

**Goal focused coaching**

This book offers a comprehensive, practical guide to goal-focused coaching. Addressing a significant gap in the literature, Ives and Cox contextualise goalfocused coaching within the broader coaching framework and explain the efficacy of this approach across a number of contexts and applications. The book draws on behavioural science, rather than humanistic psychology, to provide a well-researched, evidence-based guide that includes

* A detailed examination of the theoretical underpinnings of this approach;
* A discussion of the skills, models and formats for goal-focused coaching;
* Cutting edge insights into barriers to coaching and managing the coaching relationship;
* Summaries, vignettes, references and diagrams to aid learning.

*Goal-focused Coaching* will be of interest to students taking classes in coaching, as well as professional executive coaches.

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(Excerpt from chapter 4, pp. 40 – 52)

**4 Goal-focused Methodology**

Aims

* To explain the two key methodological features of GFC: forward focus and incremental change;
* To describe how GFC is effective in leveraging small concrete actions to support positive change and raise self-efficacy.

As set out in Chapter 2, GFC is defined by three key features: it is non-directive,

goal-focused and performance-driven. In this chapter, we explore in greater detail the distinctive methodology of GFC, focusing firstly on its forward focus and secondly on how it stimulates incremental change to raise both performance and self-efficacy. Two examples of models informed by a GFC approach are discussed in detail towards the end of the chapter, and this is followed by a summary of the main features of a GFC methodology.

**Forward Focus**

Focusing on practical steps to move the coachee forward leads to a reduction of anxiety, makes the task seem more manageable, and enhances buy-in by rendering goals more real, thus energising the coachee. Parker et al. (2008 p. 496) confirm that seeing progress is essential for buy-in: “When coachees experienced the positive learning outcomes of seeing an impact on their professional development from peer coaching, they were more likely to use it later on their own.” Practical goals direct attention towards what is attainable and its potential benefit, which renders the coachee more willing to cooperate with others. Similarly, focusing on creating positive change results in an improved coaching climate and enhanced coachee attitude, and contributes towards improved self-efficacy. Our research has found that applying a forward focus through goal setting and action planning engenders acceptance of self-responsibility, encouraging the coachee to focus on trying to improve what he or she can, rather than complaining or making ineffective demands on his or her organisation.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Grant (2006) captures the essence of this forward focused approach with the word ‘purposefulness,’ which indicates an orientation towards action and a mindfulness towards getting things done. Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) confirm a basic principle of this forward focus, that concentrating on the problem exaggerates its impact, whereas a focus on finding solutions reduces the crippling effect of the problem and increases the likelihood of finding a solution. Hudson (1999) similarly urges the coach to remain in the present and future tense and argues that rather than tackle an obstacle, it is best to imagine a way around it. Even when the choices open to the coachee are not ideal, the coaching process helps the coachee to clarify the best available option, which leads to improvement in motivation and performance.

The early stages of coaching, however, suffer from an inherent threat. The initial objective of the coach is to encourage coachees to assume ownership of their own lives, to support the coachees in a more proactive acceptance of responsibility for their own futures. However, until the coaching has reached a practical stage, some coachees may become alarmed by the sense of responsibility, before they have developed the tools to handle it. Coachees may feel overwhelmed by a task they have no idea how to execute. When the coaching still has not got down to details, this can occasionally provide a platform for criticism, resentment and venting, as nothing tangible has happened yet.

This can lead some coachees to remain sceptical of the core principle of coaching, because they may not see how their objectives could be achieved (Reeves & Allison, 2009). In the coaching literature this issue is often addressed by strengthening the coaching relationship (de Haan, 2008) and through encouraging the coachee to adopt a positive attitude (Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007; Starr, 2007). Following a goal-focused methodology, it is best to deal with negativity by redirecting attention towards something more concrete, focusing on a small, practical desired outcome.

Coachees will become more energised and find the coaching more appealing once it turns practical and starts to focus on concrete issues. These are the comments from some of our coachees:

In the last few weeks, especially, I have started to work on a couple of things that are useful to me and this has made me feel more positive about my own situation.

I am much clearer than I was about what I want to get out of my time here – what I am looking to achieve – so staying on longer to learn is about me trying to get that done.

I think that’s right, if I am committed to achieving something, I am doing it for myself, so it is no longer an issue about keeping to just turning up to work.

Once I got down to doing something that could be useful to me I was much more willing to give the whole thing a go . . . When you started talking about action plans I thought ‘what is this guy going on about’, but once we got down to discussing real things I could relate to that and understood what you meant.

The coachee will take coaching more seriously if it is seen to lead to more practical implications. A successful method of helping coachees to get over their resentment and disappointment is the act of describing where they want to be, what their aims and ambitions are, and mapping out a path to achievement. The coachee could become negative if the discussion lingers on the problem. However, even when starting from a strongly negative point, the negativity will normally subside if it is replaced with action towards a desired future (Szabo & Meier, 2009). Much of the negativity is overcome not because the problems have been resolved but because the coachee has identified a more compelling alternative.

In conflict-ridden work environments, coachees may sometimes be caught up in hostility towards their superiors and/or colleagues. Coachees may display a vivid sense of grievance toward the organisation, whereas their sense of purpose will typically be much vaguer. The coaching needs to reverse that and make their goals more vivid, which will lead to positive changes. Concrete goals better enable focus on the positive, because they make the objective seem more real, increasing the all-important buy-in. Whereas coachees experience problems as very real, the possible solutions and their potential rewards seem remote. Defining concrete actions has the power to render solutions more immediate, thereby increasing goal salience (Mischel & Ayduk, 2007). Even just *planning* for action helps coachees to focus on trying to improve what they can, rather than complaining or trying to get the organisation to solve their problems, as this illuminating comment from a coachee demonstrates:

We have decided to divert our attention towards what we need to do to make the best of the situation. When you first got involved here our main preoccupation was trying to work out why the organisation wasn’t doing what it promised and trying to work out how we could get them to do so. This has changed . . . Instead, we are trying to achieve what we need to achieve. Not that we never get frustrated or complain, but this has stopped being such a big deal.

This suggests that if coachees are clear about the goal, they will be focused on the goal and less likely to engage in marginal activities that distract from its attainment.

While coachees may sometimes prefer to express negative goals – what they wish not to have – the general evidence suggests that goals are better if they are positive. Carver and Scheier (1998) argue that there are health benefits in adopting positive goals. Schwartz (1990) suggests that it is easier to pursue a positive goal as all one needs is a single way of achieving it, whereas to avoid an outcome involves avoiding all possible means of being confronted with it. Carver and Scheier (1998, p. 93) conclude that “people dominated by avoidance goals thus have difficult lives.” However, studies have shown that some people are naturally oriented to avoidance (negative) goals. Therefore, Grant (2007) argues that coaching needs to be inclusive and use coachee-congruent techniques, as coachees with a defensive pessimism personality style will not respond positively to an over-emphasis on positivity. This is an area of coaching that requires significant further research.



**Example of critical reading notes**

Ives, Y., & Cox, R. (2012). *Goal focused coaching: Theory and practice*. Retrieved from http://www.ebrary.com

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| **Background**   * Who wrote this? * Is it based on or linked to a particular theory or approach? * What was the author’s purpose in writing it? | * Yossi Ives – chairman of a company, PhD in goal focused coaching. Being chairman of a company may mean he is interested in ‘selling’ his ideas??? * Elaine Cox – Academic at Brookes Uni UK. Editor of International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring. A more strictly academic author. * Published in 2012 – quite recent. * Based on theory of goal-focused coaching. * Purpose: probably to encourage coaches to use the goal-focused approach in coaching. |
| **Evidence**   * Is there evidence to support the author’s ideas? * Is the evidence believable / of good quality? | * A lot of research evidence from a range of sources. * Sources are academic and mainly about goal-focused coaching. * Not a lot of discussion or evidence given from different perspectives of coaching – only about goal-focused coaching. |
| **Strengths**   * Are there strong arguments or evidence? * Are the arguments or evidence stronger than in other sources? | * Makes a strong argument that focusing on achievable goals helps coachees ‘by in’ or become more enthusiastic with the coaching process. * Makes quite a strong argument that positive goals (what a coachee wants to achieve) is more motivating than negative goals (what the coachee wants to avoid). |
| **Limitations**   * Are there problems with the ideas or evidence? * Does the author recognise these limitations? | * Does concede that some coachees will prefer negative goals, but doesn’t spend much time talking about this, apart from to say it’s an area that needs further research. |
| **Balance**   * Are alternative ideas / research discussed, or just those of the author?   **Balance (continued)** | * There’s a strong focus on convincing the reader that goal-focused coaching is the right way to go, and positive goals rather than negative (avoidance) goals. The chapter is about ‘Goal focused methodology’ so I guess this is to be expected? It would be a good idea to find information on other approaches to coaching in order to compare with this goal-focused approach. * What if a coachee has real issues in the workplace that cannot be overcome by ‘positive goals’? Forcing the coachee to focus on goals rather than dealing with problems might be unfair / ineffective? |
| **Overall conclusion**   * Is the main conclusion believable based on the ideas, arguments and evidence? * What are the implications of this conclusion in the real world? | * There is quite a lot of evidence given to support the idea that forward focus/goals is effective in coaching. * However, it would be good to find out about other coaching approaches and see if there is evidence to support them as well. |
| **Other comments or ideas about this reading** | This section from chapter 4 seems to put a lot of focus on getting ‘buy in’ from coachees. Why wouldn’t coachees have buy in to the coaching process? Are they being forced to do it? Of the coaching in voluntary, why would the coachee not be interested in it? |