



Reflecting pathways to
learning and change



F. Campone, Inc. Newsletter

What can we learn from coaching research?

It's well and good to read about theories and models in coaching. What many practitioners of coaching want to know, however, is "what do I do with this?" In this month's column, I summarize an article that is based on research (although not presenting the study directly), and offers a practical example of turning theory into practice.

Currents in Coaching Research: What Can We Learn?

This month's focus article is Positive Psychology Principles Applied to Consulting Psychology at the Individual and Group Level (Sandra L. Foster and Paul J. Lloyd. 2007. Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research. V. 59, #1). While the authors do not use the word "coaching" in the article, the clients they serve, the consultation purposes and goals, and the application of theory in practice are consistent with the principles and purposes of coaching. I'll discuss the parallels a little further on in this review.

Foster and Lloyd begin the article with a substantial overview of research into the theories and applications of positive psychology, including strengths-based models, studies of positive institutions and appreciative inquiry. The Clifton Strengths Finder and the VIA Signature Strengths are both discussed in some detail. The authors also review studies on positive emotions. For coaches who are interested in reading more about the empirical bases for these theories and models, the article provides a modest review of core studies and resources.

The authors follow their review with a brief description of how they apply the principles of these models, especially positive emotions, in their consulting psychology practice. The heart of the article, however, lies in a detailed discussion of Csikszentmihalyi's principles of the flow experience and the development and use of the Experience Sampling Method (ESM). Foster and Lloyd describe the checklist used in the ESM model to collect data about clients' experiences (thoughts, feelings, judgments) during various activities. They summarize Csikszentmihalyi's findings and the core of his theory of Flow and proceed to detail their use of an adapted ESM method to help create awareness with their clients. The authors provide clients with an ESM experience and use the resulting data with clients to create change goals. The objective is to assist clients to make choices which are more conducive to their well-being.

The article includes a brief case study presented by the authors to support their proposition that data from the adapted ESM activity can effectively motivate a client to make changes. The case offers the logistics of the method as well as the tools used. The client in the case found his results to be unsettling and was motivated to follow through on redirecting his focus and behaviors.

Replicating the authors' methods is straightforward. At a prompt signal (initially provided by the consultant and later programmed into the client's cell phone), the client writes a brief journal entry describing his activity in the moment (what and with whom); satisfaction; level of skill required; level of motivation; level of challenge; and degree of concentration. For many of these items, the authors provided a ready-made scale.

Circling back to connect the characteristics of the flow experience with traits of visionary leaders interviewed by Csikzentmihalyi and colleagues, Foster and Lloyd note that many of these leaders traits match those in Goleman's emotional intelligence profiles. They end with the recommendation that practitioners begin the cultivation of flow states by using ESM logs to look at their own use of time and resources. They suggest that the results will paint a clean picture of the choices we are making.

It's valuable to note that the authors' work is based on the premise that the flow state is a desirable client outcome. Using the characteristic conditions which Csikzentmihalyi identified in his theory, the authors created an instrument and practice which is designed to help create client self-awareness. While the authors use the term consulting psychology, creating such awareness is also a core coaching competency. The authors don't identify any specific clients for whom the method would be unsuitable. They seem to suggest that helping clients choose actions that are conducive to a sense of well-being can complement other interventions in a consulting engagement. Thus, the model may apply with coaching clients equally well.

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Francine Campone, Ed.D., PCC coaches mature professionals to reinvent their lives by reinventing their work. She is a leader in the coaching research community and deeply committed to the development of reflective coaches in practice and to fostering coaching research. Francine teaches evidence-based coaching and coaching research practices for Fielding University and UT Dallas and enjoys a wonderful life in Denver, Colorado beyond her activities in the coaching field.

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