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Title Integral coaching for academics: evaluation of an intervention

Submitter Ms. Nazeema Ahmed, Prof. Jeff Jawitz

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been interest in exploring whether there is a place for integral coaching in the field of higher education. The integral coaching approach, based on the work of Ken Wilber's integral theory (2005) offers an inclusive, multi-layered methodology which guides the coaching process. This paper reports on an evaluation of a project where higher education academic staff members underwent individualised integral coaching. An independent researcher conducted interviews with participants before and after the coaching process. The coaching programme spanned between 3 to 7 months. Participants presented a range of issues including the need to complete PhD studies and research publications, coping with difficult colleagues and transitions, developing confidence, and fitting into their department. Participants expressed the view that they had benefited considerably from the coaching programme. These findings suggest the positive benefits of the integral coaching methodology in higher education.

Outline

There are a range of options available to us when we are faced with achieving our goals, or managing challenging situations. These include therapeutic processes and mentoring, the latter being widely practised in higher education as a form of support for academic staff as they transition or achieve their goals. A fairly new modality is that of integral coaching, with several forms of coaching models developing and being widely practised in different settings (Hunt, 2009). The primary aim of most coaching modalities is to bring about a significant, enduring shift in an individual or team, from their current state to one that is considered by the person or team to be a healthier one. Coaching approaches differ in their underlying views around what is needed for change to occur (Hunt, 2009). In an attempt to regulate the quality and ethics of the coaching profession, the International Coaching Federation (ICF) was established and there now exists several rigorous coaching programmes where integral coaches are certified and continue to develop themselves professionally.

The Integral Coaching model is a particular modality that is based largely on Ken Wilber's (2005) integral theory and the work of Robert Kegan (1994). It has gained considerable momentum as it offers a methodology that attempts to use "all of the world's great traditions to create a composite map, a comprehensive map, an all-inclusive map that included the best elements from all of them" (Wilber, 2005). The approach offers a lens through which we can observe the world in a holistic manner, and is most useful for those striving for an in-depth understanding of phenomena (Stevens, 2014). Integral coaching involves horizontal or vertical development, the latter being the one that helps people actually live in a different way, not just solve their problems, so the change that is brought about is more enduring (Flaherty, 2015).

The field of coaching has largely been applied in the corporate world, where the focus has been on developing executives and leaders. There is a "dearth of coaching publications authored by writers

from education” (Fletcher, 2012) and hence there is limited literature in relation to coaching within the higher education context. What is often referred to in the education context is Whitmore’s GROW model (2002) where goal setting, reality checking, availability of options, and looking at what the client will do, is the framework of the intervention.

The University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa developed an internal institutional coaching service aimed at supporting academics (Geber and Visser, 2012; Geber, 2010). A key outcome was for young academic staff to achieve significant research outputs in their early careers. Their evaluation of the coaching service revealed that the coaching enabled academic staff to better manage their interpersonal processes in a proactive manner; there was “intense self-discovery”; and they were able to “align their self-awareness with their goals and the overall organisational research agenda” (Geber, 2010:76). Personal gains included significant improvements in their personal, interpersonal and communication skills. Their research proved a huge return on investment in monetary terms and a return through the retention of early career academics and better relationships with their colleagues, peers and students. They argue for the continued support of early academics through the offer of coaching (Geber, 2010).

The University of Cape Town (UCT) currently offers a coaching service under its Leadership Development portfolio for individuals in leadership positions including Deans, Directors, Heads of Departments and professors. However, lower-ranked academic staff such as lecturers, and senior lecturers are not offered coaching and are often the new academics who are integrating into the institution and struggling to meet competing demands including publishing research in order to be promoted.

This research initiative was a pilot study aimed at offering these academics an opportunity to receive integral coaching. Academic staff in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment at UCT were invited to participate in the integral coaching initiative. Participants were informed that they would be expected to commit to participating in an authentic engagement with the coach (NA); be committed to work on the presenting issue; and attend sessions for 1½ hours per week initially and later 1 hour every alternate week. An independent evaluator (JJ) interviewed each person before and after the series of coaching sessions and compiled a report on their experience of engaging with the programme.

Five academics, comprising senior lecturers, lecturers and research officers, were interviewed and underwent a coaching programme. Information was initially collected on their motivation and expectations. A second round of interviews was conducted a few months later after completion of the coaching process. Here participants were asked about their experience of being coached. The academics presented a range of issues including the need to complete PhD studies, coping with difficult colleagues, coping with transitions, developing confidence and fitting in within the department.

All presented positive accounts of their experience of being coached. The outcomes were described at both the emotional and practical level. They gave detailed accounts of how the process had made them feel better, developed their confidence and self-awareness, and it had also provided them with “tools” with which to develop, try out and take on board new ways of dealing with situations in the workplace. Other gains included navigating their career track, managing their supervisors better, missing fewer deadlines and submitting more academic papers.

This pilot research demonstrates that integral coaching provides a valuable vehicle to assist with the strengthening of identity and equips individuals to develop more fulfilling relationships in the workplace. Two of those interviewed had considered leaving UCT but as a result of the coaching process were viewing their future in the Faculty in a more positive light. This was a particularly important finding as the institution has been working on ways to develop and retain staff. The volunteers strongly endorsed the proposal to extend the coaching programme to other colleagues in the Faculty. The academics offered evidence that the coaching programme resulted in a desired shift in behaviour and the achievement of significant outcomes.

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