Positive Psychology Coaching and its Impact on Midlife Executives

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of research into the lived experiences of senior leaders who participated in positive psychology coaching during midlife. Through personal interviews, participants shared detailed descriptions of their experiences in an effort to understand how they benefited personally and professionally while facing challenges typically associated with middle age. There were three major findings: (1) participating in positive psychology coaching provides focus and confidence that facilitates personal and professional growth during midlife by helping clients overcome challenges while pursuing their goals; (2) the coaching experience and associated results vary based on participants' wants, goals and aspirations; and (3) the client's perception of coaching's impact is tied to the length of coaching, the quality of the coach-client relationship and a perceived positive experience. These results support the use of positive psychology interventions as part of executive coaching with midlife clients.

Keywords: executive coaching, positive psychology, leadership coaching, midlife, middle age

1. Introduction

The practice of executive and corporate coaching has soared over the past two decades, accounting for an ever-increasing percentage of the $156.2 billion spent on employee learning in the United States (Miller, 2012). It is estimated that the number of business coaches grew by over 500% between 1992 and 2002 alone (Berglas, 2002). Yet despite the growth of executive coaching, there is limited empirical evidence regarding its methods, including specific approaches, interventions and standards, especially in the area of executive and leadership coaching. Additionally, there are almost no data regarding the perceptions, experiences, and cognitive representations of executive coaching clients in relation to the perceived benefits of coaching.

Coaching has largely emerged as a field of practice outside the context of academic discipline and without significant attempts to systematically operationalize its various dimensions. Seligman (2011) stated, "coaching is a practice in search of a backbone" (p. 70), and suggested that positive psychology be embraced in order to provide a scientific, evidence-based platform, as well as a theoretical structure for coaching. Positive psychology has an emphasis on the scientific study of what is right rather than what is wrong with people. It includes research about hope, happiness, strengths, resilience, courage, and other positive aspects of human functioning and flourishing (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

Employing positive psychology as the methodology for coaching could provide parameters for practice while also serving to define a system of interventions and measurements for coaches to use. Additionally, as a discipline rooted in scientific evidence, positive psychology would facilitate improvements in coach training, accreditation, and credentialing guidelines. Positive psychology coaching differs subtly from other forms of coaching because of its keen focus on strengths. Coaching that uses a positive psychology strengths-based approach employs a set of skills and tools based on empirical knowledge; it can constitute its own distinct brand of coaching or be used as an adjunct to other models and practices.

The purpose of this research project was to better understand the lived experiences of executives who participated in positive psychology-focused coaching during midlife.

Psychological investigations confirm the challenges associated with midlife (Axelrod, 2005). During this developmental stage, we face physiological, psychological, and interpersonal changes as we work to reevaluate life goals and personal values, confront our inevitable death, and make plans for the second half of life. In short, midlife can be a difficult transitional period, with opportunities for both transformation and stagnation. Positive psychology coaching has the potential for helping people to build the necessary resources and coping strategies to prevent a midlife transition from turning into a midlife crisis.

Despite its promise, the impact of positive psychology coaching on the challenges associated with midlife remains largely under-theorized. This project sought to understand how positive psychology coaching may enhance work engagement, productivity, and satisfaction by helping leaders in midlife navigate developmental struggles and invigorate energy and mental resilience. Indeed, how can positive psychology executive coaching guide leaders through a period of intense contemplation and evaluation and facilitate the pursuit of a meaningful second half of life? What other variables impact the client's perception of the coaching process? The project was based on a phenomenological study designed to obtain a detailed description of the personal and professional benefits achieved by executives who participated in positive psychology-focused coaching. Through personal interviews, participants shared comprehensive descriptions of their experiences. The investigation focused on executive coaching using positive psychology techniques such as Values in Action (VIA), gratitude, and strengths focus, as well as mindfulness and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) training in order to describe how these methodologies influence self-actualization and engagement, both personally and professionally.

Anticipated results of this study included: (a) gaining a deeper understanding of how positive psychology coaching may be effective as an approach to executive coaching, especially with midlife executives; and (b) helping executive coaches and coach training organizations better understand the mechanisms of coaching effectiveness during a time of significant change, contemplation, and potential stress.

2. Literature Review

This review highlighted selected literature that has addressed issues concerning coaching, positive psychology, and midlife challenges.

A review of the literature found a lack of consensus on both the origin and definition of professional coaching. Numerous debates center on the various approaches and theoretical frameworks underpinning executive coaching, including both psychological and non-psychological approaches. According to Passmore, Peterson and Freire (2013), recent efforts to define coaching reflect the immature nature of the discipline and the desire to define boundaries or outline a trajectory for coaching as a distinct process or intervention. The literature review also found that although some scholars continue to question the efficacy of both positive psychology and coaching, a growing number of empirical studies have found an affirmative link between positive psychology coaching and thriving. For example, research from Grant (2013) and Biswas-Diener (2010) has consistently found that the impact of positive emotion generated via positive psychology coaching promotes a sense of well-being, thriving, and resilience personally, professionally, and organizationally.

One current challenge in the coaching discipline is the lack of consensus about coaching models. The coaching community has largely accepted that practitioners may employ a variety of methodologies to meet their clients' specific needs. In recent years, however, coaching models have begun to favor of more scholarly, scientist-practitioner models that are theoretically informed and based on empirical evidence. Many scholars believe the future of coaching depends on how well it embraces evidence-based practice and argue for more rigorous controlled studies, increased reliance on validated assessments and agreement around a central theoretical construct (Spence, 2007).

As the search for an evidence-based framework for coaching has escalated, positive psychology has been elevated as a natural ally for coaching (Biswas-Diener, 2010). A growing body of research supports the opinion that the application of the positive psychology framework to coaching provides an empirical grounding for coaching, while also helping professional coaching avoid slipping into pseudo-science, pop psychology, or self-help (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007). Positive psychology, as introduced by Martin Seligman during his term as president of the American Psychological Association (APA), has been shown to be successful in developing people skills and improving functioning as part of therapeutic, coaching, and training interventions (Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011). However, a review of the executive coaching literature by Kauffman and Scouler (2004) highlights the lack of empirical data surrounding the influence of positive psychology coaching with executives.

This study differs from much of the literature on executive coaching by exploring the lived experiences of leaders who participate in positive psychology coaching during midlife. It extends the literature by giving a voice to client participants in an effort to clearly understand their perspective and the perceived impact of coaching. It also explores how executive coaching that uses a positive psychology methodology influences self-actualization and engagement, both personally and professionally. It seeks to provide insight regarding client perspectives associated with long-term change and benefits in order to inform executive coaches, prospective clients, their organizations, and coach educators.

3. Methodology

The researcher employed phenomenological inquiry because it is effective in exploring meanings and perspectives of research participants (Creswell, 2013). This study focuses on describing what all participants have in common as they experience the phenomenon of positive psychology executive coaching. The specific phenomenological method that was used was the psychological approach, which focuses not only on the meaning of experiences, but analyzes individual, not group, experiences.

The researcher conducted interviews with male and female executives who had experience with positive psychology-focused coaching during midlife. The executives, all director to C-suite level or business owners, had been coached using a positive psychology approach that utilized interventions such as VIA, gratitude and strengths focus, mindfulness, and ACT. Each reported having participated in at least three months of coaching. Men and women of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds were interviewed. Participants ranged from ages 43 to 65 and were able to recall their coaching experiences, as well as the effect the experience may have had on their overall personal and professional lives. A total of three male and seven female volunteer participants formed the convenience sample for this project. Table 1 presents an overview of participant demographics.

The research instrument was a semi-structured interview that was created as an extension of the literature review. The data collection method was a one-hour telephone interview, which was recorded, transcribed, and approved by each participant prior to inclusion in the study. Interview questions were open-ended and semi-structured in order to gain self-report information about experiences with positive psychology executive coaching and its impact on behavior, beliefs, actions, attitudes, confidence, and motivation as related to personal and professional productivity and resilience. Questions were designed to elicit meaningful responses that could be analyzed thematically and support accurate research inquiry. Questions designed to elicit examples of how the subjects resolved personal or professional issues as a result of coaching and whether the experience of coaching impacted their outlook about the future were the core of the inquiry. Sample questions include:

- Tell me how your coaching experience has influenced your life personally.
- Please provide examples of one or more personal issues that were resolved as a result of your coaching.
- As a result of coaching, has your outlook for the future changed in any way? Please describe fully and provide examples.

Following each initial interview and transcription, the researcher employed an ongoing methodological qualitative process. The data were analyzed using NVivo software to code and identify specific themes and differences among individual experiences. The data were viewed individually by participant and then analyzed through comprehensive steps; meanings were interpreted, clusters of themes identified, and descriptions examined meticulously. The intent was to uncover through open-ended processes of thematic abstraction, reflection, and interpretation the essential qualities of the participants' experiences.

4. Research Findings

Three research questions were examined throughout the study. In analyzing results for each question, a number of themes emerged.

4.1 Research Question 1: In what ways does positive psychology executive coaching guide leaders through a period of intense contemplation and evaluations associated with midlife and facilitate both personal and professional transformation?

An examination of the data surrounding Research Question 1 showed the power of employing positive psychology methodologies to generate positive outcomes related to professional and personal aspirations. Interview data demonstrated that positive psychology interventions—including a strengths-based approach, gratitude and values focus, ACT, and mindfulness—were important in providing a foundation of confidence and focus for the participant to use as a launching pad toward successful goal attainment.

All participants were able to discover and change behavior and thought patterns, and all 10 participants expressed an increased sense of confidence, empowerment, and motivation.

Two themes emerged relevant to Research Question 1: (a) leveraging confidence and focus while identifying and overcoming challenges during the pursuit of goals, and (b) coaching techniques.

4.1.1. Theme 1: Identifying and Overcoming Challenges while Pursuing Goals

One goal shared by all participants was the desire to learn and grow. Participants reported that coaching enabled them to look at themselves and find areas they felt needed improvement. By identifying goals, the participants were able to mark progress and use coaching both to gain confidence and achieve their desired end results.

In one example, Participant 1 recalled the first time he used coaching: "I encountered a significant challenge at work and was not sure my skills and patterns would achieve the best results for the team." He identified his goal and the challenge linked to it and then found and worked with a coach who had lived through similar experiences. When reflecting on the coaching experience, Participant 1 stated, "I am now able to face conflict, to give negative feedback with confidence, and to be able to present my ideas with confidence." Thus, he was able to undergo a personal transformation led by the coach and change behaviors that he felt were holding him back both professionally and personally.

4.1.2. Theme 2: Coaching Techniques

All of the participants indicated that their coaches used a positive psychology strengths-based approach. Four of the 10 participants reported that their coaches used DISC, six indicated that their coaches used VIA, and another two focused on values clarification, while one spoke about the use of a scorecard or 360-feedback to track changes. The remainder of the participants indicated their coaches used a more casual approach, such as notes or emails, to review progress. Five of the 10 respondents spoke about the use of gratitude exercises, while four of the 10 mentioned mindfulness exercises.

The lessons participants learned though the techniques, programs, and assessments employed by their coaches had a large effect on their quality of life, personally and professionally. Using a positive psychology approach and focusing on what they could do enabled the participants to see the changes they needed to make and to feel like those changes would be both positive and effective. In one example, Participant 3 said the use of ACT training enabled her to learn "to be more mindful of what I'm doing … to take that pause and know what I value." Taking that time to assess what she was doing and why she was doing it helped her improve her life and relationships. Participants whose coaches used the DISC assessment as a tool indicated that by learning about their strengths they were able to use those strengths to effect change in their lives.

4.2. Research Question 2: In what ways does the coaching experience vary from participant to participant?

During midlife, many people reassess personal meaning (Hermans & Oles, 1999). Issues of physiological change, psychological reorganization, and interpersonal exchanges can lead people to reevaluate their life goals and values as they make plans for the second half of life. Because of this, and the competing challenges of work and personal life, researchers believe that the coaching experience will vary from participant to participant in an effort to match each individual's unique life track (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Two themes emerged from the research that were relevant to this research question: (a) results of coaching, and (b) wants, goals, and future aspirations.

4.2.1 Theme 1: Results of Coaching

Participants described the results of their coaching experiences in a variety of ways. They reported an affirmation of their capabilities, better awareness, an increase in focus and creativity, becoming positive and optimistic, as well as increased motivation and accountability. Nine of the 10 participants reported significant long-term coaching-related change and accomplishments, including heightened awareness, an increase in focus and creativity, greater optimism, and an increase in confidence, motivation, and accountability. However one participant indicated that she could not maintain changes if she went too long between meetings with her coach.

Participant 6 said that as a result of coaching, "I've been more intentional and thoughtful." She said that the experience made her wish "to be learning something new all the time." Participants 3 said coaching increased her level of awareness. She stated, "I am more aware of what my mindset is, so I'm not so limited. Knowing how we can change has been very important." Participant 2 had been facing challenges at work; he stated that coaching "reaffirmed that I was a knowledgeable and capable professional." Six of the 10 participants reported increased levels of motivation.

4

They said coaching had enabled them to gain perspective on the issues they faced. One stated that her "confidence increased and motivation has increased. In fact as confidence increased, I'm more motivated to take on more challenging tasks."

4.2.2. Theme 2: Wants, goals and future aspirations

An examination of the data surrounding Research Question 2 demonstrated that clients seek coaching for a variety of reasons. One variation among participants was in their future plans, goals, and wants. Participant 10, for example, spoke about a wish to travel and an increase in personal freedom, while Participant 3 was interested in training opportunities. Participants 1, 4, and 5 all wanted to effect change and help others. Although participants reported significant goal achievement in their specific areas of interest, as well as enhanced confidence and awareness, differences in their goals and areas of aspiration at least partially accounted for the variance of experience and results from participant to participant.

4.3. Research Question 3. What other variables impact the client's perception of the coaching process?

Because coaching is highly individualized, different variables affect a participant's perceptions of coaching and associated results. The researcher anticipated that the client-coach relationship would be one such factor. An examination of the data surrounding Research Question 3 demonstrated that the client's perception of coaching was indeed influenced by a variety of factors. Three themes were identified: (a) amount of time the participant spent in coaching, (b) quality of the relationship with the coach, and (c) the perceived experience.

4.3.1 Theme 1: Time

For many participants, their relationship with the coach was built over time, allowing them to address ongoing issues. When the coach and client were well-matched, coaching that lasted more than six months tended to produce a positive perception regarding the influence and results of coaching.

Eight of the 10 participants reported working with their coach for more than a year. One participant said she had worked with her coach "on and off for 12 years." Participant 6, for whom coaching was a job requirement and whose employer provided for her coaching, had been working with a coach for nearly 2 years. She indicated that for her time was necessary to build trust in the process and in the coach. "I was hesitant in the beginning, but as time progressed I've become more comfortable with the person and the process."

4.3.2. Theme 2: Relationship with Coach

One of the most important factors that influenced the client's perceptions of the coaching process was his or her opinions of their coach.

Participant 2 found his coach to be an ally, someone who provided support and reassurance. He stated that coaching, "provided relief, confirmation, validation, perspective, and reinforcement at work, which has led to less anxiety away from work." He said that because of the support of his coach, he was able to make the personal changes he needed to be successful at work. Participant 6 was matched with her coach based on the results of an assessment process. She said, "My coach is also an S/I [DISC personality type], so we speak the same language." She felt that this helped her and the coach communicate effectively. Participant 8 worked with two coaches, one of whom was hired by his employer. "[S]ince I didn't have any control over who my coach was, it took a while to develop trust and truly know that she wasn't reporting everything I said back to my boss." Participant 8 said that "trust was the most essential part of the coaching relationship."

4.3.3. Theme 3: Positive Experience

All 10 participants in the study reported having a positive experience with coaching. Every participant indicated that they would not hesitate to seek coaching again. Many formed long-term relationships with their coaches and spent years working on their personal issues. Participant 4 reported that "this coaching worked well with my personality – very flexible and free-flow." Participant 10 said of the coaching experience: "It's had a significant impact on my self-perception, confidence and what I was able to achieve."

5. Discussion of Findings

There were three major findings from the research.

5.1. Finding 1: Goal Attainment

The first finding—participating in positive psychology executive coaching provides focus and confidence that facilitates personal and professional growth during midlife by helping clients identify and overcome real life and work challenges while pursuing their over-arching goals—demonstrates the power of focusing on strengths as a key component of coaching.

All 10 subjects indicated that coaching helped them to identify and move toward their goals and overcome challenges in order to improve their lives both personally and professionally. This supports Grant's (2013) findings that positive psychology coaching promotes a sense of well-being, thriving, and resilience personally, professionally, and organizationally. Participants also indicated consistently that coaching helped them reframe common life and work struggles as opportunities for learning and growth, which is a primary coaching objective as outlined by Biswas-Diener (2010). Finally, all 10 subjects reported a significant increase in confidence and sense of empowerment during their coaching experience. This evidence underscores the very definition of positive psychology and aligns with research that purports coaching centered on strengths rather than gap transformation alone promotes successful goal attainment and self-efficacy, which enhances confidence and empowerment toward further action (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004).

In summary, this finding supports the notion that positive psychology coaching can indeed generate positive emotions and confidence to help midlife executives thrive both personally and professionally. It also further supports Seligman's (2007) claim that positive psychology has the potential to provide an effective scientific and theoretical basis for the field of coaching.

5.2. Finding 2: Varied Clients, Varied Results

The second finding—the coaching experience and associated results vary from participant to participant based on their wants, goals, and aspirations for the future—underscores the broad spectrum of clients seeking change in various aspects of their professional and personal lives (International Coach Federation, 2012; Witherspoon & White, 1996). In addition to goal achievement in specific areas of interest, research participants reported an expanded awareness and motivation as well as the ability and willingness to focus on and tackle other challenges along the way, which they believed supported the larger goals. These data support Seligman's (2002) assertion that positive psychology tools such as VIA signature strengths facilitate the client's quest for broader personal meaning and forward knowledge, power, and goodness.

The findings also support Grant's (2013) view that the success of coaching interventions is heavily dependent on a clearly defined focus on issues within the client's sphere of influence or control. Finally, regardless of the "why" behind coaching, the coach and client work collaboratively to move him or her forward in taking action toward his or her desired goals. In other words, coaches collaborated with clients to help them define "point B" or their goal, then co-designed and co-navigated the journey through coaching sessions (Moore & Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

5.3. Finding 3: Elements of Success

The third finding—the client's perception of coaching impact was tied, at least in part, to the length of coaching, the quality of their relationship with the coach, and a perceived positive experience—underscores the importance of the coaching relationship as a key success factor in the coaching experience. While there have been numerous debates about the various approaches and theoretical frameworks underpinning executive coaching and the coaching profession (Joo, 2005), data from this study suggest that the quality of the client-coach partnership may be of equal importance. The data also suggest that the length of time a client engages in coaching is important not only for learning and execution but for building trust, momentum, and synergy with the coach. In short, the data indicate that coaching with a well-matched coach over time (six months to a year or longer) promotes a perception of positive impact and accomplishment. This finding also supports the Grant and Stober definition of coaching:

> A collaborative and egalitarian relationship between a coach, who is not necessarily a domain-specific specialist, and client, which involves a systematic process that focuses on collaborative goal setting to construct solutions and employ goal attainment process with the aim of fostering the ongoing self-directed learning and personal growth of the client. (Grant & Stober, 2006, p. 2)

The study extends this definition by including the elements of time and quality of the client-coach relationship as factors that support coaching synergy and results.

In sum, the findings of this project expand current research on positive psychology coaching by indicating positive impact in perceived goal achievement and enhanced sense of confidence and well-being for individuals participating in positive-psychology-focused executive coaching for at least six months. Results highlight the importance of a coaching framework and relationship, both of which should be given considerable attention by coaches and coach training organizations charged with equipping future coaches.

6. Recommendations & Conclusion

This study offers implications for research and applied practice of positive psychology executive coaching. Findings build on earlier research illustrating that positive psychology provides a viable framework for executive coaching at midlife. In fact, positive interventions employed during the executive coaching engagement facilitate both professional and personal growth as well as a sense of confidence and enhanced focus during a time of physiological, psychological, and social change. This is an important consideration for current practitioners of coaching and coaching psychology as well as for their training institutions, in addition to corporate partners in human resources, talent development professionals, and others interested in empowering leaders at midlife.

In light of the findings, coach accrediting organizations such as the International Coach Federation (ICF) and the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE) should consider promulgating positive psychology education as part of their coach training requirements. Furthermore, corporate consumers of coaching should strongly consider engaging executive coaches with training and expertise in the areas of positive assessment and positive psychology intervention in order to inspire midlife executives and promote individual (both professional and personal) and organizational growth. Additionally, it is critical to consider elements such as time, quality of relationships, specific goals, and future aspirations in addition to coaching frameworks, tools, and tactics. Therefore, in addition to making sure executive coaching goals align with corporate objectives, corporate consumers of coaching should also ensure a good client-coach match, perhaps by allowing the client to choose from several qualified coaches, and give them sufficient time to establish a trusting and synergistic partnership. Finally, coaches should be skilled in both the hard skills of coaching practice and soft skills of rapport and relationship building to maximize results.

Future research could examine pre- and post-coaching intervention results empirically while controlling for intra-coach disparity. Such a study would build on the data that underscore the importance of the length of coaching and the quality of the client-coach relationship by comparing a variety of subjects being coached by a single coach as well as comparison groups exploring outcomes by coach. A longitudinal study could also provide insights into questions such as: "How long do the results of coaching last?" and "How long does it take to break dysfunctional habits and thoughts and move toward a state of well-being and thriving?' It also would be enlightening to compare participants in this study, all of whom were highly successful in achieving their goals, to a control group whose members found the coaching process less successful or unsuccessful. Additionally, future qualitative research could expand on this study by identifying and exploring specific midlife challenges and details surrounding the impact that positive psychology coaching interventions provided.

6.1 Conclusion

In the past two decades, executive coaching has been a significant force within the areas of consulting psychology and corporate talent development. Indications are that this highly customizable approach to leadership and organizational development will continue to be influential; therefore, the coaching profession needs to embrace empirically sound methods of assessment and intervention.

The results of this study support the employment of positive psychology interventions as part of an executive coaching engagement, showing that to do so with midlife clients not only supports their goal achievement but also facilitates resolution of other work and life challenges over time and within a quality client-coach relationship.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Male	3	30	
Female	7	70	
Ethnicity			
	Caucasian	8	80
	African American	2	20
Education			
	BA	3	30
	Master's	4	40
	PhD	3	30
Household composition			
	Self only	2	20
	Self and partner	5	50
	Self, partner, and children	3	30
Religious affiliation			
	Christian	5	50
	Unitarian	1	10
	Spiritual	2	20
	Did not answer / not religious	2	20

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