

Two ways to be an effective coach

Two pillars of positive psychology

Maria C. Hofman – Sept. 3rd 2021

- The golden nuggets from the subconscious
- The interfering autopilot
- Research - character strengths and mindfulness
- The integration allows you to quickly reset yourself, more easily control impulses and emotions, and more easily see and challenge coachee who in turn achieves goals that are aligned with personality and values

The subconscious mind

Our subconscious mind functions at different levels that are often depicted as a pyramid, see Figure 1. Atkinson (2001) uses these neurological or logical levels - first defined by Gregory Bateson and Robert Dilts - in the coaching process. The levels each contribute in their own way to goal achievement. Changes occur when you manage to get movement in the top of the pyramid. That is, you really know who you are when you change course. That what you want to achieve is in accordance with your values, what is important to you here and now. And that you have faith that you can make it happen. The feeling of mastery comes when you find (back to) your inner resources, your personal strengths, abilities and skills. When all this falls into place, it also becomes easier to choose the right external resources and place- and time-determined actions.

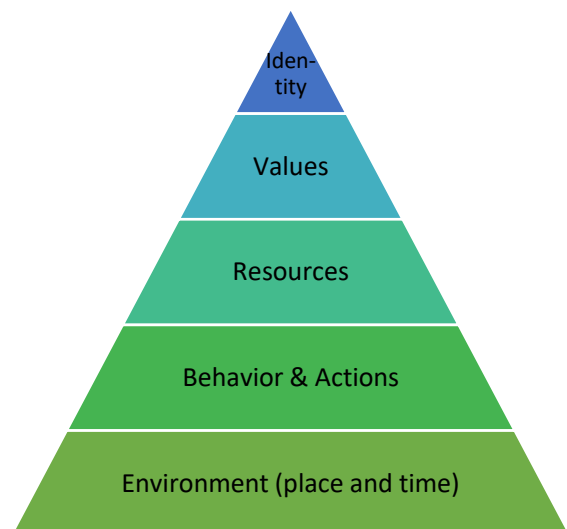


Figure 1 Logical levels
Source: R. Dilts / G. Bateson

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coach can support you in this process by using a form of conversation with powerful questions that bring out your own answers that have often been hidden deep inside you somewhere. With increased awareness of the way you think, feel and act, you can increase self-confidence, energy, focus, zest, joy, and resilience to constant change.

Conscious presence

For this process to be successful, it is important that both coach and coachee (focus person, conversation partner) are relaxed and fully present in the moment. In our technological information society, everything goes so fast that many of us go on auto-pilot. "Pling!" The mobile sends us a reminder. 'Oh yes, I'm having a meeting in an hour. Now I have to hurry because otherwise I will not have time for the next appointment, to shop, to pick up the children, ... ». We move from one

thought to another, from one emotion to another, from one action to another, from one day to another.

We indulge in little or no time for reflection. If we were to take regular breaks to find out what has triggered us to react hastily, why we feel overlooked or misunderstood, or what other opportunities we have to resolve challenges and conflicts, it is also much easier to become aware of what our subconscious really needs right now.

Greater presence gives us deeper insight into ourselves and our character strengths. And vice versa. If we are aware of our character strengths, we can also use them to strengthen our **awareness**. Mindfulness (Awareness training) is an important pillar in **positive psychology**, the science of how we thrive, perform, and handle challenges at our best in both tailwinds and headwinds.



Character strengths

Character strengths are the backbone of positive psychology. Research shows that knowing and using your unique personal strengths profile increases commitment, self-esteem, well-being and energy.

We will take a closer look at how awareness of character strengths is related to movement in the top of the pyramid with the logical levels.

The 24 VIA character strengths as classified by Peterson and Seligman (2004), can be a good starting point for (re)discovering some of your inner **resources in the logical levels**. Character strengths are the psychological ingredients for how we think, feel and act, and this is exactly where we need a shift if we want to make a change. Character strengths differ from other strengths or inner resources, such as abilities (what you are good at), skills (which are learned) and interests (what you like to do). When you like (interest) and are good at playing handball, you may have a flexible body and can think fast (abilities) and you have practiced a lot and learned the rules (skills). You would not have managed all this without your inner drive of, for example, *teamwork* (a character strength) that makes you naturally collaborate and support others, or *perseverance* (a character strength) that makes you keep on going and complete what you have started. Awareness of character strengths gives us a framework and a common universal language, first and foremost for ourselves, and next for others.

We are often not aware of the character strengths we have, or we have forgotten them. For many, it is an aha-experience when they gain insight into their top character strengths. Insight into and use of character strengths is a simple and engaging way to increase the feeling of mastery. By doing a real deep dive and really exploring your character strengths, you will find that when using them you are more often in flow. What you are doing makes sense and is valuable to you and others. Character strengths can be considered as 'values in action' and thus they cover **values in the logical levels**. A personal strengths profile helps you find out which character strengths come naturally to you, which give you energy, and which are easiest to utilize. These are called signature strengths and are part of the core of who you are, and as such they are closely linked to **identity in the logical levels**.

The combination of awareness and character strengths

In addition to ICF coaching, I work with character strengths for deeper self-insight and faster progress, and mindfulness training for increased presence and emotional intelligence. The new core competence 'Embodies a coaching mindset' defined by the International Coaching Federation (ICF) is about developing and maintaining an open, curious, flexible and client-focused mindset. This means, among other things, increasing one's own attention ('having a beginner's mind') and seeing the whole person with all inner resources, as well as allowing for silence, pause or reflection. It is precisely the combination of awareness training and character strengths that I personally benefit greatly from when I continuously build up my core competencies, especially "embodies a coaching mindset", "Maintains presence" and "Evokes awareness".

The scientific definition of mindfulness that a group of researchers came up with in 2004 is "the self-regulation of attention with the use of an attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance" (Shapiro 2004). It shows in itself how strongly these two fields in positive psychology are intertwined because *self-regulation* and *curiosity* are 2 of the 24 character strengths. That being said, there are many other definitions of mindfulness as well.



In an article on *Mindfulness in Coaching*, Cavanagh (2013) discusses several of these and gives us a good insight into how mindfulness contributes to an effective coaching practice. He connects *self-regulation* not only with mindfulness, but also with coaching: "Coaching is fundamentally concerned with the enhancement of human self-regulation". Thus, it becomes an important piece in the interaction between coach and coachee. The coach increases emotional stability and finds it easier seeing and challenging the coachee, who in turn achieves goals more easily. And with that, it seems that the character strength of self-regulation can be central to the trio of character strengths, mindfulness and coaching.

A practical way to strengthen your coaching practice

Many coaches say they struggle with the autopilot who wants to give advice or tips, or who can sometimes be a little more self-absorbed than client-focused. Being able to quickly reset and be able to use the most efficient internal resources is then a key skill. Niemiec (2014) has developed an 8-week program called Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP) that integrates these two important and popular approaches of positive psychology: Mindfulness and VIA character strengths. MBSP offers many practical, research-based activities and short exercises that are easy to integrate

into everyday life. Preliminary studies indicate a large positive effect on our well-being, job satisfaction and relationships. MBSP not only increases awareness - both in general and of character strengths - but also shows how you can use character strengths to deal with the obstacles many people experience by maintaining a mindfulness practice.

With greater self-awareness, we can set goals that are in line with who we are, with our values, and with a balanced use of our character strengths. In particular, the use of signature strengths is energizing and motivating and helps ensure that we implement what we have started. Through signature strengths, we show our authentic selves.

Summary

An integrative approach to mindfulness training and character strengths has been shown to have a major positive impact in many areas. As we have seen, both directions can also contribute positively to an effective coaching practice. Although all character strengths are important in this context, the character strength of self-regulation in particular stands out. It seems to be central to both mindfulness and coaching. Through self-regulation we become more present, we can more easily control impulses and emotions, and we increase discipline which makes it easier to set and follow up on goals.

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Maria C. Hofman, Erickson Certified Professional Coach, ICF Certified Coach, and autumn 2021 Charter certified Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP) leader through the VIA Institute on Character.

For more information about the MBSP program and your free 30-minute personal strength profile [click here](#).

Contact: <mailto:maria@tankeflyt.no>

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