

Coaching for social change

Coaching has joined the fight for social justice, helping clients challenge disadvantage one step at a time, says Carolyn Mumby

One are the days when coaching was only seen as an executive perk, an expensive privilege focused on performance management. Coaches now work across all levels of organisations, small and medium-sized enterprises, start-ups and the third sector. But what's less well known is that a growing number of coaches are using their skills to reach and work at depth with groups disadvantaged by society, whose circumstances may be complex and chaotic. And leading the wave are dual-trained practitioners, therapists who have gone on to qualify in coaching, often driven by a sense that clients need more than just a 'safe place to talk'. Many are setting up coaching projects to tackle both individual growth and broader social change. Coaching is appearing alongside counselling provision, supporting recovery from substance misuse and eating disorders, and early research suggests an integrated coaching and counselling approach can work well for young people, particularly in services that offer a variety of provision for them under one roof!

Part of the appeal of offering coaching is that it comes with less stigma attached than counselling, says Katharine Collins, BACP registered therapist and coach, who set up the Out and About project in Hackney, east London, to offer coaching to older LGBTQ+ people at risk of social isolation. 'Counselling

is still associated with weakness and failing by many people,' she says.

Coaching can also offer more flexibility in terms of number and frequency of sessions. As Collins points out, 'For people struggling with multiple disadvantages and often chaotic lives, it does not require a weekly commitment.' Coaching's flexibility also extends to its remit, allowing coaches to help clients find solutions to practical problems in a way that some counsellors may feel is at odds with their modality. 'Coaching is about building a sense of agency and control in relation to what is happening around you,' says Catherine Macadam, co-founder of Coaching for Unpaid Carers, a community interest company. 'At our project, this combination helps carers to manage stress, maintain motivation and resilience, improve their quality of life and continue caring, if that

'Coaching is about building a sense of agency and control in relation to what is happening around you'

is what they choose to do. It teaches people strategies and techniques that they can continue to use to coach themselves once the coaching is finished.'

Coaching's focus on positive qualities rather than perceived deficits means it can empower people in ways that counselling does not, believes David Britten, therapist and coach and a senior lecturer at York St John University. He led research into a mental health recovery project set up by Mind in York that provided coaching for people with serious and enduring mental health problems. 'Coaching has been seen as only for the mentally robust, but mental health and illness is not on a one-dimensional continuum,' he says. 'The emphasis of the project was not on clinical cure but on personal recovery, on finding a way to live a meaningful life, even while still experiencing

significant mental health problems. We chose to use coaching rather than counselling because my experience and my research suggest that coaching can empower people in ways that counselling does not necessarily achieve.'

Broad reach

Coaching can also reach clients who would be reluctant to come to counselling, believes David Weaver, senior partner at DWC Consulting and President of BACP. As well as being an executive coach and consultant, Weaver works pro bono with young black men involved in or at risk of serious violence in London. 'Coaching appeals to younger people because the name "coach" has an alignment with sports coaching and improving personal and team performance in a positive way,' he says. 'This sometimes appeals more than sitting down and engaging in therapy that doesn't seem to take them anywhere and may feel more like something being done to you rather than with you.'

Clients find Weaver through word of mouth in communities

where the established structures aren't providing access to therapeutic support. 'Young boys at risk of involvement in serious violence are often suffering from and exhibiting some of the effects of trauma, for a whole host of reasons,' Weaver says. 'From school onwards, people aren't imagining they will achieve. This is compounded by deprivation, alienation, discrimination, including high levels of Stop and Search and poverty. As they grow up, they increasingly feel let down and unable to engage with institutions. But if, when you're engaging with them, those young men realise that you understand what they're going through, you become

relatable on that fundamental level, and they are more likely to engage. I think that's what coaching can do, and what counselling could and should do more of, and doesn't always do.'

Values and strengths

Recognition of the client's own expertise and equal worth is core to coaching's appeal and its effectiveness, particularly in circumstances where they may feel that society judges them as less deserving or able.

In this 'partnership of equals,'² the coaching client is seen as the expert on themselves and their world, and the coach as an expert in guiding the process. As well as creating a working relationship based on equality, coaches support clients to identify their values, existing strengths and purpose, which forms a strong foundation for creating change. 'Clients invariably leave coaching feeling good about themselves, and with a greater sense of power and self-agency,' says Collins. 'This allows them to tackle the problems they encounter from a stronger and more resilient place. Being able to see that they can effect change in their own lives naturally leads to the belief that they can effect change in their wider communities.'



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Working from values and strengths does not mean that problems and difficulties are ignored. At the York Mind project, many clients were long-term users of mental health services, with multiple diagnoses that often affected their ability to function in everyday life. Despite this, there was an emphasis on seeing the potential in the person rather than seeing and approaching them as fundamentally broken. 'To be consciously aware of our personal values and how they might shape the way we are in the world contributes to a positive sense of identity,' says Britten. 'Identifying and using strengths and finding ways to exercise them in the world is a key aspect of coaching.'

Within black communities, people often find themselves in situations where the narrative is about how bad it is - and currently it is, says Weaver. 'The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 and the stress of this has created trauma in our communities, along with the wider narrative around race equality, as a result of the murder of George Floyd. Coaching can enable people to realise "we are better than this" because of that focus on looking at - but also beyond - the condition or the situation that you find yourself in now. Coaching can work with individuals and within communities by asking, "How do we move forward?" In coaching, we identify achievable steps and that has been shown to develop a sense of self-efficacy and possibility. There may be less emphasis initially on conventionally high achievement when clients are starting from a place of disadvantage due to their health or circumstances. Nevertheless, the gains can be powerful.'

Britten also emphasises the impact of an improved sense of agency. 'There might be relatively small gains where people are significantly impaired in their ability to function but those changes for them are incredibly important. Some of the changes represent a massive change to the quality of their lived experience.'

'The research³ showed that the coaching outcomes in the mental health project included a greater sense of hope in the clients and the belief that it is possible to live a different and better life. Clients were able to separate their sense of identity from the mental health condition and gained greater self-awareness and self-acceptance. They became more assertive and developed more

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agency, feeling less like they were a cork in the sea of life.'

Political process

Dr Hany Shoukry, an honorary research associate at Oxford Brookes University who writes about coaching for social change, argues that in every situation where coachees are part of an oppressive social structure, coaching becomes a political process, even when it takes place under the banners of life, career or development coaching.⁴ Coaching 'helps resist oppression from the inside out' because of its capacity to enable personal transformation and action, but coaching services informed by social justice also aim to go further and challenge the traditions that have portrayed social problems as individual problems with individual solutions, he argues.

Collins thinks that 'one of the most brilliant and beautiful tools of coaching' is to uncover and rewrite untrue limiting assumptions.⁵ 'Nowhere is this more powerful than when working with disadvantaged social groups, who cannot help but internalise some of the messages they receive that they are not good enough, inferior, unacceptable, or undeserving,' she says. 'This may show up as internalised homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, racism or misogyny.'

Being able to connect personal struggles to wider issues of prejudice and social injustice can be very freeing and empowering, says Macadam, because it moves the conversation away from perceived personal failure or weakness. 'Coaching can enable people to work out how to juggle the demands of

work and caring, develop their careers and become or remain economically active,' she says.

It's fine to say you 'work with what happens in the room', says Weaver, but 'if you're limited by that, and you're not acquiescent with what really matters out there, it's not going to be effective. I'm not saying models don't matter; of course they do, and there's nothing wrong with being committed to your particular approach. But if it's at the expense of really looking at the new world that we're living in, there is that dissonance. If we don't do that, I think it's professionally irresponsible.'

Macadam is in the early stages of researching client outcomes from Coaching for Unpaid Carers, in order to build a case for coaching to be made more widely available to support social justice. 'We have chosen Realist Evaluation,⁵ a mixed methods approach that allows us to collect and analyse a range of data to explore and explain what works, for whom, in what respects, to what extent, in what contexts, and how, and test our hypotheses about these questions.'

The coaching community is increasingly engaged in thinking about why circumstances are making many in our communities feel anxious and the increasing rates of depression, says Weaver. 'I think too often we start from seeing that people have a need for support, but we don't talk about the "why".' As Shoukry says, in order to create social change, coaches must see experiences and meanings as socially constructed and try to 'balance a belief in human agency, and awareness of social structure'.⁴

Coaching those with power

Meaningful change needs to happen at organisational as well as at a local community level, and for years coaches have been talking about the 'volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous' (VUCA) world, challenging old leadership paradigms of command and control. Hetty Einzig, an executive coach in leadership development and author of *The Future of Coaching*,⁶ challenges coaches to act 'as positive deviants' when organisations have become corrupted by denial and unethical behaviour, in the service of a more dynamic inclusivity that is needed to face the challenges of a VUCA world. Ideas for change include dynamic circle leadership, where leadership resides not in



one person but in the centre of the circle, encouraging collective power rather than top-down authority. By paying attention to how clients may be acting like 'canaries in a mine', instead of focusing just on individual distress and performance, coaches are asking themselves what is being said about and by the organisation, and wider social structures.

Coaching can play a role in creating reflective learning organisations that expose 'inequality and biases rather than perpetuating them',⁴ if it is seen as a resource available throughout the organisation and placed in a context that is beyond performance management. 'Where there are allegations around bullying and harassment, a council will typically come up with recommendations, create policy frameworks and kick it into the long grass of policy development and analysis,' says Weaver. 'But the key thing required is empathic leadership: stepping into the other person's shoes, really understanding them in a deep way, by engaging in deep listening.'

A recently published paper⁷ by A Blueprint for Better Business, an independent charity that works as a catalyst to help businesses be guided and inspired by a purpose that benefits society, challenges companies to be a force for good and contribute to a better society. It argues that 'PLC boards must step up now to meet the challenge of societal expectations and to do this, they need to commit seriously to becoming "purpose-led"'. To this end, A Blueprint for Better Business has produced a document with six questions for boards to ask themselves. By impacting both the significance of social structure and the client's ability and agency, coaching is

embedded as 'part of the daily micro-battles of emancipation and social change.'⁴

Making change happen

Collins believes coaching can widen the way we see ourselves and others, challenge our thinking and beliefs and call us to take greater responsibility for ourselves and our impact on the world around us. 'It is not the job of those who are socially disadvantaged to create change. That responsibility lies in all our hands. We all benefit from living in a fairer and kinder society,' she says.

Britten advocates for a more widespread adoption of a coaching approach by professionals working at the interface of state and society. 'York City Council has been exploring using coaching skills as an approach to facilitating people's ability to access services in a less dependent way,' he says.

When we talk about social justice we are talking about difference, says Collins. 'So key for me is that the coach has done some work on their relationship to their own and others' difference.'

Weaver has been working with a local authority to enable it to identify the groupings that are being disproportionately impacted as a result of COVID-19 and to help them create more holistic models of support. 'Not just looking at what does this mean for you back in the workplace, but how are you as an individual being impacted by what's happening out there? It's not just around the depression and anxiety, because some of them have been more impacted by Stop and Search, which has gone up in lockdown for those in the BAME community. In some communities, numbers of serious youth violence went down in lockdown, but as lockdown eases there's a strong likelihood this will increase and impact those communities.'

There is an advocacy role to play, he says: 'Extol the virtues of coaching innovation in communities, work alongside, encourage them into the profession, show it actually works. Coaching is such a powerful entry point. And we're not saying that it stays at coaching, because it may move towards counselling interventions, and if it's too compartmentalised, there's no cross-fertilisation. But coaching, like counselling, is changing lives.' ■

Extended interviews with the coaches in this article will appear in the October issue of *Coaching Today*. See www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-divisions/bacp-coaching

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