

Background

In 2004, a breakthrough occurred in the social sciences. This breakthrough resulted from an unprecedented 3-year project sponsored by the VIA Institute on Character. After comprehensively reviewing knowledge derived from the fields of philosophy, theology, and the humanities across human history and cultures, this effort, which involved 55 scientists, created the two basic tools needed to launch a new “science of character”. First, a new language for understanding what is best in human beings was created. This “language of strengths” is known as the VIA Classification and consists of 24 character strengths that nest under 6 virtues. These strengths are positive traits that all human beings have and can express to live their best life and positively impact others.

The VIA Classification offers a robust and complex picture of the many dimensions of human character, each of which can be studied on their own or collectively. This effort also produced scientifically valid and consumer friendly ways of measuring these character strengths in adults and youth – the VIA Surveys of Character Strengths. Together, the VIA Classification and its associated VIA Surveys have enabled scientists to explore the nature of character as never before, resulting in ripple effects that have substantially affected a number of fields, one of which is coaching (i.e., life, health/wellness, parent, executive/business, and other types of coaching).

“A new language for understanding what is best in human beings was created...”

Better Client Engagement

At the heart of coaching is the establishment of a good relationship, helping clients understand themselves, and collaborating with clients in setting and working toward meaningful goals. Character strengths directly impact

this work by improving the coach-client relationship. Instead of initiating the relationship around discovering “what’s wrong” with the client, coaches can organize their assessment around “what’s strong”. Clients who have a coach that spots and appreciates their strengths and prioritizes strengths work in coaching, end up feeling and “known” and understood by their coach. This contributes to a strong and mutually engaging coaching relationship. Many coaches may accentuate this phenomenon by disclosing their own character strengths and personal stories that reflect how they’ve used their strengths.

A Bigger Toolbox

When coaches invite clients to identify their character strengths, new conversations emerge for discussion and exploration. Clients begin to discover new parts of themselves, and parts which have been forgotten, suppressed, or neglected surface to awareness. Opportunities for learning and re-learning emerge as clients expand their consciousness of what’s best in them. Clients begin to see they have a range of positive qualities to draw from to confront problems and to better themselves. Thus, clients discover a wider range of tools that they have at their disposal to address their problems and aspirations. For example, a client afraid of breaking off an unhealthy relationship may become emboldened by the realization of their perseverance and hope as they realize they have the tools they need to persevere through a period of loneliness until they get into a more healthy relationship.

Creating A New Relationship With Your Client

- ▶ Move from “what’s wrong” to “what’s strong”
- ▶ Encourage them to discover new parts of themselves
- ▶ Help them build their toolbox

Integration of character strengths into coaching not only expands *clients' toolboxes* but expands *coaches' toolboxes* as well. For example, as coaches develop a familiarity with the VIA Classification and have their clients take the scientifically validated VIA Survey they end up having a much wider and “objective” language to use with clients as they apply the commonly used tool of **reframing** clients’ negative formulations about themselves into a perspective of personal strengths – transforming their self-image from “what’s wrong” to “what’s strong”. A client who is behaving stubbornly might be reframed as perseverant: a client who critically reformulates the work products of others could be understood as the expressing of creativity; a person who remains in an unhappy relationship might be understood as being hopeful. Coaches can look at any difficulty or situation that is being discussed and consider the character strengths that are at play. Character strengths might be overused or underused in any situation and can partially or fully explain the challenges clients face. Sharing and discussing such observations offers a fresh and meaningful perspective by which clients can view themselves.



Goal-setting is also an integral element of good coaching and character strengths can be central to such discussions. Coaches can link character strengths with their client’s goals which helps clients increase goal attainment but also well-being. For example, as a person sets goals around fitness routines, a person high in appreciation of beauty may want to exercise outside (e.g. walks) while a person high in love of learning might do better using a stationary machine that allows them to read or watch news on television. Matching goal-related strategies with character strengths can improve compliance and success.

When setting goals, character strengths can pose as the means or the ends. Said another way, strengths might be the *goal itself* (e.g., building up gratitude or bravery) or the *pathway* to reaching the goal (e.g., using perseverance and curiosity to reach a specific goal).

Avoiding Burnout

Burnout can become an occupational hazard associated with coaching. Relating on a daily basis with people around their problems and emotional distress can become toxic over time. However, when coaches place character strengths as important centerpiece of their work burnout can be attenuated. As described above, the work of engaging clients can become less effortful, and the deliberate deployment of the coach's own character strengths can cause work to be less draining and more energizing. And, of course, as clients respond more positively the work of coaching can become more fulfilling. In general, as any worker finds ways to better connect what they do with who they are (their character strengths) then work becomes more of "a calling" – meaning work calls forth what's best in the worker.

Summary

In conclusion, when coaches help clients improve awareness of their own strengths of character and how to use those strengths to address life challenges and to formulate and pursue aspirational goals for self-improvement, they can amplify their effectiveness as coaches. Therapeutic relationships strengthen, client engagement can improve, goal attainment becomes more likely, and *both* client and coach satisfaction with the process can become more positive.