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Using Experiential Learning for Adopting a Growth Mindset Among Coaches in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate how coaches adopt a growth mindset using the 'heart and mind' of coaching in the Teamcoach International's Certified Professional Coach (CPC) Program. The CPC program adopts experiential learning throughout the 8 modules over 3 months. Data for this qualitative study was collected from 30 coaches randomly selected from a population of 200 coaches who completed the CPC program. A survey questionnaire was distributed to the coaches after each of the four one-to-one coaching sessions with their clients. The unit of analysis was the individual coaches enrolled in the CPC program. Case analysis and cross case analysis were conducted to identify growth mindset themes and sub-themes based on Kolb's experiential learning theory to illustrate the "heart" (concrete experiences and reflective observation), the "mind" (abstract conceptualization) and the combination of "heart" and "mind" (active experimentation).

Keywords

Experiential learning, coaching, coach, clients, heart and mind of coaching

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, organizations have adopted coaching as an avenue to grow and develop their people and businesses. Coaching training has become a more accessible form of training. Coaching can be very effective when the coach has mastered the skills and is well equip with the coaching tools, this will lead to improved performance of their client. In Malaysia, there is a wide range of coaching training options available in the market and since 2010, Teamcoach International (TCI) has conducted the Certified Professional Coach Program (CPC) to enable individuals to excel and enhance their performance in organizations. Teamcoach International (TCI) was established in 1999 with the aim of becoming the preferred training and coaching partner. TCI has the passion to help organizations and individuals achieve their performance that are results driven through appreciation of the heart and mind of coaching. TCI program have been delivered in Malaysia and various countries including Maldives, Switzerland, Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Brunei, Thailand, Bangladesh, Singapore, Taiwan, India, and China.

The CPC program is designed to impart knowledge about coaching through experiential learning sessions for growth mindset with actual issues to be coached during the program. Launched in 2010, the CPC program was participated by 250 participants, however only 200 participants completed the Certified Professional Coach program. The CPC program is conducted over three months with nine days of face-to-face learning. During the CPC program, participants take turn to play the role of a coach, client and observer and constant feedback and feed forward was given so that the participants reflect on every role that they were assigned. Therefore, this study investigates how coaches adopt the “heart” and “mind” of coaching through experiential learning with growth mindset in the Certified Professional Coach (CPC) Program.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature begins with defining coaching followed by the theories that support coaching before focusing on the Experiential Learning Theory. Given several definitions of coaching by various authors, we used the definition adopted by TCI based on the International Association of Coaching (IAC, 2002) which is “Coaching is a transformative process for personal and professional awareness, discovery and growth, and the expansion of possibilities”. Including the Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2012), other theories which provide strong theoretical base for coaching are Classical Conditioning Theory (Cheetham & Chivers, 2001); Reinforcement Theory (Brennan & Hellbom, 2016); Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997); Action Learning Theory (O’Neil & Marsick, 2014); and Facilitation Theory or The Humanist Approach (Carter, 1989). Similarly, Fazel (2013) reviewed various learning theories and argued that coaching integrates classical conditioning, reinforcement, transformative learning, and experiential learning theories in an operational one to encourage deep learning and lead to participants (coaches) learning as well as coaching complies with cognitive and behavioral learning theories. However, for the purpose of this paper, the Experiential Learning Theory will be used to explain the “heart” and “mind” of coaching for growth mindset.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) was coined by Kolb in 1984 (Kolb & Kolb, 2012) and it is a four-stage circular process which consists of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. The first stage which is the ‘Concrete Experience’ stage, the participants (coaches) has a new experience while going through an experiential learning activity, this is followed by the ‘Reflective Observation’ stage. During this stage participants (coaches) observe and reflect on the new experience to see if there is any inconsistency between understanding and experience. The third stage which is the ‘Abstract Conceptualization’ the participants discovers new ideas or new ways of doing things. The new ideas or approaches are then applied to see the result or outcome during the ‘Active Experimentation’ stage.

Kolb's experiential learning theory is simple yet powerful. In the context of the CPC program, for effective learning to occur the participants (coaches) must experience the entire cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2012). This is achieved through the coaching labs which is carried out throughout the CPC program for the participants (coaches) to experience or self-reflection, observation, conceptualization and experimentation. For example, during CPC training the participants (coaches) "experience" coaching through role play and simulation as well as through "observation" of conducted in class and through the storytelling and sharing of experiences by the trainers and the other participants (coaches). The participants (coaches) then would have a better "conceptualization" of the coaching masteries/principles, models, tools in building their skills as coaches. "Experimentation" happens when they apply what they have learned and observed during the one-on-one session with their clients during the practicum. The participants (coaches) also get to "observe" the experiences of their clients when the clients take an active role and commit to their action plans, hence learning and action is optimized.

Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, the author would like to propose that Kolb's four-stage circular process can be interpreted as having a growth mindset touching the "heart" which is "concrete experience" and "reflective observation" as well as the "mind" which is "abstract conceptualization" and "active experimentation" is the combination of "heart and mind". This is based on the author's interpretation of coaching which is to enable client to experience transformation through awareness, discovery and growth as suggested by IAC.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to investigate how participants (coaches) adopt a growth mindset using the "heart" and "mind" of coaching through experiential learning in the Teamcoach International's Certified Professional Coach (CPC) Program. This study was carried out with members of various organizations in Malaysia, including Government training institutions, multi-national corporations, small medium enterprises, and non-governmental organizations. Data for this qualitative study was collected from 30 participants (coaches) or respondents randomly selected from a population of 200 participants (coaches) who had completed the CPC program. The research question in this study was, "how coaches adopt a growth mindset using the "heart" and "mind" of coaching through experiential learning?". A survey questionnaire was distributed to the participants (coaches) during practicum or four one-to-one coaching sessions with their clients as part of the CPC program requirements. The unit of analysis was the individual participants (coaches) enrolled in the CPC program who coached their clients in their respective organizations. Case analysis and cross case analysis were conducted to identify patterns and themes from the responses.

4. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

4.1 Profile of Respondents

Of the 30 respondents, more than half or 56% are female and ranged from 24 to 63 years old. They fall under the different categories which are 60% Gen X (1965-1977), 20% Baby Boomers (1946-1964), 17% Generation Y (1978-1990) and 3% Millennial (1991 onwards). About 50% of the respondents hold a degree, 30% are postgraduates, 10% are PhD's and 10% are diploma holders. In terms of positions, 27% CEOs, 20% academics (HODs and Senior Lecturers), 13% managers, 7% consultants, 7% executives, 3% engineers and 3% business planners. Majority are from the multinational corporations (40%) followed by Public Training Institutions (30%) as well as small & medium enterprises (SMEs) (23%) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (7%). About 7% of the respondents have 10 years or less working experience, 88% have between 11 to 30 years or equally distributed between 11 to 20 (44%) and 21 to 30 years (44%) and the last 5% have between 31 to 40 years of working experience. Lastly, 53% of the respondents were recently certified as coaches in 2017 followed by 2018 (39%) and 4% each in 2013 and 2016.

In answering the research question, “how coaches adopt a growth mindset using the “heart” and “mind” of coaching through experiential learning”, the result show that 41% of the coaches’ responses can be classified as “Personal Transformation” followed by 36% as “Masteryes, Models, Tools and Skills” and 23% on “Understanding Coaching”. Each of these findings will be explained below in terms of the “heart” and “mind” of coaching based on Kolb’s four stage circular process of experiential learning to foster the growth mindset.

4.2 Personal Transformation

The first theme identified from the responses is Personal Transformation. Two sub-themes can be inferred. The first sub-theme, “Self Discovery” came about from the four respondents who cited “self-discovery” as a key personal transformation for them. The second sub-theme can be classified as “Role as a Coach” whereby two thirds of the respondents felt that they had a personal transformation through their “role as coach”. Such self-discovery is evidence of a growth mindset as how coaches adopt the “heart” and “mind” of coaching through Kolb’s experiential learning theory. Under “Personal Transformation”, the coaches were discovering the “heart” of coaching as they begin to discover things about themselves in their “Role as a Coach” through “concrete experience” and “reflective observation”.

4.3 Understanding Coaching

The second theme “Understanding Coaching” comprised of three sub-themes, namely “Concept”, “Process” and “Application”. As mentioned by one respondent, “understanding the concepts, roles and duties as well as the limitations of coach when conducting the coaching session” is the gist of the first sub-theme “Concept” in understanding coaching. For the second sub-theme, during the coaching “Process” respondents discovered that their views changed and there was more awareness and new personal insights emerged. “Application” is the third sub-theme in understanding coaching after “Process” and “Concept”. Six respondents said that “being solution focused rather than problem focus” help the respondents with “meeting coaching objectives”, “to up skill staff” and have “better conversations with senior leaders”. Some respondents are already practicing “executive coaching...with leaders and managers....to work on challenging culture and behavior issues” as well as “embedding a coaching culture and need to continue with the structured program”.

According to experiential learning theory, the respondents were in the “mind” of coaching as they were experiencing “Abstract conceptualization”. Their comments suggest that they were adopting the growth mindset through the process, concept and application in understanding coaching as they underwent the CPC program.

4.4 Masteryes, Models, Tools and Skills

The third key theme identified is the applying “Masteryes, Models, Tools and Skills” to achieve clients’ goals. The theme comprises three sub-themes as follows. The first sub-theme is “Masteryes” whereby more than one third (11 respondents) cited “applied the 9 IAC Masteryes” as a key tool or models to achieve clients’ goals. The second sub-theme is “Models”. Nine respondents cited “managed to use GROW Model during coaching session” and also the “OSCAR Model”. GROW stands for Goals, Reality, Options and Way Forward and OSCAR stands for Outcomes, Scaling, Counters, Affirm and Review. These models when used by the coaches in helping the clients to find new ways of thinking and changing their perspective. The third sub-theme “Tools and Skills” refers the tools and skills that respondents learnt and applied through the coaching program. Five respondents stated that they “used coaching tools to help client achieve goals”. At this last stage of Kolb’s ‘active experimentation’, the coaches were adopting growth mindset through “heart and mind” of coaching as they test out the “Masteryes, Models, Tools and Skills” during the coaching practicum with their clients. This comes after their self-discovery of “concrete experiences” and “reflective observation” in their role as a coach (heart) and “abstract conceptualization” of the “Process, Concept and Application” of coaching (mind).

5. LIMITATION

Given the sampling limitation of this study, it is therefore recommended that in future studies larger sample would be more useful to produce a more meaningful interpretation of the qualitative research results.

6. CONCLUSION

Having analysed the responses of the 30 coaches, the authors were able to ascertain that there is strong evidence of the coaches' growth mindset through the "heart" and "mind" of coaching using Kolb's experiential learning in the Teamcoach International's Certified Professional Coach (CPC) Program. The themes and sub-themes of the growth mindset can be explained using the four-stage circular process of the experiential learning theory. Specifically, "Personal Transformation" on the "heart" of coaching through concrete experiences and reflective observation; the "mind" of coaching through abstract conceptualization as they were "Understanding Coaching" process, concept and application as well as the "heart" and "mind" through active experimentation of the "Mastery, Models, Tools and Skills". Therefore, Kolb's experiential learning helps the coaches to adopt the growth mindset using the "heart" and "mind" of coaching in enabling their clients' transformation through awareness, discovery and growth.

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