The value of Mental Coaching in the prevention and protection of workers’ health

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Summary

Coaching is defined as an energy-directing method by which resources are channeled and managed so as to make the group of coachees more competitive. The practice of coaching is gaining growing popularity both in the sports world and in the workplace where it is used to maximize performance and productivity and to minimize the effect of problems such as stress and burnout.

In particular, the workplace safety coach is responsible for strengthening and enhancing the personal characteristics of the workers as well as identifying and developing the talents of the people he is cooperating with. The figure of the safety coach is legitimized by Legislative Decree 81/08 in which the need for workers to achieve complete physical, mental and social well-being is enshrined. The aim of this document is to emphasize the importance of the mental coach, especially in the workplace, in order to improve work performance and well-being of workers.

The practice of coaching and coaching-related topics are becoming increasingly popular issues in the most varied and different contexts. As a matter of fact, the figure of the coach, the person who is capable to guide and direct actions towards achieving one or more objectives, becomes essential in every organizational context in which a goal or a set of specific goals, whether in the sports, business, economic or even personal areas, are sought (1). The term Coaching is correctly applied to describe an energy-directing method via which resources are channeled and managed so as to make the group of coachees become more competitive.

Etymologically, the English term “Coach” (from the French coche, carriage, itself derived from the Hungarian Kocsis or from the Czech Koczi) was used in the XVI century to identify a horse-drawn medium of transport driven by a guide: the coachman. The practice of “Coaching” was thereafter developed to enhance and improve the sports and strategic potentialities of the individual or groups of individuals.

Another important contribution came from the Californian psychologist W. Timothy Gallwey who wrote several books in the 1970s where he suggested the recourse to coaching in many fields: sports like tennis, golf, ski, artistic like music, but also in working contexts; his indications subsequently found an application also in the business, health and education areas (2). According to Gallwey, the most relevant energies lie idle inside the individuals, stuck at a latent level, and it is up to the coach to identify, recognize and bring them to surface so that the athlete (or the manager) is capable of using them, both during a competition and in achieving the task they have set themselves. “Guidance” is an important practice, a genuine “art”, both in personal and organizational terms: as a matter of fact, enterprises often suffer from their employees demotivation; organizational structures are full of demoralized and passive individuals and persons who do not expect anything more from their work in the company, who do no longer believe that their operational capabilities could positively affect either the final result or more in general the course of events they are involved in and that, according to this perspective, are considered as arbitrary factors over which they have no control whatsoever. Or, on the other hand, it can be the case of employees and managers who make bad use of their potential thus dissipating their energies and hard work which, if used otherwise, could be more profitably and effectively directed.

In conclusion, reaching beyond our own limits and realising our full potential can no longer be avoided in a market reality relentlessly pushing hard on individual capabilities in an attempt to overcome and break down the limits and the results achieved shortly before. This can lead to states of euphoria, exaltation, because of
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the push and emotional energy generated by this competitive tension, but it can also lead to depression, mental fatigue, discouragement (3).

It can create a state of continuous dissatisfaction over the limited results achieved, over a lifestyle far from what is sought and which is presented and touted as desirable, over the way we live our daily life and over the results achieved at work and in personal affairs (4).

But what is needed to grow, to push past our personal or environmental boundaries? Growth is an important issue, to which reference is often made these days, where all avenues and possibilities appear to have been exhausted, all resources depleted, all the possibilities to increase and improve our existential status appear dramatically reduced, particularly in countries where the economic and social crisis bites harder and deeply.

A number of strategies can be devised and implemented in view of achieving remarkable results, the most important being self-motivation. Being aware of our own potential, knowing our weaknesses and limits and the added value which can derive from our work is a prerequisite to operate at our best and achieve the expected result without overestimating our own resources, nor minimising them. According to the hierarchy of needs described in the famous Maslow’s pyramid (5) in order to achieve the results of self-realization and self-gratification, we must first be able to satisfy our basic needs, at the base of the pyramid (i.e., food, survival, personal security etc.) progressing on to meet the more complex and elaborate needs located at the top.

A number of strategies can be used for this purpose, all of which involving the consideration of a variety of factors differently affecting the end result, such as:

- **Capabilities:** the subject’s capabilities, his talents, his special skills. A proper assessment of skills is vital for a realistic and objective definition of what we want and have the potential to achieve, without megalomania nor negative self-beliefs of inadequacy and failure.

- **Will:** how strongly and tenaciously the individual is able to focus on and pursue his goals. The desire to develop and stimulate his talents is an essential element because the coach can enhance and help the individual to express his most remarkable resources and qualities.

- **Attitudes:** which directions individual talent is most naturally and innately inclined towards, which areas is the individual / athlete / worker’s attention focused on. Attitudes are important to understand the route along which the person naturally proceeds, when it is advisable to take corrective measures, and when it is appropriate to just let an interest autonomously develop, a direction be spontaneously followed.

- **Timing:** what is the amount of time the individual feels willing to invest to achieve a goal, how much time he is ready to devote to a specific activity a day (playing an instrument, practising a sport, memorizing or writing a script and so on.), the time period within which a specific goal is expected to be achieved. The amount of time invested in learning, or in training to improve a quality, is directly proportional to the skill required to master that art or specialty, without prejudice to some rest and relaxation period following hard and effort-taking periods through which the body restores its internal homeostasis and prepares for a new period of stress and operational concentration (6).

The practice of coaching is assuming increasing relevance and value within organizational structures, given the very nature of the work experience in businesses as well as of the personal and group problems arising out of or in connection to the long hours a large number of individuals have to spend every day in close contact and in the same work spaces. Business-related problems are countless: employees’ frustration, rivalry and envy among colleagues, a bad model of business management, external and objective difficulties stemming from a market downturn or from the difficulty to develop an effective business positioning strategy in a specific market, these being some of the factors affecting the internal operational level, hence the resulting well-being or distress in the workplace (7). Similarly, a non-stimulating organizational context makes employees apathetic and not feeling encouraged nor motivated to improve themselves and their professional performance.

The sociologist Emile Durkheim popularized the term anomie in his books (a-nemos, comes from the Greek a-, privative, and nomos, rule, norm, law), anomie being the lack of norms, the absence of a code of conduct which makes that the individual feels lost, isolated, without any stable reference points showing him the path to follow. In "The division of labour in society" (8) the sociologist tends to describe anomie as an objective rather than a subjective condition of lack of norms resulting in a concept of anomie as a lack of social norms, of rules able to control, within certain appropriate limits, the individual behavior. It is the description of the post-modern, metropolitan individual, who lacks any stable reference point to head in the right direction.

This situation emerges when business leaders do not have a clear idea as to how to manage a working group and what to obtain from it, thus leaving the employees left to themselves, confronted with a scenario of professional and relational uncertainty and vagueness as opposed to an effective and capable management who would instead know how to restore confidence and valorize these human resources in the appropriate manner with the result of reintegrating them in a profitable production cycle (8).

Social affordances (9, 10) refer instead to the opportunities provided by the environment to the individual: the traditions, customs, social fingerprints, the opportunities that a given community provides the individual first as a genetic and then as an environmental heritage and through which the individual or group is more likely to emerge and be more successful than competing individuals or groups.

The rules for a proper use of the practice of Coaching are to be found in a number of motivational thrusts, in the importance to stay focused at work, and in coping
strategies, i.e. the ability to master stressful events and withstand even extreme workloads (11). In this light, the coach is the figure able to identify paths of growth and cohesion among employees and play a central role in all the issues related to workplace dynamics.

A coach is a professional profile who can prove useful in any working context, even for the purpose of prevention and workers safety. A good coach is able to suggest each coachee the most appropriate, most gratifying objectives, together with the analysis of the possible methods and techniques to achieve them. Setting over-ambitious targets to coachees is not a guarantee of success, but, at the same time, oversimplified objectives do not enhance the competitor’s energy thrust and risk to inhibit his will to compete successfully (12).

One of the problems most likely to be encountered in the practice of coaching is over-training. According to researchers Fry and Kraemer, over-training represents an increase in training volume and/or intensity of exercise resulting in long-term performance decrements (13). Overtraining or overtraining syndrome (OTS) is a physical, behavioural and emotional condition that occurs when the volume and intensity of an individual’s exercise exceeds his recovery capacity. He ceases making progress, and can even begin to lose strength and fitness. Overtraining is a common problem in endurance and resistance training (weight training), but it can also be experienced by runners and other athletes. Overtraining syndrome is also common in the workplace where it is the result of chronic stress or more precisely burn-out (11, 14, 15). The term burn-out is used to describe an occupational syndrome characterized by three interrelated dimensions: exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism and reduced satisfaction in personal performance and reduced professional efficacy. Burnout can cause different effects on the worker’s health (headache, gastrointestinal disorders, muscle tension, hypertension and sleep disorders) (16); however, burnout can also be described in terms of dysphoric symptoms (emotional exhaustion, fatigue, poor work performance, negative behaviours and attitudes).

One of the contexts in which the principles of coaching are gaining growing popularity is in the field of occupational health and safety, which led to the emergence of a specialized figure focusing on employees’ safety (the safety coach) and resulting from a new perspective concerning safety in the workplace (Leg. D. n. 81/08). Leg. D. 19th September 1994, n. 626 (17) is the most representative among the texts adopted by the Italian legislator in the implementation of EC directives on the subject of occupational safety. The new provisions signal a change of perspective. As a matter of fact, the legislative decrees issued in implementation of EC obligations show a particular interest for subjective protection forms, by placing all employers under obligations of professional training and involvement of employees on the subject of safety issues.

Art.15 of Leg. D. 81/08 (“General protection measures”) describes such measures and provides the steps to follow to reach a thorough physical, mental and social well-being. For the purposes of our research, we shall focus on the following points:

- Letter b), preventative measures plans, aimed at coherently integrating into the prevention process the company’s technical and production conditions as well as the impact of environmental and work organization factors;
- Letter d), the compliance with ergonomic principles in the organization of work, in the design of work stations, in the choice of work equipment and work production methods, in particular in order to minimize the health effects of monotonous and repetitive work;
- Letter n), appropriate information and training for employees;
- Letter o), appropriate information and training for managers and supervisors;
- Letter p), appropriate information and training for Health & Safety managers (HSM);
- Letter q), appropriate instructions for workers;
- Letter r), participation and consultation of employees;
- Letter s), participation and consultation of workers’ safety representatives (WSR);
- Letter t), the adoption of measures considered appropriate to ensure improved safety levels over time, including through the adoption of codes of conduct and best practice.

The safety coach is part of this new regulatory framework as the resource person who can contribute to and enhance the intellectual and spiritual growth of the employer, the WSR, the HSM and all employees. Therefore, the ultimate objective of the safety coach is to shift emphasis towards the importance of the worker as a person and his safety in the workplace. The training of the foregoing figures must hence have as its main objective the complete physical, intellectual and social well-being, and not just the absence of any illness and disease.

Given all these circumstances, which are at the base of a new safety culture, the role and function of the coach prove undoubtedly beneficial.

The goal of the company and of its management is to maintain high profits by reducing costs while at the same time coping with the continuous changes in market demands. This is why the need has arisen to have workers who can handle urgent change and transformation. In this context, poor safety standards are going to result in lower production and efficiency levels (e.g. high absenteeism at work, reduced work performance due to a state of stress) and, hence, in a growing need for figures such as the safety coach or work and organizational psychologist who know how to make the best use of the coaching tools.

The safety coach will be expected to deal with individual coaching and team coaching principles; indeed, safety issues involve several figures with different roles, functions and powers in the company.

The safety coaching, both targeted at an individual (e.g. HSM) and at a group (e.g. workers), will build on a Socratic principle: guiding all people involved in safety management along a path of self-discovery aimed at creating better relations with the world around us (in our case the working environment).
The safety coach supports the coachee (the employer, the manager, the supervisor, the HSM, the WSR and all workers), encourages him to better understand his strengths and areas of development, his behavioural strategies, preferences and decision-making processes. In this context, coaching is unlocking the person's potential to maximize their own performance and helping them learn rather than simply teach them (1). In team coaching, focus shall be placed on how best to manage the group communications and the correct strategy to follow, not forgetting individual needs. The safety coach must also be able to activate and make Coachees' energies (the employee, the HSM, the WSR, the employer) converge towards safety results/goals in the workplace.

As specified in the Guidelines for the Work and Organizational Psychologist in the Practice of Organizational Coaching (18), the Coach is responsible for making the Coachee a protagonist aware of his choices. The coach has to improve and enhance the coachee’s characteristics as well as to identify and develop his talents. The coach helps to detect, experiment and reflect on the possible behavior patterns to adopt, encourages to challenge and question established schemes, supports the transformation of ideas into actions, facilitates the constant monitoring of progress and the evaluation of the problems which were not addressed. The coach builds a peer-to-peer relationship with a view to keeping the coachee’s trust high.

The practice of coaching shall provide positive and negative constructive feedback. Effective feedback will take into account opposing feelings, recognizes them, but far from acting as a judge he rather builds up a climate of trust and confidence.

The methods commonly adopted and regarded as effective in the practice of Coaching are (18):

- Create a positive atmosphere;
- Empathic listening;
- Formulate powerful questions;
- Act as a "mirror";
- Reflection and synthesis;
- Role play;
- Assessment Center and Personality Questionnaires;
- Action plans;
- Problem solving;
- Creativity techniques;
- Measuring results.

At this point of our analysis, we believe it is important to understand how a coach should be, even before specifically referring to a safety coach. It should be noted that no mandatory training nor enrollment in special registers are required to get access to a professional coach career. The coach’s professional competence should therefore be assessed on a case-by-case basis depending on the objective to be achieved. Basic training, namely the theoretical part of the coach’s personal training, can be varied and does not contemplate any basic educational level. There are a plethora of training opportunities as we can easily point out with a quick search on the Internet. However, there is nothing against the use of legally recognized school and academic qualifications. What is certain is that psychological competence is a fundamental and measurable requirement (e.g. a bachelor's or master's degree in psychology and the successful completion of the professional qualification exam) nor should it be overlooked that the coach must provide adequate support to individuals and that a clear and full self-awareness (e.g. through personal psychotherapy training or coaching supervision) is a non-negotiable precondition to set up healthy relationships with others.

A proper assessment of the coach’s competence profile in the employer’s areas of interest is obviously another crucial element; indeed, credentials documenting previous work experiences will provide greater opportunities. Another aspect to consider is the professional certification released by independent organisms. The certification of coach organizations is the starting point for the coach’s professionalization. The International Coach Federation (ICF) has more than 19,000 members and is present in more than 100 Countries. In Italy, it came to life in 2002 and it is dedicated to providing independent certification as well as to advancing the coaching profession.

Membership in national or international trade associations is another key element encouraging constructive confrontation and continuing education and training. Benefits of coaching can be measured in terms of improved performance of the coachee who, within the business context, will ensure added value in terms of greater savings and larger profits. Certifying the positive outcome of the Coaching principles in the safety area is the choice of two influential Italian companies: FIAT SpA and ENEL.

The theme of Coaching has shed light on the vigorous interest for this professional profile, characterized by wide-ranging competence areas, and of great interest for the market, businesses and individuals. This has resulted in a sharp increase in the number of coach-related job opportunities, supported by a simple and direct media campaign focusing on the possibility for everyone to achieve the desired goals and to develop their own potential (19). The major pitfall behind the keen interest for this new job profile is a result of the climate of uncertainty as to the didactic and learning process to qualify as a coach. Training is not governed by any law or regulation whatsoever, the only restriction being that, to date, the coach is not allowed to apply techniques and methods explicitly reserved by law to some professions (e.g. psychologists).

Therefore, the practice of coaching follows some rules: all coaching activities aimed at providing psychological support as well as counseling activities in some way dealing with the psychological health of the individual are governed by the existing legislation covering psychology careers. Indeed, according to the terms of law, only the psychologist is allowed to use the cognitive and intervention tools for prevention, diagnosis, habilitation-rehabilitation and support activities in the psychological field targeted at people, groups, social agencies and communities; interviews, observation, psychological tests
and other methods to assess behavior, personality, cognitive and social interaction processes, opinions and attitudes, mental fitness. The psychologist also uses psychological and ergonomic tools designed to encourage a more effective and safer performance in the working environment as well as being committed to the collection and statistical processing of psychological data for the purposes of research.

In this context and for these reasons, the practice of coaching is recommended to professionals including anthropologists, sociologists, communicators, human science specialists and similar figures, who can act as company coaches responsible for the tasks referred to above, with the exception of psychological and psychotherapeutic interventions, psychological testing, etc., for which the reference figure for the company physician will be the psychologist.

In all other fields of application, the company physician should not refrain from consulting experts and professionals who, thanks to their know-how and skills, are qualified to provide useful and relevant information on how to prepare the Risk Assessment Document, both with regard to the management of conflicts and with respect to the information and training in the field of workplace safety and prevention.

References