Integrating an Emotional Intelligence Framework Into Evidence-Based Coaching

Susan A. David

For coaching to continue to establish itself as a profession, coaches will need to learn what they can from the existing theory of, and research into, psychological development and change. They will also need to apply innovative, theoretically driven and empirically validated interventions. To this end, coaches may benefit from applying a framework of emotional intelligence as a heuristic tool within their practice. This framework encourages the coach and coachee to recognise, understand and assess the impact of emotions on coaching goals, and encourages a solution-oriented appreciation of how these emotions can be managed to bring about the outcomes desired.

First, this chapter will discuss recent conceptualisations of emotion and the importance of an appreciation of the role of emotions in interventions. It will then describe the Mayer–Salovey model of emotional intelligence. This model's four areas enable exploring emotions and strategising about them and is a useful heuristic framework to integrate into coaching (Caruso & Wolfe, 2002; David, 2003). The last section reviews literature that suggests it is essential for the coach to progress through all four areas of the model to facilitate movement from self-reflection to insight, and to assist the pursuit of goals and change.

Emotions Are Important to the Change Process

In recent times there has been a renewed discourse on the functionality of emotions (Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, & Campos, 1994; Stanton & Franz, 1999). It has challenged the historical view of emotions as disorganising and irrational (Campos & Barrett, 1985; Mahoney, 1991) with the assertion that emotions and their expression serve a fundamentally useful purpose.
(Bretherton, Fritz, Zahn-Waxler, & Ridgeway, 1986; Campos, Campos, & Barrett, 1989; Greenberg & Safran, 1987). Emotions provide clues to ourselves and others about how we view present and past situations. They enable us to evaluate our needs, desires, goals and concerns, and to direct our efforts toward these (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997; Safran & Greenberg, 1991). Empirical evidence in a range of areas, including coping (Stanton & Franz, 1999; Stanton, Parsa, & Austenfeld, 2002), social behaviour (Forgas, 2001) and neuroanatomy (Bechara, Tranel, & Damasio, 2000; Damasio, 1998), supports Darwin’s (1872/1965) tenet that emotions have important adaptive value for the species.

Rather than treating emotions as a by- or end-product of interventions, a focus on the function of emotions and emotional information is increasingly being recognised as pivotal (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997; Greenberg & Safran, 1987; Linehan, 1993; Mahoney, 1991; Safran & Greenberg, 1991). Mahoney (1991) suggests that emotions are (1) vital to directing the individual’s attention, (2) pervasively and often tacitly involved in perception, learning and memory, (3) integrally related to cognitive development, and (4) important to a person’s sense of psychological change.

Emotions are central to self-regulation (Carver & Scheier, 1982, 1998) and change processes (Greenberg & Rhodes, 1991; Safran & Greenberg, 1991), and a number of authors are cognisant of their role in coaching (Grant, 2001; Zeus & Skiffington, 2001). Grant and Greene (2001), for example, highlight the reciprocal relationships between behaviour, emotions and thoughts, and the situation itself, in the pursuit of goals. However, in order to distinguish themselves from therapists, because of a lack of confidence in negotiating emotions within a goal- and solution-focused framework, or because of the historical mistrust of emotions referred to previously, coaches may treat emotions as peripheral or inconsequential. As they are critical to the individual’s experience (Mahoney, 1991), ignoring them may result in an oversimplification of the individual’s context and be a hindrance to change.

The Mayer–Salovey model of emotional intelligence (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) may be a useful guide in coaching (Caruso & Wolfe, 2001; David, 2003). This framework enables an exploration of the role of emotions in the coachee’s nominated goals or current issues. It also encourages movement from a self-reflective, potentially ruminative focus on emotional experience to an insight- and solution-oriented one (see Figure 1).

The Mayer–Salovey Model of Emotional Intelligence

In 1990, drawing on the rich and complex body of emotions literature, Mayer and Salovey introduced the psychological theory of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is a composite of four interrelated abilities: to perceive, use, understand and regulate emotions (Mayer, 2001a; Salovey, Mayer, & Caruso, 2002). It is commonly defined as the “ability to perceive accurately,
Integrating an Emotional Intelligence Framework Into Evidence-based Coaching

appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotions and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (Mayer & Salovey, 1997,p.10). (For a conceptual overview see Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000a; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002; Salovey et al., 2002; Salovey, Woolery, & Mayer, 2001.)

**Figure 1**

Using the Mayer-Salovey model as a heuristic framework in coaching (based on Caruso & Wolfe, 2001, 2002.)
Consistent with the functional perspective of emotions (Mayer, 2001b; Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 1999), emotional intelligence involves adeptly processing emotionally laden information and using it to guide both cognitive activities (such as prioritising and problem-solving) and constructive behaviours (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Salovey et al., 2002). It is suggested that, contrary to the traditional view of emotions and thoughts as polar opposites, they are remarkably interdependent (Damasio, 1998; Forgas, 2001; Mahoney, 1991) and together result in more sophisticated information-processing (Mayer, 2001b).

Each of the four abilities or branches is viewed as integral to emotional intelligence (Mayer, 2001b). *Perceiving Emotions* concerns attending to and registering emotional messages in oneself and others (Mayer et al., 2002; Salovey et al., 2002). In coaching, exploring the feelings of the client and other involved parties encourages the client to attend to emotions and to consider alternative viewpoints.

*Using Emotions to Facilitate Thought* involves the integration of emotion with thought (Mayer, 2001a). For example, feelings experienced may be an important determinant of attitude (Zajonc, 1980), and the change in perspective that can arise with mood shifts (Mayer, 2001b; Salovey et al., 2002) can enable the appreciation of a range of responses and a more creative approach to problem-solving and goal-striving. Findings from memory studies, which show mood-congruent effects (Bless, 2001; Bower, 1981) suggest that a client’s propensity to recall only the unfavourable aspects of the situation may be influenced by a current negative mood.

Negative moods assist tasks that require detailed systematic processing, whereas positive moods assist those that involve creative problem-solving (Bless, 2001). With the Socratic method, coachees are often able to recognise the association between their negative feelings and a foreclosure on problem-solving or a critical response to the issue and those involved. They may comment on a recent moment of clarity about the matter or a helpful change of perspective that has come about from feeling positive or relaxed.

A working knowledge of the findings from studies on the interactions between feelings and memory, information-processing and creativity (Bless, 2001; Dalgleish & Power, 1999; Gohm & Clore, 2002) is useful for the coaching intervention. It enables coach and client to understand how the client’s and others’ moods are influencing perspectives, attitudes and reasoning; what effect these have on the approach that is being taken (e.g., critical and detailed vs. accepting); and how they affect the ability to effectively create solutions. These research findings can also help explain why the nominated development goals appear more desirable on some occasions than on others. In addition, for coaches who use a cognitive-behavioural approach, highlighting these relationships to the client can result in a powerful learning experience about the associations between emotions, thoughts and behaviours. In time, and as the coaching progresses through the framework to the *Regulating Emotions* branch, the awareness that
certain types of thinking are assisted by particular moods means that moods
can be sought out or created to facilitate the task at hand.

The third branch, Understanding Emotions, is an appreciation of how
different emotions are related, their causes and consequences, and how
they progress over time (Mayer et al., 2002; Salovey et al., 2001; Salovey et
al., 2002). Examples include an awareness that a difficulty between a client
and one of his employees that is resulting in anger on both sides is likely
to lead to a dispute if not resolved, or that a new proposal is more likely
to be accepted at a meeting if the participants are experiencing feelings of
acceptance and light-heartedness.

The fourth branch, Regulating Emotions, concerns the ability to use the
knowledge gained from the first three branches (Mayer, 2001b) to regulate
one’s own feelings and others’ (Mayer, 2001a). It is important to note that
“regulating” emotions does not mean the suppression (Caruso, Mayer, &
Salovey, 2002; Mayer et al., 2000a), minimisation (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso,
2000b) or control of emotions. Rather, it involves being open to both
pleasant and unpleasant feelings (Mayer, 2001b) and translating these into
constructive action (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997; Salovey, Hsee, & Mayer,
1993). In many cases, moderate levels of emotion management will be most
advantageous (Salovey et al., 2002).

For example, a recently promoted manager who has been complaining
about a team of employees is able to use information from the first three
branches to recognise the team’s feelings of apprehension and her own
concerns about failure and rejection (perceiving). She is able to appreciate
how these have contributed to mutual avoidance of some key business
issues and to her critical internal dialogue about the team’s behaviour
(using). She acknowledges that the team has previously been cohesive,
cooperative and open, but predicts that if the present situation continues
she will become increasingly angry and defensive and that they are likely
to become distrustful of her leadership skills (understanding). With this
knowledge, the coaching turns to actively planning how she can manage
both her own and the team’s emotions to enhance the likelihood of a good
result (regulating).

Mayer et al. (2002) make a distinction between experiential (branches 1
and 2) and strategic emotional intelligence (branches 3 and 4). When applied
to coaching, the first two branches are predominantly about the experience
and exploration of emotions, whereas at branches 3 and 4 the coaching
moves toward actively strategising with and about emotions. So at the under-
standing branch (3), the individual notes some of the possible feelings of the
parties involved, what feelings they would like for themselves and others, and
acknowledges that intervening may increase the likelihood of a good result.
As coach and client move to the managing branch (4), they focus on active,
tactical planning to achieve it.
The Importance of Progressing to the Regulating Emotions Branch of the Emotional Intelligence Framework

At its core, coaching facilitates the client’s regulation and direction of interpersonal and intrapersonal resources (Grant, 2001). It is through self-regulation that the individual is able to pursue lower-order targets that, in turn, increase their likelihood of achieving longer-term goals (King, 2001; Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000). Carver and Scheier (1982, 1998) suggest that the ability to reflect upon and evaluate one’s thoughts, behaviour and feelings; to develop insight into them; and to use this knowledge to further enhance performance are central to the self-regulatory change-cycle. The emotional-intelligence framework advances self-reflection about emotions to insightful, action-oriented management of them.

Research indicates that the self-reflection facilitated by this framework (i.e., attending to, recognising and expressing emotions) is potentially beneficial, and that a lack of attention to or overinhibition of emotions can be deleterious. A key feature of alexithymic individuals is a dispositional difficulty in identifying and describing subjective feelings (Apfel & Sifneos, 1979; Taylor, 2000). Empirical studies demonstrate that alexithymia is associated with a range of somatic illnesses and a limited capacity to discriminate among different emotional states, to think about and use emotions to cope with stressful situations, and to empathise (Parker, Taylor, & Bagby, 2001; Taylor, 2000; Taylor, 2001; Taylor & Bagby, 2000). In a study on written emotional disclosure, the difficulty-describing-feelings dimension of alexithymia was associated with lower positive mood, greater emotional inhibition, and less introspective content in written essays (Páez, Velasco, & González, 1999).

Interventions directed at both clinical and nonclinical populations that specifically encourage processing and expressing emotion have been demonstrated to have positive effects (Esterling, L’Abate, Murray, & Pennebaker, 1999; Stanton & Franz, 1999). For example, research on emotional disclosure through expressive writing, where individuals are instructed to write briefly and repeatedly over a few days about a personally significant topic (King, 2002) has produced robust evidence of improved longer-term psychological and physical wellbeing (Esterling et al., 1999; King, 2002; Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2002; Pennebaker, 1997. For a review see Smyth, 1998.) Although the focus of these studies has typically been on negative events of the past (Esterling et al., 1999), recent research has demonstrated the benefits of writing about anticipated events such as coping with a potentially stressful situation (Cameron & Nicholls, 1998).

In a study by King (2001), a group of individuals was randomly assigned to write for 20 minutes per day over four days about their “best possible self” (i.e., a personalised representation of their life in the future, imagining that everything had gone as well as it could have). Three other groups were allocated to write about a control topic, a life trauma, and a combination of
trauma (for the first two days) and best possible self (for the last two days), respectively. Controlling for prewriting mood, those in the best-possible-self group had more positive emotions immediately postwriting, and assessment three weeks later demonstrated that this group had significantly greater psychological wellbeing. In addition, despite there being no differences between the groups on measures of health before the intervention, at a five-month follow-up, the best-possible-self group and trauma-only group had significantly lower illness than the control and combination topic groups.

These results suggest that the reflection on, and expression of, emotions that is encouraged by this framework may help coaching clients to regulate their emotional experiences. Consistent with the proposal that coaching should be solution-focused (Grant, 2001), studies on writing interventions indicate that to derive benefits from emotional expression, the focus need not be on negative events. Rather, it can be aimed at positively reframing a difficult experience (King & Miner, 2000), anticipating coping responses (Cameron & Nicholls, 1998), and pursuing goals (King, 2001, 2002).

It is important to note that although those who are adept at assessing and expressing their emotions may be more skilful in negotiating their environment (Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler, & Mayer, 2000), excessive self-reflection on emotions and/or limited progression to clarity, insight and action may actually impede the attainment of goals. Swinkels and Giuliano (1995) found that individuals who report a tendency to extreme or hypervigilant mood-monitoring ruminate more, and have greater negative affect and more intense affective reactions. In contrast, those who have greater clarity about their mood states and are able to discriminate and label them experience more positive affect, higher self-esteem, and greater satisfaction with their social support. When individuals who are dysphoric ruminate on their moods, they are more likely to prolong periods of distress (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998) and to be poor problem-solvers (Lyubomirsky, Tucker, Caldwell, & Berg, 1999).

Similarly, research examining self-reflection and insight that included, but was not limited to, the emotional domain, found that self-reflection was associated with anxiety and stress, whereas insight was associated with cognitive flexibility and self-regulation, and less depression, anxiety, stress and alexithymia (Grant, 2001). Grant proposed that individuals who are experiencing difficulty in attaining goals are overly engaged in ruminative self-reflection rather than being focused on solutions and behaviour change. He demonstrated initial support for this hypothesis by finding that when individuals in a structured life-coaching program pursued goals that they had previously struggled to attain, levels of self-reflection decreased whereas insight increased.

Turning again to the writing research, a closer examination also indicates that it is not the disclosure of emotions per se that is beneficial (Smyth, 1998). In a computerised linguistic analysis of six writing samples from across a range of studies, Pennebaker and colleagues (Pennebaker &
Francis, 1996; Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997) found that better physical-health outcomes were predicted by those who used more positive emotion words, a moderate number of negative words (those with very high and very low numbers of negative words had poorer health), and demonstrated increased causal and insightful thinking. These and other studies suggest that the mechanism underlying the benefits of emotional disclosure is the cognitive work that results from exploring emotionally salient events and the construction of a coherent and insightful understanding of them (King & Miner, 2000; Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2002).

These converging lines of research suggest that a focus on, and exploration of, a client’s emotional experience is necessary but not sufficient for the coaching intervention, and that progressing from exploration to insight and management is important. The emotional-intelligence framework presented here greatly facilitates this process. It takes cognisance of emotions as central to the client’s experience and demonstrates an appreciation of the interrelationships of these emotions to thoughts and associated behaviours. When all four aspects of the model are addressed, it provides a structured solution-oriented means of facilitating progress from self-reflection to insight and planning.

Conclusion
Coaching aims to facilitate the change that is necessary for clients to achieve their life- and performance-enhancement goals. Emotions are central to human experience and an appreciation of their role in the process of change is an essential component of comprehensive coaching interventions. The emotional-intelligence framework presented in this chapter is a useful tool that is compatible with evidence-based and theoretically driven coaching that is embedded in a positive, functional and solution-oriented paradigm.

Endnote
1 The Socratic method uses questions and summary statements to gain insight into the client’s beliefs and behaviours.

References


Reference: