Can an online coaching programme facilitate behavioural change in women working in STEM fields?

Sharon Jackson & Dorota Joanna Bourne

With the communication and many aspects of social life moving into the online domain, social interaction and communication between individuals in corporate environments are often being transferred to the virtual realms in search of solutions to save time and money. This paper explores the way in which online coaching can provide a fruitful platform to introduce online communication and staff development in constructive ways where social and relational aspects of the group are accommodated.

The two key areas of research presented in this paper are: (i) online coaching: exploring different modes of online coaching and the impact of combining individual and group coaching, and (ii) behavioural change: exploring different methods and approaches to develop self-confidence in young women.

The sample chosen for this study is a group of young women. The reason this sample was chosen is that the author's coaching practice has been delivering a three-month in-person coaching programme, focused on developing young women from different organisations, aged between mid-20s to mid 30s, for the last six years. With organisations cutting costs and individuals being short of time, the author wanted to investigate if an online coaching programme could offer an alternative solution to in-person coaching. Our research, backed up by the author's own experience, also responds to the call for evidence and confirms previous claims (Followell, 2014) that if coaching is made available to women in the early stages of a career, this can help develop their self-confidence, self-belief and leadership skills.

The research presented here is an exploratory, longitudinal study, using a sample size of 12 women, from two organisations, as well as one individual participant. The online coaching programme took place over six weeks, with quantitative and qualitative data gathered on two separate occasions, using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The data collected from the first questionnaire and semi-structured interview informed the design of the online coaching programme. The data collected from the second questionnaire and semi-structured interview measured the participant's expectation against experience of online coaching. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Drawing together current thinking, research objectives and findings, demonstrates how online coaching, using synchronous and asynchronous coaching, combined with individual and group coaching, creates a powerful range of methods to facilitate behavioural change. The study demonstrates that coaching young women, individually, as well as a group, helps to develop self-confidence. The programme also encouraged risk taking which led to new learning and behavioural change.

Keywords: Online coaching, behavioural change, leadership development, women.

Introduction

Research context

THE research focus of this study is to explore online coaching and its impact on behavioural change. Online coaching is an emerging field, with still little evidence to support it, despite a consensus about the importance of technology in future learning (Overton & Dixon, 2016). Research demonstrates that young women often lack self-confidence and a vision for their future career. Followell (2014) called for coaching to be made available to women earlier in their career, such as

early to mid-30s, as a means to overcome this issue.

With society embracing online technologies of communication and learning, and individuals and companies lacking time, this study looks to combine the two together and investigate whether or not a customised online coaching programme can facilitate behavioural change and empower young women.

Two organisations were approached to take part in this project. A global pharmaceutical company and a multinational IT company. Research shows that women working in the STEM field (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) benefit from working in safe online spaces (Losh, 2016). These online spaces are critical in large sprawling organisations where women are isolated, as they offer the opportunity for women to communicate and support one another (Losh, 2016). Both companies were interested in developing women and using virtual coaching to aid personal development and achieving behavioural change.

Research aims and objectives
To investigate the impact of a customised online coaching programme to achieve behavioural change.

The aims of this research were twofold:
- *Online coaching:* Exploring different modes of online coaching, and the impact of combining individual and group coaching.
- *Behavioural change:* Exploring methods and approaches to develop self-confidence in young women.

One of the benefits of online coaching is the convenience for individuals and the coach of being able to work on electronic devices, such as a computer, laptop, tablet or smart phone with an internet connection, without the need for travel. On the downside, the individuals do not have the opportunity to come together physically in a group which may inhibit their learning and networking opportunities.

Literature and definitions
The study looks at the current theory concerning both technology and the development of women in organisations.

Research design and methodology
This research is an exploratory, longitudinal study, using a sample of 12 women from two organisations and one individual. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the beginning and the end of the coaching programme. To measure behavioural change over time, a questionnaire was completed. Semi-structured interviews were carried out to find out the participants' experience of online coaching. The data collected from the first questionnaire and semi-structured interview informed the design of the online coaching programme. The data gathered from the second questionnaire and semi-structured interview measured the participants' experience of online coaching and associated behavioural change.

Review of current thinking
According to Holley (2014), the development of leadership capabilities presents a major challenge for contemporary organisations. This paper explores if online coaching, composed of individual and group coaching, offers a viable solution.

With research showing that the most successful companies are those that have a mix of men and women on the board, there has never been a better time to start coaching the female talent of the future. But where are these women and why aren't they applying for senior jobs?

An Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM, 2011) study found that many women at the outset of their career lack clarity of direction and purpose. They therefore often have lower career ambitions and expectations. A challenging area comes from lack of confidence and self-belief. This lack of self-belief hinders women from applying for promotions and more senior roles. With the knowledge that lack of confidence, self-belief and vision of the future is holding women back, these areas were identified for coaching.

The first step is to enable these woman to examine the impact they want to have within an organisation, and how their behaviour may need to change or be modified in a corporate setting to achieve the desired results. A useful model to deconstruct unconscious behaviour is Graham Lee's ACES model (actions, cognitions, emotions, sensations), which enables individuals to consciously explore how to change from limiting thoughts and behaviours to enabling thoughts and behaviours (Lee, 2003).

The second step is to coach individuals to think about what they want from their career and life in general. The GROW model (goal, reality, options, will) gives individuals a model to help solve problems, make better decisions and have useful conversations (Whitmore, 2009). A study conducted by Dr Gail Matthews demonstrates how goal achievement in the workplace is influenced by writing goals, committing to goal-directed actions, and having accountability for those actions (Matthews, n.d.).

It is important to give women a psychologically safe online environment in which to develop skills and share knowledge and experiences, which builds relationships and social capital. Social capital can be challenging for females to develop, which can be a potential barrier to career advancement. One of the key benefits of online coaching is that the learning and development is taking place from the comfort of the individual's own environment, whether that is their home, office, coffee shop; the choice is theirs. Being in a comfortable, safe online environment encourages individuals to open up, share and offload emotions, drawing comfort from knowing others are facing similar challenges.

Different modes of online coaching

A study states that coaching for millennials is growing more than in any other generation; 23 per cent of coaches report that their clients are age 35 and under (2016 ICF Global Coaching Study). In the UK, 38 million people are actively using social media, with almost 80 per cent of one's time spent on social media and smartphones (Think Digital First, 2016).

With new working practices, emerging technologies and flexible working patterns influencing the design and delivery of learning (Overton & Dixon, 2016), the coaching field and practitioners need to recognise this shift and find alternative ways to meet their clients' needs. There is already a plethora of new methods and forms of coaching emerging as a result, such as coaching by video, phone or chat session (see www.thrivepartners.co.uk), synchronous Skype or FaceTime calls, and asynchronous video communication. There are significant advantages in applying both technological modalities (phone and internet-based coaching) in comparison to face-to-face coaching (Geissler et al., 2014). Phone text-based coaching research offers encouraging evidence to support this (Poepsel, 2011; Wang, 2000), where coaching can provide individuals with support on demand (Ahrend et al., 2010).

Further benefits of asynchronous coaching include the time available to the client to pause and reflect before responding (Diamond & Webber, 2010; Rossett & Marino, 2005, cited in Clutterbuck & Hussain, 2010). However, in contrast, because technology enables an immediate response, the coach or client could react without pausing to reflect on what is said. The coach needs to be aware that a lacking in emotional context during text-based communications could lead to misunderstandings or less constructive interactions (Rossett & Marino, 2005). One way to counteract this is through the use of emojis – 'a digital image that is used to express emotion in an electronic communication' (Collins English Dictionary, 2017) – or an emoticon: any of several combinations of symbols used to express thoughts. However, care needs to be exercised, as emojis are still subjective and can be open to interpretation.

People learn in different ways, and many are more comfortable sitting in front of their computer than in a class (CPD News Team, 2016); if we work in our preferred style it gives us more energy (Passmore, 2016). Asynchronous coaching can include coaching resources to suit different learning styles: visual, audio and kinaesthetic. Rich content, tools and techniques, and practice templates (Ahrend et al., 2010) all develop management capability through self-directed learning (Overton & Dixon, 2016).

The next section looks at the benefits and challenges of using synchronous and asynchronous coaching in a context of individual and group coaching.

Individual and group coaching
An important aspect of synchronous coaching is that individuals are not physically in the room together. Individuals who feel shy or afraid may feel more comfortable in an online environment. However, one of the pitfalls for social interaction in a computer-supported collaborative learning environment is the taking for granted that individuals will simply socially interact because the environment makes it possible (Kreijns et al., 2003). It is important to consider the social dimension of how a group develops trust, respect and a sense of belonging to feel safe, connected and willing to engage (Kreijins et al., 2003) where 'our deepest need is to belong.' (Whittington, 2016, p.59).

Research demonstrates that working in a group brings a sense of belonging (Thornton, 2010). And the feeling of belonging and commitment to something worthwhile gives strengths to its members, boosts confidence, competence and skills in that group (Thornton, 2010). However, for many, speaking up at work in a group context can be very difficult or indeed stressful. By fostering psychological safety, it means individuals feel they can challenge or contribute to an idea without interpersonal risk, which facilitates learning (Edmondson, 2008; Edmondson & Polzer, 2016).

A study explored the experience of combining the individual and group coaching of female leaders in a multinational organisation (Bonneywell, 2016). The findings suggest that the combined approach was valuable for both (Bonneywell, 2016). Research shows that women working in the STEM field benefit from having a safe online space (Losh, 2016) as it offers the opportunity for women to communicate and support one another (Losh, 2016). According to Mook (2016) 'technology may enable access to coaching for those who perhaps would not be able to partake otherwise, including women in the workplace'.

In another study concerning virtual mentoring of new teachers, findings showed that synchronous and asynchronous mentoring increased collaboration time, thus reducing feelings of isolation and helping to increase efficacy among new teachers (Hunt et al., 2013).

Developing self-confidence in women
Research shows that the slow pace of women's advancement to senior levels in organisations is ongoing (De-Valle, 2014). In 2011, the Institute of Leadership and Management surveyed managers concerning their levels of confidence in their profession: half of the female respondents reported self-doubt about their performance and careers, compared with less than a third of male respondents.

At a Henley 'Women in Leadership' event (2016), a panel of successful women from different backgrounds shared stories about their own challenges with self-confidence. One woman talked about working hard and waiting for recognition, whilst the men around her were more likely to ask for a pay rise or promotion (Henley Business School, Women in Leadership report, 2016). This ties in with evidence showing that women need high levels of self-esteem to obtain high-quality jobs, whereas men base self-esteem on high-quality jobs to a greater extent than

women (Keller et al., 2015). Followell (2014) recommends that coaching is made available for women earlier in their career, such as early to mid-30s, in order to help women focus on their career path and increase their confidence to apply for and gain top level jobs, leading to progression within the organisation (Bonneywell, 2016).

Self-confidence development has been explored quite broadly in the literature, especially in psychology. However, for this research, we selected elements of self-confidence and related developmental programmes, which particularly lend themselves for coaching. These are as follows:

- *The use of reflective practice:* To change, we need to gain awareness of our unconscious patterns of behaviour. Self-awareness enables individuals to become more conscious of their thoughts and behaviours on a day-to-day level (Bonneywell, 2016). A useful model to deconstruct unconscious behaviour is Graham Lee's ACES model (actions, cognitions, emotions, sensations). The model enables individuals to consciously explore how to change from limiting thoughts and behaviours to enabling thoughts and behaviours. This model has been adapted from ACE FIRST (actions, cognitions, emotions, focus, intentions, results, system, tension) featured in *Leadership Coaching: From personal insight to organisational performance* (Lee, 2003).

- *Vision and goal setting:* Research shows that helping individuals gain clarity and a vision of what they would like to achieve from their career and life, in general, is a useful process. According to Tracy (2017), less than three per cent of adults in society have written goals and plans they work on daily. Studies consistently show that having clear, written goals makes a significant difference in creating success. This is confirmed by a study conducted by Dr Gail Matthews on how goal achievement in the workplace is influenced by writing goals,

committing to goal-directed actions, and accountability for those actions. The study provides empirical evidence for the effectiveness of three coaching tools: accountability, commitment and writing down one's goals. (Matthews, 2007).

- *Recognising limiting patterns and managing conflict by becoming aware of 'automatic negative thoughts' (ANTs)* (Yeung, 2008): ANTs are the unbidden criticisms that pop into our heads. One of the challenges younger women often face in a workplace is having the confidence to face difficult conversations; for example, asking for a pay rise, asking for help and support, wanting to know when they are likely to be promoted. This lack of self-belief hinders women from applying for promotions and more senior roles. An ILM (2011) study demonstrates that amongst the under 30s, only 30 per cent of women expect to become managers, against 45 per cent of men of the same age. Learning how to move beyond limiting beliefs is a critical first step towards becoming successful (Bossons et al., 2012).

Summary of literature review

It is apparent from the literature that coaches need to be looking at coaching at all levels within organisations to develop leadership skills. With no geographical boundaries, or time and travel costs to take into consideration, online technology – including mobile phones, tablets, and laptops – allows coaches the opportunity to work with clients at a time and place to suit both parties.

With the world moving online, there is an opportunity to offer a more flexible way of working with coaching clients. By using different modes of online coaching with individual and group coaching, the coaches can be responsive to the client's needs and empower them to learn at a time and a place that fits in with their lifestyles.

The investigation
Objectives of the investigation
The primary objective is to find out if an online coaching programme can facilitate behavioural change. The two areas of research are:

■ *Online coaching:* Exploring the experience of online coaching; and the impact of combining individual and group coaching.

■ *Behavioural change:* Exploring different methods and approaches to develop self-confidence in young women.

Research strategy and design
To gain a deeper understanding and explore online coaching and behavioural change, two data collection techniques were adopted. Quantitative data (Hair et al., 2015) was collected through questionnaires and qualitative data was collected through two semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2013). The first set of quantitative and qualitative data was used to inform the design of the coaching programme, and the second set of data was used to measure the impact of the programme on the participants' behaviour. Both parts of data collection, coaching and research

were conducted by the same person and author of this paper.

The technology used
Table 1 details the technology for the programme and for what purpose.

Selection of study participants
A non-probability sample was used for this study. A small scale sample of 12 young women were identified: 11 working in the STEM field, who are in the early to mid-stage of their career, and one new mother considering setting up her own business. The age ranges, span from 24 to 41, with a median age of 33.

The place of employment for the 12 participants, with a breakdown of different age ranges, is shown in Table 2.

Data collection methods and analysis
A questionnaire consisting of 13 statements, with a metric scale of 0–10, was issued before and after the coaching programme to measure behavioural change. The data from the first questionnaire, was also used to inform the design of the online coaching programme. The three lowest scoring state-

Table 1: Technology used for online coaching programme

Technology used	Application
FaceTime, Skype, Webex, Zoom	Semi-structured interviews
FaceTime, Skype, Webex, Zoom	Individual coaching – not recorded
Zoom	Group coaching – not recorded
Ecamm	Recording of semi-structured interviews on FaceTime or Skype
Voice recorder on iPhone	Recording of semi-structured interviews using Webex
WhatsApp	Instant messenger for sending and receiving of messages with the group
Zoom & PowerPoint	To record short videos on goal setting and overcoming limiting belief patterns
Dropbox	Link sent to participants to access video
SMS	Short message service on a mobile device

Table 2: Participants age range and place of employment

Age range	Number of individuals	Place of employment	Number of individuals
21–29	2	Multinational IT company	7
30–39	8	Global pharmaceutical corporation	4
40–49	2	New mother considering setting up own business	1
Total	12		12

ments were identified as topics for group coaching: 'I write down my goals and aspirations and review them regularly', 'Before challenging situations, I fill my mind with positive thoughts', and 'I am comfortable with conflict'. These results are common themes which show up on other coaching programmes. Using longitudinal analysis, the second questionnaire, issued at the end of the programme, identified trends in behavioural change of the participants (Hair et al., 2015).

Some 24 online semi-structured interviews (Hair et al., 2015) were carried out at two points in time, using Skype, FaceTime, Webex or Zoom. The first set of interviews took place a week previous to the programme commencing. The data gathered from these interviews helped shape the design of the programme. The second semi-structured interview – conducted one week after the programme ended – collected data on the participant's experience of the online coaching programme.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data which allowed for patterns and themes to emerge from the material (Braun & Clark, 2006). The thematic analysis was conducted in six steps following Braun and Clark (2006): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, coding and labelling of the data, themes review, defining and naming of the themes and finally the analysis of the data.

Further data validation
To further validate the research, a feedback loop was created and participant feedback was collected two weeks after the programme ended. The next section looks at the results of this research.

Limitations
The study focuses solely on women and therefore the single gender nature of this study could be seen as a limitation. Additionally, the size and sample composition coming from single industry (STEM) is also a limitation. The coach was also one of the authors and so there is a potential for bias in data interpretation.

The behaviour change analysis presented is not a statistical analysis. The sample size is too small to support such an analysis and therefore findings on behaviour change should be viewed as indicating a potentially positive impact. Given the potential for bias due to the study design, the findings on behaviour change, while potentially encouraging, are supportive only of the need for more study in a larger well designed study.

Findings
One of the objectives of this study was to explore the online context of coaching and see how this mode of coaching is received by the coachees. We report the findings related to this aspect from a small, non-random sample size which makes our data non gener-

alisable. We wish to report the findings and data as closely as possible and so we present lots of excerpts and quotes from individuals who formed the sample. While doing so, we see this material as a stimulation and start for a new discussion and potential inspiration for future research.

Participants enjoyed the flexibility of choosing when to have online coaching:

> *I am sitting in my dining room in my track-suit bottoms. It took one minute to come to this meeting, knowing me, I would have cancelled it. Love doing this from the comfort of my own home.*

With busy schedules, some opted for coaching in the evening. One participant – a full-time working single parent – enjoyed coaching in the evening after their child had gone to bed.

A factor which helped to build trust was the safety of the individual's environment:

> *Even though you were a stranger to us in my setting, it felt very relaxed. If I met you at Costa, it would be different; I was able to open up a little more. On the telephone I wouldn't have enjoyed it so much.*

One participant mentioned how she would be more nervous in person, yet over Skype it felt a bit less formal and more relaxed, which confirms current thinking that online coaching could be more suited to introverts.

For group coaching, it was crucial sufficient trust was built to share knowledge and experiences with others. One participant stated:

> *In my job, I do a lot of telephone meetings, but when you can't see people, it's not as engaging and not as real. I honestly thought it was fantastic to be able to see people's faces, body language and reactions. I have worked on projects with people for months, and I have no idea what they look like.'*

However, one participant had a mixed response to the visual connection:

> *Seeing everybody was great, but in another sense, I didn't like it, as it pushes you into an environment you're not comfortable with. However, the more you do, the easier it becomes. Catch-22 – good to do, but nerve-wracking at the same time.*

For some, although trust had been developed, the challenge was having people in the group they knew:

> *In the first one, I was a bit hesitant. There are people from my organisation, what should I say? There are people not from my organisation, what should I say?*

> *I wouldn't share personal stuff. If we worked longer and more regularly with the group and, met in person, maybe that would happen.*

> *I felt enough trust and rapport to share with Sharon, but I didn't feel the same way about the group. Partially, this is because a couple of the people are direct colleagues of mine and I didn't want to share too much because I work with them.*

In contrast, one participant said: 'I wouldn't have brought up the conversation last week if I hadn't felt comfortable because, in theory, it could get back to people'.

One of the benefits of online group coaching is that you are not alone in your thinking:

> *Nice to hear other people's viewpoints, from different organisations. Your issues are the same. Liked we were all female, working in a male-dominated environment.*

Recognising that these thoughts and feelings are shared created a connectedness within the group. However, not everyone felt the same:

> *I did not feel I got to know anyone in the group, can't put a face to a name. Couldn't relate to the group, could relate to you as a coach. Bear in mind that I missed a session, I didn't feel the benefit; I think one-to-one works well.*

Figure 1: Staying connected through technology

The next section explores participant's experiences of different online technologies.

Online technology

When asked which medium they would prefer to use for individual online coaching – Skype, Facetime, Webex or Zoom – most people liked and were impressed with Zoom.

Comments included: 'Zoom has worked well, really impressed with the sound, no lag', and 'I like Zoom, I have used on my phone and the iPad.'

In addition to email support, a WhatsApp group was set up for participants to share ideas and experiences, and get support. When asked about what difference, if any, did it make being part of a WhatsApp group, the responses included:

It was great to keep up to date, better than email. Some people sharing their stories was encouraging.

I felt that the wider group was starting to develop a good relationship and this was evident in the openness of our group online sessions and follow-ups on the WhatsApp group.

Allowed you to get to know people, relate to other people's experiences. Made me feel happy, good luck messages from the whole group.

Being part of a WhatsApp group, people felt connected; it was also a quicker way to communicate. However, the downside was the number of messages received by individuals. It is important to agree at the outset, the etiquette of using WhatsApp.
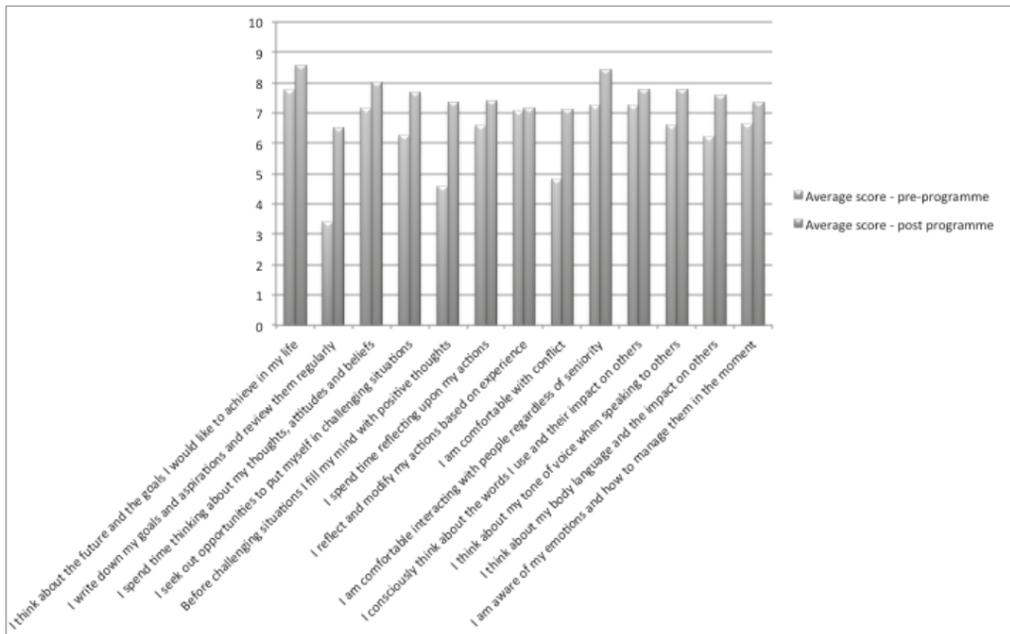
Figure 2: Questionnaires results – Pre and post programme
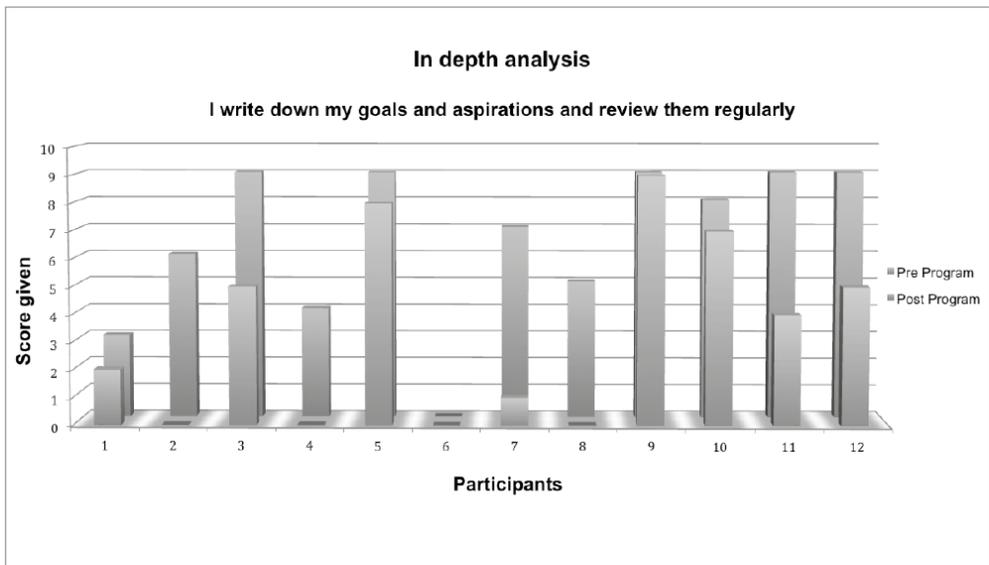

Figure 3: Questionnaire results for goal setting

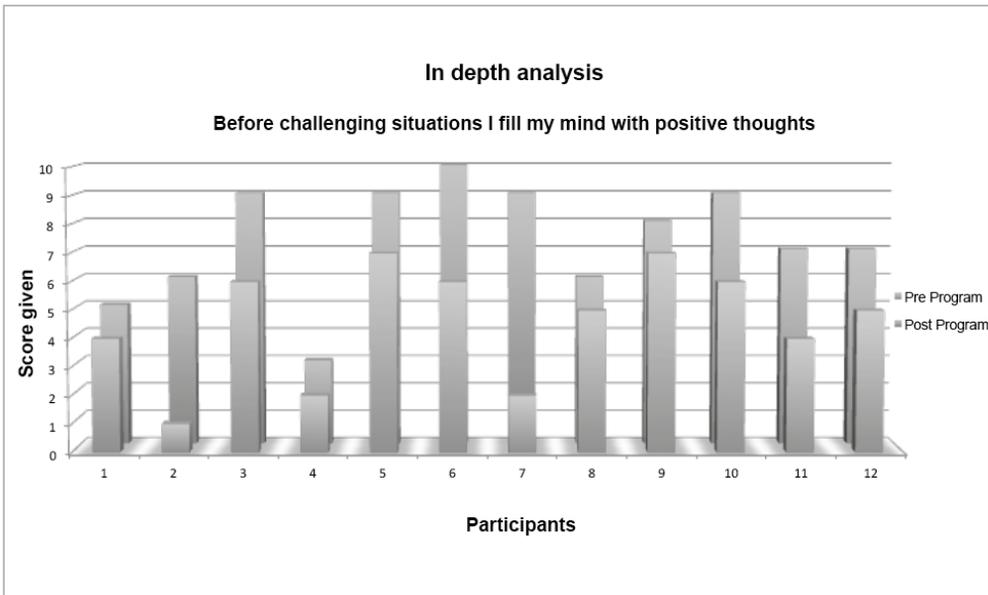**Figure 4: Questionnaire results for positive thoughts**

In depth analysis

Before challenging situations I fill my mind with positive thoughts

Figure 5: Questionnaire results for managing conflict

In depth analysis

I am comfortable with conflict
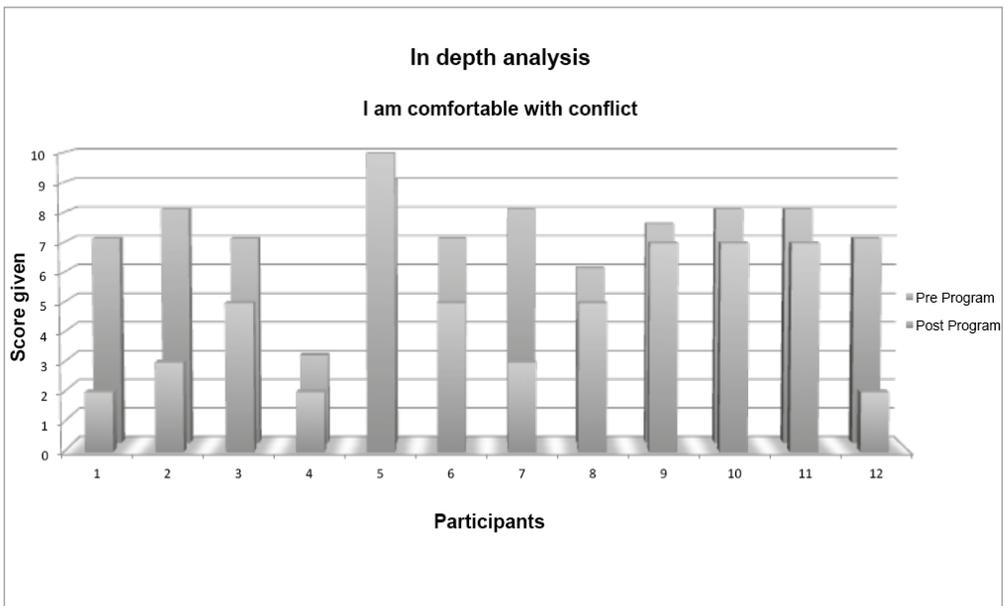
However, online coaching does have its drawbacks. Several participants requested to change the date and time of their coaching session due to work commitments.

One participant commented:

It takes more motivation to do it than to meet a coach in person. I frequently had to move my sessions as another thing came into my diary, and while work is important, I felt bad about moving things around and I'm not convinced I would have changed things so frequently if there was a person physically being put out.

Behavioural change

A key overarching objective of this study was to investigate whether online coaching could facilitate behavioural change and increase self-confidence in young women over six-weeks. The results are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 3 demonstrates the 'before and after' scores for the statement 'I write down my goals and aspirations and review them regularly'. One participant commented:

Over the last two months, I wake up every day and I write down one thing I would like to achieve in the day. I've so far been able to achieve that one thing.

For one participant, the coaching programme made them realise they could achieve their dreams:

I want to aim to be a successful leader and set an example. I have gained more confidence and already completed one presentation in front of a big audience.

Figure 4 demonstrates the 'before and after' scores for the statement 'Before challenging situations, I fill my mind with positive thoughts'. The models used were how to turn ANTs (automatic negative thoughts) into CATs (capability affirming thoughts; Yeung, 2008) and ACES (actions, cognitions, emotions and sensations; Lee, 2003)

One participant commented:

I've taken many things away from the programme, but one of the most beneficial things I learned was how useful it is to reflect. Reflecting on my actions, feelings and body language has helped me to identify patterns in how I react to things.

Figure 5 demonstrates the 'before and after' scores for the statement 'I am comfortable with conflict.'

The feedback included:

Yes, I have learned to have those uncomfortable conversations, I am much more ready for them, I'm not scared anymore; it's given me an inner confidence.

Online coaching resources

A link to two short online coaching videos on 'Vision' and 'Setting and achieving goals' – material developed by the author; and overcoming limiting beliefs, based on the model transcending limiting beliefs (Bossons et al., 2012), along with two workbooks, were sent to individuals to work through over the two-week Christmas period. The objective was to explore whether participants would engage with asynchronous coaching material. The response to the online coaching resources was:

The guides and the videos are really good, takes away from reading. The length was perfect.

Videos were great and useful. I need to do my part. The course material was useful, I like to write. I printed those out and wrote on them.

A couple of participants mentioned they would like to listen to content:

Would be good if you could listen to something – 15 minutes of 'me' time. Our company has radio talk, goes out every month. You don't have to watch something; it is playing in the background. Love audio books, so would listen when I'm washing up or ironing.

In contrast, a couple of participants commented that it would be useful to have

examples demonstrating how to change habits and behaviours. Also, a call to action would be helpful after watching a video.

Summary of findings

The findings confirm how offering a flexible online coaching programme using synchronous and asynchronous coaching, combined with individual and group coaching, creates behavioural change.

Using video technology meant facial expressions, emotions and signals were identified, which helped to build trust and break down barriers.

Figure 1 demonstrates how bringing individuals together from different organisations and locations around the UK, for one hour, to develop new skills and share knowledge and experiences, was very beneficial. Within 24 hours of a one-hour group coaching session, results were fed back to the group using an IM platform, and almost immediately positive messages were sent out from the group which encouraged, and acted as a re-enforcement to individuals to take more risks.

The power of sharing stories, challenges and experiences helps to create a social and collaborative learning environment. Knowing that you are not alone, that others think and feel the same way is reassuring.

Online coaching benefits women in universally recognised areas, such as enhancing self-confidence, increased self-awareness and behavioural change. These findings have important implications not just for coaching practitioners but for gender-related issues and practices in organisations in general.

Discussion and recommendations

This section draws together the literature and our findings to demonstrate how online coaching, using synchronous and asynchronous coaching, combined with individual and group coaching, creates a powerful range of methods to facilitate behavioural change.

The unique nature of online coaching

For many professionals with busy schedules, attempting to fit in a face-to-face coaching session can prove difficult, when taking travel times into consideration. Our research shows that online coaching overcomes this challenge effectively. A video call offers a flexible and relaxed way of coaching that can be scheduled at times which a traditional face to face format would struggle to incorporate; a couple of participants welcomed coaching in the evening when the children had gone to bed. Online coaching can be scheduled around other activities during the day, thus offering a more flexible way of working with a coach. A synchronous text message at 'point of need,' or an asynchronous message giving time to pause and reflect, eliminates the obstacle of time and also long wait which would otherwise be necessary in the case of face-to-face meetings. Our data confirms that text-based coaching is well received and can enhance the coaching process (Geissler et al., 2014; Rossett & Marino, 2005).

Asynchronous coaching creates an opportunity to deliver a variety of online coaching resources to support individuals in self-directed learning. Our research demonstrates the value of the asynchronous content for the coaches and illustrates how rich content, tools and techniques (Ahrend et al., 2010) can be applied in coaching practice. One of our study participants described the pre-recorded video as 15 minutes of personal development time. Another respondent indicated that she wouldn't remember half the things talked about during the group session, so it would be useful to have a video or audio recordings to reflect upon. The video could also serve as a discussion point during the next coaching session. Our study highlights that using a range of online coaching resources can help coaches meet the client's needs.

What emerged from our research is the way in which online coaching offers more flexibility around individual learning styles and preferences compared to face-to-face programmes. For example, some people

may like to learn by watching videos, while others may prefer to listen to content while travelling in the car or on the train. Others may prefer to write down ideas in a notebook or read some recommended material. By creating a library of asynchronous online resources in different mediums, the control stays with the client to choose how they wish to learn and absorb information.

Our findings confirm that with flexible working patterns and emerging technologies (Overton & Dixon, 2016), offering a range of online synchronous and asynchronous coaching options give individuals flexibility and choice over how they would like to be coached, and positively impacts on coaching programme effectiveness and subsequent behavioural change.

Our first recommendation is therefore for coaches and organisations to consider offering customised online coaching programmes for all organisational levels, moving away from the traditional model of face-to-face coaching available predominantly for top level managers. One of the key findings is that the flexibility of using synchronous and asynchronous coaching, combined with individual and group coaching, meets different learning styles and needs. By bringing together people from different age groups, for example, Millennials with older, more experienced individuals, this can help organisations stimulate fresh thinking, build and develop new collaborative relationships, build social capital, break down silos, and shape organisational development. To achieve these goals, a psychologically safe environment is needed, to enable an individual to open up and share. Online coaching offers enormous flexibility and with no geographical boundaries, saves the client, the organisation and the coach valuable time and cost.

The second recommendation is for coaches and organisations to consider creating a library of high-quality online coaching resources, to encourage individuals towards self-directed learning. For example, creating a range of tools including videos, audio content, workbooks, reading resources, which meet different learning styles and preferences, puts the individual in control of how they choose to learn and absorb information. These resources could also be made available to internal coaches within organisations and aid the development of a coaching culture in the company.

Combined individual and group coaching
Research shows that we should be moving away from focusing on developing individual leaders and look at developing the leadership of the whole organisation, including senior managers, middle managers and high potentials (Holley, 2014). Our research demonstrates that using individual and group coaching helps to develop new thinking, fosters new relationships and builds social capital. All of these elements form a key challenge for leaders having to successfully navigate their way through highly complex matrixed organisations (Voegtlin et al., 2012). The data confirms the power of sharing stories and experiences with others in building a social, collaborative and connected community. This in turn, can create change and develop the leadership skills needed to help the organisation going forward.

The third recommendation resulting from this study is for organisations to offer combined individual and group online coaching programmes for women only. Our research shows the importance of giving women a psychologically safe online environment in which to develop skills, and share knowledge and experience – which in turn builds relationships and social capital. Social capital can be challenging to develop for female leaders and can potentially, hinder their career advancement. One of the benefits of online coaching is the learning and development, which is taking place from the comfort of their environment. Being in a safe online environment encourages individuals to open up, share and offload emotions, and draw comfort from knowing others are facing similar challenges.

Developing self-confidence in women

Whilst no statistical analysis was applied, Figure 2 shows how a range of behaviours pertaining to self-confidence are positively impacted by the coaching programme. This supports evidence for coaching to be an effective platform for learning and application of different tools and techniques, and ultimately for individuals to overcome the imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978). This process is triggered and initiated by becoming aware of automatic negative thoughts, which can then be addressed. This process was illustrated in our data on the example of young women and presented in Figure 4.

Learning techniques to manage conflict and handle difficult conversations in the group coaching session was also beneficial, positively impacting the participant's self-confidence. This supports previous research on the role of confidence in career progression within organisations (Bonney-well, 2016; Keller et al., 2015). Our data supports coaching as a tool for achieving this and is presented in Figures 4 and 5.

The psychological safety of online coaching

One of the key findings from this study is the importance of psychological safety when working with groups. There was a mixed response to how psychologically safe the participants felt during the online coaching programme.

Some individuals were quite happy to share their stories through WhatsApp, with one participant commenting how trust and relationships can be built with just two group sessions. In contrast, others felt they could trust the coach but not the group, particularly because some were direct colleagues. Edmondson (2002) argued that psychological safety is an essential foundation for effective learning and that structuring a collective learning process at the group or team level is critical. In a safe environment, there is more chance of having an open, honest discussion, and debate can take place without anyone feeling threatened (Edmondson, 2002).

The challenge for groups and organisations is how to create such an environment to build a shared vision, where people can speak from the heart about what matters (Senge, 1994). By fostering psychological safety, this will encourage individuals to speak up without worrying about judgment from others. It is vitally important to create an environment that encourages people to embrace potentially risky contributions. By creating this environment, the group is rewarded with new learning (Edmondson & Polzer, 2016). Our research illustrates the way in which online coaching can foster and develop psychological safety in groups and, in turn, create an environment where creativity, innovation and learning can thrive.

The fourth recommendation is for individuals and organisations to learn and appreciate the importance and the impact of psychological safety when working with groups. It does not take much to change the dynamics of group behaviour, so it is important to learn how to create an environment that is safe enough to take risks, which is where a coach can help. Companies who run leadership programmes should take the dimensions of psychological safety into account when designing online coaching programmes. There is a lot of literature on this topic in teamwork and team development, but very little on the subject in the coaching literature; creating an important area for future research.

Given the nature of the sample and the method used, the findings of this research are presented to stimulate the discussion on the topics raised and as potential suggestions for the development of hypotheses to be tested in further larger scales studies.

Sharon Jackson
Coaching and Behavioural Change Founder, UCan Training

Dr Dorota Joanna Bourne
Associate Professor of Coaching and Change Management, Henley Business School, University of Reading

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