

The Future for Executive Coaching: Evolving Professional Practice

Wellbeing in executive coaching – do you address the whole person?

A paper for the 3rd APECS Annual Symposium on Wednesday June 18th 2014 written by:

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Table of contents

1: Introduction	3
2: Defining wellbeing and considering it in a workplace context	4
What is wellbeing?	4
Wellbeing in the workplace setting.....	4
Inter-relationship between work and wellbeing.....	5
3: The implications of wellbeing for executive coaching practice	7
Whose wellbeing?	7
Who introduces wellbeing?	8
What are the 'duty of care' issues?	8
4: What do you think?	10
5: References.....	11

1: Introduction

Working long hours, under high pressure while dealing with constant change is the norm for many coaching clients, especially during the economic turbulence of recent years. And now, as the economy is recovering, there's an increasing awareness of the costs to organisations and their people in terms of wellbeing.

Certainly the link between people's wellbeing and their work performance is well established.ⁱ But which aspects of wellbeing, if any, are suitable to be addressed by an executive coach. And who decides if, when and how that will happen?

Although focused on achieving work goals, at its best, executive coaching helps people succeed in all aspects of their lives and is confidential for a good reason: it provides a safe place for clients to talk about anything that affects their ability to work, including perceived weaknesses, vulnerabilities, challenges.

Sometimes these factors will be related to wellbeing – the wellbeing of the client, their team, their boss, their family and friends. In some cases, clients may want to hide these issues from their boss, or others, for fear of negative consequences. In others, wellbeing is an explicit part of the reason for seeking executive coaching.

Executive coaching can be an ideal intervention to promote positive, and address negative wellbeing. In many ways, coaches are uniquely placed to work on wellbeing issues, because they can offer confidentiality and non-judgemental development that allows the client to manage their own wellbeing, or wellbeing issues for others, more effectively without the consequences of disclosure.

Some executive coaches believe that a person's wellbeing is such an integral part of their ability to perform in their role that they address it, to some degree, in their work with all clients. Others choose to work with their clients without engaging with wellbeing at all, and still make good progress. And some maintain that wellbeing is beyond the competence and remit of coaches, should be addressed by qualified professionals and excluded from coaching conversations.

The symposium provides us with an opportunity to think about the variety of approaches and attitudes to wellbeing adopted by clients, coaches, purchasers, educators and supervisors and examine the importance of considering the 'whole person' in our executive coaching work.

2: Defining wellbeing and considering it in a workplace context

What is wellbeing?

Wellbeing is one of those words that has a variety of definitions and means different things to different people in different contexts. Ideas about health and wellbeing change over time and vary between different cultures and life stages.

A broad definition that includes physical, social and emotional dimensions of wellbeing, as adopted by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairsⁱⁱ, is as follows:

a positive physical, social and mental state; it is not just the absence of pain, discomfort and incapacity. It requires that basic needs are met, that individuals have a sense of purpose, that they feel able to achieve important personal goals and participate in society. It is enhanced by conditions that include supportive personal relationships, strong and inclusive communities, good health, financial and personal security, rewarding employment, and a healthy and attractive environment.

Wellbeing in the workplace setting

A binary view sees people as being either 'well', in which case they are able to work effectively or 'ill' 'sick' or 'stressed', in which case they should be off work until they're 'well'.

However, in reality many employees continue to be high performers, while also managing stress, a disability, a health condition or a combination of all three. This is becoming more common as the average age of the workforce increases and those affected may have particular challenges which they don't discuss openly, because they want to be treated the same as everyone else.

Looking at a few statistics, the picture becomes clear – between the 'well and thriving' and the 'sick and off work' are those whose wellbeing varies over time, depending on a combination of factors. But they are able to work effectively and there is no reason why they shouldn't be at work.

Some headline statistics:

Stress	41% are currently stressed or very stressed in their jobs ⁱⁱⁱ
Disability	19% of the working population have a disability ^{iv}
Chronic Illness	33% people in the UK have long-term health problems ^v
Back Pain	46% of women and 47% and men reported back pain in the last 12 months ^{vi}
Carers	There are almost seven million carers in the UK – that is one in ten people. This is rising ^{vii}

Reluctance to disclose is often driven by a fear of consequences – and such reluctance is widespread:

Stress ^{viii}	48% are scared to take time off sick
	7 in 10 said their boss would not help them cope with stress
	41% said stress is a 'taboo' topic
	46% said time off for stress was seen as an 'excuse' for something else
	1 in 4 said they would be deemed less capable than others if they admitted to feeling stressed
Mental health ^{ix}	Of those who had disclosed a mental health problem to their boss in a previous role, 22% had been sacked or forced out of their jobs
	20% of workers would not disclose stress or mental health issues to their manager for fear of being placed first in line for redundancy

Inter-relationship between work and wellbeing

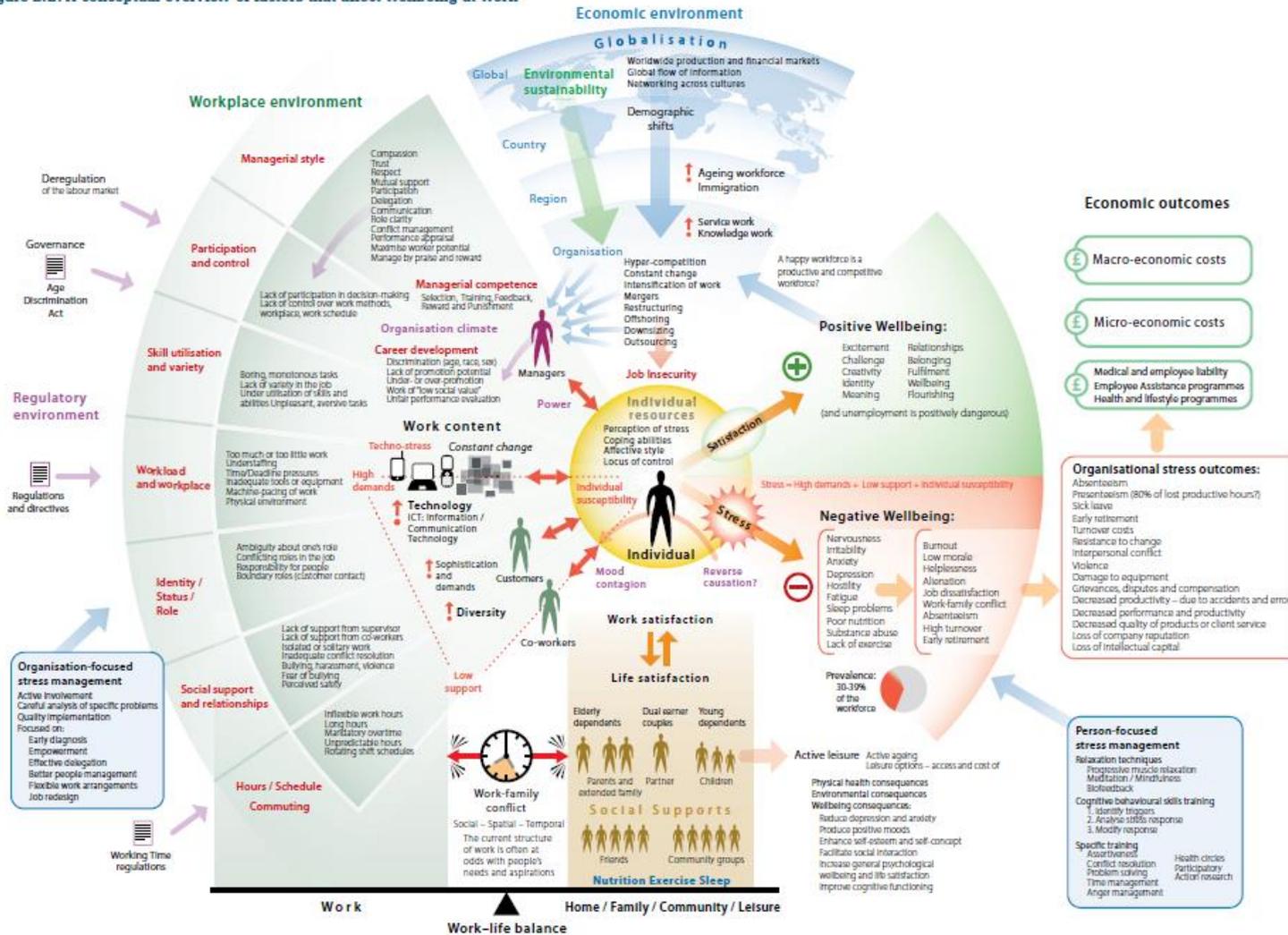
While an individual may or may not disclose issues relating to their health and wellbeing at work, research suggests that higher wellbeing is linked to higher work performance. In addition a wide range of workplace factors can impact on the health and wellbeing of employees.

The Government Foresight project on mental capital highlighted the complexity of factors affecting peoples' wellbeing in the illustration below.

You don't need to read it in detail to understand the challenge for coaches and clients in identifying which factors affect the client's ability to perform at work.

How that information is discussed and incorporated into the coaching work is fundamental to the nature and success of coaching, and is the essence of Symposium discussion of this paper

Figure B.2: A conceptual overview of factors that affect wellbeing at work



A conceptual overview of factors that affect wellbeing at work ^x

3: The implications of wellbeing for executive coaching practice

The statistics speak for themselves - whether they're aware of it or not, most coaches will have worked with clients whose wellbeing is affecting their performance or vice versa; they are also likely to have worked with someone who has a wellbeing issue, but is unwilling to disclose it at work. So the question is: what are the implications for professional practice, coach education, purchasers and supervisors?

So the questions are:

What difference does it make to our coaching work, if we avoid or ignore aspects of the 'whole person' such as their wellbeing, rather than working with an 'integrated whole'?

What are the implications for professional practice, coach education, purchasers and supervisors?

The following are a few areas in which implications can be considered.

Whose wellbeing?

Wellbeing in the client and their domain: As implied in the introduction, coaching may explicitly or implicitly address the wellbeing of the client, their team, their boss, their family and friends. The most likely is that coaching will affect the wellbeing of the client him/herself; however, given the importance of management and leadership for the wellbeing of employees, it may be that coaching, by improving the client's management skills, has a marked impact on the wellbeing of their team.

The people our clients manage or work with, may experience wellbeing challenges that are particularly difficult to manage. Frequent absence, aggression, missed deadlines, conflict in the team are all familiar and may be symptoms of underlying wellbeing issues. The challenges are more acute when life-threatening conditions or sudden death occur.

In these circumstances, there is potential for coaches to be of real value to clients and organisations. But how many coaches are interested in this kind of work and have their education and supervision equipped them to engage with these issues professionally?

Wellbeing in the coach and their domain: The wellbeing of the coach is likely to affect their ability to provide a good coaching session, project, or programme. As well as a direct impact on their ability to be present, listen, understand and challenge in coaching, the coach's wellbeing can impact on their unconscious processes, defence mechanisms, biases, transference, counter-transference, projection etc. In addition, the coach's reaction, conscious and unconscious, to wellbeing issues will affect the effectiveness with which these can be addressed in coaching.

Who introduces wellbeing?

Wellbeing may or may not be a part of initial contracting between the coach, the individual client and other stakeholders. For example:

- wellbeing may be an explicit part of the coaching contract (or even the reason for seeking coaching) clearly expressed as such by all parties
- wellbeing may be an explicit part of the coaching contract with the individual client, but not disclosed to other stakeholders (e.g. manager, HR etc.)
- wellbeing issues may emerge and become a part of the coaching process as the client's journey unfolds and get explicitly addressed at this later stage despite not being part of the initial contract
- coaching may improve the client's or others' wellbeing but never be explicitly considered in the coaching sessions.

This raises a number of potential questions for executive coaches. For example: How can anyone decide what aspects of wellbeing, if any, are suitable to be addressed by a coach? And who will decide if when and how it will happen? Does the coach ask their client about wellbeing issues – if so, at what stage?

What are the 'duty of care' issues?

The codes of ethics of APECS and the EMCC illustrate the potential need for coaches to manage boundaries in connection to wellbeing issues

The APECS code of ethics guidelines include:

APECS Executive Coaches and Supervisors will hold firmly to the foundation principles underpinning ethical thinking and behaviour.

- *Autonomy - to help individuals and companies make their own decisions and move towards increasing self-authority.*
- *Fidelity - to be faithful to contracts, relationships and promises made.*
- *Beneficence - to do what benefits the wellbeing of all.*
- *Non-Maleficence - to avoid whatever might harm others.*
- *Justice - to maintain fairness.*
- *Caring for self - to look after oneself physically, emotionally, mentally and motivationally so that clients and organisations receive the best service possible*

The ethical code of the EMCC states, under boundary management, that:

...the coach/mentor will at all times operate within the limits of their own competence, recognise where that competence has the potential to be exceeded and where necessary refer the client either to a more experienced coach/mentor, or, support the client in seeking the help of another professional such as a councillor, psychotherapist or business/financial adviser.

This process of referring on needs to be considered carefully and decisions need to be based on care for the wellbeing of the client. Coaches need to beware of a defensive instinct driven by fear of 'doing harm' or going 'beyond their level of competence' and consider who can best serve the client's interest, and how.

In some cases, it may be that a coach can work alongside other professionals to give the best outcome for the client. For diversity, equality and inclusion reasons, it is important not to assume that someone with a mental health condition or high level of stress is, by definition, unsuited to coaching. Equally, if a coach is asked to work with the client who has a mental health condition, it is important not to assume they will automatically be working beyond their remit and possibly their level of competence, which in effect would preclude all people with mental health conditions from receiving coaching. Would that be equally true of someone with a physical illness or disability? Or stress?

The challenge is for the coach to know how to engage with the client as a coach and not as a counsellor, because that's not their remit. Even if the coach is also a trained counsellor. If a coach can maintain coaching conversations with clients, and not stray into counselling, why would they decide not to work with a client who is well enough to be at work? Why should the criteria for working with clients with wellbeing issues be different to any other client i.e. is the client able to engage positively and productively with coaching?

4: What do you think?

Questions for consideration at the symposium

1. How does wellbeing feature in your current executive coaching?
2. How well equipped do you currently feel to address wellbeing issues in your executive coaching? How did you equip yourself?
3. What are the professional challenges and dilemmas around wellbeing that you find most challenging?
4. What would help you develop further in dealing with wellbeing issues in your executive coaching?
5. What would you recommend to coaching educators, supervisors and professional bodies in relation to wellbeing in executive coaching?
6. What do you think purchasers of executive coaching should know and do about how wellbeing is included in executive coaching programmes?

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