

Beware the coaching scam?

I recently initiated a furious debate on the web about a coaching technique called EFT, by asking whether there was any evidence to support its remarkable claims. The furor - from both detractors and supporters, with “let’s keep an open mind” in the middle - made me reflect on what is and isn’t “legitimate” in the world of coaching (the word legitimate itself carries a significant baggage of judgementalism!) and how a serious practitioner could usefully structure their thinking about innovations in the field.

The pressure to professionalise coaching has led to a trend for “evidence-based coaching” - approaches and methods, which can be shown through academic or other verifiable study to be effective. Evidence-based coaching also assumes a grounding in verifiable theory. However, what constitutes evidence is not always agreed and it can be argued that some aspects of human interactions do not yet lend themselves to evidence-based research, using the tools we currently have at our disposal.

Coaching relationships exist in an environment of uncertainty and complexity, or as David Lane and Michael Cavanagh would say, they are complex adaptive systems. This implies that having a multitude of approaches and concepts is highly beneficial - diversity is vital in how complex systems evolve. At the same time, it opens up the door for the weird, the bizarre - and the scam.

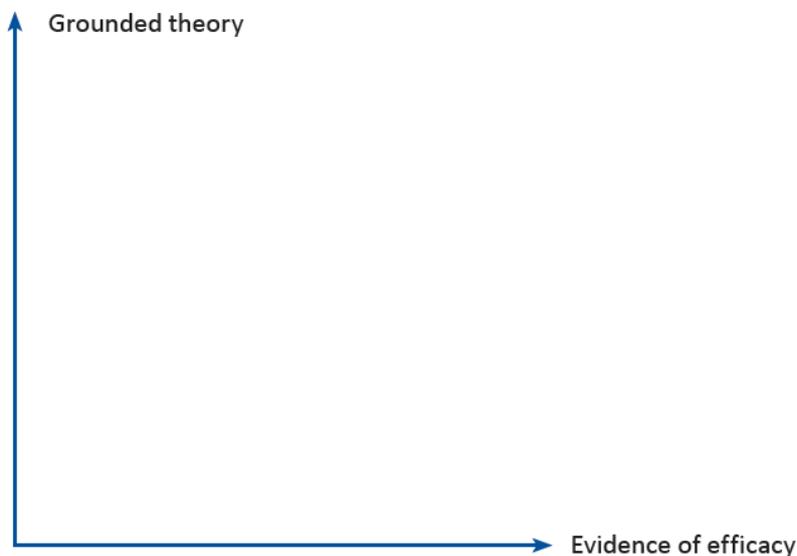


Figure 1: Credibility of coaching approaches 3 © Clutterbuck Associates 2011

Does it matter? At one level, no. We don't know how much of mainstream coaching works because of the placebo effect and if a way-out therapy helps people through placebo, so much the good. On the other hand, if the therapy prevents a client from seeking professional help for a condition that is not susceptible to placebo, it is both dangerous and unethical. For example, when a life coach claims to have "cured" a client of bi-polar disease, there is cause for concern!

The trouble is, there is no clear cut line between proven coaching methodologies and the coaching scam. It's a much greyer picture. To unravel some of the implications, I created the diagram above, which I have deliberately not populated, on the basis that I do not wish to impose my assessments on anyone else. But to take EFT, for example, on the reading correspondents so kindly directed me to in terms of evidence, I draw the conclusion that it scores very low on the groundedness of the theory, and moderately well on efficacy. (The evidence provided does not meet the most exacting scientific standards – for example, using double blind trials – but this is true of much other coaching research, too.)

Are there other signs that can help unravel whether an approach is useful or only for the credulous? Several years ago, I did a brief study of a wide range of alternative therapies, including homeopathy and reflexology. I've also observed (and often experienced) over the years a variety of semi-therapeutic movements, such as transcendental meditation. I've learned to be highly sceptical (well, I guess I also started that way), but at the same time to look for the core, if it exists, that has practical application.

One of my observations is that, broadly speaking, the more of a scam (and by scam I refer only to the delusional element of an approach, not the intent of its promoters) a therapy is, the more of the following characteristics it exhibits:

- Reliance on some mystical force or energy
- Requirement that practitioners (and/or clients) "take it on faith"
- Highly selective and biased use of scientific data to bolster claims of efficacy
- Pursuit of legitimacy by creating "master practitioners", who gather their own disciples
- Vehement rejection of traditional or mainstream therapies; and of scientific method, when it suits
- Defensiveness and avoidance of questioning basic assumptions of the therapy
- Charismatic and deeply flawed founder(s), treated with reverence by the disciples

There is a lot of similarity here with the creation and sustaining of cults. However, the observant reader will also note that some of these characteristics may be applied to what we would now regard as mainstream therapies. (Freud was both charismatic and deeply flawed as an individual!)

Because coaches differ widely in personality, background, education and simply their level of scepticism, it's inevitable that there will be a wide spectrum of responses to fringe therapies in coaching. To the sceptics, such as myself, I would say: "By all means dismiss fanciful theories as nonsense, but is there anything at all in the practical application, that could be useful or tested empirically?" To those, who have loyalty towards a fringe therapy, I would say: "Remember you have an obligation as a coach to question your own assumptions and beliefs. What is it in this approach that is truly and demonstrably useful to the client and what is more about you and your personal need for spiritual fulfilment?"

In the history of civilisation, the greatest changes come not from the centre (the mainstream) but from the far borders of the empire. Out there, on the fringes of coaching, are no doubt the germs of some of the mainstream ideas of the future. It would take someone much more prescient than me to sort out which, among the many contenders, those future mainstream ideas will be!