

2019-01-10

Volume XI

Article 2

January 2019

IJMC

International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching

EMCC

*European Mentoring &
Coaching Council*



The International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching

Volume XI Article 2

January 2019



Facilitating Change Coaching for psychological flexibility

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Abstract

Ability to change is at the heart of the agility shift that companies are increasingly compelled to embrace in order to adapt to volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous environments. It is suggested that Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT), a cognitive and behavioural approach to coaching, can considerably facilitate this process by developing individual psychological flexibility.

This article aims at providing coaches with an introduction to a new empirical based approach focused on developing the readiness of individuals to deal with constant change. It describes a practical and effective tool designed to enhance individual psychological flexibility.

Keywords

flexibility, acceptance, values, commitment, and agility.

Introduction

In the 1960's, Levitt (1960) urged companies to be closer to their customers. In his article "Marketing Myopia", referring to the demise of the railroads in the USA, he wrote, "The reason they defined their industry wrongly was because they were railroad-oriented instead of transportation oriented" (Levitt, 1960, p. 1). He initiated a paradigm shift away from an inward looking, short-sighted, product-oriented approach towards a vision of companies defining themselves and their products in terms of customers and their needs. Some 60 years later, businesses are facing many new challenges. They have to align themselves to ever more volatile and unpredictable customers with increasingly complex and ambiguous requirements: so much so that Meyer (2015) advocates the need for a further paradigm shift, which she labelled the 'Agility Shift'. She defined it as 'The intentional development of the competence, capacity, and confidence to learn, adapt, and innovate in changing contexts for sustainable success'.

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Background

'Agile Management' and 'Design Thinking', are two recent management approaches, aimed at dealing with relentless change and uncertainty by instilling added flexibility in organisational cultures. 'Agile Management' originated in software development projects using short development cycles to focus on continual improvement. In essence, the method is based on the assumption that the end users (or the clients) are unable to define precisely their requirements and will probably change their mind more than once during the life of the project. Thus, the key to successful product development is to present regularly and as often as possible deliverable prototypes to secure reliable and timely feedback from the end users. 'Design Thinking' as defined by Dam & Siang (2018) is "a methodology that provides a solution-based approach to solving problems. It's extremely useful in tackling complex problems that are ill-defined or unknown, by understanding the human needs involved, by re-framing the problem in human-centric ways, by creating many ideas in brainstorming sessions, and by adopting a hands-on approach in prototyping and testing" (p. 1).

Both 'Agile Management' and 'Design Thinking' have taken customer orientation a step further. The new buzzword is 'customer empathy'. Dam & Siang (2018) suggest that: "Empathy is crucial to a human-centred design process such as 'Design Thinking', and empathy allows design thinkers to set aside their own assumptions about the world in order to gain insight into users and their needs" (p. 2). Referring to 'Agile Management' Estaphanos (2018) adds: "Organizing effort around customer empathy can be a powerful way for your team to stay in alignment with its most important goals" (p. 3). It goes without saying that having constantly to align and re-align, processes, priorities and structures, to ever-changing customer whims, will substantially impact the way we do business and calls for a unique brand of company culture. Cameron & Quinn (2011) labelled this the "Adhocracy culture". "The major goal of an adhocracy is to foster adaptability, flexibility and creativity if uncertainty, ambiguity and information overload are typical" (Cameron & Quinn 2011, p. 49) thus moving away from a traditional command and control type culture. They remind us however that company cultures are notoriously slow to change and depend ultimately on how prepared individuals are to engage in new behaviour. (Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

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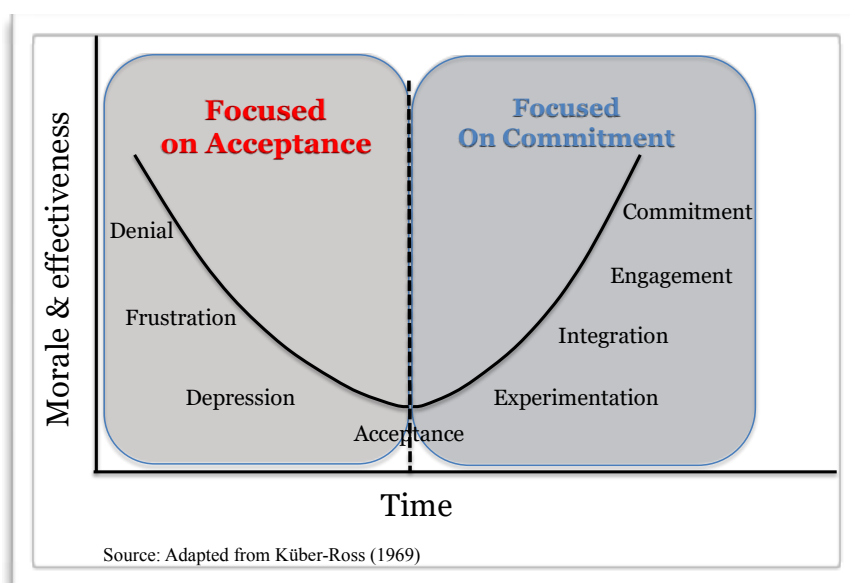
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Values and Emotions

This personalised change process is at the centre of Meyer's (2015) 'Agility shift'. She wrote in her book, 'The Agility Shift' (2015), "Recognising that there are many situations that you not only cannot control but cannot predict is a radical mind-set and practice for most" p.12). She emphasised the importance of day by day, shifting your mind-set by "developing readiness for the unexpected.... and relinquishing the illusion of control"(p. 9). Emotions, she recognizes, are of paramount importance in this process as our brains are hardwired to go into survival mode when in the presence of a threat. To be effective and agile, individuals, teams and organisations need to make a shift away from typical 'reptilian brain knee jerk' reactions such as fight, freeze, or flight (Meyer, 2015).

No matter how hard we try to ignore them, emotions play a massive role in the way we function, particularly in the face of change. They occupy a predominant position in Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's model (1969), one of the most acknowledged and useful methods to explain human reaction to change. Rather than having to shift away from difficult emotions, as suggested by Meyer (2015), Kübler-Ross (1969) believes that humans will inevitably have to live through them. Her 'change curve' has been a trusted and reliable tool to understand the stage people are going through when facing significant change. Originally aimed at helping doctors and healers understand their patients' transitions, it is useful to managers in helping them understand at what stage employees are in the process of adapting to change.

Figure 1: The Kübler-Ross Model



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As coaches we are required first and foremost to join our clients where they are at the present time. We need to ask ourselves: Are they struggling with difficult emotions such as anger and frustration. Are they fighting or avoiding those emotions? Are they entangled with negative thoughts which prevent them from opening up to new horizons? If this is the case, in a coaching context, we need to focus on the left half of the Kübler-Ross model, working with them towards managing their emotions towards acceptance. On the other hand, if in the present moment, they have moved to a more 'open' mindset, free from difficult thoughts and emotions, focus should be directed to the right side of the model, helping clients to find meaning by working with them on defining core values, and encouraging a commitment to act in their direction.

Rather than having to live through difficult thoughts and emotions, David (2016) believes that we should advance mindfully with them. "It's about holding those emotions and thoughts loosely, facing them courageously and compassionately and then moving past them to make big things happen" (David, 2016, p. 11). In her Book, 'Emotional Agility', David (2016) endorses a cognitive and behavioural approach developed by Steven C. Hayes in the 1980s, aimed at increasing psychological flexibility. As in the Kübler-Ross model, acceptance and commitment are at the heart of this method referred to by the acronym 'ACT' (Acceptance and Commitment Training).

Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT)

The purpose of psychological flexibility is to allow individuals to evaluate their circumstances and act effectively. When manoeuvring in unknown and unpredictable territory, psychological flexibility helps deal with stressful situations, by shifting focus away from difficult emotions towards the job in hand. 'ACT' suggests that the failure to adapt behaviour to external events derives from an inability to accept and embrace internal events such as difficult thoughts and feelings. "It is not the presence or absence of negative thoughts, physiological arousal, or emotions such as anxiety or anger that predict performance outcomes, rather, it is the degree to which the individual performer can accept these experiences and remain attentionally and behaviourally engaged in the performance task." (Gardner & Moore, 2007, p. 16). By attempting to avoid painful experiences through control, fight or flight strategies, individuals fuse (get entangled) with their thoughts, thus preventing them from focusing on the external world. 'ACT' challenges the idea that painful experiences must be avoided. It promotes acceptance of one's internal experience, to be able to mindfully navigate effectively in an ever-changing, external environment. Another important goal of 'ACT' is to encourage individuals to clarify and commit to their values, for example honesty, courage, authenticity, to name just a few. Values are seen as the principal motivational factor

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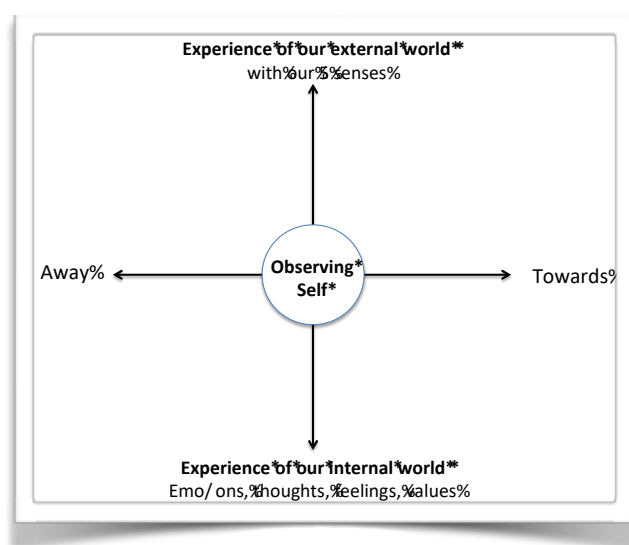
propelling people to act by giving meaning to their life and work. Moran (2011) in his article on 'ACT and Leadership, summarises perfectly this approach.

When committing to action related to one's core values, challenging emotions are likely to arise. And the pain that comes from moving towards important directions cannot be avoided, because any attempt to mitigate the pain is likely to slow if not completely derail, progress toward the valued goals. So instead of avoiding stress, strain and emotional pain, the 'ACT' model suggests acceptance of those emotions and de-fusion from unhelpful thoughts". Moran questions leaders; "What to you want your leadership to stand for? Do you want your tenure to be avoiding stress or leadership towards valued directions? " (Moran, 2011, p. 71).

Coaching with ACT: Case Study

Polk, Schoendorff, Weber & Olaz (2017) developed a tool, the ACT Matrix, designed to help the coachee understand the mechanics behind psychological flexibility. Self-observation is at the heart of the ACT Matrix, for this reason, the coachee is encouraged to position himself at the centre of the matrix, observing his/her mind, his thoughts and his behaviour. The framework is composed of two perpendicular lines. The vertical line pointing upwards towards the external world perceived through his/her 5 senses, and downwards to his/her internal experiences, such as feeling, thoughts, emotions and values. The horizontal line relates to the observation of his/her own behaviour, towards what is important to him/her on one side, and away from difficult experiences on the other.

Figure 2: The 'ACT' Matrix (Polk & al., 2017)



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In order to illustrate this, let us take a fictitious but nevertheless representative example: Paul is living through a difficult period of change. Two months ago, a new CEO was appointed to restructure the company. As a result, a big project, that has kept Paul and his department focused and committed for the last 7 months, is in jeopardy. To make things worse, he has been asked to reduce his staff. The new boss has just presented a brand new departmental vision and mission. Paul, a loyal employee for the last 15 years, is showing some obvious signs of anxiety and is gradually building defences on the road to resistance.

The coach invites Paul to observe and list, in the lower-right quarter of the ACT Matrix, the things he values most in his work. What is important to him, what provides him with a sense of purpose i.e. being part of an important project, feeling useful or having a good relationship with colleagues. Values are an endless source of motivation, at work and in life. It is worth spending some time with clients, identifying core values and singling out those that define them best. In the adjacent left quarter, in the light of recent changes, Paul is encouraged to observe and note down his emotions and feelings, in particular those that are 'poisoning' his life. What are the thoughts and emotions he is struggling with, consuming his energy and time? To what extent is he ruminating and getting 'stuck' battling with them? Next, the coach will ask Paul to move up to the top half of the matrix, away from observing internal experiences, towards the physical world, observing his actions and behaviour. In the top left quarter, he notes what behaviour he sees himself adopting, whilst trying to prevent himself from feeling those emotions. What is he frequently doing, day by day, to avoid feeling frustrated and disappointed? Whereupon, Paul is asked whether or not these actions and behaviour have been effective in the long run in moving him 'away' from these discomforting subjective experiences.

The objective of this third phase is to identify systematic behaviour away from core values, pointing out where Paul gets hooked and fused with difficult thoughts preventing him from 'opening up', adopting a more positive attitude and acting in the direction of what is important to him. By struggling with difficult emotions, Paul is at risk of getting 'hijacked' denying him the choice to act towards more meaningful goals. At this stage there is an opportunity to discuss links between some of Paul's core values and those defined in the company's new vision and mission. Rather than fight an impossible and fruitless battle with his emotions, would Paul be prepared to commit to act in the direction of his values and move forward, towards a more open and constructive approach. If so, Paul is then invited to list these actions in the upper-right quarter. This completes the ACT Matrix.

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Throughout the process of using the ACT Matrix, building a secure environment for the clients is of paramount importance, creating an environment in which they feel safe to explore their emotions and to express them freely. A climate where there is no right or wrong answers, and where observing their thoughts and behaviour implies bypassing judgement and working towards acceptance.

In Conclusion

In the light of an increasingly volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous world, Meyer's (2015) urges us to embrace a paradigm shift and alter our mind-set, away from an illusion of control, towards a readiness to adapt to persistent and perpetual change. New management approaches and culture have emerged recently, bringing with them this radically different mind-set, away from rigid hierarchical command and control methods, towards a culture of agility and creativity. At the root of this transformation lies individual personal change. Developing people's psychological flexibility, through working with ACT, I suggest is an effective way to facilitate this process.

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