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## Currents in Coaching Research Newsletter

### "I'm not sure I can do that!" : An Exploration of Self-Doubt in Coaching

This month's Research Corner looks at a study by Lynne Hindemarch which explores the phenomenon of self-doubt as experienced by clients and by coaches.[1] As a coach, Hindemarch had observed that approximately half of her clients have implicitly or explicitly raised self-doubt as a concern. She decided to undertake the study in order to better understand how individuals experience self-doubt and how they express it in coaching engagements. She further sought to identify strategies which seem to be effective in addressing and overcoming self-doubt. While the study population is small (N=8), the phenomenological approach used offers coaches some insights into what seems to be a relatively common experience among coaching clients, as well as some coaches.

The author's review of the literature encompasses the term self-doubt and similar terms such as self-limiting thoughts, as well alternative concepts such as self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem. This offers the reader an overview of key theories and theorists whose work on these concepts have influenced some elements of prevalent coaching models. In addition to presenting the concepts and how they are defined, Hindemarch also discusses proposed interventions. For example, she notes that Jenny Rogers describes the "importance of taking time to challenge the client's self-limiting beliefs", while Stephen Brookfield encourages acknowledging and making public the commonality of the experience of self-doubt and feelings of impostership.

To better understand the experience of self-doubt, Hindemarch choose to pursue a phenomenological approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with participants and applying an interpretive phenomenological analysis. There were eight participants in the study, four clients and four coaches with two males and two females in each of the groups. The interviews touched on eight broad areas: (1) recent experience of coaching; (2) understanding the term "self-doubt"; (3) experience of self-doubt; (4) triggers for self-doubt; (5) how self-doubt manifests; (6) ease of raising it with a coach; (7) effect on work performance; (8) strategies for overcoming self-doubt and their effectiveness. Coaches who were interviewed were asked about their experiences coaching clients on self-doubt. They were also offered an option to discuss their own self-doubt as coaches.

In her analysis, Hindemarch paid particular attention to the respondent's use of metaphors as this yielded clues to implicit expressions of self-doubt and descriptors of the experience. The data suggested three themes: "self-doubt as work-related, self-doubt as an emotional experience, and self-doubt as a belief."(p. 5) With respect to the first theme, Hindemarch found that transition in some form seems to trigger self-doubt. The transition might take the form of a change in supervisor, position or organization. Most respondents described the experience of self-doubt in emotional terms, such as feeling exposed, or as negative feelings that are transferred to non-work situations. Feelings of self-doubt were also associated with a sense of lacking control.

The experience of self-doubt also presented other characteristics. While the

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### Researcher's Haiku

The stars are not there to  
remind us but to let us  
know what this is.

*Cid Corman in The Unswept Path: Contemporary  
American Haiku*

(Readers are invited to e-mail their  
researcher's haiku - original or  
otherwise-for inclusion in future  
issues. Your feedback on this issue  
is welcome, too!)

### References

Lynne Hindemarch. *An exploration of the experience of self-doubt in the coaching context and the strategies adopted by coaches to overcome it.*

The International Journal of  
Evidence-Based Coaching and  
Mentoring. Special Issue, no. 2.

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experience is often hidden, women raised the issue earlier in their coaching than did men. For both, however, Hindemarch notes "it may need to be teased out, as it may not be expressly presented." (p.7). In some cases, the coach suggesting that self-doubt may be present engenders a feeling in the client of being "found out." In the article, the author offers several examples of these moments of discovery, including one in which the coach artfully names the issue and then gives it back to the client to own in the context of workplace culture. Hindemarch suggests that workplace culture is an important aspect of exploring this phenomenon with clients and may account in large part for the hidden nature of self-doubt.

There are specific strategies which client respondents found most helpful for coaches to use in working with self-doubt. These included "developing an empathetic and supportive relationship, using questioning, helping the client identify their (sic) own resources, challenging their beliefs." (p.8). The first of these seems to be especially critical, particularly with respect to the coach creating trust and the experience of safety in which the client can explore emotions. Similarly, the "coaches' positive affirmation of them as people resulted in the clients feeling positive about, and valuing, themselves." (p. 9).

When coaches discussed their own experiences of self-doubt, their coping strategies tended to parallel the ones which were effective with clients. In particular, a supervisory process with an accepting and supportive supervisor offered a safe space for the coaches to debrief and explore their experiences through a lens of self-awareness and reflection for learning.

Hindemarch concludes by exploring the implication so the results in several areas. The first of these speaks to the potential value for organizations to provide coaching support in the course of transitions, as transitions are identified as a trigger for self-doubt. With respect to the coach-client relationship, there is great value in the coach communicating positive regard, empathy and support "clearly and explicitly." The author advises coaches to pay special attention to client metaphors which focus on loss of control, as these may signal a feeling of self-doubt. It is also essential for coaches to be skilled in drawing out self-doubt as an underlying issue where appropriate, given a general reluctance of clients to expressly state such feelings. However, Hindemarch also warns coaches against projecting self-doubt when they are themselves experience it. Supervision may be helpful for coaches, especially when the supervisor-coach relationship parallels that of the coach-client in being accepting and supportive. Finally, the author concludes with a definition of self-doubt as "Negative feelings associated with evaluating one's abilities and perceiving them as inadequate to carry out a piece of work effectively." (p.11).

Given the small scale of the study, the author recommends replication and expansion of the study. She cites several areas which would benefit from further exploration, including connections between self-doubt and work performance; return on coaching investment in organizations undergoing change and research into the role of supervision in helping coaches manage their own feelings of self-doubt.

[1] Lynne Hindemarch. An exploration of the experience of self-doubt in the coaching context and the strategies adopted by coaches to overcome it. *The International Journal of Evidence-Based Coaching and Mentoring*, Special Issue, no. 2. November 2008.

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