

We hope you found our first two Research Bulletins interesting and useful (if you missed out on either, please let us know and we'll send you copies). The first Bulletin was a study of paying clients. We found different clients had different expectations of executive coaching and that 30% saw coaching as a process of transformational change. In our second study we considered the coachee's perspective and found the top two reported benefits of executive coaching to be 'access to a sounding board' and an 'opportunity to reflect'. In our third study we pursue the theme of personal change through reflection, and consider the potential use of e-mail to support coaching. For those who value the face-to-face experience of coaching, to talk of e-mail may seem distasteful, heresy even, but we discovered that e-mail may already be serving an unrecognised role in the change process that often takes place during coaching. Interested? Read on...

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Coaching as a reflective practice and the use of 'narrative e-mails'

Summary

This study documents a hitherto unrecognised set of techniques coaches may use to support reflective practice – the use of 'narrative e-mails'.

For many of us, e-mails constitute a chore, hours spent at our computers trying to clear the never ending flow of messages. Yet we know of coaches who use e-mail to summarise the content of sessions and record actions. With reference to writings by Drake and others in the field of narrative psychology and coaching, it occurred to us there may be other benefits in writing to coachees, benefits that haven't yet been fully explored. E-mail may offer a valuable tool for coaching, not as the main medium by which coaching takes place, but as a complementary medium to support reflective practice.

In this study we looked at over a hundred e-mails sent by coaches to coachees. We found that these coaches use e-mails primarily to summarise the content of sessions and to record actions. But we uncovered other uses of e-mail besides, other functions that several coaches seem to be using already, if often unwittingly. We discuss our findings in the context of transformational change and the role of reflection.

The Study

Eleven coaches participated in the study, nominating a total of 32 coachees. Coachees participated in a short telephone interview and consented to share e-mails written to them over the course of their coaching assignment with the research team. We asked coachees a series of open-ended questions, exploring the value of e-mails, and three

quantitative questions that allowed us to compare our results to earlier studies from the world of narrative therapy. We asked coaches a series of similar open-ended questions, to understand their *intentions* in writing e-mails, and the process they go through in composing these notes.

Context – 'narrative letters'

Drake (2007) writes that the narrative approach to coaching is based on "*the observation that the stories clients tell about themselves are important threads in the fabric of their identities*". He suggests that while coaching often takes place at episodic and behavioural levels, "*deeper changes are more likely when broader narrative patterns and narration strategies are also addressed.*"

Drake (2008) provides a simple example of the narrative approach in action. He writes of 'Susan', a middle-aged manager who had just been passed over for promotion, who through coaching was seeking to be better prepared for future opportunities.

"In working with her stories about what had happened, we discovered a disconnection between how she recollected herself ('I'm just a trainer'), how she carried herself now ('I'm well respected by the leadership team for my opinions on development') and how she imagined herself ('Women [like me] don't get promoted here'). Bringing the stories together in the same conversation allowed her to see the ways in which she downplayed her actual experience in deference to the stories she told about her past and future."

By helping Susan to surface her story, Drake empowered her to shape a new story that served her better in pursuit of her goals.

So what then of letters and e-mails?

“After a particularly meaningful session, a client walks away aglow with provocative new thoughts, but a few blocks away, the exact words that had struck home as so profound may already be hard to recall... But the words in a letter don’t fade and disappear the way conversation does; they endure through time and space.” (Epston, 1994)

As the pioneers of narrative therapy, Epston and White placed great emphasis upon the use of ‘narrative letters’, written by the therapist to the client after a counselling session. Their clients said these letters constituted 40–90% of the value of a course of therapy, and that one letter was worth 4½ face-to-face sessions (Freeman, Epston & Lobovits, 1997). Nylund & Thomas (1994) reported similar findings.

Fox (2003) reviewed the potential uses of a narrative letter. These include:

1 Recording what happens in a session

Epston (1994) places great emphasis on quoting verbatim:

“Because therapeutic letters evolved as a way for me to include – and privilege – the client’s viewpoint... I tried to stay very true to the exact words they used, quoting them as often as possible.”

Freeman, Epston & Lobovits (1997) say:

“What distinguishes a narrative letter is that it... tells a story rather than being expository or explicatory. The letter engages the reader not so much by developing an argument to a logical conclusion as by inquiring what might happen next.”

Barry (2007) talks of the importance of *“applauding client efforts to author and enact a preferred story.”* This is consistent with the value that White and Epston ascribe to providing tangible evidence of support and interest.

2 Documenting new knowledge & insights

In therapy a letter can be useful when someone comes across a situation they know is going to be stressful. The letter serves as a reminder of how they plan to tackle that situation.

3 Engaging others

Helping to make others aware of new preferred stories enables them to become actively engaged in ‘thickening’ that story.

4 Celebrating the transition from one identity to another

Asserting a ‘rite of passage’ facilitates the transition from one story to another, helping the individual to consolidate a newfound ‘way of being’.

We wondered if coaches who already use e-mail might already be using e-mails for some or all of these uses. The results suggested that indeed they were – often unwittingly.

Results

Quantitative results

We asked coachees three questions, similar to those used by Nylund & Thomas (1994) and Epston/White.

1. How helpful were the e-mails (very helpful, helpful, not helpful, harmful)?
2. Of the value you derived from coaching, what percentage was attributable to the e-mails?
3. How many face-to-face sessions were the e-mails worth?

Quantitative results

	This study	Epston/White (97)	Nylund/Thomas (94)
Helpful/unhelpful	Very helpful	n/a	Very helpful
% value	20% (n=30)	40-90%	53%
Face-to-face sessions	<1.0 (n=19)	4.5	3.2

Coachees found the e-mails to be ‘very helpful’, constituting an average 20% of the value of the overall coaching assignment.

The numbers were not as high as those found by the family therapists, but at the same time we were not comparing eggs with eggs. Whilst all the ‘narrative letters’ were written by narrative therapists, we applied no such criteria to picking participant coaches. Accordingly, these results triggered our curiosity further as to:

- i) what kind of value the e-mails currently represent
- ii) what further potential value they might add.

Qualitative results

1 Coachees

We asked **coachees** open ended questions around the value of e-mails. Reported benefits are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Value ascribed to e-mails by coachees (n=32)

	Value (n=32)
Record of content	24
Actions	22
Helping me to reflect	15
Positive/supportive/affirming	11
Access to a second perspective	9
Keeping me honest	8
Something I can use at work	7
Helped me track my progress	6
A document I can share with others	6
Evidence that my coach has understood my perspective	4
Generating new insights	4
Mark the end of my assignment	1

As expected 'recording the content of a session' and listing 'actions' top the list. But we saw other benefits too, indeed all the potential uses of a 'narrative letter' listed by Fox were represented:

- 15 of 32 coachees talked about the value of e-mails in helping them to reflect.
- 11 talked of the positive and affirming nature of the e-mails. For example: *"His humanity around my personal challenges validated his genuine interest in me as a person."*
- 7 talked of the use of the e-mail when coming across the kind of challenges they had been working on in coaching. *"I go back to the e-mails in between sessions, as a frame of reference in trying to change my behaviour."*
- 6 talked about sharing the content of e-mails with others, mostly in development conversations, but also in communicating the progress of coaching with sponsors in the organisation.
- 1 even cited the use of e-mail in marking an important transition for her at the end of her assignment, a kind of 'rite of passage': *"I hold on to the ones toward the end, where she said she noticed the positive effect on me of the new job. Talking about our 'ending' I found really confirming."*

2 Coaches

Most **coaches** talked about the value of e-mails in terms of summarising content and actions, but also other intentions (Table 2).

Table 2: Coach's intent in sending an e-mail (n=11)

	Value (n=11)
Facilitate reflection	6
Enable coaches to track progress over time	6
Demonstrate support and interest	4
Facilitate new insights	4
Demonstrate understanding	3
Offer suggestions or advice	2

The list of intents is shorter than the list of perceived values, suggesting that some of those perceived values may be hidden to the coach.

Discussion

None of the coaches we engaged in the study would necessarily call themselves 'narrative coaches'. And not all of their coachees were going through a process of 'deeper' change (Drake, 2007). Nonetheless the study suggests that:

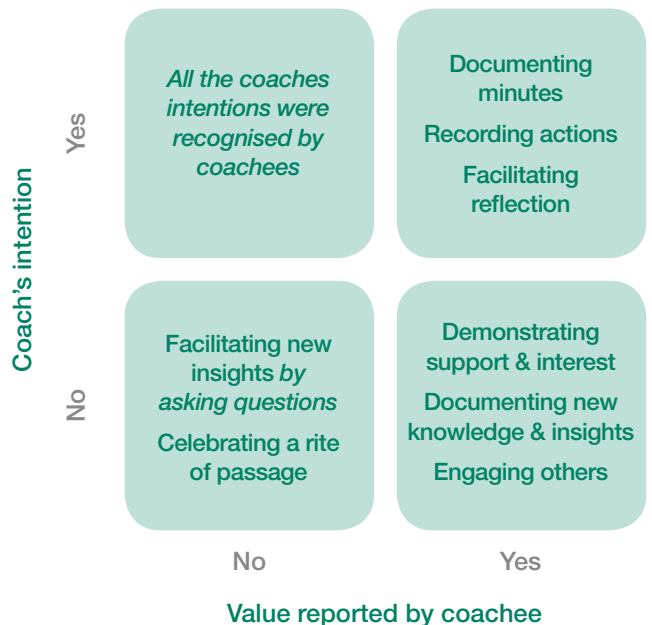
E-mails can be a very useful medium for facilitating reflection, and for supporting the ongoing developmental process. Some may ask – why does the coach not encourage the coachee to write their own notes? Indeed two of our 32 coachees said they do prefer to write their own notes, and derive little value from a note written by the coach. But nine coachees said they much preferred the coach to do it for them.

"I need to be engaged in the session, so it's not practical for me to take notes – my thoughts don't emerge in a structured way. The e-mails were a means of making a bridge to the next session without taking a step back. I needed the calibration. Without the e-mails it would have taken another two sessions for me to get to the same point."

Other coachees talked about note taking as a skill, and complimented their coach on having better skills in this area.

E-mails can serve other functions too. If we plot the values cited by both coaches and coachees we can construct a kind of 'Johari Window' around this practice (Table 3):

Table 3: Intentionality vs. perceptions of value



The majority of our 11 coaches *did* include as one of their intentions 'facilitating reflection'. Fewer though were explicit around using the e-mails as a vehicle for offering support and interest, and none expressed intentions around the use of their e-mails for documenting new knowledge or for engaging others. Yet coachees are deriving value in all of these areas.

While some coaches did express some form of intent around generating new insights, and some coachees also perceived value in this area, this remains low in terms of both intentionality and value perceived. Coaches were much more inclined to use e-mails to consolidate insights already generated during face-to-face sessions, so that we saw many more summary statements than we did divergent exploratory questions. Similarly, with celebrating a 'rite of passage', we came across just one example in talking to the coachees, a benefit that wasn't a deliberate intent on the part of the coach.

These findings support the idea that the use of e-mails can support the reflective process, and that they could be used even more effectively than is currently the case.

E-mails are unlikely to be useful by themselves, as many of our coachees point out, in effect agreeing with Epston (1994):

"My advice... is not to think of the letter as an intervention apart from the... session. See the two as completely and organically intertwined, the one following from the other like the drawing in and letting out of breath."

Contracting is important. Although no one in our study indicated that the e-mails were a nuisance, others did talk of overflowing inboxes and a lack of interest in reading e-mails or replying. This seems an important point. There is a big difference between receiving a hand-written 'narrative letter' and an electronic 'narrative e-mail'. E-mail in the corporate environment is not often used to encourage reflective practice. So it falls upon the coach to contract with the coachee, explaining both the intent and potential value of a coaching e-mail.

All coaches were sensitive to the use of e-mail, some saying they didn't send many e-mails because they didn't want to contribute to e-mail overload. Several coaches said they stop writing to coachees who don't respond. Yet our study suggests that many coachees *do* derive great value from the e-mails, even though nothing is said.

Many coaches are sensitive to the possibility that others in the organisation might read e-mails intended only for the coachee, and so tend to avoid personal content.

All of this points to the value of contracting explicitly to the writing of e-mails, their form, content and to whom they should be addressed.

In summary, we found that e-mails can play an important role facilitating the reflective process of change. Drake (2010) observes that e-mails can be helpful for coachees to reflect on, and track, their past, present and future stories, as they shift through the course of coaching. In doing so e-mails may provide an increased sense of continuity to the stories that are shared in sessions so they are more effective in catalysing change.

We don't recommend that every coach starts sending e-mails, for coaching remains an eclectic discipline – no one size fits all. The use of e-mails is one aspect of a coach's approach, one means by which the coach can facilitate change through reflective practice.

A useful question for coaches to ask of themselves may be – How do you currently facilitate reflective change in your practice? And how do you intend to enhance your capabilities in this area in the spirit of ongoing professional development?

And a question for clients – If coaching is a reflective practice – what questions do you ask of the coaches you employ in this area? What practices do they employ for reflecting upon their *own* practice (e.g. supervision)? And what techniques do they use to facilitate the reflective process for their coachees?

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