

Helping People Change: Coaching with Compassion for Lifelong Learning and Growth

Boyatzis, R., Smith, M. and Van Oosten, E.
2019

Boston MA

Harvard Business Review Press

US: \$30

ISBN: 978-1-63369-656-3

Review DOI [10.1108/EJTD-02-2022-200](https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-02-2022-200)

Introduction

This book seeks to provide individuals interested in coaching with a fundamentally different approach than is commonly used. The authors describe in great detail their “compassion-centered” coaching and contrast it with most other types of coaching, which tend to be compliance, performance or problem-focused. Coaching is defined broadly by the authors as any type of facilitative or helping relationship with the purpose of achieving some type of change, learning or new level of individual or organizational performance. Because of its broad conceptualization of coaching, this book has applicability to managers, mentors, counselors, therapists, clerics, teachers, parents, athletic coaches and anyone else who is interested in developing their helping skills. The book’s content is based on decades of research conducted at Case Western University (USA). Each chapter provides the reader with opportunities for self-reflective exercises and suggestions for applying the specific compassion-centered coaching elements discussed.

The 233-page book consists of 10 chapters, with Chapter 1 describing in broad terms the elements of compassion-centered coaching, which are then specifically discussed in detail in the book’s subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 highlights the research that found that individuals who have had positive coaching experiences describe their coaches as individuals who inspired them, showed a genuine sense of caring and concern, provided support and encouragement and facilitated the discovery and pursuit of the dreams and passions of the people being coached. Chapter 3 delves more deeply into how to coach with compassion versus coaching for compliance, performance or some other external standard. It is in this chapter that they describe how compassion-centered coaching aligns with the authors’ “Intentional Change Theory,” presented as a model of sustained, desired change. In Chapter 4, the authors discuss brain science studies that demonstrate that compassion-centered coaching arouses positive versus negative “emotional attractors” in the brain to create a more receptive and motivated emotional state. Chapter 5 builds on the brain science discussed in the previous chapter, describing in more detail the differences between a positive emotional attractor (PEA) and negative emotional attractor (NEA). The point is made that while the NEA is needed for humans to survive, it is the PEA that allows people to thrive and flourish. Compassion-centered coaches effectively invoke the PEA and create the proper balance between it and the NEA, thereby initiating the growth and change that lasts. Chapter 6 focuses on personal vision. A person’s vision is his/her ideal image of a



possible future that is not focused on goals but on dreams and passions. Chapter 7 focuses on what the authors refer to as “resonant” coaching relationships. Such relationships focus on learning to ask the right questions of one another and attentively listening to the answers to evoke learning and change. In Chapter 8, the authors focus on how one can foster a culture of coaching in an organization. This includes encouraging peer coaching, using external and internal professional coaches, and developing managers to be coaches for their units as well as other areas. Chapter 9 emphasizes the idea of taking advantage of situations in which a person is ready to be helped. The authors refer to such situations as “coachable moments.” A practical guide is provided for creating the type of safe space where coachable moments are more likely. The book’s final chapter (Chapter 10) concludes with an inspirational appeal, referring back to an exercise from Chapter 2 in which the reader is asked to reflect on and describe individuals who helped them become who they are today, and then asks “Whose list will you be on?”

Abstract

This book has relevance for individuals in formal coaching roles as well as anyone interested in helping others achieve lasting change. The thesis of the book is that traditional coaching, which typically focuses on correcting weaknesses or achieving particular performance goals, etc., is not effective for sustained change and development. Incorporating decades of coaching research, the authors persuasively present how a “compassion-centered” approach to helping others is what produces lasting change. Compassion-centered coaching focuses on connecting with a person’s positive vision of themselves or to an inspiring dream they have long held. At the end of most chapters are a number of helpful tools that highlight the chapter’s key points and offer coaching “conversation guides” to help apply the chapter material. Overall, this is an excellent evidence-based resource for a wide variety of professions and individuals.

Evaluation

Helping people change: coaching with compassion for lifelong learning and growth is a book that presents a different and refreshing approach to coaching. The book’s three authors all work closely together at Case Western University (USA) on coaching-related research and are instructors in a long-standing coaching certificate program at the university. Rather than trying to “fix” people or focusing on specific goal achievement (the typical coaching approach), the authors assert that a “compassion-centered” coaching approach is a far more effective way to help people achieve lasting change. They support their thesis with decades of research evidence revealing that when the “context” for change is primarily a gap or shortfall that needs addressing, the energy and effort needed to sustain change is typically absent. Conversely, when the context is a long-term dream or vision, people draw energy from that vision and are able to sustain their effort to change, even through difficult times (p. 6). Creating this type of context is what compassion-centered coaching is all about. It is comprising a genuine sense of caring and concern, focusing on the other person, providing support and encouragement, and facilitating the “discovery and pursuit of that person’s dreams and passions” (p. 6). Based on their coaching research, the authors provide excerpts from actual coaching scenarios to illustrate various aspects of compassion-centered coaching. Of particular note is the book’s emphasis on the “coaching conversation.” They argue that after a coaching conversation, people should feel charged up, excited, and full of purposeful movement toward their dreams (p.24).

The authors, to their credit, acknowledge that some individuals are not always open to reflection and contemplating a long-term vision; to that end, this book emphasizes the

importance of cultivating a “resonant relationship” with the person they are trying to help. This relationship is built on positive emotion and genuine mutual connection (p. 127). The authors provide compelling evidence from fMRI studies of the brain how compassion-centered coaches engage others in a type of conversation that stimulates the PEA rather than the NEA neural networks in the brain. It is when individuals are in “the PEA zone,” that they are open to visualizing their desired future (pp. 64–65). Compassion-centered coaching encourages the use of evocative, open and positive questions and comments to activate the PEA; however, the authors stress the importance of the coach actually listening more than talking; to that end, the practical coaching mnemonic the authors suggest is one I plan to personally use: W-A-I-T, “Why am I talking”? (p. 149).

In sum, this book is an excellent resource for anyone interested in an alternative, evidence-based approach to coaching.

John J. Sherlock

*College of Education and Allied Professions, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee,
North Carolina, USA*