within those boundaries

SOURCE: Stone, Deci & Ryan (2008)
Creating autonomous motivation

- **Providing sincere, positive feedback:** If feedback is evaluated as insincere it may be perceived as controlling, reducing intrinsic motivation. When perceived as “informational” (i.e. about the performance) feedback can support autonomy + competence & enhance intrinsic motivation
- **Minimizing coercive controls:** De-emphasising monetary rewards & differences between individuals will act to improve the quality of motivation amongst employees
- **Develop talent & share knowledge:** Offering educational opportunities can build autonomous motivation via satisfaction of needs for autonomy & competence

SOURCE: Stone, Deci & Ryan (2008)

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Dual need satisfaction?

- When clients begin exercising more choice over the commitments they make in life, they tend to gravitate towards activities they are most interested in
- Very often, this is also something they have a talent for or high level of skill
- When this happens, engaging in the activity will satisfy both their need for autonomy & competence
- When it doesn’t (& skills or knowledge are needed), coaching can help to draw on existing resources to fill the gap or find new resources
What about Relatedness?

- The movement towards self-authorship, whilst generally enlivening for a coachee, may place important relationships in their life under strain.
- As such, coaching for self-determination often requires helping a coachee to manage the changed interpersonal dynamics that come from more autonomous living.
- Strategies may be needed for setting new relationship “ground rules”, building new networks, or discontinuing relationships that are personally or professionally unsatisfying.

Summary

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