

From the inside out: how coaching changes lives

President of BACP, **David Weaver**, talks to Carolyn Mumby about his work with young black men and calls for increased diversity within the coaching profession.



David Weaver (DW) is senior partner at DWC Consulting, and president of BACP. We in the BACP Coaching Executive initially approached David to help us raise the profile of coaching within BACP through his work as an executive coach. When we met with him, we discovered that he was also involved in coaching young black men at risk of or involved in youth violence; they trusted him because he was from their community. David was originally interviewed for the article, *Coaching for Social Change*, in the September 2020 issue of *Therapy Today*,¹ followed by an extended interview with three other coaches from that article in the October 2020 issue of *Coaching Today*.² In this in-depth interview, David identifies important themes about the need to find and support the work already happening in communities that has a resonance with coaching.

CM: Can you describe the work you have been involved in that illustrates this notion of coaching for social change or social justice?

DW: I've done a lot of work with young black men, some of whom will be involved in, or at risk of, serious youth violence. I've also done a lot of work with people in communities who don't want to access something that is formally called 'counselling'. But they do need to speak about what they're feeling. They want to address and make sense of what they are experiencing, and they want to think about their future. That's

happened on the individual, group, large community and organisational basis, in a manner that you would call coaching.

CM: What are the assumptions that might get in the way of coaching being offered to and accepted by people from different communities?

DW: While there is less of a stigma attached to coaching in organisations, even in that context, people from under-represented groups can perceive a stigma around being offered coaching, as their presumption is that they are being seen to have something 'wrong' with them or their performance, so they are not seeing the immense benefit of coaching in terms of taking you forward. It can be seen as 'performance management' rather than 'performance improvement' and that is compounded when you are a minority in an organisational setting. People can hold many assumptions, both in the workplace and within communities, around that notion of 'needing help' as a deficit model, rather than seeing what coaching can do for them.

CM: That makes so much sense; we need to be aware that the suggestion of coaching is made and received in the context of assumptions due to conscious or unconscious bias or internalised oppression. So how in your experience can coaching meet the need of people who are placed at a disadvantage by society?

DW: Within black communities, people often find themselves in situations where the narrative is about how bad it is, and currently it is. The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 and the stress of this, plus the wider narrative around race equality, as a result of the murder of George Floyd, has created trauma in our communities. I want them to be able to recognise 'we are better than this', and



I think that's where coaching can really help, because of its focus on looking at but also beyond the condition or situation that you find yourself in now. Coaching can help individuals within communities to explore the question: 'How do we move forward?'

The other thing that appeals to younger people is the name 'coaching' because there is that whole alignment with sports coaching and improving personal and team performance in a positive way. In the work that we've been doing with young people, where they have been completely ignored by the professions or perhaps viewed just as criminals, starting from a place of seeing potential and looking to the future is one that often resonates with them much more than counselling.

CM: How do young people find you and how do you explain coaching to them?

DW: Much of it is word of mouth within communities because the established structures aren't providing access to those who really need therapeutic support. So, where people identify with the individuals or communities that are alienated by the system, that's the first contact point. Often people just need to talk to someone they feel cares for them. Speaking about young black men in particular, in every aspect of their lives, from going to school onwards, people aren't imagining they will be achieving. This is compounded by deprivation, alienation, discrimination and poverty.

There is something about making that connection, being able to build the relationship, demonstrating that you care, demonstrating that you understand that the challenge is in the context. Demonstrating that you're reliable, that you're going to be there when you say you're going to be there. That's a really important starting point.

Some of the work with these young men will come from individuals like me who are known to be coaches, or viewed as role models. Some of it will come from funded initiatives in communities, but often those initiatives aren't funded. In essence, they are 'do for self' community-based networks and individuals who come together to provide this kind of support.

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CM: So, when it emerges from within the communities, it can be more effective than when offered from outside by somebody who may not inspire the same sense of trust or belief?

DW: Yes; I often say that there is a dissonance between the counselling professions and those who increasingly require counselling in an increasingly challenging world. In the middle ground are those people who are often not trained, or some who are trained but struggle to enter or advance within the profession, but who recognise that on the community level, something needs to be done. You have a situation where people in the community are trying to attract funding so they can establish themselves to actually do the work but aren't able to provide that service as professional coaches or therapists and be paid. There may be initiatives in churches or faith groups that establish themselves to provide this type of service, or simply individuals who feel they have a responsibility to their community, to try to provide that kind of support. A lot of coaching takes place that is not regarded as 'coaching', and these individuals who should be joining the profession will find barriers to entry for all kinds of reasons, including financial, in terms of the criteria for entering into the learning establishment, and when they get there, in not being understood or supported. Often, the curriculum doesn't lend itself to actually addressing some of the needs of these people. If we see such innovative work taking place, the profession has a responsibility to embrace it and learn from it and to ensure that the learning actually bridges that dissonance. We want high quality professional coaches and counsellors and therapists; but actually, the kind of interventions that are really required are coming from outside of that established framework.

CM: What do you think we need to do differently as professionals?

DW: I think too often we start from seeing that people need to speak, but we don't talk about the 'why.'

We need to think about why circumstances are making many in our communities feel very anxious, about the increasing rates of depression we are seeing, about COVID-19 and the disproportionate impact it's having. A good example is around serious youth violence and the lack of a public health approach for seeing what is really



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happening and why. Rather than viewing young black boys as criminals, it's about recognising these young boys are actually suffering from trauma and exhibiting some of the effects of trauma, for a whole host of reasons.

The second thing is that we just need to become much more diverse as a profession. If our diverse society sees that the profession includes people who look like them, it will convey a sense of connectivity and relevance. So disabled, young, working class, black, LGBTQ+ people, for example, will feel more able to connect. In the absence of that sense of relatability, there is stigma and a sense of something being done to you rather than with you.

Then learning takes place in the profession as well, transferring information, knowledge, experience and expertise.

Lastly, there is an advocacy role for the profession. Moving away from just that focus on the clients in your practice room to being informed by knowledge of the community and your ability to be an advocate for them, because you're aware of what some of those issues are out there. You can have a powerful intervention with your clients, but is it addressing the systemic issues, addressing the institutional or the structural issues, which are putting those individuals in that position in the first place?

CM: Do you think there are formal ways in which we can take that intermediary role?

DW: BACP has great potential in this regard; but we can all play a part by seeking to influence the networks and coalitions we're involved in. This includes coaches – especially if we take seriously the view that coaching can play a key role in informing social change, tackling inequalities while supporting individuals.

CM: Yes, perhaps coaches have more of a tendency to look at the system than counsellors, because of the lineage of our work within organisations, using approaches like systemic constellations or working as a consultant alongside individual or team coaching.

Also, what I'm hearing is the importance of recognising who the problem originates with. For example, Jackson Katz talks about how domestic violence is seen as a woman's problem and actually, in fact, often it's not created by the women but usually by men who themselves are victims of a limited masculine ideal.³ We can say the same about racism, where the problem is seen to be located within the people who are the victims rather than owned by those who are doing the discriminating. So it's not so much about 'how did they get there?'; but 'how did we get here?'

DW: That's very powerful and it reminds me how, as we went into lockdown, various men's groups initiated peer coaching and mentoring. I became involved with a group in east London which initially started with black men, then expanded to men from different ethnic backgrounds. The men were of the view, based on their own experiences and insights, that there were going to be increased incidences of domestic violence and that men were often the perpetrators. We were offering challenge and support and exploring where the violence was coming from. Then we began to look with young boys at some of the domestic abuse that they were perpetrating on parents and siblings. Taking a coaching approach was delivering the dividends really, and not just for this period, but afterwards – it begins to address the issue more widely because people go out and speak more about it and continue their education and this impacts others' awareness.

There is so much opportunity here for our profession to be seen as relevant, and that comes from locating ourselves, not just with the client who may be fortunate to be in the room with us because they've got a little bit of money or have been referred through the NHS etc, but also with communities – they are our greatest ambassadors. Coaching plays a unique role because it's related to seeing and working with the ability of the individuals, because we're looking at it within a system, we are approaching it as a side-by-side relationship, seeking to support at depth but also focusing on where they want to go. I think it's really a moment for us as coaches.

CM: I really think so too. And there's something about the interplay between things being limited in lockdown and, at the same time positively disrupted, so people are asking questions that they wouldn't otherwise ask.

For me, there are big questions to consider in relation to our education system; for example, why is coaching not in schools? Why are young people not routinely offered opportunities every day or every week to think and talk individually or in groups, to build on their own natural inclination to coach one another, with more tools available, such as those provided by positive psychology?

DW: That's an interesting point; in this time of uncertainty, people are becoming used to asking questions and people are more receptive to being asked questions.

In my experience, coaching increases this receptivity, to have to sit down and think about things. Our questions are probably more insightful because we're having to think about things ourselves, since everything's up in the air. So, again, the powerful questions piece is part of the armoury that we have as coaches, and that distinguishes itself to some extent from more traditional approaches to counselling.

CM: There's something here about thinking together; that, as the coach, I am able to be often quite transparent about the fact that I'm not sure. Whereas I think sometimes, depending on the approach, counselling might locate it as, 'You have the problem, I am the expert to navigate you towards the solution'. And I think that misses out then on some of the dynamism that can occur through dialogue. If, as the professional, you have no awareness of why and how the problems are occurring through social disparity, then how can you possibly be trusted? Because without that systemic awareness, the problem is located within the individual and their adaptation or lack of it to the challenges that they face because of those social norms and oppressions.

DW: Yes, that's right. It's almost reframing the counsellor's maxim: 'I'll just work with what happens in the room'. Well, that's fine. But if you're limited by your contribution in that room, and you're not acquainted with what really matters out there, then it's not going to be effective.

CM: If coaches want to get involved in coaching for social justice, how can they best approach it?

DW: I would recommend that people find out more, and get involved in the important work of BACP Coaching. The coaching approach has a lot of powerful relevance and relatability for many people who are suffering due to some of the unprecedented challenges facing communities and individuals right now.

It is also important that we all reach out to people who have never thought of counselling as a profession, but would if they began to recognise that there are many counsellors who coach. There are so many people operating outside the counselling profession as coaches, who are making a difference to people's lives. The same goes for qualified counsellors and psychotherapists who recognise the values of coaching disciplines and are focused on social justice. So my plea is for people to join the group, engage in the discussion and work to make a difference.

CM: Yes, as a coaching division of a larger counselling organisation, we recognise that in some ways we are pioneers, building on the work of others since the division was first established. Pioneers can find themselves in some quite challenging positions and if we don't recognise that, then there's a danger we fall into the habit of wondering, 'Why are they resisting that?' But if we step back and see it systemically, we see resistance as a response to something because it's still relatively new and it operates differently in some ways from the rest of the system.

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DW: I think the notion of being pioneers is really important and I like that. Sometimes, when I'm in other conversations, I feel that they're not hearing or seeing or feeling or tasting the power of the coaching, so I think as coaches within BACP, you need to shout louder about what you do and about how it is changing lives, and the people whose lives change as a result will be your greatest ambassadors.

Because coaching is changing lives. Coaching is such a powerful entry point. And it needn't always stay at coaching because it may move towards psychotherapy or counselling or other psychological interventions, and if it's too compartmentalised, there's no cross-fertilisation. But if we feel that the wider profession doesn't value us or our intervention, we need to free ourselves of those self-limiting beliefs, just as we support our clients to do. If we mirror that to ourselves as a profession, imagine what battles we would not choose to fight. Imagine, when we shine our light, what other disciplines will glean from that? ■

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