

# Strengthening Coaching: an Exploration of the Mindset of Executive Coaches using Strengths-Based Coaching

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## Abstract

Interest in strengths-based coaching is growing, yet whilst there is evidence that focusing on strengths is beneficial, there is scant research within a coaching context and literature offers limited practical guidance. This phenomenological analysis study investigates six executive coaches' beliefs about the practice and impact of strengths-based coaching. The findings reveal what motivates the coaches to focus on strengths, including a high sense of coach authenticity, suggesting that there might be benefits for both client *and* coach. The paper also discusses the coaches' beliefs about the unique contribution to coaching outcomes and offers insights into the strengths-based coaching 'recipe'.

**Key words:** Executive coaching, strengths, strengths-based coaching, mindset, positive psychology

## Introduction

Interest in the concept of strengths has been growing since the advent of positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and is based on the assumption that strengths are integral to our identity and are fundamental in performing at our best and leading a fulfilling life (Linley, 2008). Indeed, over the last ten years, we have seen a growth in the evidence suggesting that identifying and using our strengths can lead to higher levels of well-being and confidence (Govindji and Linley, 2007), can enhance performance (Corporate Leadership Council, 2002) and can assist goal achievement (Linley *et al.*, 2010).

Such research begins to provide an evidence base to justify incorporating a strengths focus into coaching practice as a way of promoting energy, effectiveness, productivity and a sense of meaning through the coaching process (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Recent research suggests the potential benefits of encouraging clients to identify and build on strengths through coaching conversations (Linley *et al.*, 2010). However, the concept of strengths-based coaching as a unique coaching approach faces two clear challenges; firstly, whilst it is suggested that a strengths coaching approach facilitates optimal performance and well-being (Linley and Harrington, 2006), there is little empirical research that focuses on the application of strengths within a coaching context. Secondly, there is scant literature available offering practical and consistent guidance for applying a strengths-based approach. Indeed, the varied strengths assessment tools can add confusion rather than clarity. In addition, most of the literature discusses the anticipated impact of a strengths focus on the coachee, and the experience of strengths-based coaching from the coach's perspective remains unexplored territory.

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The purpose of this research is to add to the understanding of strengths-based coaching and the unique difference it might make to coaching practice by learning from some 'experts' and exploring the beliefs and assumptions that motivate them to take a strengths-based approach.

The study aims to:

- Provide more clarity about what strengths-based coaching means as it is perceived and understood by executive coaches using the approach.
- Elicit and describe executive coaches' beliefs and assumptions about the unique difference a strengths-based approach makes to a coaching conversation.
- Identify what executive coaches perceive to be the factors that lead them to decide to take a strengths-based approach, or not.

## **Methodology**

My research objectives, paradigm and philosophy led me to select an inductive approach (Saunders et al., 2009); collecting data and developing an explanation as a result of my analysis with a close understanding of the subject and also being part of the process. The nature of my research question also suggested an inductive approach that would be particularly focused on the interpretation of meaning, and led to the selection of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2010). The phenomenological and interpretative aspects of IPA link to its tendency to explore perceptions and views of participants, which resonated both with my research objectives as well as my ontological perspective.

This study is based on six participants, three men and three women. All are self-employed executive coaches who have been practising coaching for a number of years and use a range of strengths identification tools. IPA studies usually benefit from a focus on a small number of cases, so from this sample I hoped to gather enough data to be able to identify meaningful points of similarity and difference between participants.

In-depth interviews offer one of the best ways of accessing the 'rich, detailed first-person account of experience' (Smith et al., 2010 p.56) that IPA requires. A semi-structured interview provided a 'virtual map for the interview' (Smith et al., 2010 p. 59), encouraging respondents to talk at length and access their beliefs, assumptions and motivations. Reflexivity during data collection was critical; after each interview I spent time reflecting on three levels; content, process and improvements, noting my thoughts in a journal for later reference.

In IPA there is no single method for analysing data, but there are processes and principles to follow (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2010). I used these principles to design an analysis process, which was based on the methods described by Smith et al (2010). Smith's invitation to be innovative in my approach appealed to my own strength in creativity, yet I also found recommended steps and guidelines for the novice IPA researcher useful. I recorded and transcribed each interview and then analysed the transcripts idiographically before identifying common themes across all participants.

## **Research Findings**

The analysis and interpretation of the transcripts provided an insight into the beliefs, motivations and ways of thinking of six coaches who adopt a strengths-based approach. It reveals

findings about the mindset that predisposes the coaches to take a strengths-based approach and what they believe they do that is strengths-based.

The research findings reveal that the motivating factors behind the participants' choice to focus on strengths in their coaching fall into two clear themes; firstly, the personal benefits and sense of authenticity that the coaches themselves believe they derive from taking a strengths approach, and secondly, their beliefs about the many benefits their clients enjoy. Two respondents described strengths coaching as “part of the recipe”, and insights into this coaching “recipe” from the coaches' perspectives are outlined in this paper.

The framework in Table 1 summarises the three super-ordinate themes and main findings that will be discussed: Authenticity and alignment, ‘It’s part of the recipe’, Perceived benefits and outcomes:

**Table 1 – Summary of Main Findings**

<b>1. Authenticity and Alignment</b>	<b>2. It’s part of the Recipe</b>	<b>3. Perceived Benefits and Outcomes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Philosophy and purpose</i></li> <li>• <i>Identity</i></li> <li>• <i>It makes intuitive sense</i></li> <li>• <i>Strengths and values</i></li> </ul> <div style="text-align: center; margin: 10px 0;">  </div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Self actualising effect</i></li> <li><i>Symbiotic effect</i></li> <li><i>Coach fulfillment</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Focus on the positive?</i></li> <li>• <i>Always part of the mix</i></li> <li>• <i>Strengths tools and mixing methods</i></li> <li>• <i>Using myself as a tool</i></li> <li>• <i>Importance of flexibility</i></li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Conscious awareness leads to faster growth</i></li> <li>2. <i>Goal achievement is easier and more fun</i></li> <li>3. <i>Better and faster results</i></li> <li>4. <i>It’s more energising</i></li> <li>5. <i>Broadens perspective and options</i></li> <li>6. <i>Builds confidence, self-belief and identity</i></li> <li>7. <i>Leads to satisfaction and fulfillment</i></li> </ol>

### **1. Authenticity and Alignment**

A super-ordinate theme arising from the research interviews was the coaches' sense of compatibility and alignment with a strengths-based approach, leading to a sense of authenticity. The six sub-themes are summarised below.

#### *Alignment with philosophy and purpose*

Participants described how they believe a strengths focus aligns with their philosophical outlook or to their purpose in life, which seems to engender a feeling of authenticity in their coaching that benefits both them and their clients. Some coaches revealed how their philosophies of life are connected to their coaching philosophies, seeing a strengths approach as fundamental to both:

*It’s part of my philosophy and mindset as I approach coaching, that the coachee is somebody who has a lot of strengths and therefore... I’m aware that for this person to flourish and grow in their life will be a question of things like an alignment between their life and their*

*strengths...and that is throughout and behind everything that I would do with somebody in coaching. (Stephen)*

These findings reflect existing literature exploring the importance of genuineness, congruence and authenticity in the coach in order to create a comfortable coaching environment (Rogers, 1961; Stober, 2006).

#### *Alignment with identity*

The analysis also revealed that many participants believe that a strengths approach is aligned with their identity and allows them to be more of the person they are. For example, having articulated how her strengths coaching connects to her life purpose, Debbie was passionate about the need to be congruent with the person she is. She said: *'For me to be congruent, for who and how I am, it has to be part of my approach because otherwise I wouldn't be being true to who I am.'* Intuitively she had erred towards this approach because it felt authentic to her, before it was labelled as "strengths-focused".

The strengths literature reminds us that 'Authenticity is a very powerful feeling because it comes from an alignment between who we are, what we believe and what we are doing' (Linley, 2008, p.44). This research indicates that the participants are not just benefiting from an enhanced level of authenticity by taking a strengths-based approach, but that there is also a self-actualising effect (Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1961).

#### *'It makes intuitive sense'*

All participants talked about how the strengths-based approach made immediate sense to them, resonating with what they intuitively believed or aligning with existing knowledge. For example, Stephen saw strengths approaches as *'fitting with things I was already enjoying and being comfortable with.'* At a more esoteric level, he described the best thing about strengths-based coaching being its apparent alignment with the way the 'universe' works and described coaching with strengths as being common sense:

*The best thing about it is it's getting in sync with the universe. You think of Darwin... survival of the fittest, natural selection ... the universe grows by building strengths... and to me it's getting in sync with the universe that actually it's kind of going with the flow of nature. And actually to align yourself in work and life generally like that... its common sense and therefore is likely to work ... (Stephen)*

Articulating his motivation to select a strengths approach, one coach described his natural inclination to focus on what he and others were good at. Another explained how he was drawn to the strengths approach because of its emphasis on energy and what makes people good at what they do, linking to his existing interest in the whole person holistic approach. All the coaches believed that strengths-based coaching makes intuitive sense, and this appeared to be one of the factors affecting their decision to use a strengths approach. Whilst there is a place for using intuition in coaching (Whitworth *et al.*, 1998), it can be argued that doing what feels intuitively right needs to be substantiated with a stronger evidence-base. (Stober and Grant, 2006)

#### *Alignment with strengths & values, leading to a self-actualising effect*

All the participants were aware of their personal strengths and were conscious of how they have the opportunity to play to these strengths in their coaching. Biswas-Diener and Dean (2007, p.135)

suggest that ‘one of the greatest potential areas of personal growth and professional development for coaches is in identifying and accessing their own personal character resources.’

A significant finding that the analysis yielded was that many of the coaches revealed their experience of a self-actualising effect (Rogers, 1961) that they believe results from the opportunity to be more of who they are by playing to their strengths in the coaching relationship:

*There is something for me about my values and therefore strengths... the top ones are about learning, growth, variety, positivity... those are what I love to do and ... are really enjoyable to me. Those things in themselves lead you towards strengths. So there's the kind of this is what I love to do, leads me towards strengths, working with strengths gives me back more of that stuff and there is a kind of growth spiral that comes from it. (Stephen)*

Seligman (2002, p.9) asserts that ‘when well-being comes from engaging our strengths and virtues, our lives are imbued with authenticity’. Similarly, Linley (2008) states that using one’s strengths is important for authenticity, health, well-being and goal-attainment and that when we know our strengths and use them, our journey toward self-actualisation is accelerated. The research findings presented here support this, in that the participants involved in this study derived a sense of authenticity from knowingly applying their strengths to their strengths-based coaching practice. However, we do not know from this research whether a higher level of awareness and utilisation of ones strengths is more prevalent in coaches practising strengths-based coaching. Interestingly, little can be found in coaching texts to encourage coaches to consider their strengths as part of their own personal development; O’Neill (2000) offers the principle that bringing your own signature presence to coaching is the major tool of intervention and Biswas-Diener (2010) has recently suggested this practice.

#### *Symbiotic effect – A mutual benefit*

A recurring theme emerged of a symbiotic effect resulting from the coach and coachee together focusing on playing to their strengths. To date, strengths literature does not appear to have discussed this mutually beneficial dynamic. This synergetic effect appeared to have a significant impact upon the coaches’ satisfaction and continued motivation to take a strengths-based approach. I have already mentioned how coaches feel more authentic by applying their own strengths to an approach they feel aligned with, but the research revealed a further benefit; when the coaches consciously draw on their own strengths to help others to grow and become more of themselves, simultaneously, the coaches feel that they are also growing and becoming “more of who they are” - there is a mutual benefit or a symbiotic effect.

Some coaches were consciously aware of this symbiosis occurring. Stephen described it as a ‘*cyclical thing*’, whereby helping others to learn, grow and become more of who they are, he also grows and becomes more of himself. He linked this to the higher level of his life purpose. Simon acknowledged the mutual benefits of a strengths-focused conversation, saying ‘...*What they get and what we build together is a relationship based on recognising the best of each other*’.

These findings link to two of Linley’s (2008) pillars of responsibility: firstly, the responsibility to use and develop our own strengths, and secondly, the responsibility to create the conditions to enable the strengths of others. The findings from this research demonstrate a powerful symbiotic and self-actualising effect that is occurring by linking these two pillars together in a strengths-based coaching conversation, stemming from coaches consciously applying their own strengths to help

others realise *theirs*. This cyclical and mutually beneficial effect has not been explored in coaching literature to date.

### *Coach Fulfilment*

With happiness said to be the bottom line of positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), it was interesting to find that all the participants described the satisfaction they derive from their strengths-based coaching practice. Reflecting the symbiotic effect and fulfilment gained from the mutually beneficial interaction, Helen said that the best thing about taking a strengths-based approach is that *'it makes me and the client feel good about ourselves.'* Debbie specified the *'real fulfilment'* that she gains from enabling others to achieve what they want and Simon expressed how by doing what he loves and is good at (coaching that includes a strengths focus) this has enabled him to achieve his personal mission of enjoying a happy, fulfilling and meaningful life:

*So I've ended up making a living from something that I really love doing and I'm passionate about . . . so I've ended up with a kind of 'happy life'. (laughs) (Simon)*

The feeling of fulfilment gained through strengths-based coaching practice was shared by Louise, who, when asked to share the best thing about taking a strengths-based approach, said: *'Sometimes I feel so un-client-centred, it's almost embarrassing, but my answer to that is "because I'm happier".'* This does begin to raise an ethical question regarding for whose benefit a coach might adopt a strengths-based approach. However, Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) suggest that a worthy theme for research is the impact coaching has on the coach themselves, including job satisfaction. My findings provide some evidence to suggest that at least within strengths-based coaching, where coaches are consciously applying their strengths to the process, their levels of fulfilment do appear to be affected positively.

### ***'It's Part of the Recipe'***

This section presents research findings about what the participants believe they do in their coaching that is strengths-based. It explores an element of mindset that relates to their *'internal decision tree'* (Kauffman, 2006, p.220) when applying the approach. All participants use at least one strengths identification tool, but there was a unanimous belief amongst the participants that the tool alone is not enough and I summarise here their "recipes" for strengths-based coaching. Biswas-Diener suggests that strengths coaching *'looks like other forms of coaching in a great many ways'* (2010, p.145), but that it has unique features because the practices are rooted in the science of positive psychology. In presenting the dominant themes from the *'recipes'*, it is hoped that this will offer some insight into what these unique features might be.

### *Focus on the Positive?*

It was no surprise that participants are mindful about intentionally focusing on the strengths as opposed to weaknesses of their clients and deliberately move away from focusing on "the problem", described by Helen as *'the more traditional approach.'* The coaches described a variety of reasons for avoiding focusing on weaknesses, including the de-motivating effect and negative impact on performance, the de-energising impact on both coach and client and the belief that that such a focus *'would be pushing water uphill.'* However, the participants were all mindful to not ignore negative aspects and what might impede progress, but not to focus on problems or weaknesses at the expense of helping people identify their positive resources. Referring to the physiological impact of positive and negative emotion (Fredrickson, 2001), Simon used this metaphor:

*If you have choice between thinking positive and thinking negatively then that's going to create a different cocktail. It's going to actually make you feel different and it's going to... lead you into different sets of behaviour. So ... make yourself a cocktail that is useful for yourself, rather than one that's going to give you a hangover.*

All participants believe it important to get the strengths/weaknesses balance right, including addressing people's inherent negativity bias (Rozin and Royzman, 2001). Several participants also suggested that there might be times when it would be inappropriate to have a strengths-based conversation at all, suggesting the importance of not using strengths 'in a Pollyanna-ish kind of way'. Most coaches were concerned to let people embrace strengths at their own pace, a view supported by Clifford (2011).

Traditional coaching models such as GROW (Whitmore, 1996) encourage coaches to explore what is not working. The participants believe that strengths coaching is about the main focus of attention being on what is working and what is energising, but not exclusively, and a right balance needs to be found. They all believe that coaches need to be sensitive to the client's needs and to client readiness to focus on strengths rather than weaknesses. This includes a need to be mindful of the potential negative impact of taking an overly positive approach. This analysis of their views would appear to support what the strengths literature suggests (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Clifford, 2011; Kauffman and Boniwell, 2010; Kauffman and Linley, 2007; Linley, 2008).

#### *Always Part of the Mix*

Four of the coaches saw strengths-based coaching as such an integral part of the work that they do, or "part of the recipe", that it is always there to some degree, whether it is explicit or not. Moreover, because of their philosophy or the way they see people, they struggled to think when they would not take a strengths-based approach. The data suggests that when the coaches link the strengths approach to a way of relating to people that is based on acknowledging and focusing on their strengths, then a strengths-based approach is nearly always present. This is the case whether or not a strengths identification tool is being used or whether or not there is an explicit conversation around strengths, and leads us to consider whether strengths-based coaching should be viewed more as a philosophy, rather than being primarily intervention-led.

Much of the existing strengths literature focuses on tools as interventions, and it appears that more could be offered to support coaches in understanding how they can adopt a strengths approach that is less intervention-led and more of an overall approach, or "part of the mix." However, this needs to always take account of the needs and readiness of the client. Biswas-Diener *et al* (2011) highlight this gap and suggest a "strengths development" approach rather than intervention-led "identify and use" approach to strengths, but they also argue that a strengths approach might be sometimes inappropriate and they call for formal guidelines and standards for strengths-based practice.

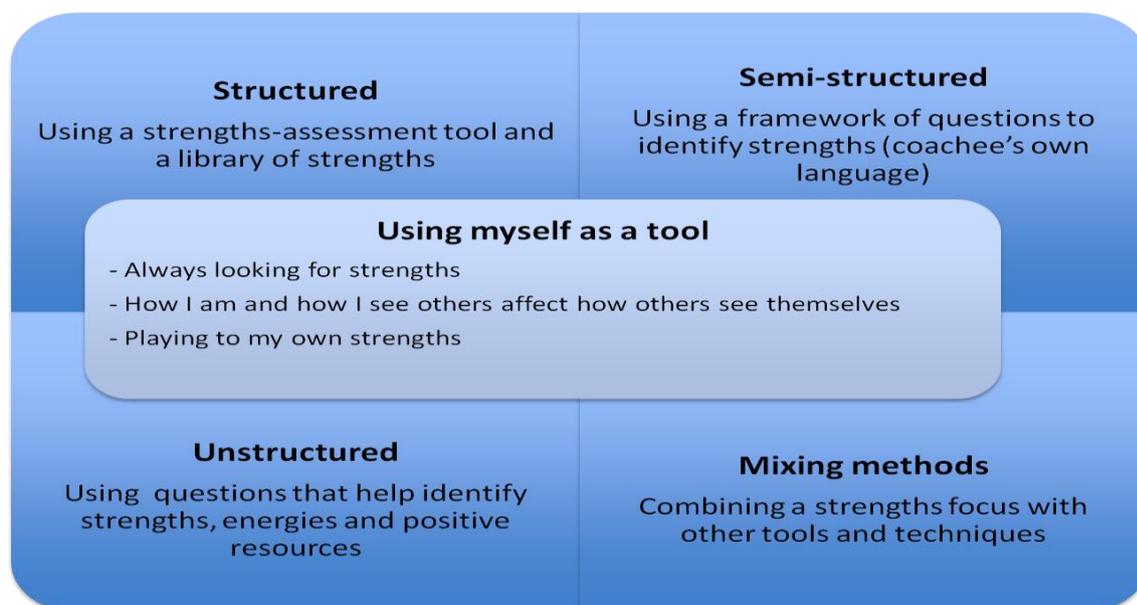
#### *Strengths tools and mixing methods*

Although all the participants used one or more strengths identification tool, they all felt that the tool on its own was not enough to have in their strengths-coaching toolkit, and less structured approaches are often used to raise clients' awareness of their strengths. Furthermore, all participants provided examples of how they combine a strengths-based tool or approach with other coaching methods.

Common to all coaches was the view that the strengths approach fits well with other tools, and indeed for those coaches who are clear that a strengths focus is behind everything they do, they *'will always be doing strengths-focused work one way or another.'* (Stephen) Models considered by the participants as good partners to a strengths-based approach included: the Solution-focused model, (Berg, 2005); Myers Briggs, (Briggs Myers, 2000); The Logical Levels of Change (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000); Hogan (Hogan and Hogan, 2001); Time to Think (Kline, 1999); and Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987).

Strengths-based coaching is described as 'the newest wave of coaching' (Kauffman and Scoular, 2004, p.55) and is still developing. These findings provide some insight into how coaches deliver their own form of strengths-based coaching, but there is some variation and inconsistency. This points to a need for a clear picture of strengths-based coaching that brings together the wide array of possible approaches, including how it fits with other coaching methodologies. Table 2 depicts the varying approaches or "recipes" adopted by the participants in this study.

**Table 2 – Strengths Coaching Recipes**



*Using myself as a tool*

The research findings suggest that the coaches see themselves as an instrumental part of the strengths coaching recipe, which manifests itself in a variety of ways, including:

- Always looking for strengths in the coachee.
- Seeing clients as having strengths to achieve what they want, contributing to a good relationship and making rapport building easy. This mindset also affects the clients' own self-belief and their sense of control.
- Applying their own strengths to the coaching process in order to strengthen the coaching process by doing so.
- Being a role model in the way that they apply their own strengths

The data further suggests that the coaches' way of being with their clients is part of what adopting a strengths focus involves. Again, we might ask the degree to which the participants' accounts might differ to what coaches not adopting a strengths-based approach would say. As an example, Simon shared that he sees himself as *'some kind of conduit to help people make meaning and learning from the information they're getting and the experiences that they're having.'* Although the data he provided suggested that he sees a strengths-based approach as a critical part of that, this is an example of a belief that may not be unique to strengths-based coaches.

### *The Importance of Flexibility*

All participants are aware of the need to be flexible in applying a strengths approach, being mindful of maintaining the relationship and responding to the needs of the clients. The participants suggested maintaining flexibility in several ways, revealing beliefs about the need to tread carefully and maintain a client focus.

Several coaches also pointed out the need to be aware of the big picture. There may be reasons that make embracing a strengths approach difficult, or there may be other things that need to be tackled first, such as *'deep-seated beliefs'* (Paul), or building confidence. The coaches felt strongly that it is important not to impose a strengths approach on people and expect them to be ready to respond to it. Two coaches stressed the need to build rapport before positioning it. All the coaches believe it important to pay attention to client readiness, the advice being to tread carefully and *'go at other people's pace'* (Paul). Finally, using the right language was considered by several coaches to be critical, yet many dictionaries of strengths can sometimes lead to confusion. Debbie pointed out: *'For some people you need to translate it into a language that works for them.'* The participants' views parallel those of Biswas-Diener *et al* (2010) and Clifford (2011), that it is important to be sensitive to the appropriateness of introducing a strengths focus, be it with or without a formal strengths identification tool.

### ***Perceived Benefits and Outcomes: 7 Key Beliefs***

This section presents some of the main findings about why participants choose to adopt a strengths-based approach over other coaching approaches, exploring the aspect of their mindset relating to what they believe about its unique impact on their clients.

All participants shared the assumption that conscious awareness and application of strengths leads to faster growth, referring to the importance of "raising awareness" and then "connecting" to strengths. This reflect Linley's (2008) assertion that "realising strengths" has a powerful double meaning; it is about knowing *and* growing our strengths. Indeed, Buckingham (2007) advises "Go Put Your Strengths to Work" in order to achieve outstanding performance. The belief that the clients' journey starts with becoming aware of their strengths, this appeared to be driving the participants' behaviour of noticing and raising their coachees' awareness of their strengths.

Building on the first belief, three participants shared the belief that *'the achievement of goals is easier and more fun'* (Stephen) if clients draw on their strengths. For example, Louise described it as *'the easiest path imaginable.'* Whilst this belief might merely be a projection of their own enjoyment they derive from using strengths, the participants' experiences parallel a recent study exploring the impact of using signature strengths in pursuit of goal achievement (Linley *et al.*, 2010), which concluded that strengths use provides a key support in the achievement of goals. Linked to this, four participants held clear assumptions about the speed and quality of results, sharing a belief that *'you get results better and faster'* (Louise). Stephen referred to previous evidence that people develop and

improve their performance faster and also enjoy it more if they are focused on developing strengths (Corporate Leadership Council, 2002). Debbie shared an example of a client whose promotion was accelerated as a result of her acknowledging her strengths. Her belief about the speed of a strengths approach is founded on years of experience: *'It's effective, for sure and that's through experience. So, I've seen it work over the last...probably 2500 hours' worth of coaching'* (Debbie). Her view echoed Buckingham (2007, p.5): 'Why do so many people from so many different worlds see such power in the strengths-based perspective? ... because it works better than any other perspective.' A similar belief emerged from all the coaches in this study, but the coaching profession now needs more empirical rather than anecdotal evidence to support this.

All the coaches referred to how *'it's more energising and therefore more effective'* (Debbie) when people play to their strengths. One coach noticed that just by talking about strengths people begin to get energised, which he considers helpful for clients needing to be resilient, *'especially in times of change or difficult times.'* Another coach echoed this, sharing his assumption that: *'connecting with our strengths gives us some of the fuel to move forward, even when we're not quite sure what forward might look like.'* The amount of resourceful energy released is also seen as being an essential reason for the ease and speed of achieving results. Sometimes this energy shift is seen to increase the *'emotional buy-in'*, as suggested in Helen's example of how one client *'felt more powerful when she went out of the room.'* Both the Strengthscope (The Strengths Partnership, 2010) and Realise2 (CAPP) tools are based on people identifying their strengths by what energises them. Govindji and Linley's (2007) study found that people who used their strengths reported higher levels of vitality, which supports the participants' beliefs that this is also true in a coaching context.

A consistent theme arising from the analysis was the coaches' belief that *it broadens perspective and 'gives people more options.'* (Paul) and that a conversation about strengths helps people become more aware of what they can and can't control (Seligman, 2007). The participants' experience also relates to Fredrickson's Broaden and Build theory, suggesting that 'when positive emotions are in ample supply people take off' (Fredrickson, 2001, p.224). Getting people to discuss what they are good at and like doing is seen by many participants to be a very effective way of connecting people to their positive resources and seeing more choices. Recent research is beginning to explore the link between strengths and lower levels of stress, (Wood *et al.*, 2011) goal progress, need satisfaction, well-being and happiness (Linley *et al.*, 2010), albeit not in a coaching context. My findings might begin to suggest that using strengths in coaching gives people the greater sense of choice and control that might lead towards such outcomes.

The analysis also revealed beliefs that the coaches hold about the impact of strengths-based coaching on aspects concerning the self. Specifically, they believe that the approach builds confidence, self-belief and a stronger sense of identity. As one coach said:

*I see it as a key part of the recipe of helping people become more of who they want to be. It's a kind of a confidence booster... It's like a Red Bull for confidence. (Simon)*

Simon linked growth in confidence to the building of positive emotions, believing that talking about strengths creates positive emotions that allow clients to feel more confident about where they are heading, reflecting Fredrickson's (2009) work on the role of positive emotions. Helen gave examples of how she uses building techniques to "lift" people, which she saw as *'broader than strengths per se'*. Several participants shared how coaches develop a more rounded view of themselves and *'understand who they are'* (Paul). In literature related to development of the self

(Kegan, 1982; Stevens, 1996) the concept of strengths-use remains unexplored, with the exception of Csikszentmihalyi's (2002) work on Flow. Govindji and Linley's study found that people using their strengths reported higher levels of self confidence and self-esteem, and this study was replicated (Proctor *et al.*, 2009).

The analysis yielded data regarding happiness, often seen as 'the bottom line' of positive psychology (Seligman *et al.*, 2005, p.413). Although all the participants believed that an emphasis on strengths in coaching leads to *a higher level of satisfaction and fulfilment* or satisfaction in the clients in some way, offering support to Linley *et al.*'s findings (2010), there were fewer examples of this uncovered by the data analysis. That said, many of the coaches described how when helping people focus on what energises them and feels authentic, they notice that people feel better about themselves or have a higher level of satisfaction: '*It's true for the people I have coached as well as myself personally, that you feel more satisfied*' (Paul). In contrast to the amount of strengths research that focuses on well being (Govindji and Linley, 2007; Linley *et al.*, 2010; Seligman *et al.*, 2005) this study offered only some data to support that this might be true in a coaching context. I do not know if the absence of data is because the participants in this study have not observed such an effect. Another explanation might be that, due to the difficulty of observing client fulfilment, which is a subjective and internal experience, they have not gathered enough anecdotal evidence through their own practice to form a clear belief about this effect of strengths coaching.

## **Discussion and Some Implications for Coaching**

The findings from this research suggest a range of implications for coaching practice, eight of which are summarised below.

### ***Sense of authenticity***

The analysis found that adopting a strengths-based approach led to a heightened sense of authenticity for the participants, brought about by a belief that it is aligned with their philosophy of coaching/life and also with their purpose in life. Overall, the participants felt an intuitive sense of congruence with the strengths-based approach and gained a sense of self-actualisation as a result of applying their own strengths when coaching.

Coaching texts often describe the process of a coaching methodology and rarely explore what predisposes and motivates a coach to decide to take a given approach. The findings suggest that coaches who might want to adopt a strengths focus could first consider their own coaching philosophy as well as the lens through which they view others, and check they are aligned with the strengths philosophy. Coaches from all disciplines might also benefit from exploring and consciously applying their strengths, thereby increasing their job satisfaction and personal growth.

### ***Mutual opportunity for growth***

The analysis revealed that most participants were describing a symbiotic effect occurring whereby, when the coach uses their strengths to help clients discover *their* strengths and grow as a result, the coach also grows and becomes more of *they* are. The sense of mutual growth might not be unique to strengths-based coaching, but the findings suggest that both parties using their strengths might enhance this mutual learning. This is unexplored territory in the strengths field and is an opportunity for future research.

### ***Enhanced coach fulfilment***

The analysis revealed a high level of happiness and fulfilment amongst the coaches, which they believe is connected with their strengths practice. An implication of this positive impact is that there is risk that coaches might choose the strengths approach more for personal satisfaction than for the client's benefit. Before adopting a strengths-based approach, coaches need to ensure that it is a self-less choice and fits with the client's agenda. Any strengths-based training for coaches should take this into consideration and it is also something that coaches might be invited to explore in supervision. However, coaches are responsible for their own growth and satisfaction, and this research suggests that both strengths use and a strengths focus might enhance the coach's well being. Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) call for research exploring the impact of coaching on the coach themselves, and it would be interesting to explore the impact of strengths-based coaching on the coach relative to other coaching methodologies.

### ***Strengths-based coaching is more than a series of interventions***

The research found that participants view strengths-based coaching as much broader than merely a series of tools and interventions. Most participants believe that a strengths approach is always present and is their preferred way of working, particularly when it is based more on a philosophy and a way of treating people. Indeed, all the coaches see their own way of being as an important tool in the process.

The findings build on existing knowledge about strengths-based coaching practice and provide some additional clarity for coaches wishing to adopt a strengths approach. The findings also offer some suggestions about when an intervention-led approach might not be appropriate. There is an opportunity now to build on this research and offer coaches a more all-encompassing picture of what strengths-based coaching means and involves. This could include consideration of strengths philosophy as well as those aspects related to the coach's mindset and their ways of being. If coaches are going to get a full picture, the research findings suggest that it is important that future strengths-based coaching literature does not focus on one single intervention, but takes account of the range of interventions available. Further research might be needed to complete the picture of what the strengths-coaching recipe involves, particularly exploring its impact from the client's perspective. Such research could also explore further whether strengths-based coaching is more suitable in certain situations than others.

### ***The importance of remaining client-led***

All the participants were clear that whilst it is their preference to focus on strengths rather than weaknesses, there is a balance to be achieved. In particular, it is important to be client-led rather than intervention-led. Specifically, most participants believe client readiness to be an important factor to be taken into consideration before suggesting a strengths intervention, echoing Clifford (2011). These findings suggest a need to ensure that coaches are not encouraged to work with strengths without a clear understanding of the need for flexibility and the possible risks (Biswas-Diener *et al.*, 2011).

Whilst there may be 'bigger issues' that the client needs to deal with before exploring their strengths, the findings suggest that a strengths-focused mindset can help clients move forward, even if strengths are not discussed explicitly. However, the analysis reveals variation and complexity in using a strengths approach and there is a need to reduce the risk that coaches learn about just one strengths identification tool and call themselves a strengths-based coach. This has an implication for communicating the breadth of a strengths approach to coaches, and suggests a need for thorough training to be offered to coaches who wish to use it.

### ***Conscious awareness of strengths leads to faster growth***

The research findings support the suggestion that it is important for people to use their strengths, not just know them, (Govindji and Linley, 2007). All participants shared the belief that helping a coachee become aware of their strengths sets them on a route for faster growth and development. If further research can provide empirical evidence that raising coachees' awareness of strengths has a positive impact on personal growth it has a significant implication for all coaching practice and coach development whereby all coaches might benefit from being aware of this potential impact. A comparison study with non-strengths focused coaching approaches would be particularly useful.

### ***A strengths-based approach can make goal achievement easier, faster and more enjoyable***

The research found that all participants believe that by applying a strengths approach, their clients achieve their goals more easily, faster and more enjoyably. This again has implications for all coaching practice and calls for further research to explore the impact of adopting a strengths-based approach on goal achievement, in comparison to other coaching approaches. However, this research has revealed a wide range of strengths coaching approaches, ranging from the use of a strengths identification tool, through to merely looking at people through a strengths-tinted lens (Linley, 2008), and this might present researchers with a challenge to be clear about which strengths based approach is having what effect.

### ***A strengths-based approach can broaden perspective and choices***

All participants believe that by encouraging clients to identify and use their strengths, it broadens their perspective, opening up more choices, removing confusion and adding clarity. We already know the role of positive emotion in broadening thinking (Fredrickson, 2001), but the broadening impact of a strengths focus in coaching, which can have the effect of generating positive emotions, has not been explored. Again there is an opportunity to support this study's finding by conducting qualitative research to investigate this relationship, particularly in comparison to other coaching approaches. Traditional coaching processes have focused on helping the client generate options (Whitmore, 1996), and if there is further empirical evidence to suggest that strengths-based coaching does indeed enhance this process, there will be future implications for considering how the benefits of a strengths focus can be incorporated into the existing literature and training for coach development.

## **Limitations**

Despite some relevant findings, this research has some clear limitations. Firstly, this is a qualitative study based on interpretations of others' meaning. The impact of double hermeneutics means that the findings can only make tentative suggestions rather than concrete conclusions. Further quantitative or qualitative research is needed to substantiate the findings and recommendations. This study informs larger studies and points to areas for further investigation, but the sample size is too small to allow generalisation.

## **Conclusion**

This IPA study set out to explore the phenomenon of strengths-based coaching from the perspective of six executive coaches using the approach, with a particular focus on what could be learned from their beliefs and assumptions (mindset) motivating them to use strengths. As a recently introduced approach to coaching with little literature and empirical evidence supporting it, it was

anticipated that the study would throw light on what strengths-based coaching means and looks like to coaches, and what unique difference they believe it makes to their coaching.

The analysis and interpretation of interview transcripts has facilitated an understanding of strengths-based coaching from two key perspectives – *how* the coaches in the study believe they incorporate a strengths-based approach and *why* they believe they do so. Firstly, the study has enabled further clarity about strengths-based practice, the different forms it may take and how it fits with some other coaching approaches. Secondly, it has provided insight into what motivates the coaches to select and continue with a strengths-based approach. These motivational factors fall into two clear themes: intrinsic motivators brought about by a sense of authenticity and alignment when using a strengths-based approach, and extrinsic motivators that reflect their beliefs about the efficacy of a strengths focus.

The research findings contribute qualitative research to support an area of coaching in need of an empirical base. Moreover, it begins to provide some much-needed clarity to coaches who are attracted by what a strengths approach might have to offer their practice and what the results might be. Interestingly, the research has also revealed a symbiotic self-actualising dynamic resulting from coaches using their own strengths to help others grow. The analysis suggests that a strengths focus could lead to a heightened level of fulfilment for both the coach and coachee. Overall, the research offers us some new ground to explore when considering the growth and development of coaches, whether or not they choose to adopt a strengths focus with clients.

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