



Can being trained in coaching skills make you a more resilient leader?

A unique insight in leadership development

Background

The study, to evidence the impact of a coaching development programme, was carried out by Lynne Graham, the Executive Director responsible for the HR and talent and development functions of Yodel, an independently owned UK parcel delivery company with over 10,000 colleagues.

In 2018 Yodel is going through a significant turnaround programme, implementing large-scale structural change, whilst at the same time reducing costs, and developing innovative products to grow in a highly competitive market.

This can create an extremely pressurised environment for the leaders of the organisation, with the responsibility to provide leadership and delivery of change layered on top of already complex and demanding operational roles.

The organisation has a strategic plan which has four pillars. One of these is to develop a high performing, highly engaged culture where people are proud to say they work for Yodel.

To achieve this goal there is a comprehensive plan of activities with one of the most ambitious being to create a coaching culture through developing leaders, at every organisational level, to become competent coaches.

Lynne Graham designed and has delivered a Coaching Skills programme (based on the application of the GROW model) to over 100 leaders over the past 2 years.

An evaluation of the impact of the programme after the first year revealed an unexpected and welcome insight. Leaders reported that, as well as their confidence in coaching improving, they felt that through using coaching skills, they were better able to deal with the pressures of work.

It was this anecdotal insight that prompted the study into the impact of becoming a coach on leaders' resilience or mental toughness.

To achieve this, it was decided to use the MTQPlus psychometric to assess (24) participants before and then after the coaching skills training, as well as after a period of sustained pressure (the run up to Christmas, which is a peak period for parcel delivery); the coach group.

In addition, an equivalent number (25) and profile (age, gender, seniority) of leaders that didn't participate in the coaching skills programme (although were scheduled to do so later) were also tested using the MTQPlus questionnaire at the same time periods; the control group.

Finally, a sample of the coach group also participated in structured interviews to provide qualitative evaluation.

What emerged?

The results were extremely useful and generally significant.

There were of course limitations to the study. There nearly always are. The sample size was small and consisted of senior managers. Academic research has shown that senior managers generally have a higher profile of mental toughness and for the coach group there was potentially less 'headroom' for an overall increase in this area.

What do the numbers tell us?

The 4Cs Mental Toughness framework assesses mental toughness across 8 aspects of mindset – the 8 Factors. These are:

Mental Toughness Scale	What this means...what does MTQ assess...the 8 Factors
CONTROL	<i>Life Control</i> – I really believe I can do it
	<i>Emotional Control</i> – I can manage my emotions and the emotions of others
COMMITMENT	<i>Goal Orientation</i> – I set goals – I like the idea of working toward goals
	<i>Achievement Orientation</i> – I'll do what it takes to keep my promises and achieve my goals
CHALLENGE	<i>Risk Orientation</i> – I welcome new and different experiences – I stretch myself
	<i>Learning Orientation</i> – I learn from what happens - including setbacks
CONFIDENCE	<i>In Abilities</i> – I believe I have the ability to do it – or can acquire the ability
	<i>Interpersonal Confidence</i> – I can influence others – I am happy to ask the "stupid" question.

As well as mental toughness overall, each of the 4Cs and the 8 Factors is scored on a normally distributed Sten Scale of 1 – 10 with 1 representing mental sensitivity and 10 representing mental toughness.

For the coach group, there was a significant positive difference between the mean sten scores before the coaching skills programme and then afterwards, with mental toughness overall and 6 of the 8 factors increasing.

Conversely, for the test group, the mean sten score on mental toughness overall stayed the same over the time period.

A statistical analysis was carried out and whilst there wasn't a statistically relevant improvement in mental toughness overall (likely because of the small sample size), when looking at the Mental Toughness factors comparing the coach group and the control group showed there was a statistically significant positive effect for the coach group in 4 of the factors – Goal Orientation, Risk Orientation, Achievement Orientation and Interpersonal Confidence.

The conclusion of the study is that there does appear to have been a positive shift in the mental toughness of the coach group following developing and practicing coaching skills.

See the tables below.

Changes with the Coach Group (24)

SCALE	Avg Sten score before the coaching intervention	Avg Sten score 4 months after the coaching intervention	Difference in Avg Sten score
MENTAL TOUGHNESS	6.46	6.67	+0.21
CONTROL	6.33	6.54	+0.21
Emotional Control	5.92	6.25	+0.33
Life Control	6.63	6.50	-0.13
COMMITMENT	6.21	6.04	-0.17
Goal Orientation	6.46	6.50	+0.04
Achievement Orientation	5.96	5.88	-0.12
CHALLENGE	6.21	6.42	+0.21
Risk Orientation	6.46	6.54	+0.08
Learning Orientation	5.75	5.88	+0.12
CONFIDENCE	6.46	6.67	+0.21
Confidence in Abilities	5.83	5.96	+0.13
Interpersonal Confidence	7.00	7.17	+0.17

Changes with the Control Group (25)

SCALE	Avg Sten score before the coaching intervention	Avg Sten score 4 months after the coaching intervention	Difference in Avg Sten score
MENTAL TOUGHNESS	5.88	5.88	-
CONTROL	6.08	6.16	+0.08
Emotional Control	5.92	6.12	+0.20
Life Control	5.80	5.84	+0.04
COMMITMENT	5.52	5.24	-0.28
Goal Orientation	5.80	5.52	-0.28
Achievement Orientation	5.60	5.16	-0.44
CHALLENGE	5.80	5.96	+0.16
Risk Orientation	5.84	5.88	+0.04
Learning Orientation	5.76	5.76	-
CONFIDENCE	5.84	5.96	+0.12
Confidence in Abilities	5.48	5.52	+0.04
Interpersonal Confidence	6.24	6.12	-0.12

What can we conclude?

This is an important and bold piece of work given that developing leaders as coaches is increasingly popular in organisations and yet this is largely uncharted research territory.

Researchers, generally, have focused on the impact of coaching on the coachees in order to demonstrate the benefits of coaching in delivering higher performance or increased engagement. To date there have been little or no investigations on the impact on the leaders themselves of acquiring coaching skills.

Perhaps one of the more impressive aspects of this work is that YODEL is proactively working on developing a coaching culture to support business development – especially in a very demanding industry where the default leadership approach is often highly directive.

Moreover, the determination to evidence properly what Yodel is doing is both unusual and praiseworthy. So many suggest that key enablers such as soft skills cannot easily be measured and personal development change is therefore difficult to assess. It can be measured and Yodel has done that.

Lynne Graham added “Developing a coaching culture in Yodel is not only providing our leaders with the skills to help their team members perform and to become more self-sufficient, it is also benefitting the leaders themselves. Coaching others is actively contributing to the leaders developing their own personal resilience.”

The study was carried out as the Dissertation for a Master of Science Degree in Coaching and Behaviour Change at Henley Management College. This was awarded a distinction.

About Mental Toughness and the MTQ measures

Mental Toughness describes the mindset that every person adopts in everything they do. It is closely related to qualities such as character, resilience, grit, etc. It is defined as:

“A personality trait which determines, in large part, how people respond to challenge, stress and pressure, irrespective of their circumstances”.

Mental Toughness assesses something fundamental – “how we think”. In other words, *why* we act and respond emotionally to events. It enables us to understand mindset in a very practical way.

The MTQ is the most widely used measure of Mental Toughness in the world – and has particularly strong application in coaching and mentoring practice.



Doug Strycharczyk is CEO for AQR International, a leading test publisher and OD consultancy. The MTQPLus is the worlds most frequently used assessment for Mental Toughness