

The Coaching Paradox and the Positive Psychology Solution

Coaching, as a profession, is at an exciting turning point. The work of the brave and talented people who pioneered the field has finally paid off: Coaching is widely accepted as an important tool in the business world, coach training programs are improving their curricula in an effort to meet more rigorous standards for credentialing, and private practices are flourishing. Even universities are beginning to take notice of our profession, and graduate degree and certificate programs in coaching are popping up on several continents. The tiresome days of explaining the difference between athletic coaching and working as a personal change agent are rapidly drawing to a close. We, as coaches, are no longer struggling to find basic acceptance as a legitimate profession. In so many ways, we have arrived, and it feels good. It feels good to open major newspapers and see articles on the benefits of coaching and profiles of leading coaches. We experience vicarious pride

when we see the success of our peers who design and implement coaching workshops for organizations, or witness the financial success of a colleague. It can be tremendously rewarding to speak with enthusiastic new students in coach training programs, a sign that our profession is growing. At last, we can bask in the same optimism that we attempt to instill in our clients.

Yes, we have finally arrived. But, now that we are here, what are we going to do? As a group of individuals and as a profession, we are just too energetic, too dynamic, and too motivated to sit idly for long. You probably recognize that achieving one goal, while cause for celebration, also clears the way to begin working toward the next. Change is inevitable, and what could be more interesting than considering the ways in which coaching might change over the next decade? In which directions coaching might move, and how our interventions and services might evolve in the near future. The possibilities are fascinating to consider. Advances in technology, for instance, will undoubtedly affect the professional tides. Similarly, widespread public understanding and acceptance of the coaching endeavor and its many benefits will impact our chosen vocation in exciting new ways, as will breakthroughs in psychological research. The field of psychology, our professional cousin, is a wonderful resource for sophisticated assessments, clever interventions, and research validation that can—and will—advance our work by leading to better service and “proof” that coaching works. This book describes one such breakthrough—the new field of *positive psychology*—and explains the many ways in which positive psychology can inform coaching practices of all kinds. Positive psychology is the first of many stimulating answers to the question: “Where do we, as a profession, go from here?”

Coaching has long been a powerful force for transformation in people’s lives. Whether conducted with executives, schoolteachers, graduate students, work-from-home Internet entrepreneurs, or small business owners, coaching is about harnessing the best in people and inspiring them to live out their potential. Coaching is a

wake-up call, challenging folks to tap their inner abundance. Because of this natural leaning toward positivity, growth and optimism coaching has attracted practitioners who value service work and clients who are achievement oriented. If you consider the ways in which you and your clients are similar, it is likely that placing a premium on self-growth is one area of common ground. Those of us who have worked with or worked as coaches recognize the frequent times in sessions when a self-imposed limit is lifted, when an “aha” moment is reached, or when we catch an emotional second wind. These are the gems of coaching and, when coaching is done well, they tend to be common. It is this proof of positive change in action that makes coaching a worthwhile endeavor for both the practitioner and the client.

But beneath this veneer of positivity and effectiveness, there is an irony in the profession that we think of as *the coaching paradox*: For a profession that systematically helps people aspire to and reach their innate potential, coaching has not yet reached its own potential. In fact, although coaching—in its modern form—is a couple of decades old, it is still in its relative professional infancy. Indeed, the hallmarks of youth are readily apparent. Coaching lacks a coherent, widely agreed on definition, coach training varies in content (although less now than in recent years), and coaching interventions differ greatly. Some coaches work with inspirational stories and games, others rely heavily on assessments, and still others focus on goals and behaviors. In short, coaching is still a broadly defined endeavor in need of refining. The profession of coaching is fortunate to have so many skilled and imaginative people working toward this end. But our chosen line of work needs more than isolated breakthroughs and good ideas that are implemented in only a handful of private practices. Coaching is just too good to be undermined by a sense that we are “winging it.” Our professional service—whether it takes the form of executive, entrepreneurial, or life coaching—will improve when we develop an agreed on definition for coaching and systematic sharing of the high quality interventions in our craft.

To be sure, progress has been made in these areas. The International Coach Federation (ICF), the largest governing body of the profession, has made gains in establishing both a code of ethics for practice and standards for the training of new coaches. Steve Mitten, former president of the ICF, made the professionalization of coaching a major part of his presidential platform. Mitten was invested in establishing coaching as a bona fide profession, with clear standards for training and practice.¹ Similarly, in England, members of the British Psychological Society have formed a special working group to advance a program of coaching psychology.² Despite this forward progress, even seasoned coaches agree that the profession is in its formative stages. Carol Kaufman, for instance, a coach and psychologist at Harvard's medical school, distinguishes between "first and second generation coaching."³ The first generation of coaches, according to Kaufman, was made up of the visionary and courageous individuals who helped to establish their services as a viable enterprise. Now, says Kaufman, we are on the brink of the second generation of coaching, in which the discipline needs to grow through the development of explicitly defined theories of human development and research on coaching effectiveness. Just as medicine has advanced through the discovery of viruses and the use of antibiotics, coaching is ready for sophisticated theories and exciting new interventions.

One of the recent pushes toward the development of a more mature coaching profession has been increased attention to the many benefits of science. In 2003, Anthony Grant, a coach who teaches at the world's first university-based coaching psychology program in Sydney, Australia, issued a call to ICF members to turn to science as a method and body of knowledge to help guide practice.⁴ The ICF responded by sponsoring annual research symposia, in which the scientific method was used to investigate issues ranging from the effectiveness of working with cultural minorities to understanding client perceptions of coaching.⁵ In later years prominent coaches such as Diane Stober⁶ and W. Barnett Pearce⁷ have echoed the original call to embrace research as a

powerful tool to improve the practice and effectiveness of coaching. In 2006, ICF president Pamela Richarde spoke with the heads of Accredited Coach Training Organizations (ACTO), reaffirming the organization's commitment to supporting a research program on coaching.⁸ Similarly, psychologists and coaches in London, Sydney, Philadelphia, and New York have looked at the role of science in coaching by forming special coaching psychology task forces, hosting academic conferences, launching peer reviewed journals, and developing university-based curricula. Simultaneously, professional books on evidence-based coaching or those adapting well-researched psychological theories and techniques have begun appearing. If these trends are any indication of the direction in which coaching is moving, it is reasonable to assume that at least one arm of the profession, in the future, will be scientifically grounded coaching, in which many practitioners will have graduate degrees from accredited universities, and in which many clients will want to see empirical validation of coaching services. We do not mean to imply that this is the only direction in which the coaching profession will evolve, but this is one likely route. Regardless of the background of individual coaches, now or in the future, it is certain that those on the cutting edge of science will have additional tools in their professional toolboxes.

In this book, we propose that the dynamic new field of positive psychology—described in detail next—is a branch of science that shows tremendous potential as a natural interface with the profession of coaching. Because it is grounded in sophisticated scientific methodology, positive psychology offers an answer to the call for an increased role of research in coaching. What's more, as an applied science, positive psychology offers theories, interventions, and assessments that form a valuable addition to current coaching tools. Among the most elegant aspects of a marriage of coaching and this new science is the fact that positive psychology is not dogmatic, proprietary, or incompatible with existing approaches to coaching. Positive psychology is a body of theory, research, and

practical tools that can be added to any coaching practice, regardless of theoretical orientation, or whether you conduct life coaching or work with executives. Further, we argue here that such an addition is good for individual coaches as well as for the profession as a whole.

Although we are attracted to the creativity that permeates the profession of coaching, we argue that the movement toward empirically-based interventions and solid theoretical frameworks for practice is in the best interest of both individual practicing coaches and the coaching profession. Coaches Dianne Stober and Anthony Grant argue that such a trend will boost the credibility of the profession and provide the foundation for higher quality coach training.⁹ We live in an age where science is the pre-eminent system of inquiry. The claims of science are testable, and the results of careful studies are both replicable and generalizable. Because the scientific method is so widely accepted, coaching practices that are grounded in science will be easier to “sell” to a skeptical public or potential clients, and especially to organizations that want reassurances that the service will be effective. Susan David, founding member of Evidence Based Psychology, a consultancy firm with corporate clients in the United States, Australia, and Asia, encourages coaches to set their services on a foundation of solid empiricism. “Companies and executives have gotten savvier when talking about psychological topics,” she told us in a recent interview. “It makes sense to them that mood can affect worker performance. The people I deal with at pharmaceutical companies and accounting firms ask intelligent questions about the research behind my services, and I have to be ready with answers.” Our prediction is that coaches who can honestly claim to work from a foundation of the latest scientific research and theory will have a tremendous market advantage over their peers. Not only will prospective employers look favorably on them, they will enjoy the comfort of knowing that their interventions are tested, effective, and—where possible—appropriate to their unique client base. The addition of a scientific basis to

coaching is one of the greatest potential growth areas for second-generation coaches.

The importance of science to our field was recently noted in a dramatic way by Jim Clifton, the CEO of the Gallup Corporation, the company famous for its polling services. In late 2005, Clifton addressed a large group of psychologists and coaches at a meeting at the Gallup office in Washington, DC. Clifton has a sharp mind and a flair for strong, provocative words. “Gallup uses positive psychology,” he began, “because positive psychology works. If the data showed that yelling at my employees was more effective, then I would do that instead.”¹⁰ Regardless of how literally Clifton intended this statement to be taken, his point was clear: Businesses and other clients want to invest in workshops, trainings, and services that work. They want proof that the methods and assessments they buy are actually valuable, and not simply the flavor of the month. In this way, coaches can make science, and psychological science in particular, work for us as we develop our profession.

What might a scientifically driven coaching practice look like? Anthony Grant and others originally trained in clinical psychology have pointed to the “scholar-practitioner” model in which most psychologists are trained.¹¹ In this educational model, students are taught to design research studies, analyze statistics, and evaluate the relative merits of other people’s research in addition to developing clinical acumen. The underlying rationale for this model is that graduates will enter the workplace as informed consumers of the research that guides their own clinical practices. Unfortunately, as sensible as this strategy is for psychologists, it is not easily applicable to coaching. Many coaches do not have a background in research methods or statistics, nor a background in psychology, and an emphasis on these skills is unlikely to have newcomers flocking to our profession. Although it is likely that in the future many coaches will hold master’s degrees in coaching psychology from major universities, it seems doubtful that in the short term all coaches—or even the majority of coaches—will

have a background in psychology. Therefore, evidence-based coaching ought to rest on the aspects of science that are accessible to coaches of diverse educational backgrounds. We have identified three areas in which coaches of any educational or professional background can easily employ science:

1. Survey readings of relevant background material could greatly benefit coaches. We have great faith in the intelligence of coaches and believe that they can easily understand versions of major studies. This allows for the fact that not everyone attracted to the profession thinks in the rigorous, questioning way common to researchers. For those with a primary interest in the direct contact with clients and an emphasis on the service aspect of the work, a general familiarity with relevant background research is probably adequate. But basic knowledge of the scientific literature may also be necessary. In our experience, the most innovative coaches are those individuals who challenge themselves by reading and learning about the change process. Whether it is essays by Abraham Maslow, leadership books by Robert Quinn, or professional journal articles, keeping up with major theories and new interventions gives coaches a competitive edge. We encourage coaches of all stripes and persuasions to become acquainted with the relevant psychological research literature, if even in a cursory way. We encourage you to extend this learning well beyond the covers of this book and into other informative domains such as trusted web sites and professional journals.
2. The second natural intersection of science and coaching is to be found in well-validated measurement tools. Empirically validated and widely used assessments can be enormously useful to coaches. Many coaches are already familiar with tools like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and Firo-B, and know that these instruments can help the work of coaching in important ways. But, formal measures of personality,

ability, preferences, and other related assessments have historically been the domain of psychologists—created by psychologists, administered by them, and interpreted by them. In addition to the information they provide, formal assessments can be interventions when they are used to identify strengths or areas needing attention, and they can also guide practice by measuring outcomes of interest. Although it is true that many coaches currently use some stock-in-trade assessments, such as the MBTI, many coaches are unaware of other useful measures available to them, including many that are easy-to-take, easy-to-interpret, and free of charge.

3. Research is fundamentally important to coaching because it can provide a basis for evaluating interventions. Studying the nuts and bolts of our actual work can tell us much about why certain interventions work, when they work, and with whom they are most effective. Take, for instance, the research conducted by Suzy Green on the effectiveness of *Solution-Focused Life Coaching*, in which she and her colleagues found that coaching produced appreciable gains in hope, happiness, and goal striving for the clients in their study.¹² Without this kind of careful, systematic evaluation of our interventions, coaching is reduced to a series of well-meaning hunches and guesswork. Knowledge of the empirical underpinnings of interventions actually allows coaches to break out of a one-size-fits-all mindset. Results from studies can tell us how gender, culture, or educational background might play an important moderating role in the coaching process. Familiarity with such research makes coaches both responsible and increasingly competitive. Science can help us understand the nuances of interventions, an awareness that might separate good coaches from great coaches.

Science is much more than artificial laboratory studies and boring, structured results. The scientific process includes the

development, testing, and revision of important theories. Now, at a time when the coaching profession is growing—both intellectually and in terms of number of practitioners—theoretical foundations for practice are more necessary than at any point in the profession’s history. Theoretical orientations are world-views that guide practice. For example, the “medical model,” an orientation subscribed to by most modern doctors, holds that a physician’s job is to diagnose illness, discover the cause of the symptoms, and develop and implement treatments. While there is no question that modern medicine under this model has produced amazing gains in the treatment of illness it is also unclear whether this is the best, or only, way to look at the mission of doctors. For example, Albert Schweitzer, the Nobel Prize-winning medical missionary, often spoke of his desire to collaborate with patients in an effort to “awaken the healer within.” We suggest that the underlying view of our work is as important as the practical strategies of coaching itself, and encourage coaches to continually evolve their own theories of change and human nature. Unfortunately, although coaches share, at the broadest level, a common vision of coaching as including a focus on helping clients achieve their goals, there is much that remains uncertain about our task as facilitators of change. What is the best way to help clients achieve their goals? Is it more important to help remove obstacles, or should we focus on developing strengths, or some combination of both? Similarly, should we help clients to achieve goals that are highly inconsistent with our own values, or those that common wisdom tells us are not likely to produce lasting well-being? For that matter, are client-driven goals the only yardstick for the measure of coaching success? An explicitly defined theoretical orientation can be a map that guides us through this uncertain territory.

Positive psychology is just such a map. In this book, we suggest that the interface of positive psychology with coaching is a natural step toward answering the call to address the coaching paradox and develop the profession in new and dynamic ways. Positive

psychology was originally introduced by Maslow who, in addition to his famous “hierarchy of needs,” also wrote extensively on peak experiences, existential growth, and the importance of building on personal resources for success in life.¹³ Unfortunately, much of Maslow’s brilliant writing was largely overlooked by both the general public and practicing psychologists. In recent years, however, legendary psychologist and former president of the American Psychological Association (APA) Martin Seligman succeeded in touting the importance of the development of a strength-based positive psychology. When he assumed the reins of leadership of American psychology’s professional body, Seligman made the bold claim that psychology, in its present form, was really only half a discipline.¹⁴ According to Seligman, the lion’s share of research and treatment in the field had focused on pathology and on answering the question: “What is wrong with people?” While this emphasis undoubtedly led to important breakthroughs in the understanding and treatment of depression, it did little to provide insight into the everyday experience of the majority of people. What does psychology have to offer the masses, asked Seligman, those countless individuals who successfully raise families, work at good jobs, and do not suffer from clinical disorders? The professional literature has been conspicuously silent on the matter of personal strengths, happiness, and engagement at work and in relationships. Seligman popularized the positive psychology movement as a means of rewarding the few researchers who were already working in these areas, cobbling together a cohesive understanding of human flourishing, and attracting new scholars to the discipline.¹⁵ Positive psychology is psychology’s answer to the other crucial question: “What is going right with people?”

We propose that positive psychology is a natural fit with coaching because both rest on the assumption that people are basically healthy, resourceful, and motivated to grow. What’s more, because positive psychology is a theoretical orientation built on a foundation of science, it contains the many virtues of scientific studies with broad samples and the ability to replicate findings.

This means that research on positive psychology, unlike inspirational anecdotes, can provide insight into how to provide effective services for the widest range of people by looking at individual differences, the timing of interventions, and including surprising, counterintuitive results. Results from research in positive psychology, for instance, suggest that focusing on strengths and developing the positive in people are actually more effective than addressing weakness and problems. Further, there are surprising findings that suggest that goals, that Holy Grail of coaching, may differ in how much they contribute to our clients' well-being. Positive psychology provides a systematic way to implement a positive worldview, and offers unique insights that lie outside the bounds of traditional wisdom and intuition.

In short, Gallup CEO Jim Clifton is right when he says positive psychology works. Exciting new research from a wide variety of domains shows that strengths, optimism, and happiness are psychological capital with tangible benefits. To skeptical readers, the idea of selling happiness to large companies might seem preposterous. While the word *happiness* might be off-putting in an organizational setting, the scientific findings from positive psychology are greatly reassuring. For instance, a recent review of the benefits of pleasant emotions such as happiness conducted by University of California-Riverside psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky and her colleagues shows that happy people make more money, take fewer sick days from work, get along with their colleagues better, spend more time volunteering, are more likely to help strangers, receive better supervisor evaluations on the job, are rated more highly by customers, and exhibit less work turnover than less happy individuals.¹⁶ These are bottom-line facts that tend to be welcomed by managers and executives. On the flip side, the organizational culture that effective positive psychology interventions tend to produce is often welcomed by employees who are overjoyed by bona fide efforts to improve their welfare while on the job. Not only is a positive approach a win-win in the workplace, it is good news for positive psychology coaches.

Even better news is the fact that you do not need to be a trained research scholar to understand and use the literature on positive psychology. Unlike mathematical theories of light refraction or the cellular development of mycosis fungoids, psychology is a commonsense science that is easily accessible to all. What's more, by the time studies are printed in refereed journals, they have already passed muster with ethics review boards as well as expert peer reviewers. On this issue, we take the same view of our readers that we do of our clients: We assume you are smart, resourceful, and certainly capable of understanding the content of this book. Thus, in the pages that follow, we have included a broad survey of the most important topics in positive psychology and tied them together with specific applications to coaching. In Part I of *Positive Psychology Coaching*, we present a core foundation of positive psychology coaching: the definition, cultivation, maintenance, and benefits of happiness. In Part II of *Positive Psychology Coaching*, we cover an additional pillar of positive psychology, the development and use of character strengths and virtues. Finally, in Part III, we apply positive psychology coaching to the workplace, as well as discuss ways to use positive psychology to build your practice.

FOUNDATION I: HAPPINESS AND POSITIVITY

The first foundation of *Positive Psychology Coaching* is happiness. Lasting personal fulfillment is a concern that touches us all. Happiness is the pot of gold at the end of the emotional rainbow, and it permeates Western culture from its inclusion in the American *Declaration of Independence* to the happy endings of Hollywood films. Experienced coaches realize that clients rarely, if ever, seek out our services with the explicit goal of increasing happiness. Nobody takes advantage of a free coaching session to increase happiness 1 or 2 points on a 10-point scale. Perhaps this is because happiness is implicitly understood to be the single ultimate goal underscoring all other goals that grace the minutes of our

coaching sessions. Perhaps it is because happiness is commonly seen as trivial, lighthearted emotional happenstance, which ought to take a back seat to weightier matters of work and family. Despite the fact that clients aren't knocking down our doors or ringing our phones off their hooks in the pursuit of happiness, research shows this emotion is far more than a goal . . . it is of vital importance to healthy functioning. In fact, happiness is probably one of the greatest personal resources your client is currently overlooking.

Research on happiness shows there is much more to emotion than meets the eye. For instance, most people think of happiness as a desirable outcome, something to be achieved through the enjoyment of creature comforts, a bit of good luck, or through a job well done. Happiness, in this view, is the emotional paycheck for effort and achievement. As commonsense as this notion is, research on the topic paints a very different picture. For instance, studies show that happiness is actually beneficial in and of itself, and acts as important psychological capital, which can be spent while working toward other goals. For example, happier people tend to be more helpful, creative, prosocial, charitable, altruistic, and healthier. Happier people also live longer, are more likely to marry, tend to stay married longer, tend to have more close friends and casual friends, and actually earn more money. As if this weren't enough, happier people also win out in the workplace, with better organizational citizenship, performance evaluations, and increased productivity.¹⁷ Thus, happiness can be looked at as a means to a valued end rather than a goal in itself. The take-home message is that by encouraging optimal levels of happiness in your clients, you can actually open the door to a whole new set of emotional resources for them to tap en route to their dreams.

But how can clients be encouraged to be happier? Is there a magic formula, a new pill, or a secret mantra that can bestow fulfillment? Such ideas seem laughable. In the absence of a miracle emotional cure, it makes sense to continue questioning:

- How is happiness achieved by any of us?
- Is happiness a matter of changing material life circumstances like making more money or moving to a nicer house in a more desirable neighborhood?
- Is happiness a matter of psychological gymnastics such as seeing the glass half-full or overlooking failures and setbacks?

One of the most promising ways to facilitate emotional flourishing in your clients is to work with them to set realistic expectations about happiness. Happiness, as it turns out, is not a bottomless pit or overflowing cup. There is, in fact, an optimal level of happiness that is mildly pleasant rather than ecstatic and euphoric. The world's leading expert on the science of subjective well-being, Ed Diener, suggests that one of the most powerful interventions for increasing happiness is to educate folks not to expect fulfillment to be extremely intense or permanent.¹⁸ Clients who can accept the realities of day-to-day pleasantness and satisfaction, rather than chasing the elusive emotional highs that accompany rare life events such as promotions and weddings, set themselves up for emotional success. Clients who view mild satisfaction as a success, rather than seeing it as the failure of not having achieved complete satisfaction, are typically more motivated, optimistic, and positive about future outcomes. This one small area of success sets them up for future successes in other areas of their lives.

In addition to the interesting findings on optimal happiness, there is a line of research that suggests that helping clients focus on existential challenges such as mastery, connectedness, and self-acceptance, can be an important and fruitful route to happiness. In fact, happiness research contributes to our innate understanding of this prized emotion by providing several useful definitions—such as existential challenge—based on careful examination of religious, philosophical, and psychological texts. In this way, well-being researchers add insights that extend well beyond common sense or armchair theories. The results of their studies point to

useful strategies for achieving and maintaining happiness that include attention to physical circumstances, personal attitudes, subjective evaluations, and social capital.

Research on happiness shows that two variables are of key importance to achieving and maintaining subjective well-being: goals¹⁹ and social relationships.²⁰ Goal setting has long been the anchor point of action-oriented coaching. Results from research on goals have shown time and again that personal strivings promote happiness by structuring people's time, giving them a sense of meaning and purpose, and supplying a useful target for measuring growth and progress.²¹ However, the research also shows that not all goals are created equally. So-called "good goals" share a common architecture, including being attainable, concrete, measurable, and values congruent.²² Many coaches are familiar with the clever goal-related acronym SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timelined). While SMART is a useful shorthand for developing goals, this simple method does not explicitly address some important aspects of good goals. Research shows, for example, that there are certain goals, such as those related to promoting friendships, which contribute to happiness while others, such as trying to persuade others, are actually toxic to well-being.²³ Familiarizing yourself with this research can help you better facilitate positive change in your clients by understanding the types of goals that are likely emotional deadends, and those that hold the greatest potential for emotional payoff.

The framing of goals also turns out to be of crucial importance to whether they promote lasting satisfaction. Whether your client seeks out a desirable outcome, or whether he seeks to avoid a possible catastrophe, can heavily impact whether his goal will add to, or take away from, his psychological well-being. Typically, when goals are structured to avoid possible negative consequences (I don't want to get fat, I don't want to embarrass myself in the morning meeting, I don't want to get cancer) they lead to more dissatisfaction than when they are framed so as to target positive outcomes (I want to run a half marathon, I want to give a well-received talk).

Knowledge of the research on how goals lead to lasting fulfillment, and vice versa, can help you work with clients to establish healthy short-term and long-term action plans.

Apart from the genetic underpinnings of emotion, relationships are, perhaps, the single most important influence on happiness. In fact, friendships are more than a chance to pal around, and romantic relationships are more than simple sexual attraction. Social relationships of all kinds offer a sense of security, opportunities for growth, and even promote physical health. Trusting relationships can be viewed as social capital that can improve performance at work and set the stage for a tranquil home life.

Whether on the job or at home, good relationships with others are important because they lead to effective work and living. Despite this fact, the benefits of relationships suffer from a diminishing marginal utility, a point at which additional friendships offer little additional happiness. Understanding the mechanisms by which relationships lead to happiness, and being aware of the limitations of relationships, can serve as an important piece of wisdom that can easily be applied to the coaching endeavor.

FOUNDATION II: CHARACTER STRENGTHS

The second foundation of *Positive Psychology Coaching* is character strength. The great tales of human history, from the Greek myths to the story of Martin Luther King Jr., are essentially narratives of virtue; people working from a position of terrific strength. The idea of paying attention to people's strengths is not a revolutionary concept to most experienced coaches. Many skilled coaches have long looked at client resources as fertile ground in which to plant the seeds of growth and change. And with good reason: Talking about strengths rather than weaknesses is attractive to most clients, and taking ownership of personal strengths is a great way to boost confidence and optimism. Now, for the first time, the science of positive psychology has contributed exciting new insights on character strengths, not least of which is the fact that

focusing on strengths is often far more productive than attempting to shore up deficits. Positive psychology provides empirical substantiation for coaches who work with strengths, as well as a helpful road map for those who do not.

Although your instinct might tell you that a strengths-based coaching practice is an effective way to work with people, you may not have the luxury of time to parcel out all the fine points of the matter. You might wonder which character traits are strengths, when they are best used, or how might they effectively be measured. Positive psychology provides fresh new answers to these age-old questions. Researchers, including one of us (RBD), have begun looking at those character attributes that are widely valued, both throughout history and around the world. Studies show, for instance, that bravery, curiosity, and leadership are all traits that are held in high esteem whether one is living in the African bush, in the remote Arctic, or in Omaha.²⁴ Further, research shows that people are at their best when they have opportunities to use these strengths.²⁵ Unfortunately, not all clients are aware of which strengths they possess or how best to use them. Sophisticated new measurements have emerged that help clients focus on their strengths, and identify those qualities that make them exceptional people. University of Michigan psychologist Chris Peterson has worked with Martin Seligman to create a formal classification of human strengths and virtues.²⁶ Their exciting new measure is available online, free of charge, and easy to understand. Perhaps most importantly, their taxonomy of strengths provides an ideal opportunity for you to open a discussion of strengths with your clients.

Helping clients identify their signature strengths is only half the win. We also encourage you to work with your clients to learn to use their strengths optimally. Having a tendency to be brave or curious, for instance, may not be enough to guarantee success. Instead, it might be helpful to take stock of these strengths and ask when they might best be employed, and when they might not be helpful at all. Research and common sense tell us that there is a

time to harness courage and a time to keep it in check and act prudently.²⁷ The ability to discern between the two is, as the serenity prayer suggests, a matter of developing wisdom. Understanding, for example, when optimism motivates your clients, and when it might be time for them to put a goal on the back burner can actually help you coach more effectively and overcome client ambivalence. In Chapters 6 and 7, we focus on specific *intra-* and *interpersonal* strengths, and discuss how you might use the research on these topics to forward the action with your client.

We are so excited by these recent developments that we encourage coaches to use strength-based positive psychology to facilitate their own growth and development. Through the process of taking our own medicine, as it were, we have identified another way to overcome the coaching paradox—not only can the field as a whole grow, but individual practitioners can develop as well. To this end, we challenge coaches to use the information contained in this book to identify, develop, and utilize their own strengths in order to improve their coaching and grow their practices.

SPECIAL TOPICS IN *POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY COACHING*

Positive psychology is far more than “happiology” or a familiar song and dance about the importance of focusing on personal strengths. In fact, sophisticated positive psychologists will be the first to admit that negative emotions, struggle, and personal failures are also an important, as well as inevitable, part of life. There is a swelling literature on growing through adversity, and we encourage you not to overlook client setbacks and difficulties as important fodder for work as you help facilitate positive change. Several topics in positive psychology speak to the fundamental truth that negatives need to be weighed alongside the positives. Researchers have investigated, for instance, positive topics that relate to adversity ranging from wisdom to resilience to optimism.²⁸ In fact, positive psychology is too large an arm of the profession to succinctly summarize completely in this book. We have,

therefore, chosen to include only a handful of positive psychology topics beyond happiness and character strengths. Because so much of coaching—whether it is executive, career, or life coaching—revolves around issues at work, we devote a full chapter to using positive psychology coaching in the workplace.

Businesses and organizations make up a large part of the coaching milieu and professional concerns account for the lion's share of coaching work. Fortunately, positive psychology is quickly coming to the attention of CEOs and managers. Large corporations from Sprint to Best Buy are beginning to make use of positive psychology programs, and coaches familiar with this material will be poised to increase their business. Take, for example, the Gallup Organization, a company with offices in 20 countries. Under the leadership of the late Don Clifton, the Gallup Organization used positive psychology strategies to produce happier, harder working, and increasingly loyal employees, as well as growing numbers of satisfied customers. Clifton instituted a positive company culture; one that valued its employees, and one that attended to their individual strengths. From "learning lunches" to on-site daycare, from rewarding outstanding performances to creating teams based on unique employee strengths the Gallup Organization invested heavily in a positive paradigm in the workplace. The move paid off. The company's bottom line was boosted by benefits ranging from exceptionally productive workers to reduced costs associated with low employee turnover. Clearly, positive psychology works in the workplace.

One fascinating new line of positive psychology research with the potential for exciting applications in the organizational setting looks at "job crafting," the way in which individuals modify the actual work they do to make it more fulfilling.²⁹ The surprising result from this research is that some individuals—those with a "calling orientation"—are far more likely to engage in this type of behavior and, therefore, reap the rewards. Orientations such as the calling attitude were first suggested by sociologist Robert Bellah in his influential book *Habits of the Heart*.³⁰ Recent research on

the topic shows that in any given profession—whether it is law, hotel management, or plumbing—people tend to vary in their relationships to their work.³¹ Some individuals, for example, dislike their job, dread going to work, and are only motivated by their paycheck. Others enjoy aspects of their job, but view their work primarily as a stepping-stone to other benefits, such as wealth, status, responsibility, or feelings of agency. Still others feel “called” to their job and exhibit a passion for their work that often translates to professional success and deep satisfaction. These individuals, who feel that they are in a calling, spontaneously modify their work to make it feel more meaningful.

A NOTE ON SCIENCE AND COACHING

We are as excited to share the findings from positive psychology with you as we were in discovering them for ourselves. In particular, we find that one of the most dynamic aspects of positive psychology is not just the rigorous scientific foundation on which it rests, not simply the surprising research findings or sophisticated assessments, but the spirit of innovation that surrounds the field. Positive psychology is, refreshingly, not confined to the professional journals or ivory towers of academia. As we researched the background material for this book, we came across individuals who were applying positive psychology in new ways and those who were laying the groundwork for future directions in the field with their provocative thinking. In each case, the enthusiasm that accompanies a focus on the positive was apparent. In writing this book, we relied not only on our firsthand knowledge of positive psychology and coaching, but we interviewed dozens of thought leaders, including coach trainers, workshop leaders, coaches, educators, and researchers. In nearly every case, we saw that using positive psychology was more than just another tool in the professional toolbox; it was an approach to life and work that affected people in profound ways. We hope that this book is just the first chapter in your understanding of positive psychology coaching.

Over the years, we have met a number of coaches who appear less interested in hearing about background research and more invested in learning about practical, specific coaching interventions. This attitude is more than understandable: Most coaches are busy growing private practices or dealing with the demands of providing high-quality service to their employers. In a world that increasingly moves at break-neck speed, many people simply do not have the time for explanations and theories that cannot be told in the span of a quick breakfast. All of us are inundated with information, and it makes sense that readers will want to know not just that some interesting things popped up in the research laboratories of prestigious universities, but also how these findings can be applied in the real world.

Despite this natural sentiment, we encourage you to take the time to learn the theory and science that forms the foundation of *Positive Psychology Coaching*. We promote the idea of regularly reflecting on what is going right, and what needs improving in your coaching practice. We encourage you to periodically return to source material, whether it is a weekend read of Rollo May's essays or a conversation with your spouse about how the positive expectations of your parents during your childhood affected your goals as an adult. This is a great way of evolving professionally. To this end, we hope that this book provides provocative new perspectives for you to consider. We have attempted to distill decades of important research on a wide variety of topics into a potent tincture, and one that is easy to swallow. Taking the time to familiarize yourself with the background research will make you a stronger practitioner. There is an art to coaching, often seen in the spontaneity, playfulness, and use of intuition common to coaching sessions. We do not suggest here that systematic science ought to replace this art, nor do we argue in favor of cookie cutter interventions. Instead, we believe that the research literature itself is full of hidden gems, and that you can use your own ingenuity and creativity to design interventions that will be locally effective with your particular client base.