

From Distress to Success:

Introducing the “Coaching Continuum”™

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Clients initiate coaching for a multitude of reasons such as career change, improved life satisfaction, enhanced work-life balance, wellness, team work and collaboration, and elevated work performance. They recognize that there is a need to act to improve their life, and turn to coaching as a resource. It is our experience that some of these clients seek coaching as it is more attractive or palatable than counselling and need to be aware that until emotional distress is resolved, they may not benefit fully from coaching. Empirical coaching research supports this conclusion.

Three coaching studies included the use of a psychological tool to screen clients for psychological distress at the onset of the voluntary coaching process. Their results consistently indicated that about 25% of participants scored above the 90th percentile in psychological distress (Keyes, 2003; Green et al 2005, Dulude 2012). As a result, they may be experiencing depletion/depression, worrying/anxiety, and other mental health issues or psychological challenges. These may leave them with a compromised level of capacity to make lasting and meaningful changes. We recognize there may be exceptions to this low capacity pattern we are describing, as the human spirit is strong. It is conceivable that some individuals will be able to make meaningful changes even when highly distressed, particularly when the distress is temporary or situational. However, coaches still face the reality that a significant group of clients may have low coaching capacity when they seek coaching.

The ***Coaching Continuum™*** model was developed to address what we perceived to be a knowledge gap in coach training. This training gap is discussed by both novice and seasoned coaches. The novice sometimes reports he or she naively took on a complex client and felt unequipped to assist the client in creating forward movement. Seasoned coaches have concurred that after working for a while with a complex client who demonstrates a poor ability to progress, the client likely was not ready for the type of coaching requested. Both coach groups should be equipped with not only more client screening skills, as well as skills to discern the client's coaching capacity, develop a coaching plan for complex clients, and refer to other professionals when necessary. All these skills empower the coach to build a strong and effective coaching agreement.

Client Screening

After looking at the change literature, we concluded that this “coaching capacity” is a combination of distress management and resilience skills. Both seem critical to sustainable coaching change. We believe that when coaches have basic training in assessing these factors, they are better equipped to co-create a coaching plan that matches the client's needs. This addresses coaching the "who" of the client.

In response, we developed targeted screening questions that can be easily integrated into an initial client interview. Training on screening and the application of the Coaching Continuum™ model has also been developed. An online client screening tool for these factors is in development.

Matching Coaching Strategies to Coaching Capacity

A further purpose for the model is to maximize client success by offering coaching strategies that are aligned with the client's coaching capacity. The model was designed with the belief that humans need to be nurtured like trees. Before attending to the crown of the tree, it would be wise to ensure the root system is well grounded. When a coach uses the **Coaching Continuum™** model, he or she can focus on working with clients on progressive skills. This enables clients to expand into their desired goals. The Coaching Continuum™ model aids coaches to meet the client at their developmental edge.

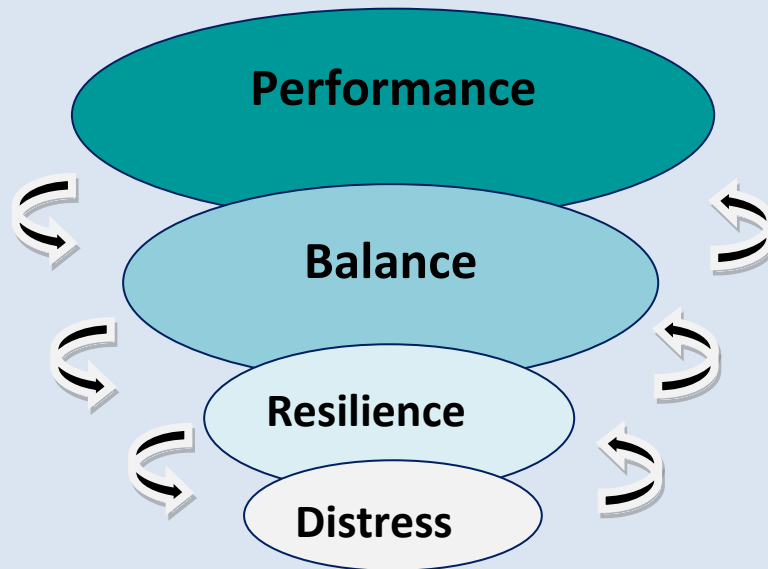
The Coaching Continuum™

The Coaching Continuum™ model proposes a four-level, sequential progression to qualify the client's coaching capacity as follows:

1. The client is likely in high emotional distress and therefore would present with low coaching capacity. A referral to other professional services may be appropriate before entering coaching,
2. The client is ready for resilience coaching,
3. The client is ready for balance coaching,
4. The client is ready for performance coaching. A detailed description of the model is provided below.

The four stages of the Coaching Continuum™

The four stages of the **Coaching Continuum™** are demonstrated by the following graphic. As you will note, the progression is somewhat unstable, with the client “tilting” or moving backward down the continuum when exposed to enough stress. Forward movement is dependent on dynamic balance at each moment.

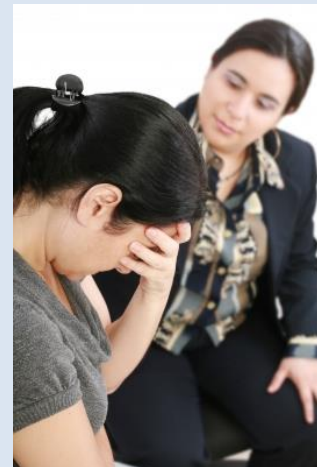


The first phase of the Coaching Continuum™ is Emotional Distress. Individuals who score in the lower end of the spectrum are reporting an elevated level of emotional distress and may have difficulties retaining forward movement on the Coaching Continuum™.

1. Emotional Distress

Defining Client distress is no easy task. However, we believe that clients who present with high levels of emotional distress will likely report some of the following:

- Inability to remain emotionally grounded (high emotional distress, debilitating anxiety),
- Feeling disempowered about his or her destiny,
- In the acute phase of grief for the loss of a person or a way of life (relationship, job, financial bankruptcy),
- Struggling with a long history of interpersonal conflict (aggression, violence, lack of empathy, poor problem solving, inability to maintain meaningful personal relationships),
- Presenting with a history of poor self-esteem and shame (self-loathing, self-deprecation, feeling easily attacked or blamed, defensive, avoidant of relationships),



- Disclosing a prolonged history of lack of personal success (unemployment, repetitive job loss, financial failures, broken relationships),
- Reporting a history of trauma with active triggers,
- Relapsed or actively engaged in their addiction (alcohol, drugs, sex, gambling, food, etc),
- Lacking the ability to trust in relationships,
- Experiencing debilitating anxiety, depression,
- Expressing a negative self-view.

These psychological dynamics may stem from a variety of factors such as bio-chemical imbalance, past or recent traumatic experiences, deeply ingrained belief systems, or personality structures. It is often helpful for the client to attend counselling to develop emotion management and cognitive skills within its specific supportive environment. We believe that this type of psychological support required by the client is generally beyond most coach's training and can present risks to their coaching business.

There are specific coaching niches such as substance abuse recovery coaching or ADHD coaching where the coach has specialized training to address the client's distress and in those circumstances, it may be appropriate for them to begin coaching at this level.

2. Resilience Coaching

“Resilience” is a term that has arisen in the past three decades to describe the human process of bouncing back from stressors and adverse events as well as adapting rapidly to change. Resilience is understood as a psychological skill rather than a trait in an individual. (Rutter, 2012)

The concept of psychological “hardiness” is related, as it describes the ability to feel committed, challenged, and to have self-efficacy. Those who are “hardy” accept change is inevitable, and see change as an opportunity for expansion of skills and self. They are able to see themselves as actors who can change roles in a situation at will. Numerous authors and studies have indicated that psychological hardiness is strongly associated with resilience, it can be improved, and it buffers the negative physical effects of stress (Hansen & Taylor 2016; Siebert 2005; Kobasa et al, 1983; Maddi, 2006, Bartone & Hystad 2010).

These adjectives add to our understanding of the concept of resilience: animation, elasticity, vivacity, liveliness, rebound, vigor, and vitality. Resilience implies energy, forward and outward movement, and a positive ability to adapt and view the world as manageable.

Those who display resilience ability have these common traits: awareness of their own emotions and situations; knowledge that setbacks are normal; strong problem-solving skills and ability to focus; a desire to be a survivor and not a victim; willingness to ask for help when it is needed; strong social supports, optimism, and a reliable stress response.

Resilience Coaching is best suited in circumstances where the client wishes to address the following:

- Developing coping strategies to manage life changes
- emotional self-regulation
- personal meaning and purpose
- acquiring more personal resources (place, people, things, practices)
- enhanced self-directedness and empowerment
- self-esteem
- personal boundaries and assertiveness

Coaching can empower these individuals. Through coaching conversations, they can learn to modify their narrative about their life situation and ability to manage and influence it, to leverage their own strengths, and take charge of their life.

There are common features to resilience coaching, as follows:

- The client sets his or her own accountability measures.
- When the client fails to reach a goal, the coach asks specifically about obstacles and problem-solves them.

There are conversations that assist the client to improve personal competencies and create a positive shift in identity. These conversations focus on developing the following spheres of resilience:

- Physical- recovery from illness, recovering strength and health.
- Emotional- recognizing and managing emotions and reactivity, self-regulation.
- Cognitive- challenging belief systems, managing inner narratives and perceptions of self and others, clarifying values.
- Energy and focus- Setting boundaries and gaining focus skills.

3. Balance Coaching

Balance coaching, sometimes also called Life Coaching, has been defined as the professionally-guided process by which “people discover what they want in life and unlock their own brilliance to achieve it” (Williams & Davis, 2002). Through these coaching conversations, they generate their own answers and solutions to life challenges and transitions.

Balance Coaching is likely to be successful for any client who demonstrates he or she is in the low to moderate range of psychological distress. The client expresses self-agency over his or her life. Several aspects of life are moderately satisfying to highly successful.

Sparrow (2007) stated that life coaching is not as well understood as executive or performance coaching. Grant and Zackon (2004) distinguished life coaching from executive or performance coaching as a coaching process with a specific focus on clarifying and pursuing life goals and values. The client may seek coaching to take stock of the current situation and reset the course.

We agree with Sparrow (2007) that Balance Coaching is best suited in circumstances where the client wishes to address the following:

- The ability to reflect on the nature of self and life
- Personal competencies and strengths
- Self-esteem, self-expression and self-management
- Personal focus and motivation
- Focused personal learning
- Personal purpose
- Life satisfaction levels
- Life/work balance
- Health and wellness
- Social connections
- Personal finances and wealth
- Career management

There are common features to Balance Coaching, as follows:

- Defining happiness and success,
- Expansion of personal meaning, purpose,
- Attention to life satisfaction in multiple spheres,

- Celebration of and leveraging of strengths,
- Increasing positive experiences and emotions,
- Replacing limited thinking with notions of thriving, flourishing, and the value of optimism,
- Specific goal setting and accountability.

4. Performance Coaching

Coaches often assume that performance coaching targets corporate leaders or seasoned professionals. We would like to suggest that performance coaching is available to any individual who has a strong grasp of resilience and life balance. This client reports little psychological distress during screening, demonstrates a high level of emotional well-being, and exhibits strong life and/or work skills. This client is ready and capable of deep reflection work and can maintain healthy boundaries and focus under stress. This client has the desire to expand his or her capacity to inspire, influence, and motivate, as well as sustain an elevated level of performance.

Global and systemic thinking is typical, as is insight into the interplay between their personal performance, leadership actions, collaborations, and outcomes. High performers don't let their personal agendas and style interfere with forward progress and the problem-solving process.

Performance Coaching is best suited in circumstances where the client wishes to address the following:

- presence
- reflection practices (emotional intelligence)
- professional legacy
- team dynamics
- championing others
- personal impact on community and workplace
- self-discipline and ethical practices
- cultural competence
- communication about complex topics
- problem analysis and creative solution design
- collaboration with others

There are common features to Performance Coaching, as follows:

- Assessments of behavioral and communication styles
- Neuroscience education
- Emotional Intelligence training
- Mindfulness skill development
- Time and energy management
- Delegation skills
- Cultural alignments
- Mediation skills training
- Mentoring and coaching skills
- Real time observation and feedback of client interactions
- Role play
- Team dynamics training

Movement up and down the Coaching Continuum

It is our belief and observation that all humans are capable of not only increasing their coaching capacity, but also of marked deterioration in response to high stress. Coaching clients may therefore present at one level, make gains as they are coached, then given a disruptive life challenge drift downward to a lower level. We have observed this phenomena in situations such as sudden job loss, death or disability of loved ones, serious accidents, receiving a diagnoses of serious illness, or other traumatic circumstances. As a result, we argue for the importance of coaches to remain vigilant about this risk and regularly take the "client's coachability pulse".

Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe that using screening questions assists the coach to better evaluate where the client resides on the Coaching Continuum™. Identifying the client's coaching capacity gives the coach a way to harmonize their coaching strategies so they are better aligned with the client at all times. This framework can light a pathway for the coach and the client to maximize coaching success.

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