

Education to Empowerment: An Introduction to Applying Positive Psychology Coaching

In 2007 an extraordinary thing happened to me: I published my first ever book, *Positive Psychology Coaching*.¹ It was a defining moment, much like getting my doctorate or the birth of my children. Holding the book—the actual book—in my hands represented a huge accomplishment and marked a turning point in my life. We all know about Steven Covey’s time matrix: People are likely to continue putting off those tasks that are important but not necessarily urgent. Well, I was lucky enough not to fall into that trap. I was one of those folks who took this lifelong dream—writing a book—off the back burner and made it happen. The book was written with my co-author Ben Dean over the course of a year, and it was the result of countless hours of phone calls, interviews, reviews of the research literature, and even a couple of international trips. Those grueling hours of lonely writing under the emotional pressure of looming deadlines had all paid off. It is difficult to describe the intense mix of relief, accomplishment, pride, and fatigue I felt. I was, at long last, a published author. I had a small book launch in England, received the occasional letter of thanks from strangers in places like India and Australia, and was invited to give talks and coaching demonstrations. My star seemed to be on the rise.

And then a funny thing happened. A few months after the publication of the book, Ben and I received a scathing review on Amazon.com. The author of the review, which ran about 1,200 words—the length of a short magazine article—clearly did not like the book. He referred to Ben and me as “academics with no writing skills” and, at one point, said, “This book was so bad, in so many ways, it’s hard to know where to start.” The review included stinging phrases like “a shallow rehash” and “I don’t know which was more painful: their condescending prose, or the glee with which they seem to think they’ve said something useful.” The reviewer concluded with a list of books people should read instead of *Positive Psychology Coaching*. Again, it is difficult to describe the overwhelming emotions I felt while reading this review. I was crushed. This book had been the major project representing a year of my life. It was the very activity to which I chose to commit myself precisely because I felt it was so worthwhile. I instantly thought of every instance that I told my son “I’m sorry I can’t play with you right now, Daddy’s working on his book.” Would I have been better off to abandon the writing project in favor of more family time?

What other opportunities had I missed while I was—arguably—wasting a year on a useless book? For the first time since I had begun working on the project I began to question the wisdom of my decision and the quality of the product I had produced.

What followed, as you might expect, was a period of depression. I had very definitely been knocked out of my saddle. I quit working on research projects and quit writing magazine articles. I went into each coaching session shaky and uncertain of my own abilities. I wondered if I was really a laughingstock to others and just didn't realize it. And it wasn't just me: The book sales dipped sharply after the review appeared online. Dozens of people on Amazon.com reported that the review was helpful to them and one even took the time to comment: "Saved me reading the book." I wondered what type of person I was that people had to be saved from me and from my best efforts. Even now, more than two years later, I find writing about these events painful.

Fortunately, the depression didn't last. After a couple weeks of floundering I bounced back. I began to see that, between the harsher criticisms and strong opinions about tone and language use, the reviewer was correct on many points. In fact, I should go on record here saying that I really bear the reviewer no personal ill will. It might surprise you to learn this, but he and I have exchanged some very friendly e-mails in the time since his review was published. He apologized for the tone of the review, which he said was written largely for effect and that, upon further consideration, he thought was disrespectful. I accepted his apology and believe he meant it sincerely. Despite all that, I have to acknowledge that the reviewer made some legitimate points and illuminated the differences in expectations I had as a writer from those held by many of my readers. I had thought that, as an expert positive psychology researcher, I would introduce coaches to the fascinating new science of positive psychology. I further expected that readers would simply want to take this information and create their own interventions in their own ways, appropriate to their own coaching practices. These ideas, as I later learned, were somewhat off the mark. In my experience with coaches since that time, I have found that most are eager for ready-made interventions and are principally interested in research results when they are couched in terms of "next steps," "practical skills," or "applications." That is, as an academic I have always been excited by ideas, and I realized, all too late, that coaches are generally excited by action.

What the reviewer wanted—and I think he was right to want this—was practical next steps: clear suggestions for translating the research into workable questions, assessments, and interventions for use with coaching clients. His review expressed, if nothing else, his frustration with what I had done with *Positive Psychology Coaching*. I had discussed many studies but rarely mentioned the relation of these exciting research results to coaching. As an expert, I failed to accept the mantle of leadership and offer clever ways to spin the straw of positive psychology into coaching gold. For my own part, I had assumed that my initial mission of merely educating readers about positive psychology would be enough. The interesting aspect of all this was that it was not the harsh review that changed my thinking—although it certainly presented a red flag that suggested my thinking needed to be changed. What really turned me around was conducting workshops with coaches. I began standing in front of groups of coaches in places like Iceland, Turkey, Canada, and Denmark, and they all wanted the exact same thing as my reviewer: They wanted tools, not

concepts or ideas. Over the course of many workshops my attitude evolved from one of wanting to educate people to one of wanting to inspire people to one of wanting to empower people. And here, at last, is the heart of my critic's comments: a plea to be empowered.

I want to be clear, up front, about my goals for this volume. I do not apologize for my earlier book—indeed, I do not believe there is anything to apologize for. I am quite proud of it. Nor do I write this book as a means of compensating for failures related to the first book. Finally, I do not write this book as a defense against my earlier critics. Instead, I wanted to write an additional book that represents my own personal growth. My goal for the first volume was to educate people about the emerging science of positive psychology, and my goal for this book is to present a wide range of useful tools based on that science. As the title of this book implies, I am interested in strategies for assessing and applying positive psychology within the coaching context. To the extent that you, the reader, can walk away from this book with new ideas that you can immediately put into practice in your own coaching, this will have been a successful endeavor.

► Why Are You Reading This Book?

It may sound like an unusual question, but I would like you to stop and think about why you are reading this book. Are you hoping to learn something about the science of positive psychology that you didn't know before? Are you hoping to walk away from the experience with actual tools that you can use with your clients? Are you hoping to breathe new life into your existing coaching practice by adopting a new philosophical orientation? Are you hoping that this book will, itself, serve as a sort of coaching education? The answer to the question of why you are reading this book is important because it sets up expectations for the book's contents and its usefulness to you.

It may help you to think about the two coaching books I have written—this volume and the earlier *Positive Psychology Coaching: Putting the science of happiness to work for your clients*—as I do: as a single book divided into two volumes, one intended to present a foundation of science and the second written with the purpose of expanding on this foundation in practical ways. This process, which I call “education to empowerment,” reflects the same approach I use in my international workshops. I begin with a seed of knowledge (education), introducing participants to a new idea such as the notion that developing strengths might lead to success more than overcoming weaknesses. From there I move to inspiration, in which I show that this knowledge can be used in exciting ways to improve performance. Using the strengths example, *I demonstrate my ability to accurately spot strengths in strangers using very little information*. In truth, my ability to spot strengths is not some prodigious talent I have, but rather, it is the result of countless hours of practice. Even so, my workshop participants find this inspiring, to watch someone who is masterful at a skill. Psychologists know much about inspiration, which we sometimes call “elevation.”² Elevation is an emotional reaction related to awe at the performance of another person. This emotional engagement is just what the “education” piece often lacks, and is exactly what my critic was complaining about. Moving people into



an elevated state, however, prepares them for action. From here, I try to shift from inspiration to empowerment. There is a subtle but critical difference between seeing that something is possible and realizing that you, yourself, can achieve it. When we watch Olympic athletes perform, for instance, we are amazed at what they are able to do, but we do not for one second think that we could accomplish the same level of mastery. The trick in workshops, coaching, or even book writing is to show people what is possible and then wake them up to the idea that they have the personal resources to enact this change in their own lives. Going back to the strengths example, I show my workshop participants that they, too, have the ability to easily spot strengths in action, even in strangers.

The “Education to Empowerment” Model

Education: Developing strengths might lead to success more than overcoming weaknesses.

Inspiration: Demonstrate my ability to accurately spot strengths in strangers using very little information.

Empowerment: I show my workshop participants that they, too, have the ability to easily spot strengths in action, even in strangers.

Example of the Education-to-Empowerment Continuum

1. Education -----	2. Inspiration -----	3. Empowerment
“Spotting strengths is a useful skill.”	“It is possible to spot strengths.”	“You, yourself, can learn to spot strengths.”

■ The Two Questions That Inform This Book

In a recent issue of *Choice* magazine, a publication for coaches, I wrote an article about the relationship between coaching and positive psychology.³ For the uninitiated, positive psychology is a relatively new movement—about a decade old—within the field of psychology. Positive psychology is an emphasis on the scientific study of what is right, rather than what is wrong, with people. It includes research on hope, happiness, strengths, resilience, courage, and other positive aspects of human functioning and flourishing. To be sure, positive psychology owes much to its many intellectual forebears including figures in classical Greek thought, the humanistic movement, and even religious studies. Positive psychologists are not the first to suggest that there is tremendous traction in looking at when people are at their best or discussing how people might achieve their highest potential. Positive psychologists do, however, have the most sophisticated empirical methods of studying these topics. By relying on the virtues of the scientific method, such as representative samples, advanced analytic technique, and controlled laboratory studies, positive psychologists are able to arrive at insights that were previously out of bounds to faith, intuition, reasoning, and logic. It doesn’t take much to see that positive psychology and coaching are natural bedfellows. Both professions

are principally about helping individuals and groups to perform better and live more satisfying lives.



Positive Psychology in a Nutshell

1. Positive psychology looks at what is right with people, focuses on when people are at their best, and attends to individual and group flourishing.
2. Positive psychology is not the focus of the positive at the expense of the negative. Positive psychologists recognize negative emotions, failure, problems, and other unpleasanties as natural and important aspects of life.
3. Positive psychology is, first and foremost, a science. As such, it is principally concerned with evidence, measurement, and testing. That said, positive psychology is also an applied science, and there is a common understanding that research results will lead to the creation of real-world interventions that will improve school, businesses, governments, and other aspects of individual and social life.
4. Interventions produced by positive psychologists are, by and large, positive interventions. Positive interventions are ways of working with people where the focus is not on alleviating pain or restoring a person to normal functioning from sub-standard function, but, rather, on promoting superior functioning. Positive psychologists often talk about this in terms of helping clients go from “+3” to “+5.”

For many people, coaching is the natural choice for being the applied arm of positive psychology. In fact, many people with an interest and education on positive psychology open coaching practices. Although positive psychology is, itself, an applied science, there is, as yet, no coherent or consistent methodology for delivering positive psychology services. There are people, such as my colleagues at the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP), who use strengths science as the centerpiece of their organizational consulting work. There are others who integrate tenets of positive psychology into their psychotherapy practices. And there are many, many others who turn to coaching as a means of putting positive psychology into practice.

► What Can Positive Psychology Do for Coaching?

This raises the first, most important, and most obvious question that forms the foundation of this book: What can positive psychology do for coaching? There is an unspoken maxim that holds that, as a science, positive psychology is well poised to inform the coaching profession and help elevate the standards and tools of practice. Indeed, positive psychology has provided a number of empirically validated interventions that might be of interest and use to coaches of all stripes. For instance, researcher Fred Bryant at the University of Chicago has conducted studies of the emotional consequences of using pieces of memorabilia to “positively reminisce” (that is, to savor the past).⁴ This has all sorts of practical ramifications for coaching. Just imagine using positive reminiscence with organizational leaders, teams, couples, or individuals seeking more meaning and happiness at home or at work. This is simply a variation on the coaching technique of visioning, but with a retrospective

focus instead of a future focus. Positive psychology has produced a number of these types of interventions that, taken together, form the corpus of a scientific toolbox that coaches can add to their existing practices. Positive psychology also has produced new and often counterintuitive insights. Just consider a few of the following: studies show that people are generally poor predictors of how well they will adjust to future situations;⁵ that too much satisfaction actually appears to undermine performance;⁶ that fantasizing about the future can undermine motivation;⁷ and that managing to strengths can produce better performance at work relative to managing to weaknesses (don't worry, I'll talk about all of these later on!).⁸ These insights can help coaches approach common client dilemmas with new ideas, appreciation, and ways of working. Positive psychology also provides new assessments of which coaches can avail themselves. There are well-validated surveys of strengths, optimism, life satisfaction, work style, and many other topics that are directly relevant to coaching.

Taken together, the specific set of intervention tools and assessment rooted in the science of positive psychology form the corpus of positive psychology coaching. Interestingly, positive psychology coaching, as an endeavor distinct from other approaches to coaching, is fairly poorly defined. It is unclear who should reasonably call him or herself a positive psychology coach. Should there be some formal certification process by which such coaches can evidence their mastery of both positive psychology and coaching? Should positive psychology coaching be viewed as additional, advanced coach training, in the same way that—say—psychiatric residency is specific training undertaken beyond the basics of medical school? Most readers who are experienced coaches will be familiar with the ways in which these uncertainties mirror the evolution of the field of coaching as a whole. In the early days of coaching, a few brave and visionary pioneers went about the business of motivating others to help them achieve their goals. To transform a loose collection of motivational practices into a coherent profession, however, took time. Professional organizations such as the International Coach Federation have been invaluable in establishing coherent standards for training, practice, and ethical behavior. Researchers such as Anthony Grant and his peers at the Coaching Psychology Unit at University of Sydney have been instrumental in establishing the validity and effectiveness of coaching interventions.⁹ Independent coach training schools and university-based programs have been vital in acting as the front lines of creating the profession by balancing market needs with responsible practices.

It is my strong recommendation that positive psychology coaching should be considered with equal gravitas. I am, to be honest, concerned about the number of people who hang up shingles and market themselves as “positive psychology coaches” with limited knowledge of both standard coaching techniques and the science of positive psychology. This is, to some extent, a profession-wide problem, but it is one that concerns me as a practitioner of positive psychology in particular. At the heart of my concern is the fact that positive psychology is a science and, as such, is both technical and dynamic. Although the topics of positive psychology, such as happiness, appear at first glance to be straightforward concerns, the scientific exploration of them is far from simple. A technical understanding of positive psychology, including the ability to critically consume the research literature, effectively use relevant assessments, and create interventions that are within the bounds of the field, is a critical component to being an effective positive psychology coach.

Equally troubling is the fact that, as a science, positive psychology is ever changing. I'll give you an example: In 2002 a collaborator and I published a frequently cited article reviewing the existing research literature connecting income with happiness. Among our reported conclusions was the idea that—at the national level—as income goes up over time happiness stays level.¹⁰ In the United States, for example, household incomes have grown dramatically across the decades, but the average level of happiness appears to have remained flat. This casts doubt on the idea that increasing national wealth, consumption, and infrastructure actually translates to a higher quality of life. This finding, called the “Easterlin Paradox” after the UCLA economist who first reported it, is important.¹¹ It could, for instance, help policy makers create laws and programs that balance economic concerns with the well-being of citizens. The problem is, it might not be true. In the years since 2002 a number of scientists—economists, sociologists, and psychologists—have published articles (based on data and sophisticated analyses) refuting the Easterlin Paradox.^{12,13} It turns out the story of money and happiness might just be a bit more complicated. It could be that the Easterlin Paradox exists in certain countries but not others. If this is the case, then the next logical step would be to identify the factors that lead toward or away from this flattening effect of happiness. An alternative explanation might also be that the Easterlin Paradox depends a little on what type of happiness in which a person is interested. It could be that the Easterlin Paradox holds true for feelings of happiness but not cognitive evaluations of happiness such as life satisfaction judgments.¹⁴ As more research is conducted the story will continue to unfold. Did my collaborator and I misreport? No, we reported conclusions based on the best available data at that time. But as new studies are conducted our conclusions will necessarily be modified. In this spirit of dynamism it is vital that those calling themselves positive psychology coaches have a mechanism for regularly updating their knowledge of the field.

■ Some Suggestions for the Creation of a Formal Positive Psychology Coaching Profession

Following I have listed six core areas that I believe to be crucial for the professionalization of positive psychology coaching as a subdiscipline of both positive psychology and coaching. In addition, I make specific recommendations concerning each of these core areas:

1. Credentialing

Just as the International Coach Federation has established standards for training and credentialing coaches, I believe that those using the professional label of “positive psychology coach” ought to have formal training in positive psychology. At this time, there is no set standard for the type or duration of this training, and I am not so presumptuous as to think that my opinion can be the sole voice on this topic. While one obvious type of credential is a doctorate degree, there are a variety of other types of training programs as well. Here, I suggest a number of types of programs and Internet information for each (current as of the time of this writing).

Master's Degree Programs in Positive Psychology: The advantage of these programs—and there are only two in the world that I am aware of—is that they

have the backing of established, accredited universities and therefore enjoy a depth and rigor that is a hallmark of university education. The two programs include:

- A. University of East London, Master's degree in Applied Positive Psychology <http://www.uel.ac.uk/psychology/programmes/postgraduate/positive-msc.htm>
- B. University of Pennsylvania, Master's degree in Applied Positive Psychology <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/lps/graduate/mapp/>

Certificate Coaching Programs in Positive Psychology: There are a number of programs for coaches that specifically promise an education in positive psychology research, assessment, and intervention. I have listed three different types of such programs here.

- A. San Francisco State University, College of Extended Learning, Core Strengths Coaching http://www.cel.sfsu.edu/coaching/classes.cfm?selection=indprograms&Abbrev=coah&Admin_unit=E
 - B. MentorCoach, ICF certified training with a positive psychology emphasis <http://www.mentorcoach.com>
 - C. Terri Levine Positive Psychology Coaching Program (in the interests of full disclosure, I designed this eight-unit certificate course) <http://www.terrilevine.com/positivepsych.htm>
2. Keeping Up-to-Date with Positive Psychology

As mentioned previously, positive psychology's knowledge base is continually shifting. It is crucial that those calling themselves positive psychology coaches keep abreast of current developments in the field and that they do so in a rigorous and consistent manner. Reading a book, such as this one, is one means of updating knowledge, but even the research and interventions reported on between these covers will need updating. There are a variety of online listservs and blogs about positive psychology, but I do not consider these adequate sources of current information because they are not primary sources and because they do not necessarily reflect the voices of those most expert in the field. Instead, I highly recommend that people subscribe to the academic journals in which positive psychology research is published, attend skills-based trainings by recognized experts, and join official positive psychology professional groups. I include a brief list of each of these below:

Journals: There are a number of journals, including coaching journals, that publish positive psychology research. However, there are relatively few journals that are wholly devoted to the science of positive psychology.

- A. The *Journal of Happiness Studies* <http://www.springer.com/social+sciences/quality+of+life+research/journal/10902?detailsPage=description>
- B. The *Journal of Positive Psychology* <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/17439760.asp>
- C. The *British Psychological Society Special Group in Coaching* <http://www.bps.org.uk/coachingpsy/journal.cfm>

Trainings: There are a number of high-quality trainings in positive psychology application and assessment that are appropriate for coaches. The following

examples do not represent a complete list but are intended to act as illustrations of trainings with an emphasis on positive psychology.

- A. Realise 2 Practitioner Programme (Centre for Applied Positive Psychology—UK). This two-day program introduces a wide range of practitioners to the science of strengths, to a well-regarded strengths assessment, and to strategies for using a strengths focus as work. <http://www.cappeu.com/practitioners.htm>
 - B. Strengths Training (Values in Action Institute—USA). The VIA Institute on character, funded by the Mayerson Foundation, is a leader in character strengths research and offers occasional trainings related to their VIA strengths assessment tool and other positive psychology topics. <http://www.viacharacter.org/>
 - C. Resilience trainings (The Happiness Institute—Australia). Under the leadership of Dr. Tim Sharp, the Happiness Institute offers a wide range of courses and trainings in positive psychology. <http://www.thehappinessinstitute.com/events/>
3. Remain Vigilant for Signs of Personal Strengths

It may sound obvious to coaches to pay attention to the personal strengths of a client. Indeed, seasoned coaches will already be in the habit of keeping a sharp eye out for potential client resources, including abilities, skills, talents, and other positive personal characteristics. It is the good fit between this pillar of positive psychology and this tried-and-true coaching strategy that leads me to believe it should be a core part of any formal positive psychology coaching. Rather than some vague idea of looking for what the client does well, I endorse a highly specific means of identifying and labeling strengths. Pay attention to the visual and auditory cues from your clients' engagement, such as their posture, inflection, and hand gestures. Just as important, begin to build a strengths vocabulary so that you can label positive qualities when you see them and have a shared language for communicating these virtues to your clients.

4. Use Established Positive Psychology Assessments

One of the best aspects of positive psychology is the fact that it is a science. This means that it is centrally concerned with measurement. Because of this, coaches can benefit from established positive psychology assessments of psychological phenomena such as optimism, self-esteem, motivation, and meaning in life. By relying on measures that are well developed and measure topics of interest to coaches, you can gain additional confidence in the quality of the results as well as contrast your clients' answers to those of comparison groups. Coaches can draw on positive psychologists' sometimes superior knowledge of statistics and test construction to arrive at better surveys.

To illustrate how sophisticated these tests can be, just consider the development of the most widely used life satisfaction measure: the Satisfaction With Life Scale, created by Ed Diener (my father) and his colleagues.¹⁵ In the early 1980s they began with the simple idea that life satisfaction can be reliably measured. The simplest way would be to ask people the single question, "How satisfied are you with your life?" and use a numeric answering system. The problem with single-item scales is that they are sensitive to what researchers broadly call

“error.” This means that all different people might interpret this item in unique ways or that their answers might be influenced by some momentary circumstance. An improved strategy would be to ask multiple questions that attempt to assess the same concept. So, in this case, instead of simply asking how satisfied you are with your life, I might ask to what extent you feel you have gotten what you want in life, to what extent you feel you are making progress toward your goals, to what extent you harbor regrets, and to what extent you generally feel satisfied. Taken together, these items have the potential to reduce error and produce a more reliable overall satisfaction score. Diener and his colleagues tested hundreds of these items, submitting each to statistical scrutiny, until they arrived at the five items that showed the greatest promise. The researchers examined this elite item pool against other existing measures of happiness, including non-self-report measures.¹⁶ This is a far more stringent approach, sometimes taking years, than the off-the-cuff measures that some coaches create. The good news is, positive psychology is full of free, easy-to-use measures of a wide range of interesting variables.

5. Communicating with Your Client about Your Approach

I recently received a call from a prospective client who was shopping for a good fit with a coach. She had come across my name as being connected to positive psychology, and she was curious about what, exactly, this meant with regard to the way I practiced. She asked a terrific question: “How would your coaching look different from anyone else’s?” Her question was important for two reasons: first, it underscores the necessity to distinguish positive psychology coaching from other forms of coaching, and second, it emphasizes the importance of being transparent with clients. One of the things I have long valued about being a coach is the openness and naturalness of the relationship. When I was trained as a therapist—a noble pursuit in my opinion—I was often frustrated with the admonition not to disclose too much personal information or, at times, pull back the curtain and let the client see your inner thinking and process. The caricature of the therapist merely nodding and saying “Mmmmmm-hmmmmm” has become a short-hand joke for the popular view of therapists being unreadable. Coaching works best under a different set of circumstances. It works best when coaches and clients can authentically join together to cocreate the relationship under an umbrella of complete honesty. My clients can tell when I am jazzed about a particular solution and when I feel lukewarm, and we sometimes discuss my emotional reactions as well as theirs.

The other important aspect of my prospective client’s question—how does my positive psychology coaching differ from other forms of coaching—is easy. I am explicitly informed in my coaching work by the science and theory of positive psychology. This means I have a tendency to look for solutions rather than explore obstacles, that I use a codified vocabulary for strengths, that I draw upon empirically supported interventions and assessments, and that I attend heavily to the role of positive and negative emotions when I interact with my clients. To be sure, some coaches might do all of these things, and many do some of these things, but there are important points of departure. The most obvious, and perhaps the largest, is that I draw upon a large, first-hand expertise of research.

This means that my coaching style—much as writers talk about their unique voices—vacillates between coaching proper (exploring, supporting, and challenging) and mentorship (giving expert advice and consultation). As I moved from a novice coach to a more advanced coach, I found that my clients not only appreciated my ability to move between these two modalities, but also that they actually sought me out for this skill. In the same way, I think positive psychology coaching, as a niche practice, gives coaches a competitive edge because it promises not only basic coaching acumen but a level of facility with appealing scientific subject matter such as happiness and hope.

Understanding how your knowledge of positive psychology content areas affects your practice is critical to selling your services and establishing your coaching voice. Knowing, for example, that you use an approach based explicitly in appreciative inquiry or solutions focus can help you articulate the nature and process of your work. Telling your clients that you routinely use the Realise 2 strengths assessment with your clients can help them know what to expect when they engage your services.

6. Make a Paradigm Shift

Consider how, when, and why integrating positive psychology in general, and strengths in particular, might benefit your work with each individual client. Those potential benefits may include (a) clients being more predisposed to enjoying positive topics, (b) therapists buffering themselves against burnout, and (c) both clients and therapists experiencing the psychologically tonic effects of using strengths. Positive psychology coaching is, essentially, about a paradigm shift. This might mean a shift for you as a coach, but it will certainly mean a new way of thinking for your client. Even the most upbeat, optimistic clients will sometimes bump into professional, social, or emotional walls. As a coach, you can lend them a fresh perspective by framing questions in a way that assumes solutions are inevitable and that the client is capable of change.



Positive Psychology Coaching Credentialing at a Glance

A certification in positive psychology coaching should rest on the twin laurels of basic coaching competence and a firm grounding in positive psychological science. I believe the latter would ideally cover three core areas:

1. *A positive focus*—At its core, positive psychology is about asking what is right, rather than what is wrong, with people. While this does not mean that we, as coaches, ignore weaknesses or problems, it does mean that we think there is at least as much utility in focusing on the positive. This fundamental philosophical view is a prerequisite for all positive psychology interventions.
2. *The benefits of positive emotion*—Happiness, however defined, is the currency in which we trade. Positive emotions are associated with virtually every desirable goal and outcome ranging from solid friendships to better workplace safety records. Understanding how positive emotions work, and how and when to best promote them, is a core mechanism that makes positive psychology coaching effective.

3. *The science of strengths*—Another pillar of positive psychological science is the study of strengths. The idea that each individual possesses admirable attributes and that these are responsible for success and can be even better developed is essential to a positive psychology coaching practice.

In addition, I think any responsible training would present learners with mechanisms, such as continuing education credits, for keeping up to date with the evolution of positive psychological science. Finally, I would view any responsible training as including a relational component—such as active supervision or peer consultation—between the learner and a credentialed positive psychology coach.

► What Can Coaching Do for Positive Psychology?

The second major question that must be considered is just as important but, perhaps, slightly less obvious to coaches: What can coaching do for positive psychology? If positive psychology lends credibility and tools to coaching, then it only makes sense that it is in coaching's best interest for positive psychology to flourish; whatever aid coaches can lend to that process could be considered an investment in their own professional interests. My guess is that most coaches don't feel an explicit professional obligation to positive psychology, any more than they might feel obliged to help sports psychologists or economists. The truth is, however, that there are a number of unique ways coaching can benefit positive psychology and, in turn, its own professional fortunes.

Coaching sessions, themselves, are terrifically fertile ground for ideas and insights about relationships and performance. Who among us hasn't lit up with excitement as we or our clients stumbled upon an intriguing new approach to an age-old problem? Just as clinical therapy sessions have long been a rich source of anecdotal evidence, coaching sessions can be used as instructive case studies, not only for other coaches, but for positive psychologists as well. By sharing the insights and ideas that are borne out of coaching sessions, coaches are well poised to guide new positive psychology research and the creation of useful new assessments. Take the simple idea of brainstorming. There are a number of ways to brainstorm with clients, but experienced coaches likely develop preferences for a particular style based on the results it produces. In their coaching classic, *Co-Active Coaching*, Laura Whitworth and her coauthors describe brainstorming as a skill in which "the coach and client together generate ideas, alternatives, and possible solutions. Some of the proposed ideas may be outrageous and impractical. This is merely a creative exercise to expand the possibilities available to the client. There is no attachment on the part of either coach or client to any of the ideas suggested" (p. 254).¹⁷ I love this definition, and, as a coach, I brainstorm with my clients in this exact way. But as a scientist I also wonder if there are insights we can gain through study that might help us to brainstorm even better. Just consider the following types of research questions:

- Are there certain types of clients for whom rapid-fire brainstorming is more appropriate, and others for whom the rapid-fire style dismantles a more deliberative approach?

- Is there an ideal ratio of outrageous to practical ideas that helps the process be more productive?
- Are there preparatory practices, such as telling jokes, that increase positivity and make brainstorming reliably more productive?
- How does the level of attachment to brainstorming outcomes on the behalf of either the coach or client affect the brainstorming productivity?

Coaches often lack either the tools or the interest to investigate their practices at this micro level. Each of these is a question with empirical merit that could, potentially, be guided by coaches who already have anecdotal evidence and preliminary answers to some of these questions. Imagine a system in which coaches and positive psychology researchers team up together in a dialogue that enhances each of their professional interests. Just as there is a growing number of coach directories listing coaches for prospective clients, there could be a directory through which coaches and researchers could connect and share mutually beneficial ideas. Coaching practices can act as on the ground data collection sites and benefit from the insights related to the research that is produced. Open dialogue between coaches and positive psychologists would also allow the former group to request specific research. It could be, for example, that a coach is particularly interested in a phenomenon local to his or her practice. Here is an example from my own practice: I have had so many occasions that a client has shown up for a session and said, “I wasn’t feeling very motivated, but then I thought, ‘What will Robert say to me at our session?’ The specter of you as my coach really motivated me!” This is interesting to me as a coach, because it suggests a powerful way that the coaching relationship is used by clients through their own imaginations. Now, wouldn’t it be exciting to have an even better understanding of when clients are likely to engage in this type of motivating fantasy, or to know which clients are likely to do so? And what about that minority of clients who show up to a session with an extra heap of embarrassment because they were not able to follow through on their commitments? Obviously, personality plays a role in explaining why one person would use a fantasy vision of her coach as motivation and the other would use a fantasy vision of her coach and become embarrassed. But systematic research can open the door wide on this phenomenon, helping us to understand what works, why, and when. Imagine that you had a direct line of access to a research laboratory and could request studies done on specific topics that are relevant to your coaching practice.

The final area where coaching has an obligation to positive psychology is as a market concern. Positive psychology has evolved from a basic science to an applied science. This means that a decade ago researchers were primarily interested in exploring strengths, happiness, and other positive topics. But in recent years there has been an increasing trend toward application of these research results. What this means is that the new wave of people who are being attracted to positive psychologists are just as interested, on average, in application as they are in research. To a large extent they seem themselves as “anti-therapists” providing consultation and intervention services that help promote positive aspects of functioning and boost happiness. The problem is that because positive psychology is such a new discipline there are relatively few established jobs for graduates of programs like the University of Pennsylvania’s



master's degree in applied positive psychology. Graduates generally choose between research, applying positive psychology to some other established field such as finance or management, or some more applied work. The de facto choice for a third option is coaching. I believe it is in the interest of all working coaches to actively work toward credentialing this new wave of practitioners. By establishing clear criteria, such as those put forward by the ICF in which formal positive psychology programs can work, we will all benefit from a higher quality of responsible practice on the behalf of those with training in positive psychology, but not necessarily in coaching.

The Coaching Obligation to Positive Psychology, at a Glance

1. Insights from coaching sessions and professional trends within coaching suggest areas for research focus.
 2. Coaching sessions of all stripes provide an interesting and important testing ground for new positive psychology interventions.
 3. Coaching trends related to business and other commercial needs offer a needed guide for the development of solid positive psychology assessments.
 4. As positive psychology becomes increasingly applied, and as more students graduate with degrees specific to positive psychology, coaching provides a natural professional landing pad.
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► How This Book Works—Layout, Types of Coaches, Reader's Responsibility

If you are anything remotely like me, you like books. You buy books—especially professional books—because they are a great way to get inspiration, new ideas, new skills, and to basically grow in your work. If you are like me, you likely purchase books from a wide catalog of topics including management, coaching, psychology, and general nonfiction. Also, if you are anything like me, you do not read these books cover to cover. You probably hop around to the most interesting or relevant chapters or just read the introduction before casting the book aside. My bookshelves are stacked with unapologetically half-read tomes. This is one of the great truths about professional books: Far more are sold than are actually read. And I believe this makes sense. Professional books often present a single sticky idea or list of useful tools, but rarely do they have the kind of narrative arc that best-selling novels have. It is unfair to compare this summer's best beach read to the hot management title you skim while on the plane. This book is no exception. As much as I would like to up the interest level by putting a murder mystery between the chapters on positive diagnosis and positive assessment, it just won't happen. Instead, I expect you, the reader, to jump around the book and use it in a nonlinear fashion as you deem appropriate. I want you to be able to read a chapter as a stand-alone topic, without having to have read the chapters that came before and without being obligated to read what comes after. I want you to be able to mine these pages for exactly the content you can use, without wasting any of your time on the topics that are of less interest to you.

■ What You Will Find in This Book

1. *Strengths*: Everyone—clients and others—are naturally loaded with a wide range of skills at which they naturally excel. Despite the fact that these abilities are second nature, they can also be developed. There is an exciting branch of positive psychological science that focuses exclusively on the study of strengths. This includes ways to assess client strengths, research on the correlates of strengths, and strategies for developing strengths. Strengths scientists also acknowledge the fact that everyone has weaknesses that they may need to overcome en route to achieving their goals. Chapter 2 explores the relationship between strengths and weaknesses and provides what is, essentially, a master class in using a strengths approach with your clients. Strengths is among my favorite areas of research and my training passion. I have attempted to pepper this chapter with some of my favorite insights and activities from years of trainings on the topic.
2. *Happiness*: Feeling good and experiencing a sense of meaning is a concern that touches everyone. Importantly, the science of happiness has shown that feeling upbeat has a wide range of benefits at work, in relationships, and personally. Nowhere is this more pertinent to coaching than in the topic of happiness at work. Research and theory by Richard Boyatzis, Peter Warr, and Sonja Lyubomirsky show a number of ways in which happiness is an entirely appropriate subject for the boardroom. Chapter 3 includes both a brief overview of the science of positivity, especially as it concerns workplaces, and a number of specific applications including the reflected best self, optimal feedback, and visioning. As a researcher, happiness is my primary area of expertise, and I attempted to stretch this chapter well beyond its counterpart in my original book. Rather than covering the fascinating basics of happiness science, as I did in the earlier book, I have tried to present information that is specifically applicable to coaching.
3. *Hope*: Humans are unique in our ability to look into the future. Whether planning a holiday, predicting the weather, or setting strategy for the next business quarter, we can use our ability to think ahead to live a better life. This is especially relevant to coaching clients when it comes to hope. Our belief in our ability to positively influence a future outcome—our hope—is central to coaching success. Many of our most powerful professional tools—championing, acknowledgment, challenging—are employed with the implicit aim of encouraging hope and thereby increasing motivation and self-efficacy. In Chapter 4 I will present the theory and research on hope as it relates to coaching, and offer suggestions for instilling hope in clients.
4. *Positive Diagnosis*: Since the dawn of medicine doctors have been leveraging their diagnostic ability in their fight to beat illness and promote health. By using symptoms to identify syndromes, doctors have been able to target specific treatments. What if there was a positive counterpoint to traditional diagnosis? What if there were such a thing as a “positive diagnosis” in which coaches were able to look at patterns of positive behaviors, feelings, and thoughts to identify performance syndromes and adjust work styles accordingly? Chapter 5 introduces the concept of positive diagnosis and presents suggestions and measures for accomplishing this.

5. *Assessments:* Among the strengths of the coaching profession is a widespread reliance on established measures of personality, interests, strengths, and other personal qualities that influence our performance. As a science, positive psychology similarly relies on well-validated measurements to study individuals and groups. In Chapter 6 I will present some introductory information about measurement in general. But if this sounds suspiciously like a rehash of your undergraduate statistics course, then be rest assured that my goal is to raise interesting questions about measurement and equip you with tools for evaluating competing measures. Once we have dispensed with this brief foray down the psychometric rabbit hole, we will move on to a list of actual assessments on topics such as satisfaction, hope, motivational style, and negative feelings. The assessments will be discussed and reprinted in their entirety for your benefit.
6. *Transitions:* While you might not actively think about it, your day—and, indeed, all your days—is made up of crucial transition points. You transition from bed to breakfast, from home to work, from work to home. You transition from early career to mid-life, from a full house to an empty nest. Both at the micro and macro levels, these transitions can affect how we feel and how we will fare in our next round of activities or next stage of life. I will present an overview of transitions, related research, and case studies from actual coaching sessions. In each case I will emphasize how transition points can be leveraged for better coaching and better client performance.
7. *An overview of PPC sessions:* There are many definitions of coaching, and it is sometimes difficult to tell one form of coaching from another. Sometimes it is even difficult to articulate the subtle differences between coaching and therapy. Nonetheless, these distinctions are real. To the extent that positive psychology coaching can be distinguished from other forms of coaching, I offer a chapter on the mechanics of positive psychology coaching as a unique endeavor. I offer hints and tips from other coaches with whom I have consulted and outline specific issues related to delineating positive psychology coaching from other brands.
8. *A crystal ball:* Although I am not a fortune-teller, I will make an attempt to read the future of positive psychology coaching. I believe this is a discipline that is at the exciting nexus between two young professions—coaching and positive psychology—that seem to generate more excitement and enthusiasm than almost any other field I have come across, and appear to be growing at a rapid rate. I will make specific predictions about coaching trends and positive psychology trends, and offer recommendations for riding the wave of both of these great fields.

► An Invitation

I invite you into this book. Read it in order, read only a chapter, check it out from the library, give it as a gift to a colleague. However you choose to use this book, my goal is to present you with at least one novel or challenging idea, one new exercise you can use, one inspiring story or one assessment that improves the quality of your practice. I do not expect you to agree with every point I make or to follow every

suggestion. I am relatively unconcerned about convincing you I am right or impressing you with my expertise. I want, instead, for this book to be about you. I want you to walk away from the reading experience with something you can hold onto, something you can use or share with a friend. To that end, I invite you to look at the experience you are about to embark on less as a critical foray into a professional book and more like a treasure hunt. Some points in this book will, undoubtedly, seem dull while others will shine with a crazy luster. I invite you to poke around, hunt all you like until you find, for yourself, where X marks the spot.

