

Applying ACT to Workplace Coaching

A guide to using Acceptance and Commitment
Training in work-related coaching

Rachel Collis

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Rachel has extensive experience in applying ACT to organisational settings. She has presented at both national and international conferences on the topic and contributed a segment on new innovations in ACT in the recent book - “The Mindful & Effective Employee”.

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Introduction

This ebook accompanies a workshop I run for coaches. So there are places where I will refer to content covered in the workshop. In those spots, I will also suggest other resources where you can access that information...or....you could come along to one of my workshops! You will find details on my website: www.rachelcollis.com.au. If I am not running a workshop in your country - feel free to get in contact and we can see what we can work out.

ACT Basics

What is ACT? It is an approach to helping people to flourish. ACT does this by building psychological flexibility, which is:

‘contacting the present moment fully as a conscious human being, and based on what the situation affords, changing or persisting in behaviour in the service of chosen values’

Psychological flexibility is about:

‘living in accord with your values and in a way that is more open and accepting of your history as it echoes into the present, that’s more self-affirming, self-validating and values based.’ - Steve Hayes

More than 20 studies have shown that psychological flexibility predicts a wide-range of work-related outcomes – including work attitudes, wellbeing, job performance and absence rates (Bond, Flaxman et al. 2013).

ACT interventions have been shown to both increase psychological flexibility and:

- Reduce work-related emotional distress (Bond and Bunce 2000)
- Increase productivity (Bond and Bunce 2000)
- Increase innovation (Bond and Bunce 2000)
- Increase transformational leadership behaviours (Bond 2011)

- Improve team leadership, leading to increased organisational commitment and profit (Bond 2011)
- Reduce unplanned absences from work for employees with chronic health problems (Dahl, Wilson et al. 2004)
- Increase the application of new learning to the job (Varra, Hayes et al. 2008)
- Increase job satisfaction (Bond and Bunce 2003)
- Increase the benefit of job redesign (Bond, Flaxman et al. 2008)
- Increase motivation (Keogh, Bond et al. 2006)
- Improve performance (Keogh, Bond et al. 2006) (Bond and Bunce 2003),
- Increase resilience (Flaxman and Bond 2010)
- Decrease the incidence of burnout (Hayes, Bissett et al. 2004, Vilardaga, Luoma et al. 2011)

(There is an updated list of research related to applying ACT to the workplace at the Working with ACT blog - <http://workingwithact.com/what-is-act/act-in-the-workplace-research-references/>)

A fundamental difference between doing ACT and other approaches is that whereas many other approaches try to change the *content* of thought, ACT aims to change the *relationship* people have with their internal experiences, which then frees people up to choose to behave in line with their values.

When you are just starting to learn ACT and trying to combine it with other approaches to coaching, a good way to check if what you are doing is ACT consistent or not is to ask yourself:

1. Am I trying to change the *content* of the coachee's thoughts and inner experience or am I trying to change the *relationship* they have with those inner experiences?

2. Is what we are doing in the service of helping the coachee to live freely chosen values?

(Now, of course, it isn't 'right' to be ACT consistent and 'wrong' not to be! But it is helpful to have a sense of whether you are doing ACT or

not and it can be confusing for coaching clients if you give them mixed messages.)

Some Definitions

Like any technical approach, ACT has its own jargon. We will try to avoid jargon as much as possible in this e-book but there are some words that it might be helpful for you to understand if you are to 'get' what this is all about (Also see the ACT Advisor in the workshop workbook for a quick guide).

1. Values

In ACT the word 'values' has a particular meaning.

'Values are intentional qualities that join together a string of moments into a meaningful path' (Hayes and Smith 2005)

or a more technical definition of values:

'a special class of reinforcers that are verbally constructed, dynamic, ongoing patterns of activity for which the predominant reinforcer is intrinsic in the valued behavioral pattern itself.' (Wilson, Sandoz, Kitchens, & Roberts, 2008).

The key practical points in these definitions are:

1. If values work is done well, then the values reinforce behaviour associated with those values - creating a positive feedback loop.
2. Values don't have to be fixed, they can evolve over time.
3. Values work encourages the individual to take action that is in their long term best interest and mitigates somewhat against actions that are rewarding in the short term but unworkable in the long term.
4. Good values work encourages patterns of behaviour that over time help the individual to create a life that is rich and meaningful to them.

In ACT it is important that values are freely chosen. They aren't about what you think you should do but what you genuinely, deep in your heart, want to stand for. Everything else in ACT is in the service of helping the person to live these values moment to moment.

The first step in ACT coaching is often values clarification, so that coaching clients are clear about not only what they choose to value in life but also how they want to show up at home and at work. Clarifying

values can help the coachee to be more willing to do what matters, even when it involves experiencing uncomfortable emotions.

2. Fusion is where you get entangled with your thoughts and *'Your thoughts dominate you; they dominate your awareness or your actions or both'* (Russ Harris). When we are in a state of fusion, we assume that our thoughts are telling us how things really are and that we need to do what our thoughts tell us.

When we are fused with our internal experience, we tend to focus our attention on the contents of our mind (our thoughts, memories, assumptions, beliefs, images, etc) rather than what we are experiencing through our five senses. We then make decisions and take actions based on our internal experience (thoughts, memories etc) rather than what is really going on in the world.

3. Defusion is where we can observe our thoughts and see them for what they are - just products of our busy minds. Defusion is *'a very useful skill to develop. It is the skill of noticing and then benignly neglecting what is noticed, holding it gently, refusing to take it seriously, or whatever words you want to pick, OR doing the opposite, depending on the context'* (Hank Robb)

4. Experiential Avoidance is where we focus on trying to control, avoid or get rid of unwanted thoughts and feelings and as a result avoid taking actions that are important to us.

5. Acceptance and Willingness is choosing to adopt an open, curious and receptive attitude to internal experiences (such as thoughts, emotions, memories and urges) as they arise, even when they are unpleasant or unwanted.

Kelly Wilson suggests willingness involves deciding, *'Where you want to go in life and then heading off in that direction, even if that means feeling some pain along the way'*.

6. Flexible Contact with the Present Moment involves flexibly paying attention to what is happening in the present moment, as opposed to being on attentional autopilot. It includes the skill of being able to choose where you put your attention; to be able to move your attention around as needed (Hayes 2012).

The only place and time that we can actually do something and have an impact is this moment now. Our thoughts tend to pull us into the past

or the future, and sometimes this is useful - planning, problem solving, learning from mistakes - but it is unhelpful when we give attention to the past and future and lose contact with the present moment. Present moment awareness however, can include flexibly bringing attention in the present to memories of the past or imaginings about the future.

Contact with the present moment can help coachees to become better at noticing their thoughts and feelings and as a result can build defusion and acceptance.

7. Self-as-Observer is where -*'The person I call me knows what I am thinking but it distinct from that process'* (Hayes 2012) rather than seeing the thoughts, feelings and stories I have about myself as the same as me. Some ACT practitioners are also linking Self-as-Observer to the concept of Self-as-Perspective. This links to some theoretical ideas in Relational Frame Theory (the theory underpinning ACT, see later) and the experience that the one thing that is consistent through life is the perspective from which we view the world.

8. Committed Action is when we identify the actions we need to take to put our values into practice; we take those actions flexibly in response to the needs of the situation and persist with those actions even when we are experiencing unpleasant or unwanted thoughts, feelings or urges.

Targeting Different Processes

In ACT we are trying to build psychological flexibility and the way we do that is to

- Break psychological flexibility down into 8 processes;
- Assess how the client is doing on these processes, both in the moment and in general
- Use interventions designed to build these processes.

There are hundreds of metaphors and activities available to target these processes - passengers on the bus, the compass card sort; the tin man metaphor; the clipboard activity....- and that can feel a bit overwhelming when you are starting out.

Kirk Strosahl suggests that a way to simplify this complexity is to learn just 3 exercises to target each process. Repeat those until you feel confident using them and only then expand your repertoire. Over the page is a table with my list of favourite approaches. We will cover most of these in the workshop.

The interventions use in ACTherapy were designed for clinical populations and many of them don't quite land right with coaching populations. So I have just listed the ones that I have found work well in work-related coaching.

Russ Harris' book *ACT Made Simple* is a great source of well described ACT interventions.

You will notice that I use mindfulness to address many of the processes. In the workshop I will explain how this works. We will also spend some time on the ACT Matrix¹.

I also highly recommend *Mindfulness for Two* by Kelly Wilson and Troy Dufrene, for a detailed and quite lovely account of how to use mindfulness to build psychological flexibility.

¹ You can learn more about the matrix at Kevin Polk's website - www.drkevinpolk.com

Process	Intervention
1. Present moment awareness	Mindfulness of breath and body Mindfulness of 5 senses Mindfulness of thoughts and emotions Matrix
2. Flexible perspective taking/ Observer Self	Future you, Past you GROW questions How would x see this? Role play – swapping roles backwards and forwards 3 senses of self Matrix
3. Defusion	Hand as talking mouth Mindfulness of thoughts Creating some space Matrix
4. Acceptance	John Forsyth's dance Mindfulness of emotions Physicalizing lite Matrix
5. Choosing Values	Compass Card sort VIA signature strengths test Values-based 360

6. Committed Action	GROW Goal setting & action planning Matrix
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Research on Coaching

If you want your approach to coaching to be evidence-based, what do you do? It is early days for research on coaching, there is a '*lack of empirical evidence for what happens, why it happens, and what makes it effective or ineffective*' (Joo 2005)

A review of the literature in 2010 found only 11 randomized controlled trials for coaching in general (Grant 2010). The majority of those studies had Anthony Grant as a co-author and used a solution-focused methodology. The majority of these studies showed a positive outcome for coaching.

Grant (2010) also came to the conclusion that effective coaches have the following attributes:

- Capacity to build empathy
- Credibility and confidence
- Authenticity and integrity
- Willingness to challenge and probe
- Ability to flexibly move between challenging and supporting the coachee
- Ability to draw on their own career experience
- Maintain confidentiality
- Evoke reflection and problem solving
- Develop between session action steps for the coachee
- Help the coachee to develop the capacity to see alternate points of view (Grant, 2010).

ACT (particularly if it is combined with Functional Analytical Psychotherapy – FAP (Kanter, Tsai et al. 2010)) provides an empirically supported approach for coaches to build these attributes (Hayes 2012).

In the next session we will look at whether there is empirical support for using ACT in 1:1 workplace coaching.

Is There Empirical Support for Using ACT in Work-Related Coaching?

There is extensive evidence for the effectiveness of ACT in psychotherapy (Ruiz 2010). No studies have been done using ACT in individual coaching, however a number of studies have been done using a small group, multi-session model (6 participants) in workplaces and these have shown good outcomes (Bond, Flaxman & Livheim, 2013).

As in coaching, the primary focus of ACT is behaviour change. The model has been shown to support behaviour change in a wide range of settings (Hayes 2012).

ACT is unusual in psychotherapeutic approaches because it is grounded in empirical behavioural science. The ACT model and approach are empirically supported by many studies at several different levels of analysis (McHugh 2011). It is this grounding in science that gives support for using ACT in new ways, such as work-related coaching. If coaches learn the underpinning science² then they can adjust ACT interventions to fit the circumstances whilst still staying true to the underlying theory.

So there is reason for cautious support for taking an ACT approach to coaching. There is more empirical support for an ACT-based approach to coaching than many other widely used models. Time will tell if careful studies confirm ACT as an approach of choice in work-related coaching.

² The underpinning science is functional contextualism and relational frame theory – it isn't easy to learn but is possible!
www.contextualpsychology.org has plenty of resources to help with this.

Higher Level ACT-Informed Coaching Skills

Basic coach training usually involves learning skills such as how to listen actively, ask good questions and paraphrase back for understanding. These are important basic coaching skills. But what higher level coaching skills are important and how do they relate to ACT? A coach needs to be able to demonstrate the following skills:

1. Compassion for others
2. Compassion for self
3. Genuine curiosity
4. Listen for non-verbal cues
5. Help the coach get present in the moment
6. Notice what is going on inside you during the session
7. Assess psychological flexibility
8. Train higher order relational framing skills

1. **Compassion for others**

Effective coaches show compassion, not only towards their coaching clients but also to others in the situation. For example, if the coachee is complaining about a direct report whose performance is poor, an effective coach would show compassion towards both the coachee and also the direct report. This compassion is then likely to build trust and flexible behaviour in the coachee.

According to Paul Atkins (Atkins and Parker 2012), compassion involves four stages:

1. Noticing another is suffering,
2. Making judgments about what is going on,
3. Feeling empathy, and
4. Taking action.

You may find that you go through these steps several times during a coaching session. You are not only demonstrating compassion but also

training coaching clients in this skill and, for some, that will take multiple experiences.³

2. Compassion for self

Self-compassion is:

- Being kind toward oneself in instances of pain or failure;
- Perceiving one's experiences as part of the larger human experience; and,
- Holding painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness (mindfulness)(Neff, Rude et al. 2007).

Self-compassion means that when you make mistakes, don't know the answer or fail to live up to expectations in some way, you feel able to face the reality of the situation. This behaviour of admitting mistakes can be very important both to build trust in the coaching relationship and also to model how to respond effectively to mistakes and failings. Interestingly, self-compassion leads to better outcomes than having high self esteem but low self compassion in a range of important behaviours (Neff, Rude et al. 2007) (see table).

³ To learn more about this I highly recommend reading Paul Atkins paper on compassion in organisations: [https://crawford.anu.edu.au/pdf/staff/paul_atkins/2012/Atkins-and-Parker-\(2012\)-AMR.pdf](https://crawford.anu.edu.au/pdf/staff/paul_atkins/2012/Atkins-and-Parker-(2012)-AMR.pdf)

High Self Esteem but Low Self Compassion	High Self Compassion
Lower depression and anxiety	Less painful emotions when distressing events occur
Defensive in the face of negative feedback	React to negative feedback with more acceptance and with an orientation towards growth and the development of mastery
Fail to learn from mistakes	More willing to make needed changes
May not always take responsibility for their actions	Take more responsibility for their actions
Can be narcissistic	More compassionate to others
	Associated with more wisdom, more curiosity, more initiative, higher scores on agreeableness

3. **Genuine curiosity.** Coaches who mindfully listen with curiosity and aren't judgmental in their responses, build trust more effectively with their clients. This then creates a space where the coachee is more willing to be vulnerable, look at their own behaviour and explore their mistakes and failings and successes. Genuine curiosity means that coaches are less likely to impose their own preconceptions on the coaching client. The client and coach can look at things as they are, rather than as how they think they should be. Seeing the situation with new eyes may lead to new solutions.
4. **Listen for non-verbal clues,** e.g. pace, tone - especially moments of transition. When people are flexible, open and curious they sound and look different to when they are inflexible, avoidant and fused. Most coaches can notice this. Perhaps the client is telling the same old story with no sense of hope for change or growth; you can see and hear it in their non-verbals. Responding to that rigidity in a way that promotes a shift to a more flexible space is a useful coaching skill. It might include saying something like:
 - *'Can we just pause there a moment? This sounds like this might be important. I just want to explore this a little'* and then ask questions with a stance of genuine curiosity to help them to look at the

situation more flexibly (for suggestions, see the Reality section of the ACT informed GROW process outlined later).

- *There is a lot here, and it sounds like it isn't easy to deal with. Can we just pause a moment and take a breath?*
- Or walking them through the ⁴Matrix (which we will cover in the workshop), to help them to notice their thoughts, actions and the context relating to the issue.

Noticing moments of transition between a flexible and inflexible stance not only in the coachee but also the coach is also very helpful. Those moments are important. It is worth being curious about them.

5. **Help the coachee to get present in the moment**, both to help them to learn that skill in general and also because that can create more flexibility in the conversation. You might ask;
 - *Can we just pause for a second and check in?*
 - *What is your mind telling you about this?*
 - *As you talk about this how does it feel in your body?*
 - *I just want to pause for a second...as you talk about this I notice...* (describe what you are noticing about them (NB observations rather than evaluations - the way they are talking, their body language, etc)...and I am wondering...
 - *Can we just take a moment to get centred?*
6. **Notice what is going on inside you during the session.** Instead of resisting it, could you use it to help your client? If you find your client boring or irritating then others probably do to. Could you raise that with kindness and curiosity? *I notice that I am having a lot of difficulty staying focused on what you are saying, that might just be my problem. I might be a bit distracted today but I am also wondering if that seems to happen with other people?* Then get curious. Explore what is going on here and now, between the two of you? How is it similar to/different from what happens with others? And be okay with the coachee saying, *No, it doesn't happen with other people,* that is a good opportunity to both model how to give and receive feedback flexibly and also the

⁴ You can learn more about the matrix at Kevin Polk's website www.drkevinpolk.com

skill of bringing your attention to something important even when you are feeling a bit distracted.

7. Consciously **assess psychological flexibility**, both in terms of the level of skill the coachee has in the ACT processes in general and also how open and aware they are in this moment in the coaching conversation (the 'ACT Advisor' is a good tool for this - we will cover that in the workshop,) **and intervene as appropriate**.
8. **Train the client in higher order relational framing skills** - perspective taking, conditional, analogical and hierarchical frames (see the notes on RFT and the GROW questions later in this ebook).

Traps Involved in The Transition from Counselling/Clinical Psychology to Coaching (A brief section just for psychologists, therapists and counsellors)

Psychologists have been trained in many of the skills that are important for effective coaching; what can go wrong when they cross over to work-related coaching?

According to Joo, (Joo 2005) only one third of potential executive coaching clients view psychologists favourably as coaches. Joo suggests that this may be due to clinical psychologists entering the field without appropriate retraining in coaching and business expertise; clients worrying that psychologists will do therapy rather than coaching and some clients viewing psychologists as doing too much assessment which increases cost unnecessarily. (Joo 2005)

When executives and organisational sponsors are choosing a coach they are looking for:

- Evidence of having done similar coaching work previously.
- Evidence of extensive coaching experience. The coach is able to speak confidently about their coaching experience
- Personal capability, credibility and relevant organisational experience
- A coach who shows an interest in and appreciation of the organisation and sector
- Good interpersonal skills
- Flexibility of the coach - use of a range of models, tools and techniques.
- The coach embodies their declared coaching style, i.e. , if they use ACT then they demonstrate psychological flexibility in their behaviour
- A coach who will both focus on improving business results and also on the coachee's individual goals
- Cost effectiveness; this doesn't mean the cheapest; suppliers who are 'too cheap' (i.e. well below market rate) are looked on with a suspicion of being low quality. (Leedham 2005) (Ridler 2013)

For psychologists and therapists who are new to workplace coaching it may be helpful to consider any gaps you may have in your knowledge and experience and work to gradually broaden your expertise.

Building a Flexible Sense of Self

Adapted from Villatte 2013.

The ACT concept of the three senses of self can be very helpful for some coaching clients. It can help them to become more aware of both their own internal processes and their visible behaviour. It can help them to be more willing to sit with discomfort and less inclined to act impulsively.

The 3 senses of self that coaching clients often find useful are:

- Self as content (Self as story)
- Self as process
- Self as perspective

Self as Story (Self as Content)

Self as content is a sense of self that encompasses all the descriptions we have about ourselves - our roles, history and attributes. We constantly categorise and evaluate ourselves. *'I am tall', 'I am bad at maths'*. This is normal and unavoidable, it is part of how our minds work but it can be a problem if we treat those evaluations about ourselves as if they are facts. If *'I am bad at maths'; 'I don't cope well with stress'; 'I am a great leader'* and *'I am not good at this touchy, feely stuff'* are treated as if they are the same as *'I am sitting on this chair'* or *'I am alive'* then our life becomes restricted.

We can tend to treat these evaluations we have about ourselves as if they are rules we must follow. Unfortunately humans find it oddly rewarding to make our behaviour consistent with our internal rules. We don't see alternative ways of behaving. It is helpful to learn to hold those stories lightly, to notice when our stories are fencing us in and become curious about the possibility of other ways of behaving.

How can we loosen the hold these stories and evaluations have on behaviour?

Imagine you are working with a manager who has been given feedback that he needs to focus more on building relationships. He has been told that he is too focused on getting the task done. He says, *'I am not really a touchy, feely sort of a person.'* This evaluation about himself is likely to get in the way of change, so it can be helpful to defuse from this story.

You might try:

- Looking for exceptions.

Has there ever been a time when you did take the time to build good relationships with colleagues?

Explore the situation, what they did and the outcome of what they did with curiosity (i.e. work together on a behavioural analysis).

- Exploring the pros and cons of change.

Would there be any benefits of being a more 'touchy, feely' manager?

What would be the risks?

You will often find rigidity here – that they see the change as all or nothing – either I am focused on achieving the task or on the relationships. It can be helpful to help them to explore the situations where one approach is likely to work and the situations where another is likely to be more useful.

- Converting the stories into behaviours that can be done or not done in the moment.

If you were to focus more on building relationships in the team, what exactly would you be doing differently? (Search for specific behaviours)

As an experiment, would you be willing to try... (choose the smallest change in behaviour they have expressed) when you next talk to Tania? Just to see how it goes?

How will that feel? (Normalise that it will feel uncomfortable – but only ask this if they are at the point where they can express uncomfortable emotions)

My experience is that when people try out new behaviours, they often feel a bit clumsy and they often don't get it right the first time. Do you think that might happen here? (Normalise performing poorly on a new skill)

If it doesn't go well, what could you do? (Make an if...then plan)

- Check if the new behaviour aligns with their values in some way.

'You mentioned that it was important to you to be...and I am wondering if there are times when that would involve you giving a little more attention to how the other person is feeling?'

- If they are reluctant to try even a small new behaviour then consider exploring whether the 'No' is a result of fusion or avoidance:

'When you picture yourself giving more time to building and maintaining relationships what thoughts and feelings come up?'

Then walk through the ⁵Matrix (which we covered in the workshop) to explore what happens when they let the story control their actions rather than live their values.

Self as Process

Self-as-process involves noticing that you are seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, thinking, feeling and doing (Harris 2013).

'I am checking my email', 'I am thinking about my conversation with David'; 'I am feeling hungry'; 'I am feeling anxious at the moment'.

Self as process relates to present moment awareness. It encourages defusion and acceptance. Self as process involves tracking what you are doing, thinking and feeling and noticing the impact of what you do. This is an important step in behavioural change.

To help your client to build a sense of self as process, throughout the coaching session ask questions to encourage observation of:

- Inner experiencing in the present

How do you feel as you talk about this?

- Changes in inner experiencing over time

How do you feel when you are giving Sarah feedback? How is that similar to or different from now? How is that similar to or different from when you are giving David feedback?

Did you feel the same all the way through that discussion with Sarah or did it change through the meeting?

What did you notice as you were talking to the group?

⁵ You can learn more about the matrix at Kevin Polk's website www.drkevinpolk.com

- Ask questions to encourage noticing of subtle variations in behaviour in different contexts.

In what situations does this behaviour ofturn up most for you? And when do you notice yourself doing...instead?

Ask questions to help them to notice the key factors in the context that seem to reinforce the desired or unworkable behaviour. Also explore the function of this behaviour in that particular context.

Self as Perspective

Self as perspective involves noticing ‘that you are noticing...and that the you (or part of you)’ which notices is continuous, unchanging, distinct from, more than WHAT you see, hear, touch, etc’ (Harris 2013).

Self as perspective includes ‘flexibly noticing from a perspective of I, here, now’ i.e. Flexible perspective taking (Harris 2013)

Contact with self as perspective is important in supporting defusion, acceptance and willingness. It allows people to take a longer term view and to be less pushed about by their thoughts, feelings and impulses. It builds empathy and compassion.

Coaching naturally builds flexible perspective taking skills – coaches ask questions that invite the coachee to explore the perspective of I-Here-Now.

To build self-as-perspective skills, start with self-as-process (get present and notice) then move into exploring the common perspective across the different experiences (who is noticing):

How did you feel when Angela said...? What did you think about it by the end of the meeting?

So you are noticing that how you felt and how you saw things changed through the meeting?

Did you notice that at the time?

Would it be helpful to get better at observing yourself in that way?

- Ask questions to encourage changing perspective:

One year ago, what did you imagine you would be like?

If you were me and you heard what you are saying right now, what would you think/feel?

How do you think Jo sees you?

- Encourage observation of how the experience changes when they take a different perspective:

When you see yourself from Jo's perspective, is it different?

When you look at this from Sonja's perspective, does it feel the same?

- Encourage observation that there has been one consistent perspective through their life:

So even though you are a very different person to who you were 10 years ago, there is still this sense of continuity through your life, a sense of a you who has watched your life unfold and is watching at this moment?

Many coaching clients find that awareness of these three senses of self - both intellectually and experientially - can increase their capacity to be flexible and effective.

(This section draws heavily on the work of Jen and Matt Villatte - you can download handouts from their workshops on Clinical RFT from the ACBS website).

What is Relational Frame Theory and Why Does it Matter?

Relational Frame Theory (RFT) provides an explanation of language, cognition and learning that allows for more accurate prediction and influence of behaviour. RFT explains complex human behaviour such as storytelling, metaphors, humour, empathy and perspective-taking.

RFT is grounded in behavioural analysis, which has strong empirical support. RFT now also has strong empirical support in its own right.⁶

RFT is based on the following assumptions:

- ‘Thinking is behavior which is subtle or private and thus hard to observe, except for the person doing it (and sometimes even...)
- Thinking is a subtype of verbal behavior.
- Thinking can be understood using the same basic behavioral principles as for understanding other behavior.
- Thinking can effect other behavior of the same organism as in other behavior–behavior interaction’ (Törneke 2013).

RFT has one central idea: *‘Human languaging and cognition consists of a specific kind of learned behavior: A particular way of relating stimuli’* (Törneke 2013).

What is the specific behaviour that we learn? When we are little, other people teach us that symbols can represent things in the real world and that those symbols can be equivalent to each other. For example we learn to treat a written word (e.g. Ball), a spoken word (*‘Ball’*), a picture of the thing and the actual thing as if they are functionally the same. We not only learn to relate these ‘stimuli’ to each other but we also learn the more general skill of relating one thing to another.

Once we learn this skill of relating then we learn other more and more complex relations.

⁶ There is an updated list of the research here - <http://contextualscience.org/publications> - search for ‘RFT Empirical’

RELATIONAL FRAMES

Coordination (Sameness, A=B)

Comparison (More than, Less than, Better than, Worse than, Bigger than, Smaller than)

Opposition (Is opposite to)

Distinction (Is different to)

Hierarchy (Contains, is a member of, or belongs to, in this category)

Analogy

Contingency/Conditional (if...then)

Perspective

- Deixis (I v You; Here v There)
- Temporality (Now v Then; Before v After, Now v Later, 5pm v 3am)

We get so good at this that we can relate any stimulus to any other stimulus using any relational frame. Over time, everything we encounter gets slotted into our increasingly complex internal verbal network. If I ask you about your best friend, you will describe them based on the relationships in your network. *'We met in grade 5 (time). She lives in England (place). She is a nurse (category, distinction).'*

We all have strengths and weaknesses in our ability to frame in these ways. Weakness in the later contingency and perspective taking frames impact on higher level skills like planning, empathy, influence, perseverance etc. Coaches often need to work on these skills with coachees to help them to become more flexible and effective:

If you do x, what happens?

How will Jane see this?

How will you see this in 10 years time?

Research suggests it takes multiple examples and experiences to improve these skills, which is why you can't just tell a coachee with poor interpersonal skills about perspective taking and expect them to start to do it. You have to coach them to experience perspective taking over and over and over again.

Relational frames are important in understanding how language influences behaviour. Over time, we develop an elaborate verbal

network of how people, events and things relate to each other. Through ‘transformation of stimulus function’; objects, events and people take on functions for us that aren’t based on how we experience them through our five senses but are based on how they fit in our network. The man who conned Dad out of \$50,000 drives a Porsche and my new boss drives a Porsche - I will treat him as untrustworthy.

Transfer of stimulus functions also explains why metaphors can often have a larger impact on behaviour than just giving someone an instruction. e.g. *‘You need to be more measured in your approach’* v *‘How would Penny Wong respond in this situation?’* If you know the Australian politician, Penny Wong, the second statement will convey a wealth of subtle information about what measured behaviour looks like. It is well worth learning about how to create your own metaphors in the moment from the material the client gives you. e.g. If they say, *‘I get in this state where i just lose it and become really destructive’* you can build on that by exploring what this means to them and then perhaps adding in a metaphor that help to make their repertoire more flexible and broad. *‘So when you get that impulse to rage and destroy, there is also a part of you that would like to pause and show your strength and courage differently - more like a river changing the landscape gradually than a tidal wave that wrecks everything in it’s path?’*

Skilful coaches can use an understanding of transfer of stimulus functions to help coachees to adopt behaviours that align with their values. The ACT Matrix⁷ is a good example of this. The ACT Matrix can change the function of painful thoughts and feelings from a trigger to try to get rid of the thought or feeling, to a reminder to take valued actions.

⁷ We cover the Matrix in the workshop and you can also learn more about it at Kevin Polk’s website - www.drkevinpolk.com.

Rule Governed Behaviour

One of the ways in which humans are different to animals is that we create rules about ourselves and the world and we find it intrinsically rewarding to follow those rules. When our behaviour aligns with our rules about how we should behave we get a sense of satisfaction. (Your parents and teachers spent a lot of time and energy training you to do this!) This rule governed behaviour can be helpful (e.g. I follow an internal rule to be careful with my money) but we can have a tendency to persist with following our internal rules in situations when they aren't helpful and fail to notice when the rule doesn't apply (My carefulness leads me to try to save money by fixing my car on the cheap and it becomes dangerous to drive). Rule following can make us insensitive to what is going on in the real world and can make our behaviour inflexible and ineffective. This becomes even more problematic when the rules are about abstract ideas, e.g. *'I could never be a good leader'* or *'It is wrong to feel angry'*. Following these rules narrows down our options.

A particularly unhelpful rule that many people have learnt is that internal events like thoughts and feelings cause external behaviour. Following that rule causes several problems. Firstly, it means that you have to try to control your internal experiences if you want to control your behaviour. This is incredibly difficult and can be counterproductive, when we try to avoid emotional pain we inevitably end up losing joy as well (Gross and John 2003). Secondly, following this rule means that if you can't control your thoughts and feelings then you are doomed to act on them. Finally, this rule can lead us to avoid challenges. We think *'I will apply for that role once I feel confident about the interview'* or *'I won't ask for feedback because it will make me feel too anxious'*. ACT works to undermine this rule governed behaviour. The aim is for people to feel that they can adjust their behaviour based on the demands of the situation rather than fighting to control problematic thoughts and feelings.

In ACT-informed coaching we help clients to start to notice their internal rules; notice when they are following those rules; notice when it works and doesn't work to follow the rules and then choose to follow the rule or not based on their values and the needs of the situation.

An ACT/RFT Consistent GROW Process

The GROW process is a well known and effective approach to structuring a coaching conversation. Adding some ACT and RFT to this process can make it richer and more impactful. Below are some suggested questions for each stage of the exercise. I have added the ACT or RFT process that each question draws from⁸. We will cover this in the workshop.

Goal

(Committed Action/Values)

What is the goal you would like to achieve?

If you achieved that goal, how would your life/work/this situation be different?
(Conditional)

Why is that important to you? (Coordination, Hierarchy – values)

How does this goal link to your values? (Increase reinforcement through transformation of stimulus functions).

Coach states understanding of the key points, acknowledging both content and feelings

⁸ This section draws on the work of Matthieu and Jennifer Villatte. You can find out more about their trainings at their website. <https://practiceground.org/blog/author/matt/>

Reality

(Present Moment Awareness/Defusion/Perspective Taking)

Ask questions to encourage observation and description (a collaborative functional analysis)

Tell me more about the situation. Exactly what happens and when?

Look for specific details rather than generalities.

Explore the details of

- their goal,
- the issue,
- the past and present circumstances.

Encourage the coachee to focus with more attention than usual.

Seek descriptive not judgmental answers.

What did they experience through their 5 senses?

Encourage the coachee to question assumptions.

See if you can draw out the rules they have in relation to this. Are they workable and are they applying them flexibly?.

Ask questions to help the coachee become aware of their own thinking and reasoning and become curious about others' thinking:

What is the data behind that statement? (5 senses experiencing)

Does everyone agree what the data is? (Perspective taking)

Can you run me through your reasoning?

When you said...did you mean...? (Perspective taking)

When Jody said...what do you think she meant? What else could she have meant? (Perspective taking)

What assumptions do you think Jody is making about this situation? (Perspective taking)

What have you done so far to achieve this goal? (5 senses experiencing)

What was the impact of that? (Conditional, Comparative)

If you had your time again what would you do differently? (Perspective taking)

What happens if you do x or y? (Conditional, Comparative)

What else happens? Anything you didn't expect? (Conditional)

What are the circumstances in which x seems to work? (Conditional, Deictic)

What are the circumstances in which you are more likely to do x? (Comparative)

Have you been in a similar situation before? (Temporal)

How did you approach it then? What worked? What didn't work? (Conditional)

What were the factors that shaped your decision? (Temporal, Perspective taking, Comparative)

You have said and I am just wondering if there are any ways that the opposite could be true? (Opposition)

How do others see this? (Perspective taking)

What are some of the other steps you believe would be useful but haven't followed? (Conditional)

What prevented you from taking those steps? Look for both internal and external blocks (Problem solve external blocks; use ACT for internal blocks).

What resources do you have or need to deal with this?

Coach states understanding of the key points, acknowledging both content and feelings

Options

(Present Moment Awareness/Defusion/Acceptance/Perspective Taking/Acceptance/Committed Action)

What ideas do you have about options for reaching your goal? (Broadening options)

What else could you do?

What would you do if you had the resources/support you need?(Conditional)

Is there any of that you could do any way?

What do you think would happen if you did x? (Conditional)

If we could time travel and bring 'you' from 5 years time into the room now and ask his or her advice, what would he or she say? (Perspective Taking)

How is this issue like...a bubble/a tree/a journey etc? (Analogy) Does thinking about it in that way suggest any new options?

What do you think....(a person whose opinion they trust)...would suggest? (Perspective Taking)

What are the advantages and disadvantages of these options? (Comparative)

Which are most likely to get you to your goal? (Comparative)

How will you deal with any barriers? (Normalising Barriers, Conditional)

How will you know that you are stuck or heading in the wrong direction? (Conditional)

Coach states understanding of the key points, acknowledging both content and feelings

What/When/Who/Which
(Committed Action/Acceptance/Values/Defusion)

Which options are you going to pursue?

Develop a written action plan

Clarify detail – *exactly who is going to do what by when?*

Could you approach this as an experiment – try things and see what results you get? (Coordination - willingness to make mistakes)

Break the plan down into small, high-leverage steps

If not already explored - *What blocks or difficulties could arise?*

Again look for internal and external difficulties. Use ACT for internal difficulties; problem solving for external difficulties. *How will you deal with them?*

Who needs to know? (Perspective Taking)

What support do you need? (Normalise need for support)

Is there anything else we need to consider? (Perspective Taking)

On a 0-10 scale how likely are you to take these actions – if less than 7 - break into smaller steps, review deadliness, priorities, whether the goal links to values. Also look for avoidance of painful thoughts and feelings or entanglement with unhelpful inner experience.

What is your mind likely to do as you take these actions? (Normalise internal barriers)

How will you respond to that? (Self Compassion). *What will be the signs that you have been hooked by those thoughts?* (Conditional)

As you take those actions what qualities do you want to express? (Coordination with values)

How will you know that you are starting to make progress (Conditional - Encourage tracking)

Will this plan meet your goal? If not, do we need to change the plan or modify your goal?

When are we going to meet to review progress?

What will you have done by then?

What Are We Trying to Achieve With These Questions?

We are trying to build psychological flexibility - '*the ability to notice and react to thoughts, feelings, and behaviour in order to give one the opportunity to take action towards important ends.*' (Törneke 2013)⁹

These questions do this by helping the coachee to:

1. Notice the difference between an evaluation and a description and notice which is more helpful in informing choices about behaviour.
2. Observe their own behaviour and notice more clearly how effective it is.
3. Start to track the triggers and outcomes of their behaviour (Antecedent - Response- Consequence).
4. Start to group behaviours according to function rather than form. For example working hard to deliver an excellent result can sometimes be a move towards values and at others it is a move to avoid inner self-critical thoughts. We want clients to start to notice this difference.
5. Start to notice the problematic consequences of certain groups of behaviour (such as 'away' moves).
6. Notice self instructions and rules as they arise.
7. Notice when they are following internal rules rather than responding to the environment/expressing their values through their behaviour.
8. Notice the circumstances where following a particular rule works and the circumstances where it doesn't work.

⁹ For a more detailed explanation of the practical applications of RFT, download the handouts to the following Pre-Conference Sessions from the ACBS 2013 Conference:

Steve Hayes, Matthieu and Jennifer Villatte - Integrating RFT principles in clinical practice

Niklas Törneke - RFT for Clinical Use

They can be found at:

http://contextualscience.org/worldcon_xi_in_sydney_preconference_workshop

(available to members of the ACBS).

9. Notice their own internal responses, become more accepting of those responses, and view those responses from the perspective of the Observer self. So that internal responses have less impact on behaviour.
10. Transform uncomfortable internal events from triggers to unhelpful behaviour into reminders to take valued action.
11. Broaden the behaviours the coachee sees as options in a given situation, so that their behaviour becomes more flexible and responsive to the demands of the situation.
12. Help the client identify unlimited sources of motivation for goals and actions by linking them to values and purpose.

ACT Informed Goal Setting

The ultimate aim of ACT is for the client to take actions that move his or her life in a valued direction.

In ACT, a goal is defined as '*a specific achievement sought in the service of a particular value*' (Hayes 2012).

Goals that aren't linked to freely chosen values tend to lack vitality. They set people up to be overly focused on an imagined future, when they have achieved the goal. The present time is viewed as not being as good as this imagined future because in the present the goal hasn't been reached whereas in the future it will have been achieved.

When goals are linked to values then each small action taken towards achieving a goal can be seen as success in the present. This enables people to take more pleasure in the journey and be more present in their lives.

Expressing freely chosen values is intrinsically rewarding. So linking goals to values also provides motivation to take action even if the action itself isn't very enjoyable or rewarding.

An ACT informed goal setting conversation would ideally start by exploring how the qualities they have identified as values could be converted into actions.

If you were being 'supportive' what would you be doing? (Conditional framing)

What are the things you could do that would be part of being a more supportive manager? (Hierarchical framing) (Villatte 2013)

As the coachee develops their coaching goals it is important to explore how the goals link to their values. Asking directly is often easiest: *How do these goals link to the values we spoke about last time?*

It is helpful to stress test goals - ask:

Why this goal and not another? (Distinction) (Villatte 2013)

If you achieved this goal how would things be different? (Conditional Framing) (Villatte 2013) (Watch here for emotional goals, e.g. '*I would feel less stressed*', if that turns up, dig for the values underneath, '*Tell me why 'feeling less stressed' is important to you?*')

What do all these goals have in common? (Coordination) (Villatte 2013)

Will this goal move you towards what you want your life to be about?

The coachee may also come to coaching with some goals that others have set for them, again these need to be explored in the context of the coachee's values:

Your manager said that she wants you to delegate more efficiently to your direct reports. Do you think that is a good idea? What would that look like?

Is that something that is important to you?

How does that relate to the values we discussed last time? (Coordination) (Villatte 2013)

The goals are then linked to specific behaviours that the coachee can undertake in the present, *'So you want your team to be more engaged? You have decided that you can contribute to this by being more curious about your direct report's interests when you delegate work. Talk me through how that will work in practice? What would be the first and smallest step you could take?'*

Goal setting also needs to include exploration of possible obstacles – both internal (thoughts and feelings etc) and external (lack of resources). Work together to problem solve external obstacles and use ACT in response to internal obstacles.

5 Session ACT Consistent Coaching Process Overview

In this section I want to try to give you a sense of how ACT informed coaching works over a number of sessions. There is an outline of the process below and then more detail in the next pages.

Pre-Session & Session 1 - Beginning Well

- Assess client readiness

- Assess and try to improve the context

- Build trust and confidence in coach

- Agreement around confidentiality

- Agreement around how coaching will work. What will happen in the sessions.

- Initial values activity – Retirement party/ Values-based 360

- Initial assessment of the coachee

Between sessions

- Agree committed actions between each session

- Session review questions

- Complete ACT Advisor

Session 2

- Meet with manager and facilitate a feedback conversation

- 1:1 with the coachee:

- Analyse any feedback/assessments

- Choose values – compass card sort

- Choose coaching goals & committed actions – Coachee to check with their manager that these are aligned with organisational needs and workable

- Complete ACT Advisor

Session 3 (onwards - depending on the total number of sessions)

The Matrix

Review committed actions

Other ACT interventions as needed (based on your list of techniques to target processes)

Skill building, problem solving etc as needed

Where appropriate use ACT consistent GROW process

Seek feedback on progress from trusted others

Session 5 - Endings

Acknowledging together what the coachee has achieved and also what is still to do

Give honest and genuine positive feedback about what you see in the client and how it has been meaningful.

Make a plan to build on gains and avoid backtracking

Also meet with the coachee and their manager and facilitate a discussion to review progress against the goals

5 Session ACT Consistent Coaching Process

I need to make a short disclaimer here - this isn't a summary of the perfect way to do coaching – just an attempt to give you an honest account of how I apply ACT to coaching. Take whatever works for you.

Pre-Session & Session 1

1. Assess and try to improve the context

It is important to both understand the context for coaching and also, as far as is possible, try to set things up so that the environment is supporting the coaching process.

An organisational culture that is supportive of coaching, seeing it as a positive leadership development activity rather than a remedial effort for poor performers, increases the likelihood that coaching will be successful (Alvey and Barclay 2007). Although you can't change the whole organisational culture, you can foster those supportive behaviours in the people around the coachee and this is likely to be helpful.

Ask the organizational sponsor, '*What might make change difficult? Can those barriers be overcome?*' (Peterson, 2002).

The majority of work-related coaching is paid for by the organisation. This means that in each coaching assignment you may need to manage a number of 'clients' at once: the coachee, someone from HR or organisational development and the coachee's manager. Often others also have a stake in the outcome - peers, direct reports, etc.

At the start of a coaching engagement it is important to make sure that you understand who considers themselves a 'client' in the process? Who will want to be involved in the development of goals; who will want to be updated about progress; whose support is needed for the coaching to be a success? It is also important to get the coachee's agreement on all this and develop a plan together for how to get the needed ongoing support. (For some clients this process can be an important first learning - around how to be proactive in setting situations up so they support positive outcomes).

2. Assess client readiness

In conversation with the referring client in the pre-session conversation and also with the coachee in the first session assess the following:

Do they want coaching? Are they interested in change? Are they willing to invest the time and energy it takes to change? Coaching is more challenging if the coachee isn't interested in change and doesn't see coaching as helpful. And often if you both work hard to develop trust and also support the coachee to become more psychologically flexible (so they are able to tolerate the discomfort of accepting the need for change) then they do become committed to the process. A stance of hopefulness can make a big difference here.

It can be helpful to ask both the 'client' (HR Manager, etc) and the coachee whether changing will lead to a benefit that is worth the cost. It is better for everyone to decide that coaching isn't workable at the start rather than to plod on against odds that are just too big.

3. Build trust and confidence in coach

Rapport, trust and commitment are key factors in coaching success (Passmore and Fillery-Travis 2011). Research has shown that ACT creates particularly powerful therapeutic alliances compared to other approaches (Hayes 2012). I suspect this is also true of ACT-based coaching. Functional Analytical Therapy (FAP) (Tsai 2008) takes this thoughtful approach to building genuine and meaningful relationships a step further and can be adapted to help coaches to quickly create powerful interactions with coaching clients - in the service of the client's chosen goals.

The first step in the process of trust building involves the coachee **deciding whether the coach is credible**. The coachee tends to make this assessment based on the coach having previous experience in successfully coaching clients in similar situations; previous personal success in a similar workplace situation and/or academic credentials (Executives don't place much value on coaching credentials) (Alvey and Barclay 2007).

In initial interactions it is best for the coach to be supportive and nonjudgmental (Alvey and Barclay 2007). Is it clear that the coach is

approaching the assignment in the service of supporting the development of the coachee? Is the coach committed to helping the coachee to succeed at what is important to them? Give the coachee the opportunity to ask questions, *'Is there anything about me, my background or approach that would be helpful for you to know?'*; raise any reservations, *'Do you have any concerns about what could go wrong in coaching?'* and take ownership of the coaching, *'What would make this a good first session for you?'* (Tsai 2008)

These **'confirming' behaviours** (nonjudgmental curiosity, honesty and empathy) by the coach enable the coachee to gradually become more open in the relationship (Alvey and Barclay 2007).

Once trust has been established, **the coach begins to challenge the coachee more** (this could be in the first session but often isn't until the second and tends to build over time as the coaching alliance develops) - questioning assumptions, challenging choices, etc. It can be helpful to check in around this (*'Let me know if I am pushing you too hard'*), to watch for early signs that the coachee is getting defensive (and then use ACT to help them become more open and flexible, e.g., by linking to values or getting grounded in the present). It is important to make it clear that challenging them is in the service of helping them to achieve their goals.

4. Agreement around confidentiality

Developing clear expectations around confidentiality early in the relationship is important in work-related coaching. The coachee doesn't necessarily need the sessions to be completely confidential, sometimes that isn't practical, but they do need clarity about the circumstances in which material is shared with others and what information will be shared (Alvey and Barclay 2007). It is helpful to acknowledge the needs of the 'client' – their manager; HR Manager; OD consultant - the coaching needs to benefit them and the organisation in general. A clear agreement as to how we will demonstrate that benefit whilst maintaining trust in the confidentiality of the sessions is important.

5. Agreement around how coaching will work

What will happen in the sessions? I usually give a general overview of coaching, something like: *'My job is to help you to set clear goals, make plans for how you will achieve those goals, identify what could get in the way of progress and help you to plan for how to deal with those blocks. As we go along I*

will try to balance supporting you with challenging you – let me know if I stray too much in one direction or another.'

I also usually briefly mention 'in-session' responding (Tsai, 2009), *'Although our interactions will probably be quite different to the interactions you have with other people, it is likely that some of the behaviours that you want to work on will turn up here between us. If that seems to be happening, is it okay if we pause and explore what is going on?'*

I also ask them if they are willing to complete a brief session review questionnaire at the end of each session. I explain that some research suggests that combining this session review with carefully tracking progress can improve outcomes by 30% (Boswell et al, 2013).

I explain, *'We want the coaching to lead to both learning and actions that you do out in the real world. So at the end of each session I will ask you what your key take aways are and what actions you are intending to take as a result of our discussion.* Many of my clients find it helpful to jot themselves some notes during the session to remind themselves of any learnings and planned actions steps.

I also say:

'I also want to check in on how the coaching is going. The questionnaire is an opportunity for you to shape my behaviour so I do more of what works for you and less of what doesn't work..'

Here is the questionnaire I use in my coaching, it is based on the work of Scott Miller

In today's session:

1. Did we talk about the right topics?

1 (no)	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 (yes)
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Any comment:

2. What was the most helpful thing that happened in today's session?

3. What was the least helpful thing that happened in today's session?

4. Did my questions and comments make sense to you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Any comment:

5. Did I fail to ask you about something you consider important or wanted to talk about but didn't?

6. Was the session length

Too short				Just right					Too long
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7. Did you feel heard and understood?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Any comment:

8. Is there anything that happened (or did not happen) that would cause you to be reluctant to meet with me for another coaching session?

9. Overall do you think what we are doing is likely to help you achieve the goals you set at the start of our work together?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Any comment:

10. Is there anything else I need to know?

6. Initial Values Activity – Values-based 360

In ACT everything we do is in the service of:

‘living in accord with your values and in a way that is more open and accepting of your history as it echoes into the present, that’s more self-affirming, self-validating and values based.’ - Steve Hayes

So it is important to do an initial values activity at some point in the first session. A values-based imaginary 360 process can be a good way of doing this.

‘Imagine we could read the minds of the people you work with, we could really know what they think of you...if you were being the person you want to be what would you hope their opinion of you would be?’

Explore the perspective of clients, colleagues, direct reports, respected managers. Draw out qualities they want to express in their approach to their work, *‘So you would like your team to see you as supportive, fair and authentic?’*

7. Initial assessment of the client and the context

It is helpful to assess the level of insight the coachee has into their performance:

Does the coachee know their own strengths and weaknesses? Do they know what skills and behaviours they need to change and develop? Do they know what they need to do to be successful in their environment? Do they know how to get good quality feedback?(Peterson 2002)

Assessment works best if it is a shared endeavour to gather and interpret information in order to ensure goals and action plans are likely to lead to success.

Work with the coachee to decide what information they already have and what information they need. They have often done various personality profiles in the past and have information from performance evaluations. What other information do we need?

Do they need to do their own informal 360 process? Where they meet 1:1 with trusted colleagues and ask them some questions we have developed together? Would a formal 360 process be helpful? (There is more information on 360 feedback processes [here](#).)

Do we both understand what the organisation expects from the coachee and the coaching process?

It can be helpful to talk to the client (HR, OD) to get a sense of this.

During this conversation you will also start to get a sense of how psychologically flexible the coachee is.

8. Agree committed actions between each session

At the end of each session make sure the coachee has some actions they commit to taking between sessions. Check that the actions are:

- In line with their values
- Likely to move them towards the outcomes they have chosen as important
- Realistic and achievable

In the first session the action may be seeking feedback from trusted others.

9. Complete session review questionnaire and discuss any relevant responses

Between Sessions

1. Client - Between session committed actions

2. Coach - Note down your assessment of psychological flexibility

Complete an initial ACT Advisor form to identify possible processes to target.

3. Coach - Note down what ACT approaches you have used to shift processes and the impact of those interventions.

Session 2

1. Analyse any feedback/assessments

If the coach provides useful insights in analysing any assessments (such as 360 feedback or personality profiles) with the coachee, this will build trust in their expertise and judgment, which in turn enables the relationship to quickly become useful to the coachee.

2. Choosing values – The compass card sort

If values were unclear in session 1, spend some time supporting the coachee in choosing values. The compass card sort is a good approach to this. The cards can be bought at: <http://www.lifecompasscards.com/> Detailed instructions for the card sort are in the workshop workbook.

3. Choose coaching goals & committed actions

In session 2, the coach supports the coachee in developing goals that are both relevant to the organisation and meaningful to the coachee (see section on [ACT Consistent Goal Setting](#)).

I usually further clarify in-session responding here. We agree on behaviours that are a problem for the clients and behaviours that they want to do more of. We also agree what would be a helpful response if and when those behaviours crop up in the coaching sessions.

Coachee: *I have had feedback that I can be arrogant.*

RJC: *What do you think it is you do that others experience as arrogant?*

Coachee: *I am not sure. I think I express my opinion as if it is the truth and don't seem interested in hearing other views.*

RJC: *What would you like to do instead?*

Coachee: *I still want to appear confident but also more open to adjusting my opinion given new information and more respectful of others' views.*

RJC: *If that behaviour of 'expressing my opinion as if it is the truth and not seeming interested in hearing other views' turns up in our sessions what would be a helpful way for me to respond?*

Coachee: *You could just point it out.*

RJC: *Okay, I will...and I will do my best to raise it in a way that is 'confident but also open to adjusting my opinion and respectful of your view'.*

With some coaching clients I will also ask them what they are concerned I may do that would be unhelpful and ask them to gently point out if ever I am doing something unhelpful. This can be a great opportunity to practice feedback.

It is helpful to get a sense of what they broadly want to get out of coaching, *If we could travel forwards in time and see you in 6 months from now, how would we know that the time we spent together has been worthwhile? What would be different about you?* (Perspective taking)

They may want to talk about differences inside themselves, *'I will be more confident, I will be coping better with my workload.'* If so, ask them - *How could I tell that from watching you? What would you be doing differently?*

Encourage the coachee to commit to a specific action after each session.

4. Meet with manager and the coachee together and facilitate a feedback conversation.

Ask the manager:

What is John currently doing well?

What does he need to do less of?

What does he need to do more of?

What do you see as the desired outcomes from coaching?

If we achieve those outcomes, what will be different?

If this coaching is a success, what would others see John doing more of or less of in 6 months time?

Ask clarifying questions so that all three of you have a clear idea of what success looks like **in behavioural terms**.

Also make sure the manager is prepared to give the necessary support including regular feedback and watching for and encouraging early signs of progress.

Make sure that the manager understands that the coachee will need opportunities to try their new skills at work; to discover what does and doesn't work. Ask, *'Will John be supported if he makes mistakes as he tries out new behaviours at work?'*

5. Agree committed actions between each session

At the end of the session make sure the coachee has some actions they commit to taking between sessions. Check that the actions are:

- In line with their values
- Likely to move them towards the outcomes they have chosen as important
- Realistic and achievable

Between sessions

- 1. Between session committed actions**
- 2. Session review questions**
- 3. Coachee to check with manager that goals and actions are both aligned with organizational need and workable**
- 4. Assess psychological flexibility**

Review the ACT Advisor form to identify possible processes to target.

Session 3 (onwards - depending on number of sessions)

1. Review progress on committed actions

What went well and what didn't go well. Be curious about both success and failure – teach the coachee how to analyse what happened in a way that is useful to them.

2. The Matrix

We cover the matrix in the workshop. You can learn more at Kevin Polk's blog:

<http://drkevinpolk.blogspot.com.au/>

or attend an on-line training with Benji Schoendorff (highly recommended)

<http://www.youtube.com/user/benjaminschoendorff/about>

3. Other ACT interventions as needed (based on your list of techniques to target processes)

Once you get comfortable with ACT, you can target processes as they arise in the coaching conversation, gradually building psychological flexibility.

4. Skill building, problem solving etc as needed

ACT consistent coaching also includes the sort of problem solving and skill building strategies you would use in most other approaches to coaching.

5. Where appropriate use the ACT consistent GROW process (see notes on this earlier)

6. Agree committed actions between each session

At the end of the session make sure the coachee has some actions they commit to taking between sessions. Check that the actions are:

- In line with their values
- Likely to move them towards the outcomes they have chosen as important
- Realistic and achievable

7. **Session review questions - as appropriate.** After the first couple of sessions I tend to use the session review questions intermittently to check in on how things are going.

Between sessions

- 1. Client - Between session committed actions**
- 2. Encourage coachee to seek feedback on progress from trusted sources**
- 3. Coach - Note down your assessment of psychological flexibility**
Complete an initial ACT Advisor form to identify possible processes to target.
- 4. . Coach - Note down what ACT approaches you have used to shift processes and the impact of those interventions.**

Session 5/Final Session

1. Meet with the coachee 1:1 and acknowledge together what the coachee has achieved and also what is still to do

Review the progress that has been made (both against the goals and in general) and acknowledge the efforts the coachee has made during the coaching process. Ask the coachee what they have got from the coaching process, what they will remember, and what they have achieved.

2. Meet with the coachee and their manager and facilitate a discussion to review progress against the goals

Coachee briefly presents what they have gained from coaching.

Ask what changes the manager has noticed? What does the manager suggest for the next steps to support the coachee's further development?

3. Meet with the coachee 1:1

Debrief the discussion with the manager.

4. Make a plan to build on gains and avoid backtracking

Ask about what they hope for the future.

Acknowledge that there will be moments of failure.

Ask:

What is likely to trigger you to slip back into old habits?

Is it possible to set things up so you lessen the likelihood of those moments?

Is it possible to recognize those moments early and pause and observe before you act?

Through the coaching process you will have trained the coachee in responding with curiosity and self-compassion to failure – it can be helpful to reiterate this at the end:

No one is perfect, there will be times when you don't live your values. When that happens how will you respond?

5. Give honest and genuine positive feedback about what you see in the client and how it has been meaningful.

Before the final session take a moment to think about your work with this coaching client. Were there any moments that stood out? What have

you learnt from working with this coachee? What are your hopes for them for the future? (Tsai 2008)

Share this with the coachee, taking into account their style, what they are likely to find rewarding and what would be unpleasant for them.

I also usually let the coachee know that I will be pleased to hear about their future progress.

Coaching to Improve Poor Performance

Contextual behavioural science involves considering behaviour in context, both the external environment and the person's internal environment. This can help a coach to work with the client (the HR Manager/Manager etc) and the coachee to accurately diagnose what is going on when performance is poor.

Often the biggest hurdle in coaching an individual with poor performance is to get them to actually accept that there is a problem.

Why do people resist facing performance problems?

- Fusion with self-as-content. If I see myself as being the same as my achievements then suggestions that I am not doing well feel like an attack on me rather than an observation about my behaviour and the outcomes I am achieving.
- Lack of self-compassion. The coachee avoids facing the issue in an attempt to avoid their harsh inner critic.
- Lack of present moment awareness. The coachee doesn't notice what is happening in the world because they are too caught up in their inner experience. They then don't have any objective data to draw on to assess how they are doing.
- Egocentric assessment - 80% of people think they are above average. This problem with self-assessment gets worse the less expertise you have (Finkelstein and Fishbach 2012) (Kruger 2009.)
- Fear for where it will lead - will they lose their job or get demoted?
- They don't know how to improve. They don't have the knowledge or skills to perform well. They don't believe that they will be given the support they need?
- They may be fused with stories that tell them they can't change or improve.
- They may believe they have to wait until they feel differently or have different thoughts before they can change.
- They feel that if they agree that there is a problem, then it will be made 100% about them when the environment is contributing at

least 50%. They don't have the resources they need. The team culture doesn't support good performance. They are concerned that this isn't being acknowledged.

- There are positive consequences for poor performance, e.g., being given easier work or a smaller workload
- They don't accept they are performing poorly because the expectations were unclear so they don't know how they are being measured.
- They don't accept they are performing poorly because no-one has told them in clear unambiguous language. (In my experience this is amazingly common. It is often due to experiential avoidance on the manager's part.)
- They don't accept they are performing poorly because they aren't actually performing poorly. Is there clear, objective evidence?

ACT informed coaching can be very helpful in providing the motivation to change; the resilience to face the discomfort around accepting that you haven't been performing well; the perspective taking skills needed to negotiate for support from others; and the willingness to try new and often uncomfortable behaviours.

Using Conversation to Build Motivation to Change

When we want people to change, our instinct is to try asking (or telling!) the person to change. Explaining to them why we think they should change. If we are really good at 'selling change' then we might even describe the benefits to them of changing.

The psychology of behaviour change suggests a different approach.

Conversations that both increase commitment to change and are more likely to lead to behaviour change include the following coaching behaviours:

- Empathic listening (Perspective taking)
- Showing genuine interest in understanding the person's perspective

- Help the person to explore their options and help them to make their own decision about whether they want to commit to change (a mindful, curious stance)
- Help them to see the reality of the situation (Present moment awareness)
- ‘Roll with resistance’ rather than arguing with the individual (Flexible and curious)
- A respectful stance that honours the person’s autonomy
- A collaborative approach
- Exploring with curiosity how the change does or does not link to values
- Noticing any experiential avoidance that may be driving the avoidance of change and supporting a more open and flexible stance.

In conversations that have the best outcomes, it was the person themselves who is describing the benefits of the change rather than the coach. The individuals came to their own decision that they wanted to change. It was only at this point (when they heard the individual saying *‘I want to change..’* or *‘I am going to change...’*) that the effective coach starts to help the person to make a plan for how they would go about changing. (Miller 2002)

Coaching Alpha Executives

‘Alpha’ males make up 70% of senior executives (Ludeman and Erlandson 2004). They are confident and intelligent. They like to be in charge. Although some female executives do adopt alpha behaviours, problematic dominance behaviours are less common in women.

Alpha executives can tend to be impatient. They don’t listen well to others and don’t let others influence their decision making (See, Morrison et al. 2011). They often have unrealistic expectations of themselves and others which can lead to burnout. They can be dismissive of other’s feelings and can fail to notice the negative impact their competitive and aggressive approach has on others. Others can experience their behaviour as bullying.

They engage in dominance behaviours (Schmid Mast and Hall 2003), such as:

- Taking charge of the conversation
- Interrupting others
- Talking down to people
- Expressing strong opinions
- Tending to steamroll others into doing what they want (Schmid Mast and Hall 2003)

How Can a Coach Best Engage Alpha Executives?

The coach needs to behave in ways likely to build respect. Psychological flexibility is vital here. These clients are used to people trying to please them. They tend to respect people who stand true to their own values. So notice in yourself the inclination to either be submissive or to get in a competition where you try to dominate them back. Ask yourself what values you want to live in this coaching relationship and how you want to express those values in this moment. For me I usually want my behaviour to be calm, supportive, confident

and mindful, so I try to express that in the interactions (sometimes with more success than others!).

You can expect an ‘extinction burst’ if you don’t join them in the game of working out who is boss. They are likely to increase their dominance behaviours for a little while to see if they can win before they settle into a more cooperative relationship.

Set some ground rules that make it clear that you will interrupt them and have some input into the direction of the conversation. Say something like, *‘For coaching to be effective, we need to make sure our conversation is different to other conversations you have. That might mean I need to interrupt you to focus in on an important detail or explore a particular topic in a different way.’*

Get agreement that you will make nonjudgmental observations about what is happening between the two of you. Then if unhelpful dominance behaviours turn up, be prepared to raise it with openness and curiosity.

It is important to establish credibility early in the relationship. This doesn’t mean listing your achievements but does mean behaving in ways that clearly demonstrate that you are an experienced coach who understands the opportunities and challenges involved in being a senior manager.

Be curious about any doubts they may have about coaching. Respond non-defensively. Make it clear what your work is in the service of.

Reassure them that the aim isn’t to make them soft but to give them more options. So they can choose different approaches based on the needs of the situation rather than using the same approach over and over.

Give them a compelling reason to change. Work with them to identify their own values. They have often been living an achievement-oriented life without thinking about the bigger picture of what they want their life to be about. Something like the retirement party activity can have a big impact on them. They don’t tend to like having to conform, so they like that values in ACT are freely chosen rather than having to blindly adopt a set of organisational values.

Many alpha executives are often good at thinking long term but their horizon is often only a few months or years. Giving them the larger

perspective of the retirement party can help them to focus on becoming more flexible in their behaviour.

Help them to notice when dominance behaviours work and when they don't. They tend to like data and the data they trust the most is their own. If you can help them to learn to be more present, to notice what is really happening rather than what their mind is telling them is happening, then they can start to make more flexible decisions about what behaviour is likely to be workable in each moment.

Help them to learn to be better at sitting with their feelings of impatience and become less reactive. They can usually see the benefit of this.

Don't work with them in isolation, engage with their broader context. Usually their environment has been rewarding the behaviour. Encourage the alpha to share their goals with appropriate stakeholders and ask for support. Involve their manager in goal setting and ongoing feedback around performance.

Agree on a way to measure outcomes of the coaching - Alpha's will focus on what gets measured.

Understand that defensiveness is always about protecting vulnerability and vulnerability will relate to something they value. We only get defensive about things that really matter to us. So if they get defensive you know you are touching on something important...and you know that you need to move forward carefully. It can feel incredibly risky to acknowledge vulnerability. Go at their pace, create a space where it feels safe to be vulnerable and ask evocative questions but don't push them too hard.

In my experience, if you can get Alpha executives committed to change they can be very rewarding clients to work with.

ACT Informed 360 Feedback Process

Is a 360 Feedback Process a Good Idea For this Client at this time?

360 feedback processes have been shown to sometimes lead to worsening performance, disengagement and damaged working relationships. And if it is done well, 360 feedback can increase awareness and provoke improved individual and team performance ([Nowack and Mashihi 2012](#)). What does the research suggest about what will make a 360 process more likely to be beneficial? In the table on the next page is a summary of research that suggests how best to approach a 360 process.

Data credibility	Type and number of raters	Ideally, 4 supervisors, 8 peers and 9 direct reports. Selected by the coachee with the manager's input, so they see it as a valid group
	Credibility of ratings	Clear definitions are given for the behaviours being assessed, with examples of what effective and ineffective behaviours look like. The behaviours assessed link to organisational success factors.
	Open-ended responses	Give raters guidance - ask them to make feedback behavioural and give suggestions for how to improve. Remove subjective, judgemental comments that are likely to provoke a negative response with little benefit to the coachee. Give the coachee support in interpreting and responding to open-ended responses

The way the information is presented		<p>Give mean/mode and also the distribution of responses.</p> <p>Give enough information so that coachee is able to tell how different rater groups responded to different questions and whether there is agreement or a range of opinion within a rater group.</p> <p>Coach needs to help the ratee interpret these differences</p>
The participant	<p>What is their feedback orientation?</p> <p>What is their readiness to change?</p> <p>What are their beliefs about how to change?</p> <p>Do they have self-efficacy about their capacity to change?</p> <p>How self compassionate are they?</p>	<p>Coachee's who are conscientious, have high self-efficacy, a learning orientation and low anxiety respond best to 360 feedback. If the coachee doesn't have these qualities they may need to work on building readiness to change, psychological flexibility, self-compassion and self-efficacy prior to starting the process.</p>

Support offered	Coaching support increases impact	Coach helps the coachee interpret the results and analyse strengths and weaknesses. The coach makes concrete recommendations and supports the coachee in developing an action plan
	Coach facilitates coachee to engage with raters to review and clarify feedback and get support for the action plan	This both increases behavioural change and increases raters perception of change
	Manager is involved in action planning process	To ensure it links to organisational goals and to provide support and feedback on progress.
Assessing behavioural change	Have a clear answer to the question - how will we know if behaviour change has been successful	
Where there has been significant negative feedback		Give coachee support in managing their initial response. Coachees may need time to assimilate and respond to the feedback - 6 mths later they often perceive the feedback as useful and have made significant changes.

Supporting long term behavioural change		Build self-efficacy for the change, explore the cons and pros of the change, let them choose to change or not, work on relapse-prevention strategies
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Table is a summary from (Nowack and Mashihi 2012) (Bracken and Rose 2011).

What does ACT Consistent 360 Feedback Coaching Look Like?

Session 1

Meet with the coachee prior to starting the 360 process.

Explore their work-related values - how do they want others to experience them? Spend some time on this. Why does it matter to them? Frame the feedback as a way to get some information on how others see them and whether that aligns with how they want others to experience them.

Help them choose appropriate raters - encourage them to notice whether choosing a particular person is a move towards values or away from discomfort. Also encourage them to be conscious of the politics of who they choose. If they look at their list of suggested raters from the perspective of their manager - does it look like they are genuinely interested in getting honest feedback or are they just interested in getting feedback from people they expect to view them positively?

Normalise that for most people even with our best efforts, this is a stressful process because we are social animals, so most of us care deeply what others think of us. Link this discomfort to willingness to have pain in the service of the values they have chosen.

Encourage them to use objective, 5 senses experiencing data when they do their own self-rating

Explore how they are likely to respond if the raters give them low scores in areas that are important to the coachee. If the coachee thinks they will respond with something that suggest avoidance or defensiveness (e.g. *These people are idiots they don't understand what I do*), see if you can explore what is underneath that. Defensive, avoidant moves often signal vulnerability and where there is vulnerability, there are also some deeply held values. Consider doing some work to build self-compassion.

Create some flexibility around the results. This isn't truth. It is how the respondents saw you at that moment in time. That is very useful information but it isn't the truth about you.

Normalise a tendency to focus on negative responses. *'When I get feedback, if 90% of it is positive and 10% negative, which bit do you think I focus on most?...Are you likely to do that?'*

Do some *if...then* planning. Most people get some negative responses in a 360, how would you like to respond to any negative feedback in yours?

Are you likely to ruminate on any negative feedback? What would be the best way for you to handle that?

Arrange to meet to give them their results or soon after they have their results.

Consider giving them a worksheet to help them start to make sense of the results when they get them. It is often helpful to get them to sort results into - expected positive and negative responses and surprising positive and negative results.

Explain the agenda for the follow up session. It will include spending some time analysing the results, giving them an opportunity to explore their response to the feedback, deciding on how best to explore the responses with the raters; developing an action plan for any changes they may want to make as a result of the feedback. Emphasise that those changes need to be about expressing their values rather than changing to please people.

Session 2

Give them an opportunity to explore their response to the feedback

Analyse the results – help them to consider how to interpret the information they have been given

Help them to decide how best to explore the responses with the raters

Develop an action plan for any changes they may want to make as a result of the feedback. Emphasise that those changes need to be about expressing their values rather than changing to please people.

Help them consider what support they will need if they are to change their behaviour.

And finally...

We started this e-book with this quote from Steve Hayes. ACT is about:

...‘living in accord with your values and in a way that is more open and accepting of your history as it echoes into the present, that’s more self-affirming, self-validating and values- based.’ - Steve Hayes

I think that the research is suggesting that if we can do this as coaches and, if we can help our clients to do this in their lives, then in small and large ways things will get better. We will become better coaches - more flexible and present; more in contact with our values. Our clients will become better leaders - less driven by anger, fear or greed and more able to make wise decisions and take actions that create vitality, meaning and purpose.

I think that is a goal worth working towards.

Recommended Resources

Books

Bond, F. W., Flaxman, P. E. & Livheim, F. (2013). *The Mindful and Effective Employee: A Training Program for Maximizing Well-Being and Effectiveness Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*. Oakland, CA, New Harbinger Publications.

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Training

Russ Harris' training is always excellent. He also regularly brings international ACT trainers to Australia. You can find out what is on offer here: <http://www.actmindfully.com.au/>

The website for the ANZ Chapter of the Association of Contextual Behavioural Science (ACBS) lists ACT training in Australia and New Zealand, including the yearly ACT conference: <http://www.anzact.com/>

Benji Schoendorff provides on-line training which I highly recommend: <http://www.youtube.com/user/benjaminschoendorff/about>

I provide 8 week online training courses in advanced coaching skills. [Sign up to my newsletter](#) to get details of upcoming courses.

Community

The Association of Contextual Behavioural Science is working to model how to set up and maintain a vibrant, cooperative community.

There are listservs, Facebook groups, special interest groups and resources: <http://contextualscience.org/>

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I hope that this e-book has given you some useful information that will help you to grow as a coach. Do drop me a line and let me know how it goes as you apply some of what you have learnt to your coaching practice.

“A good coach motivates and encourages you to improve your skills, knowledge and attitudes in your personal and professional lives. They establish good rapport with you, give you constructive feedback and you’ll set clear objectives together. They’ll stretch and challenge you and encourage you to solve problems and make changes by yourself. A good coach is analytical rather than critical. They depersonalise the problems you discuss by focussing on facts, outcomes and performance rather than your personality or style.”

(Chambers 2005)

Good luck!

Rachel

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If you haven’t attended my ACT coaching workshop, you will find details of upcoming sessions on my website:

www.rachelcollis.com.au

I also provide 1;1 mentoring and training for coaches...and coaching for a range of clients. More details are on my website.

You can sign up for my free occasional newsletter [here](#). It includes:

- An irregular evidence based success tip (it will turn up in your inbox about every two months)
- A free copy of my e-book: *How to be a Great Manager*
- A five week e-course on *How to Climb The Corporate Ladder Without Losing Your Soul*
- Notification of upcoming public workshops and webinars