

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238318405>

Positive psychology coaching: putting the science of happiness to work for your clients, by R. Biswas-Diener and B. Dean

Article in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* · September 2009

DOI: 10.1080/17439760902992498

CITATIONS

4

READS

6,834

1 author:



Anthony M Grant

The University of Sydney

82 PUBLICATIONS 7,155 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

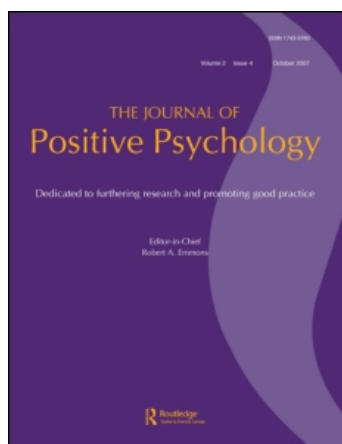
This article was downloaded by: [Grant, Anthony M.]

On: 11 August 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 913840259]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



The Journal of Positive Psychology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t724921263>

Positive psychology coaching: putting the science of happiness to work for your clients, by R. Biswas-Diener and B. Dean

Anthony M. Grant ^a

^a Coaching Psychology Unit, Department of Psychology, University of Sydney, Australia

Online Publication Date: 01 September 2009

To cite this Article Grant, Anthony M.(2009)'Positive psychology coaching: putting the science of happiness to work for your clients, by R. Biswas-Diener and B. Dean',The Journal of Positive Psychology,4:5,426 — 429

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/17439760902992498

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17439760902992498>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

BOOK REVIEW

Positive psychology coaching: putting the science of happiness to work for your clients, by R. Biswas-Diener and B. Dean, Hoboken, Wiley, 2007, 272pp., US\$50.00 (hardback), ISBN 0-47-0042-46-X.

Coaching and positive psychology appear to be a perfect fit. Where positive psychology is the scientific study of what constitutes the life well-lived (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the essence of coaching is a collaborative, solution-focused, action-oriented methodology that aims to enhance the coachee's personal and/or professional life experience, goal attainment and well-being (Grant, 2003). To date, there has been considerable progress in the field of positive psychology as regards understanding human strengths and values. However, much of the work thus far has been about investigating the nature of the relationships between various constructs, such as self-concordance, well-being, goal attainment and goal satisfaction (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), the measurement of constructs such as well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1996) or the development of a taxonomy of human strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), rather than research into how best to operationalize positive psychology constructs within a one-to-one helping relationship such as coaching.

There have been several book chapters and a number of journal articles on this topic (c.f., Kauffman & Scoular, 2004; Seligman, 2007), and there are several solid texts on using positive psychology primarily within consulting relationships rather than coaching (e.g., Linley & Joseph, 2004). However, to the best of my knowledge, Biswas-Diener and Dean's *Positive Psychology Coaching* is the first complete book to systematically present the major findings of positive psychology explicitly for use in coaching practice.

Coaching and positive psychology: an ideal fit?

As Biswas-Diener and Dean argue, coaching and positive psychology appear to be an ideal fit. However, if indeed these are such ideal compatriots, why has coaching received so little attention within the positive psychology literature? One answer might be because in the past the commercial coaching industry has not been held in high regard by many academics, scientists and scientist-practitioners (Goldstein, 2005;

Salerno, 2005). Indeed, in various quarters coaching is still regarded with some disdain. To be frank, this disdain may well be justified as many sections of the commercial coaching industry have done little to demonstrate scientific, ethical or intellectual rigor in either practice, research or coach training, and the brash marketing by many life coaches is more reminiscent of the over-selling found in late-night television infomercials than in a genuine helping profession. Given that positive psychology has been at pains to differentiate itself from the anti-science rhetoric and faddism frequently associated with the human potential movement, its distancing from the commercial coaching industry is understandable.

However, coaching as presented in Biswas-Diener and Dean's book, involves the systematic application of the behavioral science of positive psychology in the service of enhancing clients' life experience, work performance and wellbeing. It is the focus on the systematic application of the evidence-based behavioral science of positive psychology and the incorporation of an informed-practitioner model that distinguishes the coaching approach in this book from the all-too-frequent pop-psychology or pseudo-science seen in many proprietary coaching approaches. It is this focus and this grounding that makes this book such a welcome addition to the coaching and the positive psychology literature. Whilst being theoretically-grounded and well-referenced, the book is written in an accessible, conversational style making the text highly readable, and the authors take care to present the academic research in a way that makes it easy to relate it to one's own personal everyday life experiences.

Applied positive psychology: consultant or coach?

The book is primarily written for practicing coaches who wish to learn about positive psychology, rather than positive psychologists who wish to learn about coaching. The authors assume that the reader holds a relatively sophisticated prior understanding of coaching. Consequently, the authors do not spend time explaining the basics of coaching, rather they get straight into addressing the book's primary aim, which is to impart a straightforward understanding of the research and science of positive psychology

for use by coaches in real-life coaching practice. This Biswas-Diener and Dean do particularly well.

Coaches with no previous knowledge of general psychology, social science or positive psychology will find this book presents this information in a highly accessible fashion. Those who already have some background in positive psychology will find that the material presented may well provoke new lines of thought about how to apply positive psychology. In addition, the book overall presents a convincing case for the use of coaching as a methodology for applied positive psychology.

This latter point is important, because the dominant methodology for the application of positive psychology found in the academic literature tends to position the positive psychology practitioner as someone who gives the client directions as how to best improve their well-being. Whilst the role of expert consultant can be a useful one, there is a danger that positive psychology interventions based on a consultation model can become overly-prescriptive; clearly we need to avoid the patronizing 'take three blessings and a gratitude exercise daily, and come back to see me next week' approach. Indeed, it is somewhat ironic that overly-prescriptive positive psychology interventions run the risk of emulating the worst aspects of the medical model with its attendant overt power hierarchies and paternalistic tendencies. Fortunately, Biswas-Diener and Dean present a collaborative, client-centered coaching approach that provides an important counter-balance, and this is an important contribution in the development of an applied positive psychology.

Three key sections in the book

The book is presented in three key sections. The first section addresses foundational concepts of happiness and positivity. I found this section of the book to have a welcome pragmatic focus, with the authors emphasizing the utility of happiness rather than taking an evangelistic stance.

The authors make the salient point that coaching clients rarely, if ever, come to coaching with the explicit goal of being happy. Rather, clients tend to present with specific complaints or problems. As Biswas-Diener and Dean point out, the skill of the coach lies in being able listen carefully to client complaints, identify the unstated emotional needs and then work with the client to help the client set goals that are both materially and emotionally satisfying. Indeed, the section on goal setting gives the reader some useful ways to approach the process of setting

goals from a positive psychology perspective, and reminds coaches to pay particular attention to issues of self-concordance and goal conflict.

However, I found the section of the book on the use of goals to be somewhat over-focused on the mainstream positive psychology literature. Whilst this focus is in keeping with the aims of the book, I felt that this section would have benefited from drawing on the broader goal literature to a greater extent, particularly the work of Street (2002) on conditional goal setting, and Locke and Latham's seminal works on goals and task motivation (2002).

Following the discussion of goals, Biswas-Diener and Dean then go on to present a chapter on ways to enhance happiness and well-being. This chapter details a range of evidence-based interventions. Again, the information in this section was well-referenced and highly accessible, and most practicing coaches will have little difficulty in adapting it for use in their own coaching practice or in their own lives.

The second section of the book centers on character strengths and virtues, and is predominately focused on the work of Peterson and Seligman (2004). Whilst this is a seminal work in the area, it would have been useful had the book also covered other approaches to understanding character strengths and virtues. Nevertheless, this section of the book is a good introduction to the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) for those coaches not already familiar with Peterson and Seligman's approach. Biswas-Diener and Dean also present an informed perspective on the use of the VIA-IS in coaching, and this rightly includes a discussion on cross-cultural issues and a caution on over-simplistic notions of a strengths approach.

This is important because without a solid understanding of the underlying principles and without a sophisticated coaching skill-set, a strengths-based coaching intervention can easily come across as over-simplistic Pollyanna 'happy talk' or, even worse, downright patronizing. Biswas-Diener and Dean discuss a range of ways to avoid these pitfalls, including ideas on how to prepare the coaching client for a strength-based coaching session, and they suggest a number of ways of introducing the strength-based paradigm to clients.

Preparing clients for a coaching session is one thing, but another problem faced by many coaches is how to prepare themselves for a coaching session. How can one best get into a strengths-based mindset in order to facilitate such thinking in the client? The section on how to use a strengths-based framework to prepare for a coaching session contained some useful tips and techniques. For example, in addition to

planning the process of the session (also discussed in the Appendix), Biswas-Diener and Dean suggest that coaches mentally prepare for a coaching session by focusing on and explicitly detailing the clients' strengths.

Their well-grounded advice is for coaches to be themselves, rather than trying to impress clients by being a 'super-motivated, all-action achievement coach.' This may appear common-sense or even trite advice, but my experience is that many novice coaches automatically assume that if they are offering positive psychology coaching services then they themselves must always be happy, highly positive, incredibly motivated, and all aspects of their lives must be perfect. Biswas-Diener and Dean's message is clear and important; know yourself, be yourself and be authentic in your coaching style.

They also present scripted examples of how such a session might progress, and this gives some insight on ways to use the strength-based approach in a coaching session. Here I felt it would also have been helpful to have some more scripted examples of how to deal with client 'objections' to the use of a strength-based approach. This is because most coaches will have had clients who, despite presenting as being willing and engaged, still manage to find multiple reasons why they should spend time in the coaching session talking about their problems or past difficulties, rather than strengths or solutions, and many coaches find it difficult to help clients shift from a problem to solution-focused mindset.

The third section of the book presents a short overview of special topics in positive psychology, including its application to jobs, careers and organizations, and a discussion on the future of positive psychology. This section is much briefer than the other two sections. It presents useful information but, because of its brevity, this section had a sense of unfulfilled promise, and I would have liked to have read more of the authors' thoughts and experience on these issues. Maybe this section will form the beginnings of their next book on coaching? There are certainly many coaches practicing in work-related domains such as executive coaching, organizational change, and training managers in coaching skills who would welcome a workplace coaching text on positive psychology, and this would be a valuable addition to the coaching and positive psychology literature.

Meta-theoretical issues

An issue that some may consider to be a limitation, and one which I believe is broadly true of writings on

positive psychology coaching in general, is the lack of an commonly-used and explicitly-stated overarching theoretical framework. Although applied positive psychology encompasses a number of theoretical sub-perspectives (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1980; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005) and a number of authors have presented a range of approaches to a meta-theoretical framework for positive psychology (e.g., Sheldon, 2004), few authors within the positive psychology coaching arena detail their underlying assumptions or meta-theoretical frameworks.

In contrast, other domains of applied psychology explicitly articulate their assumptions and frameworks. Contemporary health psychologists for example, tend to work within a bio-psychosocial perspective (e.g., Sheridan & Radmacher, 1992). Where alternative theoretical orientations are assumed in domains such as health psychology, for example post-modern or constructionist frameworks (Hepworth, 2006), those core assumptions are normally explicitly stated, even if only briefly.

In addressing issues related to theoretical orientation, Biswas-Diener and Dean welcome the notion that positive psychology is transtheoretical, and that there is no single theoretical framework for positive psychology. This, they argue, is a good thing because '... (positive psychology) can be accepted in bits and piece by everyone, without concern for ugly professional turf wars based on dearly held theoretical orientations' (p. 220). Their point has some merit.

However, without an explicit theoretical reference point, positive psychology coaching runs the risk of becoming (or perceived as being) a purely simplistic technique-driven process, resulting in a superficial one-size-fits-all approach. Although those with a substantive training in psychology (or the social or behavioral sciences) will be very familiar with (for example) cognitive-behavioral or bio-psychosocial conceptualisations, many individuals who come to coaching from other backgrounds may not have such a grounding (Spence, Cavanagh, & Grant, 2006). It may be useful for future work to explicitly articulate such theoretical frameworks, and in this way further contribute to the ongoing education of coaches and the continued development of the field of applied positive psychology.

Conclusions

Coaching and positive psychology have much to offer each other. The sustained development of positive psychology coaching requires that coaches become informed about the science of positive psychology,

and conversely, that positive psychologists become knowledgeable about evidenced-based coaching methodologies. Coaching authors have a vital role to play in ensuring that coaches have exposure to the research, practice and the theory of positive psychology. Fortunately, Biswas-Diener and Dean's book manages the rare feat of balancing reader accessibility with scientific fact, real-life experience with theoretical frameworks, and optimism with a refreshing dose of pragmatic realism. This book is a welcome addition to the coaching and positive psychology literature.

References

- Biswas-Diener, R., & Dean, B. (2007). *Positive psychology coaching: Putting the science of happiness to work for your clients*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (1980). Self-determination theory: When mind mediates behavior. *Journal of Mind & Behavior*, 1(1), 33–43.
- Fredrickson, B.L., & Losada, M.F. (2005). Positive affect and the dynamics of human flourishing. *American Psychologist*, 60(7), 678–686.
- Goldstein, S. (2005). Editorial: Coaching as a treatment for ADHD. *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 9(2), 379–381.
- Grant, A.M. (2003). The impact of life coaching on goal attainment, metacognition and mental health. *Social Behavior & Personality*, 31(3), 253–264.
- Hepworth, J. (2006). Strengthening critical health psychology. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 11(3), 401–408.
- Kauffman, C., & Scoular, A. (2004). Towards a positive psychology of executive coaching. In P.A. Linley & S. Joseph (Eds.), *Positive psychology in practice* (pp. 287–302). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Linley, P.A., & Joseph, S. (Eds.). (2004). *Positive psychology in practice*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Locke, E.A., & Latham, G.P. (2002). Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation. *American Psychologist*, 57(9), 705–717.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M.E.P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues. A handbook and classification*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Ryff, C.D., & Keyes, C.L.M. (1996). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96(4), 719–727.
- Salerno, S. (2005, August 9). Qualifications needed to be a life coach: er...none. [Electronic version]. *Times Online*. Retrieved December 19, 2005, from www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,7-1726677,00.html.
- Seligman, M.E. (2007). Coaching and positive psychology. *Australian Psychologist*, 42(4), 266–267.
- Seligman, M.E., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5–14.
- Sheldon, K., & Elliot, A.J. (1999). Goal striving, need satisfaction and longitudinal well-being: The self-concordance model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76(3), 482–497.
- Sheldon, K.M. (2004). *Optimal human being: An integrated multi-level perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Sheridan, C.L., & Radmacher, S.A. (1992). *Health psychology: Challenging the biomedical model*. New York: Wiley.
- Spence, G.B., Cavanagh, M., & Grant, A.M. (2006). Duty of care in an unregulated industry: Initial findings on the diversity and practice of Australian coaches. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 1(1), 71–85.
- Street, H. (2002). Exploring the role of conditional goal setting in depression. *Clinical Psychologist*, 6(1), 16–23.

Anthony M. Grant
Coaching Psychology Unit
Department of Psychology
University of Sydney, Australia
anthonyg@psych.usyd.edu.au