

Positive psychology techniques: three good things

Article

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Positive Psychology: Three Good Things,

Jonathan Passmore & Lindsey Oades

Abstract

This short article is the last in a series of six papers exploring positive psychology coaching techniques. The previous papers have explored the concept of positive coaching psychology and how it may be applied. The focus of this paper is a technique that encourages the mind to pay more attention to good things and develop a mind more observant of the positive in life.

Key words:

Three good things, positivity, positive psychology coaching.

Three good things

‘Three good things’, like ‘active constructive responding’ (2014b) and the other techniques in this series, is a technique which can be used both in coaching conversation and, more generally, in one-to-one conversation where the coach, manager or facilitator of the conversation wishes to encourage more positive responses from their coachee (team member). It forms part of the wider approach to positive psychology coaching we discussed earlier in this series (2014a) and in other papers (2014c).

This technique starts with the use of a question – “*What are the best three things about working here?*” (or “*What are the three best things about today?*”). Some individuals are able to respond by listing three aspects without further prompts. This opens up a conversation about the three ‘good things’, with the coachee encouraged to expand or provide specific details. By talking about a recent experience, or by explaining why these are the top three items the coachee has selected, the coach is encouraging the coachee to focus on the positive aspects of an issue, day or relationship, rather than being drawn to the negative.

Other individuals find it hard to start with a positive statement or complete the description with three positives without moving onto negative features. If the coachee mentions a negative aspect, the coach intervenes; “*We can look at some of the downsides later, but what have you enjoyed most?*”. The intervention brings the focus back to the positive. Such an approach of reframing to the positive links back to Fredrickson’s ‘Broaden and Build’ theory (Fredrickson, 2001).

The repeated use of this technique (for example, daily practice over several months or - even better - a year or more) may strengthen the neural pathways which look for the positive aspects or issues which the individual encounters. As a result the negative (downsides) focus and thinking is reduced (Seligman, 2016).

One of us has used coaching extensively with his children. To our surprise, children respond positively to coaching as a learning aid that helps them think about their reasons for doing or not doing things (like running in the road or standing on their chair while at the table). This raises self awareness. By exploring potential outcomes, coaching can also enhance personal responsibility for future actions. By adapting general coaching techniques, the use of three good things has become part of one of the authors regular night time routines, with his two daughters: Florence and Beatrice. Having used the technique for several years, the author now regularly receives coaching back from his four year old daughter, after asking them

their three good things, their reply is often followed up by; *‘Dad, what were your three best things about today?’*

Table 1 illustrates two real exchanges with Florence, when she was three, and used on two consecutive days to reflect on her experiences from that day. The first example used standard open questions to encourage reflection on the day. The second placed a positive focus on the reflection, with the specific aim of encouraging Florence to talk about her positive experiences and, in doing so, think about these experiences as she was getting ready for bed. What was interesting was that this exchange lead to Florence acting out her own positive experience with her doll as she thought and described the experience. While she was less able to articulate the experience than an adult, she was able to re-experience the emotion and then having reflected on it, to act it out with her dolls.

Table 1: Three good things – Example

Day 1: Example using Typical coaching questions	Day 2: Example using ‘Three good things’ questions
Coach: <i>“So Florence, how was your day?”</i> Florence: <i>“ok”</i> Coach: <i>“What did you do?”</i> Florence <i>“I played dollies”</i> Coach: <i>“What else?”</i> Florence <i>“I played with Tabatha”</i> Coach: <i>“It sounds you had a</i>	Coach: <i>“Florence what were the best three things you did today? “</i> Florence: <i>“Going to Valerie’s house”</i> Coach: <i>“What did you like about going to Valerie’s?”</i> Florence: <i>“Getting a present from Valerie..... baby”</i> Coach: <i>“What did you like about the baby”</i> Florence: <i>“Cuddling baby..... playing with baby</i>

lovely time”.	Coach: “What else did you enjoy?” Florence: “Pasta and ice cream tea.....chocolate ice cream “ <i>(Florence had eaten ice cream and pasta at Valerie’s House. A few moments later, Florence picked up her new doll and starts feeding pretend food to it.</i> Florence (to her dolls): “You like ice cream.....more ice cream?..... it’s nice.....”
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The power of the technique is built through repeated use. We would typically invite adult coachees to take the intervention away as a homework task, and to repeat it for seven days, including writing down the details of the event and emotion. What we have found is that having tried it for a week, just like our children, many choose to make it a regular part of their routine, as they find it pleasurable, useful, stimulating and an effective counter to negative ruminations at the close of the day.

Conclusion

As with many of the other techniques, ‘three good things’ is a technique the coach can use themselves, as well as offer to coachees’ as a homework exercise, helping them to develop a more positive thinking style and enhance satisfaction with life and work.

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