Value Creation in the Coach Developer Landscape

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Introduction
This research project explored the learning journeys of Coach Developers enrolled onto the 2018/19 UK Coaching Strive programme, which supports individuals in the early stages of their Coach Developer journey. Those participating in the Strive programme generally come from within national governing body (NGB) of sport talent pathways (eg British Swimming and England Boxing). Sixteen Coach Developers were involved in the Strive programme in 2018/19.
A Coach Developer supports coaches through a blended approach of coaching conversations, observation, feedback, critical reflection and supportive challenge.

The aims and objectives were:

1. To explore how Coach Developers made sense of their role(s) considering the various contexts in which they operate
2. To investigate the nature of the value created for Coach Developers during their engagement with the Strive programme
3. To better understand the professional learning requirements of Coach Developers on the programme (and in general).

The Value Creation Framework (VCF; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015) was utilised within the programme itself (as part of the content) and the research to gain a better understanding of the value created through specific learning experiences. It comprises eight value ‘cycles’ – orienting, immediate, potential, applied, realised, transformative, enabling and strategic (see Figure 1). Immediate value, for example, refers to local solutions to problems such as being made aware of equipment which could be borrowed or shared with another provider.

This paper presents a summary of the research presented at the UK Coaching 2020 Applied Research Conference. One case study is presented, with implications for coaching drawn from the wider research study.

Figure 1: The Value Creation Framework (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015)
Method
In the early phase of the programme, each Coach Developer completed six sense-making and value-based discussion triads, based around the VCF (see Figure 2). Subsequently, the Coach Developers contributed to a 20-minute focus group focused on the learning journeys to date. At the end of the programme the six sense-making and value-based triads were repeated. This was supplemented by writing a short ‘value story’ to explain one or more of the triads in more detail. In addition, a 40–75-minute individual interview was conducted with each of the 16 Coach Developers. The Coach Developers were also split into two groups to complete a 20-minute focus group, which concentrated on the most valuable learning experiences they had encountered during the Strive programme. After initial analysis of the data, a two-hour collaborative discussion was held between the programme team to discuss the findings.

Results
A number of case studies were produced exploring the nature of the different types of value participants perceived and how this aligned with their broader professional learning journey. Here is one example:

Value story 1:
Meeting Gemma

- Immediate: “Antony had put me in touch with Jemma and said, “You guys, I’ve spoken to both of you independently. You sound like you’ve got similar challenges in your environments, it might be worth you having a monthly catch up,” and we have done that, and we will continue to do that, but had he not recognised the similarities and bridged that gap, we probably wouldn’t have- well, we wouldn’t have reached out to each other.”

- Potential: “It’s being able to make the connections from all of those experiences and learnings, and those connections always come later. It’s almost like you gain the knowledge and then it just sits there waiting to be tapped into. Yes. Sometimes these connections happen and I just tap into it years later somehow.”

- Applied: “I remember sharing that the coach that I was working with wasn’t really going on the journey that I was expecting. Some people said, “Well, … don’t expect them to meet you where you are. You need to meet them where they are.” It just reframed my expectations, and enabled me to just reconnect and go back, and just appreciate the journey from the coach’s point of view … and not get so frustrated.”

- Realized: “So, as a result of scaffolding that observation, she was able to reflect more accurately, and her self-awareness was much better as a result of that. So, then, again, at the end of that conversation we discussed, “Right, What are you going to try and do in the next session?” and she was able to articulate really clearly.”

- Transformative: “Up until that point, I didn’t think that that was our role as coach developers. I thought we were meant to explore and make suggestions but, ultimately, they had to come up with the drive and the suggestions, and that wasn’t happening.”

Figure 2: A visual representation of a completed value-based triad featuring ‘meeting Gemma’ as the critical incident

Figure 3: Gemma’s value story
Gemma’s perceived value had been created through her Strive journey in a number of ways. She benefited from the connections she made with people experiencing similar difficulties to herself (see ‘Immediate’ cycle) and felt that she gained considerable information which she might apply in the future (see ‘Potential’ cycle). Perhaps most crucially, Gemma changed her interpretation of what it was to be a Coach Developer, and this altered the way she approached the way she was attempting to help one of her coaches develop (see ‘Transformative’ cycle). Gemma perceived that this change in approach ultimately had considerable benefits for both her own growth as a coach developer but also in the enhanced reflective and analytical abilities of the coach she was supporting.

Implications of research for coaching

Coach Developers perceived considerable value had been created across a number of value cycles; the most prominent value cycles evident in this group were immediate, potential and applied. Coach Developers gained considerable reassurance and confirmation of their roles through engagement with Strive and, in particular, their understanding of the role of the Coach Developer grew substantially. Coach Developers felt well-supported by the programme deliverers who they perceived had considerable expertise to share and ‘walked-the-walk’ in terms of the way in which they facilitated learning throughout the programme.

Only the beginnings of strategic and enabling value were evident due to the relatively novice status of the majority of Coach Developers on the programme. This meant their most pressing learning needs focused on their interactions with the coaches they were supporting.

There were also some challenges (eg perceived varying degrees of commitment to the programme). A group’s commitment to their collective learning journey is vital and is strongly related to the development of individuals over a sustained period of time. Wenger (1999) highlighted that learning groups take time to become established and some may take many months if not years to thrive. Understanding and accounting for the differing degrees of engagement and giving groups time to form and mature is vitally important. In many ways, this data highlights the Strive 18/19 cohort were just beginning to thrive as they reached the completion of the programme – a classic challenge in programme-based development work!

Other similar programmes should consider whether longer-term case studies across a range of coach developer contexts should be conducted to better understand the professional learning requirements across the landscape. This may enable further strategic and enabling value to be created and evidenced. For example, a series of case studies of two-three years would capture fuller and richer value stories. Greater consideration should be given to exploring the value created by Coach Developers on the practice of the coaches they support. For example, the extended case studies could examine any enhancements in the professional practice of the coaches supported by the Coach Developers.

References


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