

Use it or lose it!

How many times have you heard this mantra? Intuitively, and practically, it seems to ring true. But is there any science to back it up? The answer is an emphatic yes.

One person who has made it her business to assemble evidence is Professor Felicia Huppert of Cambridge University. She is a psychologist who promotes the notion of positive ageing.

One thing that is certain is that we are all ageing! And not all of us look forward to the implications of getting older. Felicia was giving the annual Meyler Campbell lecture in November and her audience was a wide range of business coaches, many of them quite mature. The bad news is that our bodies do decline with age even if we are lucky to stay fit and well. Muscle strength and oxygen uptake follow a relentless downward curve, our eyes require more light, our hearing drops off at higher frequencies – even our sense

of smell becomes less acute. However, there is plenty of evidence that keeping physically fit mitigates these effects.

Every decade, life expectation goes up by 2 years. We will spend about one third of our lives in a post-retirement phase. Felicia now had the coaches gripped, and moved on to the brain. Apparently, our brains also work less well as we age but the decline is not so great as other parts of our body. The scientific evidence shows that older people's cognitive function is more dispersed than the younger ones i.e. the range widens, with some older people more than keeping up with the youngsters but others declining severely. Functional MRI allows us to see which parts of the brain come into play when, for example, we are solving a problem. In older people, more areas 'light up', suggesting that the brain is adapting to a loss of function.

Higher education earlier in life is a positive indicator and exercising the brain regularly is essential. Whether you are working on a business strategy,

a tax return or doing Sudoku or a computer game is less important than the mere fact of using your brain like a muscle. The brain is plastic and is capable of neurogenesis. In other words, the brain can rebuild itself and find new pathways if we challenge it.

What about the psychology? Intriguingly, mental disorders such as depression fall away as we get older – but are disturbingly high in the working population. Perhaps the 30s and 40s are the time of maximum stress in building careers and raising families, with the added realisation that we are not going to become another Steve Jobs or Prime Minister! There is a very strong correlation between our psychological wellbeing and how the brain functions. This supports the approach we have been advancing in our coaching: positive psychology. Put simply, we are more likely to change and adapt if we focus on positive outcomes and feel good about doing something. ■



Robocoach

I'm logged in and I am ready for my next avatar-based coaching session. The screen fills with the smooth features and impeccable hair of my avatar coach, Mary Jane.

Mary Jane: Hi Tom, how are you feeling on this beautiful day?

Tom: Pretty crap, actually

MJ (expressionless): Tom, would you like to expand on that comment?

T: Not really.

MJ: It is necessary that we understand your feelings before we set our objectives for this session

T: Well if you must know, I had trouble starting the car, got stuck in awful traffic, discovered I left my phone in the toilet at home, and had a row with the boss about her pointless email that I didn't answer within one hour. Apart from that, I'm fine.

MJ (smiling smoothly): Thank you, Tom. Now we can agree our objectives. What are your objectives for this session?

T: I don't really have any. Can't we just talk?

MJ: All executive coaching must follow the GROW model. We must have goals for this session that are congruent with the goals for our programme.

T: I know all that stuff, but I just want to talk in a – well – unstructured way and see where we end up. We might discover something new or insightful...

MJ: It is necessary to follow a structure to reach a goal.

T: I feel a severe headache coming on.

(Logs off abruptly and runs into the canteen to talk to someone – anyone...)

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Keary Harper was founded in 2000 by John Keary and Rosemary Harper. We are full-time coaches with decades of experience. All our consultants are business people first and last, but are also well-versed in psychometrics. All of us have led at a senior level.

KEARY HARPER
SENIOR EXECUTIVE COACHING

SPRING 2010
NEWSLETTER

COACHING SUSTAINS REAL CHANGE BECAUSE IT IS A PROGRAMME, NOT A SINGLE EVENT – AND PROVIDES A FRAMEWORK FOR LIFE-LONG DEVELOPMENT.

THE FUTURE OF COACHING

It's our 10th birthday! We were tempted to reminisce but thought you, our readers, would be more interested in the future. We have looked far and wide across the world of coaching to see what is going on. Some of the items we have picked up are already seriously influencing executive coaching; one is a light-hearted journey into an all-electronic world.



STRENGTHS

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Psychology is a relatively new science. The big three: Freud, Jung and Adler were the dominant influences in the first half of the last century when psychology became a recognised discipline. Its primary focus was on the pathology of individuals i.e. those people who were ill or considered mentally abnormal. The normal functioning of human beings was much less studied. All the attention was on looking for things that were going wrong and attempting to fix them. Astonishingly, it was only in 1998 that the then president of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman, called for the profession to shift its emphasis fundamentally onto the majority of healthy, normal humans. He is now the standard bearer for a new movement: *Positive Psychology*.

Perversely, we go through life looking for problems. The imprinting starts at school when we go through tests and examinations at every stage. Parents, teachers – and children – focus on the weaknesses and deficiencies that need addressing. In adult life at work, most of us are now exposed to some kind of 360-degree feedback. And what do we do?

We obsess over the low scores and the negative comments, sometimes completely missing the good things people say about us.

In our leisure life, we might get some coaching for our sport. Typically, in tennis or golf, for example, the coach will give us a running commentary on the things we are doing wrong: "don't lift your head", "throw the ball higher", "don't bend your elbows" etc.

Fortunately, in our lives, there will be those occasions when you receive positive and encouraging comment. Remember the times when someone praised something you were doing and you literally glowed with pleasure – and went on to try even harder? The teacher who noticed the things you were really good at and made you feel significant? The sports coach who watched quietly and then reinforced the aspects of your game that you were getting right?





Professor Alex Linley,
Founding Director CAPP

“Organisations have an ideal person in mind when they recruit, draw up succession plans or run development programmes. This well-rounded paragon of virtue doesn't exist – never did! Much more intelligent to identify and harness strengths, manage weaknesses and moderate learned behaviours”

In the British working culture it is strikingly rare to receive praise, but just occasionally one has a boss who picks up on the things you are doing well – and says so. You might even have felt ten foot tall for a few minutes!

Essentially, what we are talking about is motivation. Not the version supposedly generated by vast bonuses or the use of the corporate jet. The version that is cost-free and depends on one human being noticing what another is doing – in positive terms. Simple, really... and if it's that simple why aren't more people doing it?

Because we are programmed to do the opposite, and perhaps because we are culturally embarrassed to give praise.

At this point, you are probably saying “hang on a minute, we all have weaknesses and you simply can't ignore those; what you are proposing is just pink and fluffy”. Quite right to the first statement – but we are not for a moment suggesting that weaknesses should be ignored or translated into weasel words like “developmental opportunities”. We are arguing for a shift, a rebalancing, from negative to positive.

In 2008 we became founding members of the UK-based Centre for Applied Positive Psychology because we knew from our coaching practice that this philosophy is so powerful. Last year, CAPP brought out a brilliant yet easy-to-complete self-assessment tool.

The self-assessment tool enables us to look at ourselves in four ways:

Realised strengths

- The things we love to do

Unrealised strengths

- Ditto but we use them less often or never

Learned behaviours

- The things we can do when needed

Weaknesses

- The things we find hard to do and may avoid

Why is it brilliant?

Because if we know that we have strengths we are more motivated and find it easier to tackle our weaknesses. And because it may be telling us subtly that we are over-using some of our realised strengths. Or that our unrealised strengths have real relevance to the job we are doing and should be used. Or that we can turn a weakness into a learned behaviour by getting support and taking a few risks in order to make the new behaviour more comfortable.

This analysis of strengths – and weaknesses – is the ideal platform for executive coaching. It forces us to re-think old habits and assumptions and to re-formulate one's leadership style. It can even challenge us to do things we thought impossible!

Of all the ideas that have emerged over the last ten years, we believe that strengths-based coaching is the most powerful and practical. It now forms a central part of our coaching repertoire and has proved hugely helpful with our clients. As one told us:

“The use of strengths helped tremendously in keeping me focussed on what I could do – rather than what I was failing at – and to build on this... My confidence and therefore my commitment have increased significantly, and I have progressed from questioning my value to achieving all my objectives for the organisation.” ■

HORSES & COACHING

Given this title, your first thought might be to put the coach before the horse, and your next thought might be “I know a lot of pubs called the Coach and Horses”. Quite so! But how about using horses in executive coaching?



It was a sunny but chilly day in May. The Chiltern Hills were covered in blossom and the grass was a lush green. I was striding down the field. On my left shoulder was a magnificent chestnut mare, keeping pace with my every stride. We were linked together by a single strand of wool – extraordinary!



The day had begun with Pam Billinge and Harriet Worthington of the Equest Partnership explaining to our group of five ‘coachees’ why horses could help us understand more about ourselves and the way we interact with and, crucially, lead other people. We paid particular attention when they reminded us that horses might not mean to hurt you but they are big, heavy and powerful if you get in their way.

As we left the comfort of the canvas yurt to be introduced to our equine companions, we all felt apprehensive – even those of us who had ridden horses before. We had to influence the horses to move in the directions we wanted, but without riding them at all.

At first it seemed impossible. Then frustration gave way to an inner calm and, in some cases, a sense of fun. The horses began to respond and we were on our way.

In the afternoon, Harriet and Pam asked us to work as a team to lead the horses into marked out squares and then to jump over an obstacle course. Again, it all seemed utterly impossible. All of us had worked in large organisations and had become ‘hard wired’ to apply logic to any situation. The more logical and competitive the team tried to be, the less effective and more frustrated we became. Then one of the team started joking and leaping around. The horses responded to this physical display and within minutes we had them round the obstacle course and raring to do more.

The implications for leading people are profound. As Pam and Harriet pointed out, horses give you direct and immediate feedback on your behaviour – especially your manner and confidence. Unlike humans, they are not concerned with massaging or filtering the message. They have no hidden agendas: if they feel comfortable with you and pick up your sense of purpose they will work with you. If not, no amount of pulling, pushing or cajoling will budge them.

Coaching with horses is quite new, but it is already showing up in quite a few parts of the World. There are several businesses in the UK; in the USA they are mostly located in the wide open spaces: New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Minnesota. Here the coaching is more closely identified with life coaching. In mainland Europe, we have found horse coaching in Mannheim and just outside Bordeaux.

Both are aimed squarely at the corporate market, and the French website reminds us that the origin of the word management is literally from the leading of horses. At the other end of the world, there is even a tropical version in North Queensland!



Where does this fit with ‘mainstream’ executive coaching? For some individuals it can be a powerful experience to understand the link between the impact of their physicality and their ability to influence and lead. It is complementary, and could easily be part of a normal coaching programme. However, we believe that its greatest impact is with existing teams: project teams, functional teams and even boards could gain immensely. Forget paintballing or quad biking: this is the real deal! ■