



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Using coaching skills

Introduction

This learning tool is based on the doctoral studies of Suzanne Triggs: 'From transmission to transformation: an exploration of how the use of coaching is experienced by social workers and service users'.

This research explores both children's social workers' experiences of delivering coaching to parents and young people, and families' experience of receiving coaching from social workers in a local authority in the north of England.

This is the first study globally to explore the impact and experiences of children's social workers and families engaging in coaching. This tool is designed to help you think about how you could use a coaching approach during supervision. It outlines the foundational principles of coaching and gives you examples of coaching questions you could ask in supervision.

What is coaching?

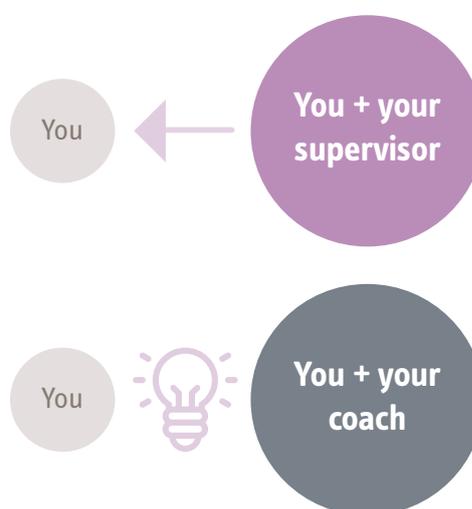
Coaching is generally described as a one-to-one relationship which helps people to learn, grow, and develop their abilities. A useful definition is provided by Rogers (2016, p7):

‘[Coaching is] the art of developing another person’s learning, development, wellbeing and performance. [It] raises self-awareness and identifies choices. Through coaching, people are able to find their own solutions, develop their own skills, and change their own attitudes and behaviours. The whole aim of coaching is to close the gap between people’s potential and their current state.’

As an approach, coaching is grounded in positive psychology which is concerned with strengths, pursuing happiness, and nurturing positivity, enjoyment and wellbeing. The focus of coaching in a professional context is to get to an optimal state or the ‘best version of you’ in the present and future, rather than looking to the past for problem analysis, or to overcome any perceived weaknesses and deficiencies.

Coaching is always voluntary. You cannot refer someone for coaching about an issue, but you can use a coaching approach to try something new. It is particularly useful when people are at transitional points and when they want to make a change but don’t

know how. The person who is being coached always decides upon the topic and the coach uses advanced listening skills and questions to help the coachee discover solutions they feel they can action and commit to. In this way, coaching enhances self-awareness, freedom and personal responsibility.



Coaches do not, therefore, use their experiences, resources or assets to fix another person. In fact, this research showed that not knowing anything about parents and young people beforehand liberated social workers from feeling that they had to know the answer and tell people what to do.

The evidence base is still emerging for the use of coaching in social work but the benefits of it are increasingly being recognised and appreciated within the profession. Leadership coaching can be used to ensure the workforce is more reflective of the diverse communities served, including at senior management levels (Stout-Rostron, 2019).

Six founding principles of coaching:

The client is resourceful

The coach's role is to develop the client's resourcefulness through skillful questioning, challenge and support

Coaching addresses the whole person

The client sets the agenda

The coach and the client are equals

Coaching is about change and action

Ways of using a coaching approach

Getting started

It can be useful to allow some time in supervision sessions (at the beginning or end) to use a coaching approach, and to make it clear that this part of supervision is different. Coaching is often very effective when people are stuck, uncertain, have a dilemma to deal with or a difficult decision to make. You might find it helpful to use the ideas presented below to think about how you can structure coaching within a supervision session.

Start the coaching element of supervision with questions like these, which let your supervisee set the agenda:

What's on your mind?

What would you like to get out of coaching today?

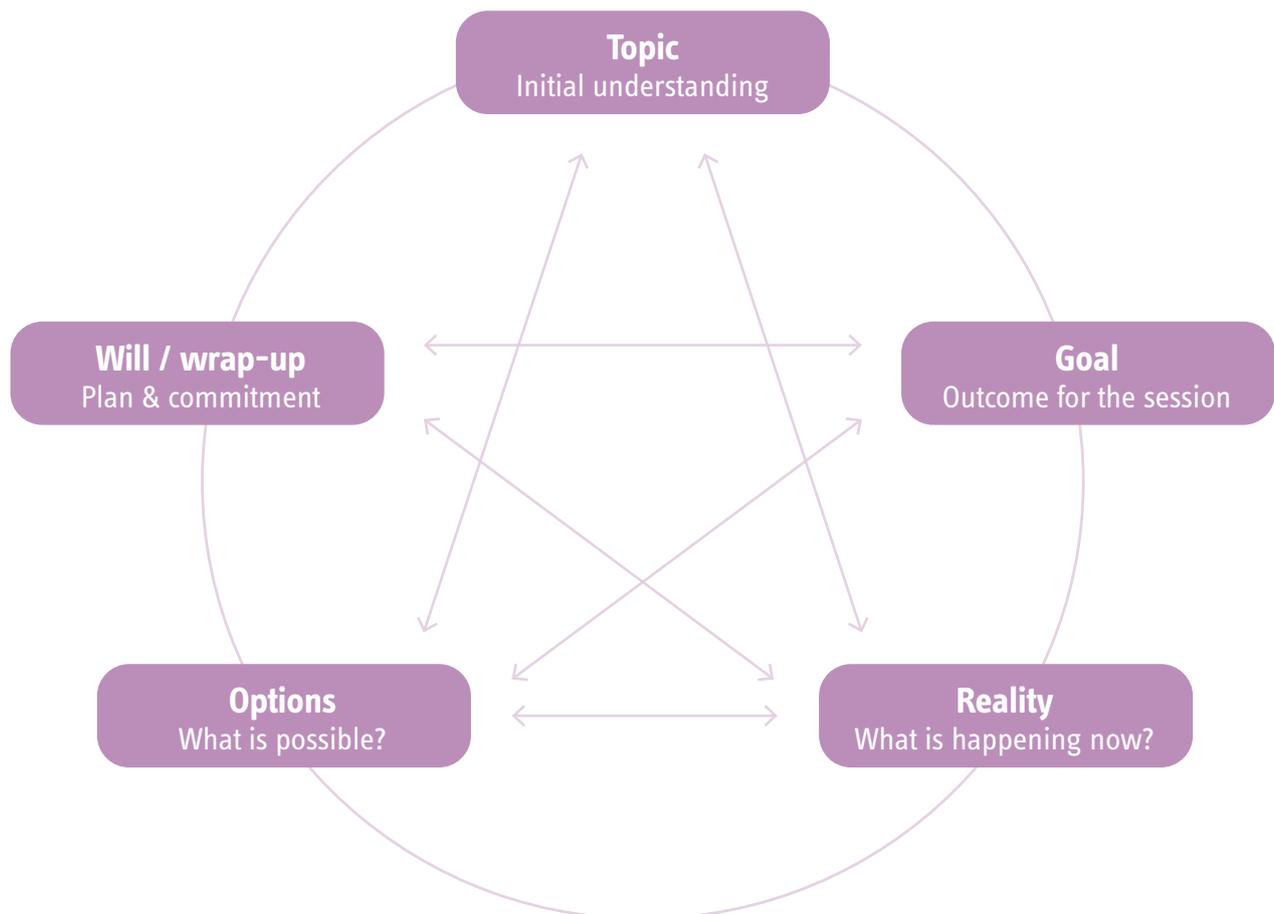
What would make this feel like time well spent?

What would you like to be different when you leave?

Coaching conversations work best if you use a coaching model to provide a structure. The most well-known coaching model is the TGROW (topic, goal, reality, options and will) model adapted from Whitmore (2017) below.

You can go around the model asking questions which relate to each section, starting with the **topic**, developing the **goal** for the conversation, surfacing an understanding of the **reality** of what's happening, exploring the **options** and finishing on the **will** to action the solution identified to meet the coachee's goal. You can move back and forth around reality, options and goal until you've really pinned down the action/s.

TGROW coaching model



TGROW coaching model, adapted from Whitmore (2017)

After the coachee has identified the topic they want to discuss, you can ask questions which are based on this easy to remember model.

Goal

What makes this important right now?

What's the real challenge here for you?

What do you want?

AWE – and what else?

What might happen if you and I don't work together on this goal?

Reality

What is happening at the moment?

What else might be going on here?

Options

Imagine you're at your most resourceful, what could you do to change this?

If you had no fear what could you do?

What is the smallest thing you could do that would make the biggest difference right now?

Will/wrap up

What are the next steps?

How might you stop yourself from doing this?

Who do you need to be to make this change stick?

Reflective prompts

Remember:

- > to focus on what can be done and future possibilities rather than trying to deconstruct the past
- > to focus on strengths and growing capacities as opposed to trying to handle negativity
- > that a coaching relationship is egalitarian - you are not the expert, you do not need to know everything about the situation, and you do not give advice
- > to print out the model and questions and have them in front of you at first - your coachee will appreciate you sharing the process with them.

These are just a few coaching questions you could try. There are many more to explore in the coaching literature.

Key messages from the research

This research indicates that coaching is an important and useful tool for social workers to use both in supervision and in practice.

Parents and young people

‘Like, the way, like, she was speaking and - it didn’t feel like - it didn’t feel and it didn’t sound like she was a social worker. I didn’t look at her like that.’

– Daisy, young person

Families put aside their hostile associations with the social work identity of their coach in order to engage in coaching.

They then saw their ‘social worker coach’ as an exception to the rule because the coach spoke and behaved differently to the social worker they’d experienced beforehand.

Receiving coaching prompted families to adopt new perspectives and to make small but transformational changes in their lives.

Social workers

‘I think I can be a better social worker. Still with that bottom line. And kind of a better human being almost alongside it. If there’s the coaching approach integrated into it.’

– Sophie, social worker

A summary of benefits of adopting a coaching approach:

- > Pausing habits of fixing and ‘transmitting’ (doing to / for others, advice giving, directing, instructing, leading the agenda) during coaching resulted in social workers transforming elements of their everyday practice.
- > Being a social worker and a coach initially triggered identity strain, which then resulted in a more flexible professional identity, which became customised to include elements of coaching attitudes and behaviours.
- > Using coaching provided a way for social workers to step out of process-driven practice and facilitate change in service users based on their personal goals, which were not quantified in the language of outputs or outcomes.
- > Using coaching gave social workers the ‘how to’ skills to translate empowerment from being an abstract concept into a reality. They recognised that deep listening, not setting the agenda / goal or trying to fix others during coaching, resulted in their coachees feeling empowered to set, reach for and meet their own goals.
- > Coaching provided a means for social workers to reclaim a more relational approach based on short-term connections rather than long-term relationships.
- > Facilitating coaching enabled social workers to energetically reconnect with their values and aspirations to ‘make a difference’ to others. Through seeing parents and young people make small transformations in their lives, the social workers felt they had made a difference again. For example, one parent whose goal was to ‘make more time for me’ had accessed a local women’s centre group, completed two mindfulness and meditation classes, was seeing her family more regularly, making time each day to read a book, and had signed up for a college course after just three coaching sessions.
- > Using coaching enabled social workers to foreground a practice based on the growth and agency of family members.
- > The experience of facilitating coaching infiltrated social workers’ professional and personal lives. Social workers went beyond using it as a practice tool and began to use coaching in everyday conversations with their friends, partners, children, colleagues and staff. In other words, they ‘became’ coaches.

The information in this section is taken directly from the author’s doctoral research. Please reference the PhD study if you wish to cite any of it. You can find details of the study in the reference list.

Other ways you can use this tool

You could use the information presented in this tool to talk with staff individually or in group supervision / team meetings to start a conversation about using coaching skills in practice.

It could also be used to advance diversity, equality and inclusion by using the TGROW questions to address specific diversity-related problems, such as how to improve practice with black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) families, or address the underrepresentation of BAME women in senior leadership posts.



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

References

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