

Coaching To Unlock the Potential of Disabled People

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This research report is published as part of my Clore Social Fellowship. As part of the Clore Social Leadership Programme, each Fellow is required to undertake a piece of practice-based research. The purpose of the research is to help develop Fellows' skills as critical users of research, and to help develop the evidence base for the sector as a whole. The research focus, methodology and output are all chosen by the Fellow.

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1 Acknowledgements

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The event wouldn't of course, have been possible without our four webinar panellists; Steph Cutler, Simon Lydiard, Gwynneth Peddler and Danny West, to whom I am deeply obliged for their candid, compelling and thought provoking contributions.

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Lastly I would like to convey my deepest gratitude to the Clore Social Leadership programme, for providing me with the opportunity to more fully explore a question that has been foremost in my thoughts for some time.

Our Sponsor

The AoEC is committed to maintaining the highest professional standards, becoming the only UK coach training company to be accredited by the three top professional bodies, the International Coach Federation (ICF), European Mentoring & Coaching Council (EMCC) and the Association for Coaching (AC), as well as validated by Middlesex University. We are proud to support the provision of coach training to allow those with disabilities to follow a coaching career and would welcome anyone wishing to explore this further, to get in touch at info@aoec.com.

2 Introduction

Many organisations now invest in coaching as a method of improving the performance and impact of individuals, and teams. The Riddler report 2013, analysing trends in the use of executive Coaching, was compiled using data provided by such respondents as Allen & Overy, Barclays, BBC, Boeing, Deutsche Bank, Maersk Line, News International, various NHS organisations, PricewaterhouseCoopers, RWE npower, Save the Children and Siemens. The strikingly diverse nature of this list of contributors reveals the degree to which coaching is becoming valued within all sectors as a tool to bring out the best in people.

In addition to my career within the public and social sectors, I am also a qualified transformational performance coach. Consequently I have developed the profound belief that coaching would be an extremely effective tool for many of the most disadvantaged in society, including disabled people. And I must admit to finding it a little perplexing that coaching is a tool largely available only to executives and those in business whom have already achieved a degree of success in their careers. It seems to me that our society could be very different if excluded groups such as disabled people had access to coaching support to enable them to identify and set personal goals, to pursue and achieve ambitions and aspirations.

So, when I was lucky enough to be awarded a Fellowship on the 2013 Clore Social Leadership programme, I decided to use the opportunity offered by the practice based research element of the programme to further explore this question.

The London 2012 Effect

The London 2012 Paralympic games, for the first time, put disabled people on a world stage equivalent to that of their non-disabled counterparts. The inspiring feats and achievements we witnessed were of course testament to the talent and determination of paralympians. But it was also a powerful endorsement of what is possible when people obtain appropriate, dedicated coaching to support them to achieve their potential.

So the question this raises is, what could disabled people achieve in other arenas if such dedicated coaching support were available to them? .

3 Methodology

I was keen to adopt an innovative approach to this practice based research project and work with new media to deliver an interactive output, whilst ensuring the content was recorded and available for future use to prompt further debate and continue to generate ideas and actions around the topic of coaching and disability. I therefore decided the principal output for this project would be an on-line webinar event, bringing together a panel of disabled people, with knowledge and experience of personal performance coaching representing both coach and client's perspective.

The project consisted of two distinct phases.

- 1 A limited evidence gathering process, comprising circulation of a short questionnaire to disabled people experienced either as coaches or clients of performance coaching.**
- 2 A webinar event comprising of an on-line panel discussion of a number of overarching questions, based on the evidence obtained by the survey.**

The questionnaire respondents and webinar panellists were recruited by an invitation issued via E-Bulletin circulated to the Disability rights UK's Radiate Network. The Radiate Network has a membership of 250 disabled people from a diverse range of professional backgrounds and experience. A number of which to my knowledge have experienced coaching through passed Disability rights UK leadership programmes.

Volunteers from Radiate completed a questionnaire, and from this group, 4 panellists were identified based upon their experience of coaching. Questionnaires were also completed by a CSLP Fellow, a member of the AOEC alumnae and a former Paralympics athlete.

4 Survey Results

A total of 8 questionnaires were completed.

A copy of the full questionnaire is attached to this report as Appendix 1.

Section 1 - Coaching Experience

Respondents were invited to indicate the nature of their coaching experience, i.e. whether they are coaches, clients or indeed both.

- Five respondents were Coaches, five have experienced coaching as clients and two of whom indicated experience of both.

Section 2 - Sector

Respondents were invited to indicate the sector in which they have obtained their experience of coaching.

- One respondent was from a sporting background, being a former Paralympian and Paralympic coach. Three respondents were from a business background, two have experienced coaching in the community and two respondents indicated working in both business and community sectors.

Section 3 - Coaching Impact

Respondents were invited to indicate the degree to which they agreed with the 8 following statements by indicating one of five options (A) Strongly agree - to (E) Strongly disagree.

Respondents were further invited to provide additional information from their own experience, to more fully explain and illustrate their responses. Selections of some of the most informative extracts are included below. Where possible I have provided the exact wording as it appears on the questionnaire, but where this has not been possible without recreating the full response, I have only ensured the statement remains comprehensible.

1 Coaching has transformed how I see my potential.

There were four respondents who **agreed strongly** with this statement, two who **agreed**, one respondent was **undecided** and one who **disagreed**.

Some examples of additional illustrative information provided by respondents:

“Coaching encouraged me to look at situations in a different and more challenging way, enabling me to make more choices”

“I have been able to identify my core strengths and employ those skills in how I interact with others”

“Coaching helped hugely with my confidence and understanding of my own (often unrealised) talent”

“I have achieved far more with the support of my own coach in terms of my professional and personal goals”

2 Coaching has enabled me to overcome limiting beliefs about how my impairment limits me.

There were three respondents who **strongly agreed** with this statement. A further one who **agreed**, with two being **undecided** and two respondents who **strongly disagreed**.

Some examples of additional illustrative information provided by respondents:

Respondent chose **strongly disagree** because; *“the question assumes that I have limiting beliefs about my impairment. I didn't have such limiting beliefs”*

“I challenge my own beliefs as part of my everyday life as a result of my own coaching relationship”

“My experience of coaching has encouraged me to appreciate the abilities I have rather than focus on the disabilities”

“Coaching has made me communicate better with this who think just because I'm blind I will not be able to do things and more gently show them that actually a blind person can pretty much do anything they want to with the right amount of attitude, focus and support”

Strongly disagree because; *“my beliefs in how to organise my life to accommodate my desires and disability have never been a problem.”*

Respondent was **undecided** as uncertain whether *“a limiting belief is pessimism or reality”*

3 Coaching has enabled me to draw on inner resources my disability/impairment has given me, to achieve my goals.

Four respondents **strongly agreed**. There were two in **agreement**, with two being **undecided**.

Some examples of additional illustrative information provided by respondents:

Undecided because; *“I think coaching may have helped me to analyse and understand the range and limits to my capabilities and capacity to work and to manage whatever resources I have, thoughtfully and carefully”*

“Yes, in the sense it has supported me to see greater value and legitimacy in my skills and in helping me to make choices that maximise rather minimise my use of them”

Undecided because; *“Coaching I received was to increase my leadership skills and disability plays no part in that, as far as I'm concerned”*

“I have found that I am far more able to draw on a reservoir of calm within whereas previously I would have struggled”

“One area is determination, if I can do something, no matter how difficult, and I am determined to do it, I will and often extremely well. Through the reinforcement of confidence, coaching has encouraged me to go the extra mile”

“I am able to draw on my resourcefulness, resilience, determination and creativity”

“I was already doing much of this stuff, but coaching helped reinforce it”

“Coaching has certainly helped me to examine my motivation and get my mental approach to a sporting challenge or work related situation, properly focussed or in the right place”

4 Coaching has enabled me to identify and pursue a particular purpose, role or ambition in life.

There were five respondents who **agreed strongly** with this statement. Two **agreed** with it and one was **undecided**.

Some examples of additional illustrative information provided by respondents:

“Coaching helped me find solutions to some weaknesses and helped me achieve my goal quicker”

“Yes, I became a coach as result of entering a coaching relationship”

“Coaching encouraged me to strive successfully to achieve promotion to the senior Civil service”

“Without a doubt, I have found that through both receiving coaching and since becoming a delegate on the Practitioners course I have found a career path that is interesting, challenging and rewarding”

“Made me look carefully at how I needed to rethink my tactics, drawing on my inner resources to help me explore another path”

“Not in a fundamental sense, but articulating and focussing on short/medium term goals has been helpful”

“What was always a general interest evolved into a clear area to research and is now a clear focus of my work”

5 If Coaching were more widely available to disabled people in general, many more of us would be able to lead more independent lives.

All respondents **agreed strongly** with this statement.

Some examples of additional illustrative information provided by respondents:

“Coaching encourages people to look at their inner resources to face daunting situations”

“I have absolutely no doubt that if coaching were more widely available to the disabled community that there would be a significant increase in the number of disabled people in a position to be able to work, either through identification of the inner skills and strengths or through realisation of potential doorways to careers which they may have discounted due to their disability”

“The impact of coaching has been to encourage me to be ambitious and confident - factors that I feel unlock talent and enable more independence”

“Coaching enables disabled people to network and challenge their isolation”

6 If Coaching were more widely available to disabled people, even greater numbers would participate in employment and/or volunteering.

All respondents supported this statement. Seven **agreed strongly** and one **agreed**.

Some examples of additional illustrative information provided by respondents:

“Coaching has definitely enabled my clients to participate in employment and volunteering”

“Coaching has taught me to enjoy working more. Whereas, too often in the past the difficulties that my disability caused have just felt overwhelming”

“Particularly in supporting job retention when disability acquired during working age, helping people to stay in employment”

7 If coaching were more widely available to disabled people, there would be a greater impact on the perceptions of individuals and society about disability and the capabilities of disabled people.

Five respondents **agreed strongly**, one **agreed** and two were **undecided**.

Some examples of additional illustrative information provided by respondents:

“The more people with disabilities who mentor or coach will in turn have an impact on their colleagues without disabilities accepting them as peer professionals”

“Coaching enables people to find their inner strengths and potential and would therefore portray a far more positive image of disabled people”

“I have surprised many people who just wouldn't have thought that someone with the disabilities I have could be so successful”

“Coaching builds confidence it leads to increased positive role models”

8 If coaching were more widely available to disabled people in other than the sporting setting, we would see more disabled role models as business and community leaders.

All respondents supported this statement. Five **agreed strongly** and the remaining three **agreed**.

Some examples of additional illustrative information provided by respondents:

“I feel passionately that more coaching for disabled people would enable more of us to become role models across various sectors”

“I believe it is far more likely that disabled people that receive good coaching would have a much broader understanding of their potential in the work and business environments”

“The financial climate at the moment is holding back the opportunities to coach future models”

5 The Webinar

The Webinar was held on 14 October 2013.

The full recording of the event can be heard at:

<https://AoEC.webex.com/AoEC/ldr.php?AT=pb&SP=MC&rID=24440952&rKey=8EDCEC8689C29EFE>

The event was hosted by the AOEC and Chaired by the Academy's Chief Executive John Leary-Joyce.

The panel consisted of five panellists all of whom are disabled people, experienced in coaching, either as coaches or clients.

The Panel

Andy Shipley (also co-facilitating)

Danny West

Simon Lydiard

Steph Cutler

Gwynneth Peddler

The panel was invited to individually respond and discuss the following questions, which have been derived from the questionnaire feedback.

How has coaching worked for disabled people outside of sport?

What needs to happen to replicate such success on a more widespread basis, for disabled people including that not in work?

Panellists were then invited to respond the question;

If, instead of a 'work capability', 'assessment', unemployed disabled people had a coaching conversation, they would find more personally sustainable and fulfilling roles, making a valuable and longer term contribution to the economy and society?'

Lastly there was a short discussion about what action should be taken going forward.

6 Conclusions

What is clear from the feedback obtained from the survey and webinar is that coaching enables disabled people to recognise and apply their gifts, skills and abilities, such as resourcefulness, resilience and determination, and focus less on their impairment or health condition as an issue. It builds self confidence, enabling disabled people to strive for goals such as finding a new career, promotion at work or learning to use public transport. Panellists were also clear that coaching offers a very viable career path for many disabled people as it employs many of the resources they have needed to develop to manage their lives. Its accessibility of coaching, through technology such as Skype, makes it possible to practice from locations that suit all participants.

Where coaching has been available through initiatives such as the Cabinet Office's "Leaders Unlimited" and disability rights UK's Leadership programmes, coaching has proven a very successful tool, enabling disabled people to achieve greater impact. However, neither of the leadership programmes referred to here are currently running, and one panellist's experience would indicate that willingness to invest in coaching support appears to have diminished within the Civil Service in the six years since "Leaders Unlimited" ran.

It was also the view of the webinar panel that coaching support shouldn't be the preserve of leadership initiatives and should be available throughout organisations and within the community. The point was made very strongly that many disabled people don't have the financial means to enable them to access coaching support or pursue coaching as a career option. It was felt that coach training organisations should explore ways to make their programmes more accessible and available to people of diverse means and backgrounds, and the example of a scholarship scheme was mentioned in the webinar. There was also strong support for peer coaching initiatives within the community, where coach training is provided through national disability organisations into community groups to enable people to support each other to build confidence and become more active.

It was identified that a primary barrier to this approach is the general lack of awareness of what coaching is, and what it can achieve. It was felt that until more organisations and businesses adopted a coaching culture, many disabled people would continue to experience a sense of failure and develop low expectations and aspirations for themselves. If more companies, social and public sector organisations were made aware of the business benefits of adopting a coaching culture the disabled people for whom they are responsible could be enabled to have greater impact. If for example, Employment Advisers adopted a coaching approach, their disabled clients would be able to identify their skills and abilities, increase their self confidence and establish what they can contribute, breaking the cycle of diminished confidence, low motivation and minimal aspirations from others and themselves.

7 Recommendations

AoEC and its fellow coaching organisations should find ways to more actively increase awareness of coaching and what it can achieve, among organisations and individuals. This should also include activities to raise the profile of disabled people who've succeeded through coaching, seeking to achieve the kind of national recognition gained by Paralympians.

AoEC and fellow coaching organisations should work with private, public and voluntary sector organisations to support the development of a coaching culture.

AoEC and fellow coaching organisations should explore and develop ways to make coaching and coach training more affordable and accessible to those of limited means and diverse backgrounds, including of course, disabled people and those with long term health conditions.

In order to achieve a wide spread recognition and adoption of the coaching approach across the corporate, statutory and social sectors; it might be helpful for AoEC and its counterparts to adopt a collaborative approach. This would offer the advantage of sharing the financial load of such initiatives as scholarship schemes, and achieve greater, more rapid impact towards adoption of a coaching culture across all sectors.