Discover proven strategies for applying positive psychology within your coaching practice

Written by Robert Biswas-Diener, a respected researcher, psychologist, life and organizational coach, and expert in positive psychology, Practicing Positive Psychology Coaching presents a wide range of practical interventions and tools you can put to use right away in your coaching practice.

Each intervention is clearly outlined and, where appropriate, illustrated by case studies from organizational and life coaching. Providing unique assessments that can be used to evaluate client resources and goals, this practical guide introduces tools unique to this book that every professional can use in their practice, including:

- Findings from new research on goal commitment strategies, motivation, growth-mindset theory, and goal revision
- A decision tree for working specifically with Snyder’s Hope Theory in the coaching context
- An easy-to-use assessment of “positive diagnosis,” which measures client strengths, values, positive orientation toward the future, and satisfaction
- Measures of self-esteem, optimism, happiness, personal strengths, motivation, and creativity
- Guidance for leading clients through organizational and common life transitions including layoffs, leadership changes, university graduation, middle age, and retirement

Filled with reflective exercises for use in your own personal and professional development, Practicing Positive Psychology Coaching also includes guidance and recommendations for marketing a positive psychology coaching practice.

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PRACTICING POSITIVE
Psychology Coaching
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ASSESSMENT, ACTIVITIES, AND STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

ROBERT BISWAS-DIENER

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PRACTICING POSITIVE
Psychology Coaching
Education to Empowerment: An Introduction to Applying Positive Psychology Coaching

In 2007 an extraordinary thing happened to me: I published my first ever book, *Positive Psychology Coaching*.\(^1\) It was a defining moment, much like getting my doctorate or the birth of my children. Holding the book—the actual book—in my hands represented a huge accomplishment and marked a turning point in my life. We all know about Steven Covey’s time matrix: People are likely to continue putting off those tasks that are important but not necessarily urgent. Well, I was lucky enough not to fall into that trap. I was one of those folks who took this lifelong dream—writing a book—off the back burner and made it happen. The book was written with my co-author Ben Dean over the course of a year, and it was the result of countless hours of phone calls, interviews, reviews of the research literature, and even a couple of international trips. Those grueling hours of lonely writing under the emotional pressure of looming deadlines had all paid off. It is difficult to describe the intense mix of relief, accomplishment, pride, and fatigue I felt. I was, at long last, a published author. I had a small book launch in England, received the occasional letter of thanks from strangers in places like India and Australia, and was invited to give talks and coaching demonstrations. My star seemed to be on the rise.

And then a funny thing happened. A few months after the publication of the book, Ben and I received a scathing review on Amazon.com. The author of the review, which ran about 1,200 words—the length of a short magazine article—clearly did not like the book. He referred to Ben and me as “academics with no writing skills” and, at one point, said, “This book was so bad, in so many ways, it’s hard to know where to start.” The review included stinging phrases like “a shallow rehash” and “I don’t know which was more painful: their condescending prose, or the glee with which they seem to think they’ve said something useful.” The reviewer concluded with a list of books people should read instead of *Positive Psychology Coaching*. Again, it is difficult to describe the overwhelming emotions I felt while reading this review. I was crushed. This book had been the major project representing a year of my life. It was the very activity to which I chose to commit myself precisely because I felt it was so worthwhile. I instantly thought of every instance that I told my son “I’m sorry I can’t play with you right now, Daddy’s working on his book.” Would I have been better off to abandon the writing project in favor of more family time?
What other opportunities had I missed while I was—arguably—wasting a year on a useless book? For the first time since I had begun working on the project I began to question the wisdom of my decision and the quality of the product I had produced.

What followed, as you might expect, was a period of depression. I had very definitely been knocked out of my saddle. I quit working on research projects and quit writing magazine articles. I went into each coaching session shaky and uncertain of my own abilities. I wondered if I was really a laughingstock to others and just didn’t realize it. And it wasn’t just me: The book sales dipped sharply after the review appeared online. Dozens of people on Amazon.com reported that the review was helpful to them and one even took the time to comment: “Saved me reading the book.” I wondered what type of person I was that people had to be saved from me and from my best efforts. Even now, more than two years later, I find writing about these events painful.

Fortunately, the depression didn’t last. After a couple weeks of floundering I bounced back. I began to see that, between the harsher criticisms and strong opinions about tone and language use, the reviewer was correct on many points. In fact, I should go on record here saying that I really bear the reviewer no personal ill will. It might surprise you to learn this, but he and I have exchanged some very friendly e-mails in the time since his review was published. He apologized for the tone of the review, which he said was written largely for effect and that, upon further consideration, he thought was disrespectful. I accepted his apology and believe he meant it sincerely. Despite all that, I have to acknowledge that the reviewer made some legitimate points and illuminated the differences in expectations I had as a writer from those held by many of my readers. I had thought that, as an expert positive psychology researcher, I would introduce coaches to the fascinating new science of positive psychology. I further expected that readers would simply want to take this information and create their own interventions in their own ways, appropriate to their own coaching practices. These ideas, as I later learned, were somewhat off the mark. In my experience with coaches since that time, I have found that most are eager for ready-made interventions and are principally interested in research results when they are couched in terms of “next steps,” “practical skills,” or “applications.” That is, as an academic I have always been excited by ideas, and I realized, all too late, that coaches are generally excited by action.

What the reviewer wanted—and I think he was right to want this—was practical next steps: clear suggestions for translating the research into workable questions, assessments, and interventions for use with coaching clients. His review expressed, if nothing else, his frustration with what I had done with *Positive Psychology Coaching*. I had discussed many studies but rarely mentioned the relation of these exciting research results to coaching. As an expert, I failed to accept the mantle of leadership and offer clever ways to spin the straw of positive psychology into coaching gold. For my own part, I had assumed that my initial mission of merely educating readers about positive psychology would be enough. The interesting aspect of all this was that it was not the harsh review that changed my thinking—although it certainly presented a red flag that suggested my thinking needed to be changed. What really turned me around was conducting workshops with coaches. I began standing in front of groups of coaches in places like Iceland, Turkey, Canada, and Denmark, and they all wanted the exact same thing as my reviewer: They wanted tools, not
concepts or ideas. Over the course of many workshops my attitude evolved from one of wanting to educate people to one of wanting to inspire people to one of wanting to empower people. And here, at last, is the heart of my critic’s comments: a plea to be empowered.

I want to be clear, up front, about my goals for this volume. I do not apologize for my earlier book—indeed, I do not believe there is anything to apologize for. I am quite proud of it. Nor do I write this book as a means of compensating for failures related to the first book. Finally, I do not write this book as a defense against my earlier critics. Instead, I wanted to write an additional book that represents my own personal growth. My goal for the first volume was to educate people about the emerging science of positive psychology, and my goal for this book is to present a wide range of useful tools based on that science. As the title of this book implies, I am interested in strategies for assessing and applying positive psychology within the coaching context. To the extent that you, the reader, can walk away from this book with new ideas that you can immediately put into practice in your own coaching, this will have been a successful endeavor.

Why Are You Reading This Book?

It may sound like an unusual question, but I would like you to stop and think about why you are reading this book. Are you hoping to learn something about the science of positive psychology that you didn’t know before? Are you hoping to walk away from the experience with actual tools that you can use with your clients? Are you hoping to breathe new life into your existing coaching practice by adopting a new philosophical orientation? Are you hoping that this book will, itself, serve as a sort of coaching education? The answer to the question of why you are reading this book is important because it sets up expectations for the book’s contents and its usefulness to you.

It may help you to think about the two coaching books I have written—this volume and the earlier Positive Psychology Coaching: Putting the science of happiness to work for your clients—as I do: as a single book divided into two volumes, one intended to present a foundation of science and the second written with the purpose of expanding on this foundation in practical ways. This process, which I call “education to empowerment,” reflects the same approach I use in my international workshops. I begin with a seed of knowledge (education), introducing participants to a new idea such as the notion that developing strengths might lead to success more than overcoming weaknesses. From there I move to inspiration, in which I show that this knowledge can be used in exciting ways to improve performance. Using the strengths example, I demonstrate my ability to accurately spot strengths in strangers using very little information. In truth, my ability to spot strengths is not some prodigious talent I have, but rather, it is the result of countless hours of practice. Even so, my workshop participants find this inspiring, to watch someone who is masterful at a skill. Psychologists know much about inspiration, which we sometimes call “elevation.” Elevation is an emotional reaction related to awe at the performance of another person. This emotional engagement is just what the “education” piece often lacks, and is exactly what my critic was complaining about. Moving people into