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Coaching Fast–Coaching Slow: Applying Positive Psychology, Behavioral Economics and Neuroscience to Leadership Coaching

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ABSTRACT

What can the rapidly expanding esoteric field of Neuroscience or Brain Science possibly offer the very pragmatic "hands on" Leadership Coaching profession? How can research findings from the fields of Positive Psychology and Behavioral Economics be productively used by the practicing Leadership Coach? Does a choice of coaching style and speed of interaction actually matter in producing successful coaching outcomes? This paper will explore answers to these questions, discuss some of the relevant research and offer practical applications and insights that can be used by the practicing leadership coach to become more effective. The intent of this work is to help bridge the gap between cognitive neuroscience, positive psychology, and behavioral economics and the application of useful tools for the leadership coach. In particular, the body of work and insights of Nobel prize-winning Israeli-American Psychologist Daniel Kahneman will be highlighted. Included in the paper is a definition of both fast and slow coaching, potential areas of neuroscience research support, examples of fast and slow techniques, integration of the two modes, implications for research, and a closing summary.

Keywords: behavioral economics, leadership coaching, Kahneman, neuroscience, positive psychology.

INTRODUCTION

One of the central challenges facing the effectiveness of the leadership coach today is how to adapt to the different ways in which their coachees show up for coaching sessions. This includes how their coachees think, display non-verbal clues of their intent, orally present themselves, respond to questions, process information and react to stress. Contemporary brain science research offers some possible insights into useful ways in which this adaption might occur. Recent works by Rock & Page [1,], Anderson [2.} and Andrade [3.] illustrate several neuroscience-informed coaching models.

The basic premise of this research is that by knowing some of the basic modes in which the brain operates can enable the leadership coach to select and utilize the best ways in which to interact with different individual clients. Research by Bossons & Riddell [4] indicates that different coaching tools appear to selectively engage different brain areas. Knowing in advance which particular brain areas will be impacted and what functions they perform by a particular coaching tool can enable appropriate coaching tool selection. For example, employing the neuroscience-based tool of reflective mapping [5] when the client shows a verbal and behavioral activation pattern indicating overload of the brain's emotional centers. Use of the tool can serve to redirect and calm these agitated brain centers.

Therefore, a significant implication of this enhanced knowledge of the brain is that it can assist coaches in choosing interventions grounded in proven neuroscience. Advanced knowledge regarding which brain regions might be impacted, and which functions that they control or influence, can help practitioners anticipate coachee responses to their intended interventions. Daniel Kahneman [6.] was particularly noted for challenging existing dogma and productive enquiries into the fields of positive psychology and behavioral economics. Specific areas of interest to the Leadership Coach include: the psychology of judgment, the effects of bias, and different cognitive modes of decision-making. Kahneman's total body of work also earned him the unofficial title of the "grandfather of behavioral economics." Grounded in Kahneman's work on thinking probabilistically, careful use of logical reasoning, employment of creative methods for learning new information and identifying particular patterns of behavior and cognition, this paper will also introduce the concept of dual or bi-modal coaching. These two different ways of coaching parallel and are based on and consistent with Kahneman's System 1 and System 2 [7.] thinking model. This is a mental construct that is concerned with speed of cognition, specifically to thinking fast and thinking slow. Recently, Skillern [8.] has also advocated that it is in the best interests of leadership effectiveness for the leaders themselves to slow down in order to go fast. Coaching (Fast) – is a reactive, intuitive, pattern-based response. It is also quick, emotional, stereotypical, energy saving, automatic and unconscious-based in nature, Coaching (Slow) – is more unhurried, reflective, and employs analytical deliberation. Coaching Slow is also more logic-based and employs more complex and careful reasoning processes The essential differences between these two thought systems and the ways in which they process and interpret information helps to explain why different clients may arrive at different conclusions given the exact same inputs.

WHAT IS FAST-SLOW COACHING

Rooted in Kahneman & Tversky's [9.] research on prospect theory, Fast-Slow or bi-modal brain-centric coaching, provides the practicing leadership coach a framework within which to conduct coaching by constructively adapting to the thinking and actions of the client. This means of Leadership Coaching offers the practitioner a support structure that is consistent with how the brain appears to actually operate in practice.

Prospect theory is firmly ingrained in the field of behavioral economics. It was developed in 1979 by Daniel Kahneman and his long-term research partner Amos Tversky [10.]. The theory challenges traditional economic theory which assumes individuals always make decisions to maximize their own benefit. Prospect theory attempts to describe how people actually make decisions in real life that are founded in perceived gains and losses as opposed to careful consideration of actual final outcomes. Taversky and Kahneman's approach to uncertainty, heuristics and bias has also been extensively critiqued by Marvin & Jenkins [11.].

Some example psychologically-based heuristics [12.] (information used to enable or speedup decision-making) include:

- The Scarcity Heuristic- the notion that some items that are considered to be more rare are also innately more valuable than those that are those that are readily available and abundant.
- The Availability Heuristic- the tendency to use information that is more easily recalled to mind with which to make decisions.

- The Representativeness Heuristic – the use of the frequency of past experience to predict the outcome of a new experience.

Some common biases [13.] (prejudices for or against some thing or someone) are:

- Anchoring; over reliance on the first piece of evidence received about a topic to influence a decision.
- Confirmation; actively seeking out and positively interpreting information that reaffirms preexisting beliefs.
- Sunk Cost; continuing the pursuit of failing projects because of significant prior investment, even though actual prospects remain poor.
- Framing; use of emotionally-charged language to skew objective assessments

NEUROSCIENCE SUPPORTS FOR FAST AND SLOW COACHING

The neuroscience foundations for Fast/Slow coaching are imbedded the recent writings and findings related to practical brain operation by Gladis [14.], Rock [15.], Bouvier [16.], and Bobinet [17.], These authors have written extensively in the areas of neuroplasiticity, structural reward systems and emotional regulation. Many of these commentaries suggest that certain mental techniques can be designed to activate specific brain areas, Additionally, these authors propose which intervention to select when the first attempt doesn't seem to work.

Neuroplasticity [18.] is the capacity of the brain to rewire itself by modifying its internal neural connections through reorganization and growth. This process occurs through learning new skills, experiencing changes in the environment, or adapting to brain damage or sensory deficits**.** ·Structural reward systems are a group of areas and pathways within the brain that influence positive feelings and motivate behavior. These particular brain regions help to motivate behavior that is perceived by the individual as enjoyable or pleasurable. Change is accomplished by the release of brain chemicals or neurotransmitters, such as dopamine and oxytocin, that induce good feelings. A growing number of useful insights are arising from the growing field of Neurobiology including how our emotions are regulated. Emotional regulation [19.] is concerned with the ability to exert control over the brain's emotional state. Positive regulation can lead to improved relationships, enhanced ability to face challenges and resilience in the face of stress. Thus, it appears that the findings of modern brain research indicate certain coaching techniques tend to activate specific brain areas. Additionally, each coaching tool can be mapped to the brain region it activates. "Fast" tools seem to engage more reactive or subcortical circuits, while "slow" tools activate the brain's frontal cortex executive networks*.* Together, the research findings offer a neuroscientific rationale for choosing which coaching mode to apply and when to apply it.

TOOLS FOR COACHING FAST

- Rapid reframing- ask if there is another way to reach the desired outcome or how a valued person might interpret the situation
- Incorporate relevant metaphors in the coaching dialog
- Employ pattern interrupts by selectively using pauses or changes in conversational direction
- Tell a relevant story from your own experience.
- Ask how someone with super-powers might deal with the problem

- Determine "What can you live with if the situation turns out badly? "

TOOLS FOR COACHING SLOW

- Mental-contrasting; asking if the coachees themselves or someone they know has ever experienced a similar situation and how it was handled
- Introduction of mental models- provide some simple analytical frameworks (e.g. best, worst, most likely outcomes)
- Mindfulness or breath control training
- Determination of implementation intentions-what would a positive outcome look like
- Use of storytelling metaphors

INTEGRATING FAST AND SLOW COACHING

- Emphasize easy fluid switching between modes as needed. For example: advising coaches to select fast interventions that align with neural hotspots during stress (e.g., disrupting limbic-driven responses) and slower interventions during less stressful periods,
- Coach might deploy a fast narrative shift first (limbic interruption), then transition to a structure\planning tool that activates higher-order executive circuits.
- Use Bossons & Riddell's research to determine which tool to use when the initial attempt fails, thus enabling dynamic, neuroscience-informed tool selection rather than employing one-size-fits-all coaching.
- If a fast approach fails, the leadership coach can use alternate tools that more directly target the logic oriented prefontal brain area, (e.g., instead of a rapid reframe, use reflective questioning to engage the prefrontal cortex)
- Consider shifting from a fast to a slower mode when new information becomes available and the time frame is less pressing.
- Think about choosing the appropriate tool that will achieve neural activation and result in effective behavioral change.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

- For coaches: Exploring the impact of fluid switching between fast and slow coaching modes,
- For training: Develop modules teaching how to match the coaching method to an actual neural target, using Bossons & Riddell research findings as a foundation.
- For research: Investigate whether intervention tool–brain region mapping actually predicts coaching efficacy.

SUMMARY

This paper has posed the intriguing possibility of using a new dual mode of leadership coaching; Fast vs. Slow coaching, This new model of leadership coaching is based on the work of positive psychology and behavioral economics pioneer Daniel Kahneman. Coaching Fast-Coaching Slow also incorporates recent supportive research findings from neuroscience studies. These research outcomes are applied so as to enable improved ongoing diagnosis and the making of more effective choices during the process of Leadership Coaching. Also described were a set of tools for use in each of the two modes and a means for rapid shifting between them. The issues in integrating the modes were also discussed as well as potential implications for practice and

further research. Additionally, it was noted that the featured binary mode of coaching allows for fluid shifting of approaches depending on changes in the leadership coaching circumstances.

It is hypothesized that leadership coaching can be more effective when grounded in basic neuroanatomy and brain function. Coaches who understand which particular brain region an intended tool impacts, will be better able to choose more effective evidence-aligned interventions. Informed leadership coaches who know something about how the brain works will know what tool to use for a particular context and how to best proceed when it appears their best efforts are not working.

In review, it appears that Positive Psychology, Behavioral Economics and Neuroscience all do have something important to offer the Leadership Coach, In combination, these disciplines can offer synergistic new avenues of approach to improve the effectiveness of the coaching relationship.

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