4.2.4 Life Coaching: The Heart of Advising

by Victor Harms (Psychology & Human Services, Bellevue University)

Educators can use the life coaching process to enhance their personal development work with students in contexts such as advising and career guidance. In contrast to mentoring, which is a more open and collaborative process, life coaching incorporates more structure and puts more emphasis on achieving growth in focused life areas. In contrast to counseling, life coaching does not focus on reducing mental health problems that are inhibiting growth. Research on decision-making and goal-setting has established important theoretical foundations for life coaching. Positive psychology and social learning theories provide the broadest perspective on the principles applied by life coaches. This module includes a case to illustrate the potential of life coaching for enhancing the advising experience. This discussion introduces the FOCUS model of facilitating the life coaching process; it has several components in common with the Personal Development Methodology (4.2.3) (PDM). FOCUS is an acronym that stands for “formulate, organize, clarify, utilize, and sequence.” Learning a basic life coaching model will help educators remember to systematically explore learners’ life experiences and growth goals as part of academic advising.

Definition of Life Coaching

Life coaching is a facilitation process in which healthy people identify, select, and accomplish personal and professional goals. Life coaching clients select goals that fit their insights about the paths of action they deem most important; life coaches provide structure, facilitate the process, and guide the assessment of results. A coach does not need to possess specific knowledge or direct experience in the goals that the client selects but must be able to empower client action by applying a model of coaching that gives form and structure to the process. There are multiple models of life coaching that fit various contexts and purposes. The FOCUS model is described below in order to illustrate the steps and processes that are typically used by life coaches. The special characteristics of life coaching can be understood more clearly by comparing and contrasting it with counseling and mentoring.

Differentiating Counseling, Mentoring, and Life Coaching

Life coaching is a relatively new professional role which places particular emphasis on facilitating the client’s development, or strengthening, of personal processes in a way that better enables them to achieve desired goals. Life coaches make use of many of the same interviewing and interpersonal skills that have been used and researched by counselors. Life coaches lead individuals to explore ways to identify and achieve performance objectives. Mentoring, which has been used by humans throughout history, utilizes many of the processes of life coaching but is focused on the personal development and growth of individuals by means of a supportive, collaborative relationship (4.2.1 Overview of Mentoring). The differences between the three roles are summarized in Table 1.

Individuals who have life problems that impede their personal development benefit from counseling services. Counselors work within a medical framework to provide diagnosis and treatment; they identify problems and design treatments to reduce symptoms and to return the person to a state of positive mental health. Clients in a counseling relationship must become involved in and compliant with the treatment plan; they document their progress toward the treatment goals, and this documentation provides assessment feedback for monitoring progress.

Individuals seek a mentor when they have a personal or professional goal in mind but realize that they might benefit from someone else’s experience, knowledge, and skill. The process can be quite formal, if preferred, but is often informal in the way that it is actually worked out between the mentor and the mentee. The nature of mentoring also varies depending on the needs of populations; for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td>Engaged professional</td>
<td>Diagnosis and treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>Experienced expert</td>
<td>Collaboration between novice &amp; expert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Coaching</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
example in national mentoring programs, adults are paired up with adolescents who lack healthy parental role models. Educators are more likely to be involved in mentoring relationships involving more experienced faculty members and a new or less experienced faculty member. Regardless of the context, the mentors share their knowledge and wisdom with mentees. Although it is more common for mentees to seek to attain the level of competency of the mentor, over time a mentee may progress beyond the level of the mentor.

Mentally and emotionally healthy individuals seek out life coaching when they want to take on a new challenge or when they aspire to a new level of growth in a particular area of performance. In the life coaching relationship, the goal is for the client to accomplish future positive actions. Life coaches facilitate growth processes relevant for the accomplishment of these goals. Life coaching encourages individuals to focus on immediate coaching goals by using a process that also builds potential for transferring competencies to future coaching goals. Life coaches assume that individuals possess most of what is required for them to accomplish their goals and that they are able to access the required resources. When these conditions are not met in a realistic way it is necessary to return to the skill or resource development steps of the goal-setting process or to reconsider the goal. Unlike counselors, who must address specific diagnosed problems, life coaches facilitate the client’s selection of goals that fit his or her current skills and resources but which also have promise for expanding the quality of life of coached individuals.

**Theoretical Foundations of Life Coaching**

Life coaching has emerged from mentoring and counseling practice. The principles and processes used by practitioners in these three roles have a foundation in psychological theories and research. Selected counseling psychology theories, positive psychology theory, and goal-setting theory will be considered here.

Two prominent counseling theories represent how research from the counseling perspective provides a rich foundation for life coaching. The first is the person-centered counseling theory of Carl Rogers (1951). According to Rogers, the answers to a person’s problems lie within the person, and the counselor’s role is to provide unconditional positive regard and to model specific helping attitudes. Roger’s ground-breaking research demonstrated that counselors who provide these conditions allow clients to discover their own answers to their problems. A second theory is solution-focused counseling (Molnar & de Shazer, 1987) which uses a general systems approach as the framework for assessing external as well as internal causes of client problems. Practitioners from this perspective emphasize that client movement toward positive solutions and behaviors will be inconsistent with the negative emotions and behaviors associated with diagnosed conditions.

Positive psychology is an especially close fit with life coaching because it is a coherent theory that integrates information about how healthy people use positive coping mechanisms and maintain personal development skills that add to the quality of their lives. Seligman (2000), in his introduction to a special issue of *American Psychologist*, explains the contrasts between his earlier work on mental health problems and the newer perspective of positive psychology. His earlier research on learned helplessness provided a significant improvement in the understanding of depression and of reactions to performance failure. However, he also noticed that many individuals who seemed to have had experiences that were just as negative as those who were depressed seemed to be coping and thriving. He provides an overview of positive psychology and of the kind of empirical evidence that supports it. In contrast to humanistic psychology, which was a much earlier reaction to the relatively deterministic perspectives of psychoanalytic and other clinical psychology theories, positive psychology is being developed on the basis of rigorous empirical research. Among the research areas being addressed, goal setting and personal growth are especially important for life coaching. For example, Fredrickson (2001) has identified the beneficial role of positive emotions in the process of expansion and development of a personal growth repertoire. This concept is a significant building block for the personal growth and actualization of the life coaching process.

Keyes & Haidt (2003) argue that when people experience positive mental health they can be said to be “flourishing.” The opposite of flourishing is experiencing mental health problems such as depression or anxiety. These authors describe the middle ground between mental health problems and flourishing as “languishing.” Life coaching fits the needs of people who are flourishing because it helps them to further expand their areas of growth. More typically, however, it fits the needs of those described as languishing because, although they are not experiencing any major problems, they feel their life is missing something and they don’t yet understand how to proceed.

The goal-setting process itself has received much attention by many researchers such as Locke (2002). How individuals handle goal setting and decision making has a substantial influence on their quality of life, and are therefore of special interest to life coaches. Locke, whose research program over several decades has addressed goal-setting theory, assumes that when a person sets
a goal and is able to accomplish it, they experience an increased level of life satisfaction. He has identified a number of psychologically significant factors relevant to an individual’s success with goal setting. Initially, success with goals is moderated by four factors: level of commitment, quality of feedback, task complexity, and value to the individual. Second, even if positive conditions exist regarding these four factors, individuals tend to address performance goals in predictable ways. First, they do what has become automatic or habitual. When these efforts don’t meet their performance expectations, and if their automatic responses don’t succeed, they may apply increasingly more sophisticated strategies, such as adapting their current skills. Persons with high self-efficacy expectations about personal potential for success identify more effective strategies. Overly specific performance standards, which may result from evaluative feedback (4.1.2 Distinctions Between Assessment and Evaluation), induce anxiety; in this emotional state, the ability to think is reduced, and he or she is likely to conduct a scattered search for better strategies. When coaches allow individuals some latitude, while also encouraging high standards, individuals tend to select higher standards for themselves (4.2.2 Becoming a Self-Grower). Finally, clients can gain greater flexibility and creativity in finding ways to improve their performance if they receive relevant training or education. Life coaches can facilitate individual progress by helping clients use more optimal goal-setting strategies.

A General Model of Life Coaching

There are many models and approaches in the emerging field of life coaching. Most of these have been created and marketed by individuals who have a special approach or specific technique. The coach’s role is to facilitate the individual’s movement through the self-regulatory cycle towards goal achievement (Grant, 2003). The FOCUS model has been created to integrate practice by incorporating many of the common features that are considered significant to successful coaching practice in a variety of contexts.

Several assumptions important to the FOCUS model are best described in terms of the specific motivational factors in the last column of Table 2. The rows in the table represent the typical sequence of life coaching work that must be planned, implemented, and assessed. At any point it may be necessary to return to a previous process in order to achieve success. Life coaching clients must learn the affective skills needed to handle the iterations of the coaching process that are typically essential to support realistic learning and growth.

Each of the rows in Table 2 identify the activity, main moderating factors, performance standards, and motivational factors important for each process or step within the FOCUS model of life coaching. Each of these will be briefly discussed in the following paragraph.

First, life coaches must establish a positive relationship with coached individuals in order to achieve “collaborative synergy.” Lack of trust or confidence with one’s life coach and failure to achieve interpersonal rapport will reduce overall effectiveness. Second, if clients learn to articulate their core values, priorities, and life goals, their sense of self-concept is significantly enriched. Individuals with a strong sense of identity and meaning have deeper personal resources for addressing goals. Third, context influences whether a client’s current skills and resources match desired goals. Goal processes and outcomes must be specific, concrete, and measurable while also taking into account skills and resources. Fourth, the quality of client skills and resources determines whether the client...
is ready to proceed directly with working toward goals or whether the client and coach should devote additional time to enhance skills and resources. As noted in the discussion of Locke’s goal-setting theory, individuals may need to assess their actual skills and related potential carefully to avoid acting only on the basis of initial, automatic responses. The full range of resources must be considered because the support of family and others, availability of essential information sources, and adequacy of financial resources each play a role. Fifth, any significant goal must be properly sequenced and must be considered worth celebrating. Having a clear action plan with specific steps is essential but may take some time and reflection based on assessment. One positive indication that the client expects success is the desire to plan a celebration at the time of successful goal attainment. In the next section, an advising case provides a more concrete illustration of life coaching practice that is relevant to educators.

Case Illustration

A new student stops by your office during office hours.

“What classes do I need to take next semester?”

Resisting the urge to give a pat answer, you ask: “What are your longer-term goals for your life and career?”

The student appears to be put off: “I just want to know what classes to register for, since today is the last day to register.”

“As your advisor, I can give you a couple of classes that are being offered this next semester. But I would also like to spend just a couple of minutes helping you choose some classes that will be consistent with your goals. Would that be OK with you?”

“Sure.”

Develop background with discussion of several questions: “Tell me a little bit about yourself. What do you like to do in your spare time? What are your hobbies? What classes did you like in the past and which ones did you not like? How did you choose this institution? Of all of the programs, why did you choose this one?”

Sample response at the end of the discussion: “I choose this program because I want to become a security professional who can make a difference and also move up in a company or agency.”

“I am here to help you choose your own path and also help you put the steps in order so that you will be successful in your formal educational process. My ultimate goal is to facilitate your ability to be able to identify, select, and achieve your life goals. How does that sound to you?”

Concluding Thoughts

Educators tend to emphasize learning with the goal of helping students become self-growers who know how to perform in an independent and intrinsically motivated way. Another role that educators often need to handle well is that of academic advisor; performance in this role can be significantly enhanced through use of the life coaching processes. Students need advising that addresses not only practical matters like planning for the next term but that also, and more importantly, addresses questions about who they are, what career path to take, how to adapt their social and community activities to their growth priorities, how to handle stressors, and how to become stable and effective self-regulators of their own emotional lives. There are very few relationships in life in which a more experienced person has no agenda other than the success of the less experienced person, and is willing to explore options, without adding evaluative “shoulds” and “oughts.” The life coaching model is useful to educators because it provides a structured but flexible process for facilitating stronger skills and greater life confidence in their advisees.

References


