

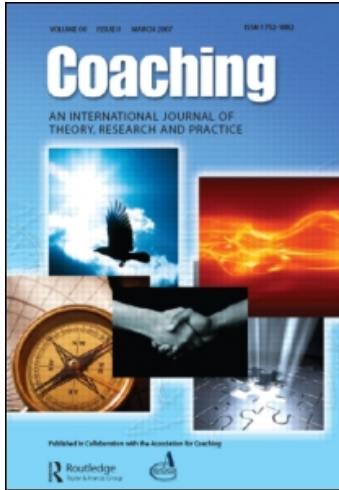
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Suggestive techniques in coaching

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Effective communication is central to coaching. Suggestive influencing is expected to occur interpersonally; directly or indirectly, with or without intention. Even without our awareness, we are engaged in a process of suggestive influence. Despite the role suggestions can play in all communicative relationships, very little has been written about how coaches can utilise them to enhance their effectiveness and better meet their coachees' needs. Although suggestion and suggestibility have been traditionally associated with hypnosis, hypnosis is not required for suggestive influence. When used skillfully, suggestions may affect perception, behavior, cognition, emotion and motivation in a pre-planned manner. They may be intentionally incorporated into a coaching dialogue or added to existing coaching techniques. This paper discusses the nature of suggestions, offers guidelines on how to enhance their impact and describes specific suggestive techniques with accompanying examples which coaching professionals can strategically incorporate in their coaching practice.

Keywords: coaching; suggestions; suggestive techniques; communication; suggestive influence; coaching hypnosis

Introduction

Coaching is an interpersonal process that aims at enhancing well-being and performance in personal life and work domains (Grant & Palmer, 2002; Palmer & Whybrow, 2007). Suggestive influencing is expected to occur interpersonally; directly or indirectly, verbally or non-verbally, with or without intention. Even without our awareness, we are engaged in a process of suggestive influence. Where communication, suggestive factors are at play (Hilgard, 1991). And coaching is foremost a communicative process.

Suggestion and suggestibility have been traditionally associated with hypnosis. Those trained in hypnosis are also trained in using suggestions skillfully to enhance desired responses. That is the case with coaching hypnosis where hypnotic strategies and communications are strategically integrated in the coaching process (Armatas, 2009). However, hypnosis is not a requirement for suggestive influence. Although, hypnosis is used to enhance the level of responsiveness to suggestions (and thus change suggestibility), a range of responses to suggestions can be obtained without formal hypnosis.

Coaches applying solution-focused and strategic approaches are familiar with the intentional use of suggestions and the importance of communication patterns as are

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those who incorporate NLP in their practice. They have all been influenced by the likes of professionals such as Gregory Bateson, Paul Watzlawick, Milton Erickson, Jay Haley and Virginia Satir (Cade, 2007; Grimley, 2007; Haley & Richeport-Haley, 2003; Nardone & Portelli, 2005; Watzlawick, 1993). However, this paper does not intend to provide an overview of different approaches but rather to introduce specific suggestions that coaches can use in their work, regardless of how they work and what model they prefer.

Suggestive strategies are not offered as an alternative coaching model but rather as knowledge that one can add to their existing repertoire. They do not favour a directive or non-directive approach. Even if one does not see a place for both styles in a coaching setting, suggestions can be incorporated and adapted to fit a coach's style of work. A directive coach will add suggestions to a directive work style and a non-directive coach will apply them in a non-directive environment.

What is a suggestion?

Since we are referring to suggestive techniques, it is necessary to understand suggestions (Gheourghiou, 2000; Lundh, 1998; Lundh, 2000; Lynn, Meyer & Shindler, 2004; Rossi & Rossi, 2007). A suggestion can be defined as an interpersonal priming process whereby one person by means of verbal communication, non-verbal behaviors and other contextual factors aims to influence the beliefs, intentions, desires or feelings without the other person being aware of it. This influencing may take place unintentionally, as a by-product of the interaction of two people. Hence, we may influence someone's ideas, beliefs or desires without any such explicit intention.

Intentional suggestion, on the other hand, requires skill and training. When used skillfully, suggestions may affect perception, behavior, cognition, emotion, and/or motivation in a pre-planned manner. For example, if the coachee's goal is relaxation, the coach may want to consider using the 'Yes-Set' strategy *before* suggesting relaxation training in order to enhance positive expectancy (the 'yes-set' is discussed below).

Suggestion is not persuasion. Persuasion refers to a communicative process that makes use of verbal arguments. Suggestions do not rely on arguments although they may be employed to influence others in accepting them. For example, non-verbal behaviors that have a highly suggestive impact may be utilised during argumentation in order to strengthen verbal arguments.

The coach intends to build response sets; using suggestions to create behaviors that will eventually lead to the coachee's goal. However, the coachee is not aware of the influencing taking place nor does he or she need to understand the suggestions, which is in sharp contrast to other communicative forms.

Ethical use of suggestions

Suggestive techniques are used to meet client requirements. Suggestion use is not manipulation. Manipulation involves the intention to get someone to do what you want. Coaches use suggestions for the sole purpose to meet the coachee's agenda, not their own. For example, a coachee wants to tackle his presentation stress and to appear more relaxed and confident. During relaxation, you may embed suggestions that enhance confidence and self-mastery. Although the coachee may be unaware

that you are embedding ego-enhancing suggestions in the breathing routine, it is in line with his or her requested goals.

Although coachees are not aware of your suggestions during a session, it is appropriate to be sincere about your use of influencing techniques when you introduce yourself and your style of work during the first session. The author tends to offer examples of suggestions so that the coachee fully understands their purpose.

Types of suggestion

Although there has been much discussion about whether it is best to use direct or indirect suggestions, suggestion type does not seem to be as important (Lynn, Neufield, & Mare, 1993). Indirect suggestions may be used to put more responsibility on the coachees so that they can create for themselves the experiences and resources that coaches are helping them to access and thus claim ownership of the results (Heap & Aravind, 2002). A combination of direct and indirect suggestions is recommended while remembering to assess which suggestions are working for which coachee.

Direct suggestions are pretty straightforward. For example, physicians use them – often unknowingly – in their contacts with their clients while writing a drug prescription ‘*This pill will make you feel better*’. Likewise, a coach will use them while outlining a program for change ‘*This will help you improve your performance*’. The emphasis of this paper will be placed on indirect influencing techniques. Following are some ways that coaches can present indirect suggestions in a coaching dialogue or add them to existing coaching techniques. (Armatas, 2009; Erickson & Rossi, 1979; Heap & Aravind, 2002).

Suggestive techniques

The yes-set

The yes-set is used to start a pattern or response set that will increase receptiveness and enhance positive expectancy. It is the simple association of a positive thought with the suggestion of a desired possibility. It is often used in a dialogue where many positive questions are asked in order to get a ‘yes’ response. These questions are asked before the suggestion is presented to increase the chances of an acceptance (the intended yes). As a coach, you need to ensure that the coachee agrees with the positive statements you will be presenting.

Following is an example of a ‘yes-set’.

- *You have done well.*
- *Yes. I feel good about it.*
- *It does feel good, doesn’t it?*
- *Nods affirmatively (a non-verbal yes).*
- *And you were right about what you told me last time. When you commit to a task, you do commit.*
- *Yes, I always worked that way.*
- *I guess that is a part of who you are, yes?*
- *Yes.*

- *Well, this is a pretty good preview on how succeeding each further step will feel* (this statement also includes a presupposition which is described next).
- *That's good to know.*
- *Yes, and you can continue by moving on to the next step* (the intended suggestion).

Let us see another example that does not require a 'formal' dialogue. I could have started this article with a yes-set. A (yes) is added next to the statements with which the reader is likely to agree.

... As coaches, you want your coachees to achieve their goals (yes) whether that is well-being, development, performance or all of the above (yes). You want to feel that you are doing the best there is (yes) and offering them the best coaching practices available (yes). You want to be confident about your communication skills (yes), knowing that you can positively influence your clients in more ways than you thought you could (yes). And you can build on your skills by learning how to utilise suggestions skillfully.

Presuppositions

By using presuppositions, you get the coachee thinking that something has happened, is happening or is about to happen. Following are three examples of presuppositions.

(1) Presume that something is about to happen:

'Before you follow this plan, I would like to give you some helpful tips' (presupposes that coachee will follow this plan).

'Yes, many find it difficult in the beginning' (presupposes that it will get easier).

(2) Presume that something is happening:

'That's right, continue relaxing.'

(3) Presume that something has already happened:

'What did you notice happening this time?'

Questions to focus associations

Questions can focus on different aspects of inner experiences. Responses are likely to differ depending on where the attention is directed. Coaches need to be clear as to where they want their coachee to focus on.

The following question focuses on tension:

'On a scale from one to ten, how tensed would you say you are?'

A simple change and the focus is now on relaxation:

'On a scale from one to ten, how relaxed would you say you are?'

Embedded suggestions

During a conversation or an experiential exercise, specific words and phrases are set apart by brief pauses or slight changes in voice tone. Words and phrases can also be discreetly emphasised non-verbally.

A coachee, who would like to present more confidently, is about to engage in guided imagery. Suggestions of confidence and self-mastery can be embedded before the mental imagery is introduced. In the script below, the embedded suggestions are underlined.

... As you close your eyes and are getting ready to perform a mental rehearsal of how you will be performing presentations confidently, you may simply relax and present yourself with a reminder of experiences of feeling confident while working and facing challenges. Standing firmly on your two feet (using coachee's phrase) and confidently presenting yourself with the opportunity to show all your learnings ... (continue with the mental imagery and embed similar suggestions throughout the process).

Metaphors and stories

Metaphors and stories are both a way to convey suggestions and a method of accomplishing suggestion repetition without resorting to the use of identical words or phrases (Queralt, 2006). They can be classified in two categories: metaphors and stories developed by the coach and those that the coach identifies in the coachee's narration. This approach allows coaching professionals to a) bypass reflective objections; b) test client's responses for ideas; c) build a careful foundation before being direct with your messages; and d) prepare for future responses.

Reference to experiences from everyday life

Rarely do we relate to theory as much as we relate to actual experiences.

a) Reference to a coachee's experience.

A coachee seems to be performing poorly at work. During our conversation, he recounted his first year at University. He was falling behind his coursework and came to a point of almost dropping out. However, he persisted, managed to follow through and finally graduated.

'Remember when you performed poorly at University but you refused to give up? And then you decided to take matters in your own hands (coachee's phrase) and you kept the ball rolling (coachee's phrase). Even you were surprised with the resources you realised you had' (at this point you can tie specific resources with current situation).

b) Reference to other people's experience.

'Recently a senior-level executive was facing the same challenges and he successfully followed this very same model.'

Binds and double binds

A bind offers the coachee a free conscious choice between two or more alternatives. However, both choices are comparable, so no matter what choice is being made, it will lead to the desired outcome.

*Would you like to discuss this today or during our next meeting?
Do you want to relax now or later?*

A double bind, by contrast, offers possibilities that are outside the coachee's usual range of conscious choice and voluntary control.

'I wonder where you'll start feeling more confident first. Will it be with your clients or with your colleagues?'

Paradox

A paradox appears to suggest the opposite response to what is really required.

*'Try not to think about the end result right now.'
'I'd prefer you did not make any changes just yet.'*

Contingent suggestions

This refers to when we tie a suggestion to an ongoing or inevitable pattern of behavior.

'As you continue sitting there (ongoing situation), you will find yourself becoming more relaxed' (contingent suggestion).

'As you are mentally rehearsing your upcoming presentation, you can develop more ways of using your strengths.'

Enhancing Suggestive Influence

Coaching is a co-operative venture. Developing a trusting coaching alliance is a prerequisite. Here are some ways to enhance the impact of your suggestions (Hammond, 1990; Kaplan, 2007):

Create positive expectancies

There is a relationship between what individuals expect and their experiences of seemingly automatic responses, also known as non-volitional responses (Coe, 1997; Kirsch, 1985). It seems that response expectancies are sufficient to cause non-volitional outcomes and tend to be self-confirming. Since suggestions often mean coming to expect that the suggested event will or has occurred, coaches are in a unique position to utilise them and create positive expectancies for their coachees.

Use repetition

It is recommended that the coach repeats the main message several times throughout the coaching session, thereby repeatedly directing attention to the intended goal or idea. This can be accomplished by simple repetition, by using synonymous words and phrases, by incorporating non-verbal behaviors or by combining direct and indirect suggestions. The latter may include the use of metaphors and stories conveying the same idea.

Be flexible

Being flexible means adjusting your pace to your coachee's rate of response, respecting the individuality of your coachee, evaluating what works throughout the session and making the necessary adjustments.

Connect suggestion to a dominant emotion

This is of special consideration to those clients who use their emotions more than their intellect in their decision making. Stir their emotions and connect suggestions to them:

'This is a plan you will want to follow because it just doesn't feel right not to reach your full potential and I know you want to feel the satisfaction of making it.'

Link motivations and goals to suggestions

This may be a choice for coachees who emphasise logic and reasoning:

'This plan suits you, it reinforces the kind of thinking that brought you here.'

Combine suggestive techniques

A coach can combine different suggestive techniques during the coaching process. The following dialogue (after a brief discussion about strengths) incorporates a 'yes-set' along with a contingent suggestion, a presupposition and a reference to other people's experience:

'So, is it clear now how using strengths can help?'

'Yes, it is.'

'Can you see the benefits of using this approach with you?'

'Yes, it actually matches my way of thinking too.'

'So, shall we continue in the direction that matches your thinking, yes?'

'Yes' (Yes-set).

'Many people are not aware of their strengths and how to harness them until we start talking about them' (reference to other people's experience and presupposition).

'Nods.'

'As we are talking about strengths, you may find yourself thinking about your own' (contingent suggestion).

You can then add strategies, guidelines, or continue with your coaching approach, knowing that your coachee is likely to be more co-operative and motivated.

Use ego-strengthening suggestions and positive reinforcement

Identify, reinforce and compliment your coachee's behaviors, emotions and cognitions that are in the desired direction. That requires attentiveness and focus throughout the coaching session. By doing so, not only are you reinforcing responses that will lead to the desired goal but also strengthen the coachee's sense of self-efficacy. We all want to feel good about ourselves.

Use positively-stated suggestions

The author was requested by a publishing company to give feedback on a book where the principle of positively-stated suggestions was strongly supported. Its author went to lengths to convince the readers of its importance. She reported she would not even wear t-shirts unless mottos were written in a positive manner. The principle that suggestions need to be positively stated (do this rather than don't do that) has often been overstated. Even so, it is recommended that your suggestions gear them toward a desirable goal rather than away from an unwanted one.

Utilise coachee's language and behavioral patterns

Listen for phrases, words, images or metaphors that your coachee chooses and utilise them in order to enhance your influence. For example, a coachee mentioned more than once that 'I know if I put my mind to it, then I will make it happen'.

This same phrase was used as an embedded suggestion during a brief relaxation regime:

'That's good, now as you exhale, notice how you have already started the process of self-control. Continue relaxing just as you have decided to do so, after all if you put your mind to it, you will make it happen. So continue, relaxing even further'.

You may influence even further by appealing to all sensory modalities with a particular emphasis on the one most suitable to the coachee, which you can pick up by being attentive to the words most often used to describe experiences and beliefs.

Use suggestions respectfully

Suggestive techniques ought to be used respectfully, keeping in mind the mutually agreed upon outcomes. Respecting and accepting the coachee will facilitate an acceptance of what one has to offer as a coach and hence a bigger suggestive influence potential. The suggested response needs to be within the coachee's repertoire of abilities. It is recommended to start within a coachee's repertoire of abilities and build upwards (Heap, 2000). It is important that the suggestion is acceptable to the client and compatible with the context in which it is given. The better the fit between ideas presented and the client receiving them, the better the chances for the desired response (Fourie, 2000).

Hold coachee's attention

Anything that holds or absorbs a person's attention could be described as hypnotic. Hold your clients' attention, detect the times they are mostly absorbed during the coaching session and use those times for greater influence.

Conclusion

Suggestive influencing is expected to occur in all interpersonal situations. Since coaching is a communicative relationship, suggestions are expected to be at play. They are not an alternative coaching model but rather knowledge that coaches can add to their existing repertoire, use them to meet their client's agenda and adapt them to fit their style of work. With training and experience come the abilities a) to build response sets and facilitate positive expectancies; b) to focus and direct attention; c) to assess client's responsiveness; d) to use a combination of direct and indirect suggestions; and e) to be flexible by making the necessary changes according to what is working (or not) during the session (Teleska & Roffman, 2004). The skillful use of suggestions can be an asset in all communication-based professions and coaches are in a unique position to harness their impact and utilise them in order to better meet their coachees' goals.

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