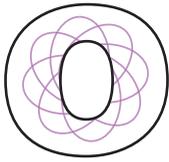




# POSITIVELY BLOOMING

Positive psychology has a mission – a noble goal – to help the world flourish by feeling good. **Fiona Parashar**'s study reveals seven themes that can help coaches turn this ambitious call to action into a reality

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ne of positive psychology's calls to action is to increase the number of

'flourishing' individuals to more than half of the world's population in the next 50 years. Coaches can play a part in making this happen by helping individuals set and attain goals linked to well-being.

Flourishing is defined as being found at the most positive end of the mental health spectrum<sup>1</sup>. It is characterised by high levels of emotional, psychological and social well-being. Such high levels have been associated with economic benefits due to reduced absenteeism, lower healthcare costs and better performance in the workplace and at school<sup>2</sup>. However, only about 10-15 per cent of the world's population is estimated to be flourishing<sup>3,2</sup>.

Martin Seligman, in his opening address to the first World Congress on Positive Psychology in June 2009, stated that the goal of positive psychology is to increase the world's population of those flourishing to 51 per cent by 2051: "Beyond feeling good they're also doing good adding value to the world... striving to flourish... is a noble goal"<sup>4</sup>.

### **Broaden and build**

The release of energy and creativity from powerful goal setting is vital in the positive coaching process. It provides momentum to generate ideas and strategies which enable clients to solve current problems or generate fresh perspective about their issues.

This psychological process can be explained by Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden and Build model (1999). Fredrickson's work shows how positive emotions momentarily expand the "thought-action repertoire".

“The release of energy and creativity from powerful goal setting is vital in the positive coaching process”

Fredrickson describes this as “the discovery of novel and creative actions, ideas, and social bonds, which in turn build that individual's personal resources. I call this the broaden and build theory of positive emotions, and use it to describe the benefits of positive emotions”.

In coaching this helps produce a fresh array of ideas about how to solve the challenges facing the client. Emotions experienced by the client (joy, hope, pride, gratitude, interest, serenity, love) create this expanded thought-action repertoire. They can answer the coach's questions with more creativity and resourcefulness than if the coach and client just talked about the problem.

When they discuss problems they usually experience negative emotions (anger, frustration, fear, guilt, anxiety, jealousy) and their energy drains. Their thought-action repertoire contracts.

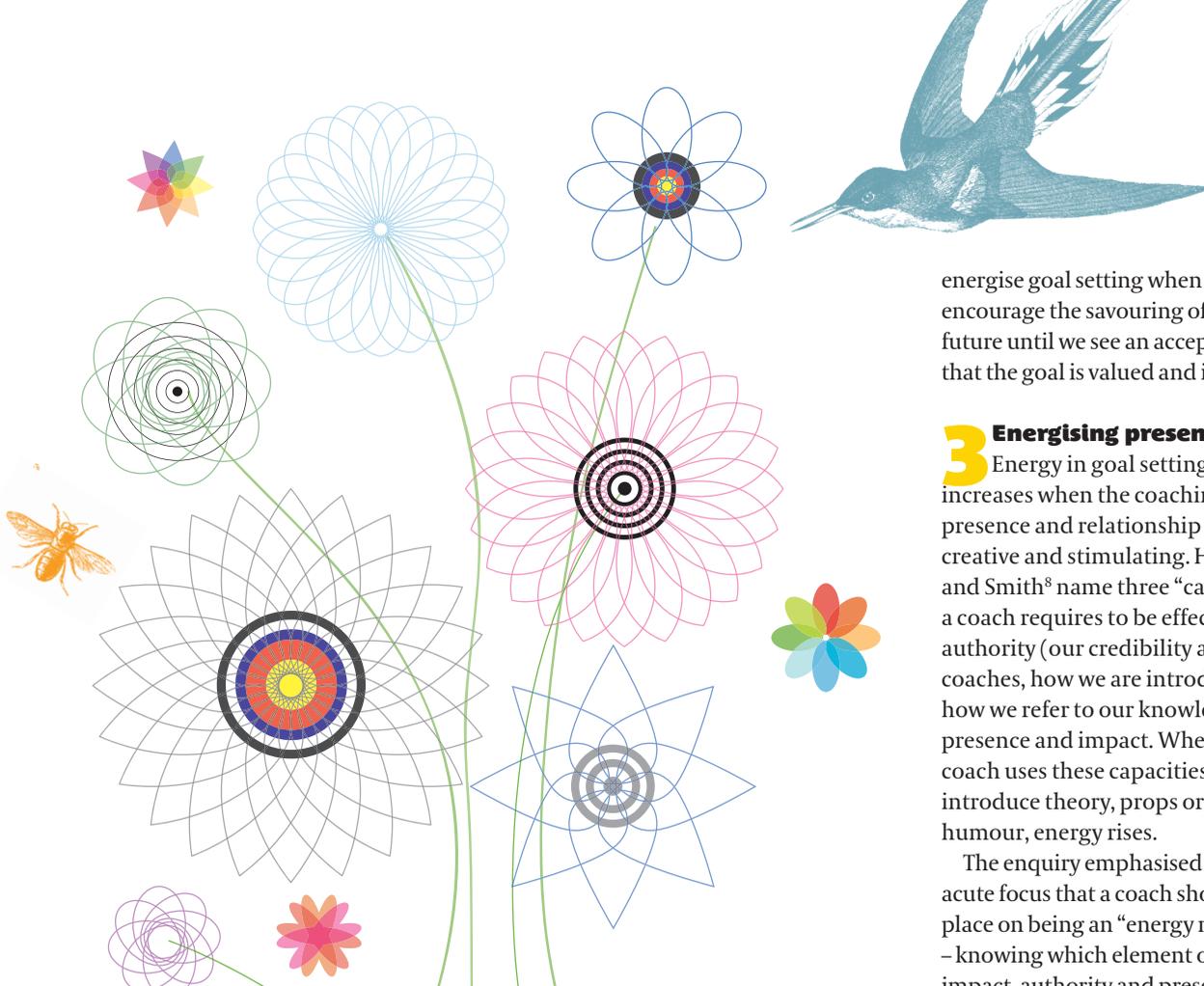
In helping the client experience an expansion in their

thought-action repertoire, the positive psychology coach helps them build their social, psychological and physical resources to tackle the issues they face. Experts in the field of positive psychology coaching, such as Carol Kauffman, Alex Linley, Anthony Grant and Robert Biswas-Diener, have written about the power of applying many positive psychology principles to coaching. Enabling and energising the goal-setting process to encourage positive emotions such as hope or pride and joy is an important role – and goal – of the coach in positive psychology.

### **The study**

As part of my positive psychology MSc research, I carried out a co-operative enquiry with seven experienced executive coaches. The aim was to enhance the goal-setting practice of those collaborating and to explore the active ingredients that energise goal setting. All the coaches reported enhanced thinking or practice relating to





“As coaches we can energise goal setting when we encourage the savouring of the future by the client”

energise goal setting when we encourage the savouring of the future until we see an acceptance that the goal is valued and intrinsic.

**3 Energising presence**  
Energy in goal setting increases when the coaching presence and relationship is creative and stimulating. Hawkins and Smith<sup>8</sup> name three “capacities” a coach requires to be effective: authority (our credibility as coaches, how we are introduced, how we refer to our knowledge), presence and impact. When the coach uses these capacities to introduce theory, props or humour, energy rises.

The enquiry emphasised the acute focus that a coach should place on being an “energy monitor” – knowing which element of impact, authority and presence keeps goal setting vibrant.

The enquiry highlighted that imparting or informing can be energising, which created a quandary for non-directive coaches. Used deftly, a directional framework that facilitates hope (combined with a non-directive stance) adds energy. For example, in positive psychology findings, certain types of goals are more likely to create flourishing<sup>9</sup>, while a positivity:negativity ratio of 3:1 has been empirically associated with flourishing<sup>10,11</sup>.

**4 Slowing to speed up**  
The enquiry highlighted the “hurry” we, as coaches, are often in to expedite the change process. Part of this is due to a need for a result, which can create performance anxiety, while ignoring the looping, emergent nature of goal setting.

The enquiry unearthed the notion of “slowing down to speed up” change. Helping clients make a genuine connection to their goals

energising goal setting. The study yielded seven themes. These offer executive coaches a potential conceptual model as well as some practical tips on how to energise the goal-setting process.

**1 An energising lexicon**  
The initial use of the word goal or goal setting was reported to be potentially workmanlike and draining. By spending time co-creating or even providing a new lexicon of goal setting (eg, a wide range of words that suggest a future goal, ranging from promise, dream, agenda, duty, legacy, best possible self), we noted a positive shift in energy.

The invitation to have a more enlivening conversation has similarities with appreciative enquiry<sup>3</sup>, which uses a directional

framework to engage stakeholders in positive stories.

**2 Time travel energises**  
Helping the client focus on the future – metaphorically time travelling to their desired future – facilitated greater energy, hope and positivity. Helping clients focus on a positive future is often a new experience for them.

Perhaps what we are witnessing here is what Snyder<sup>6</sup> refers to in his theory of hope. Having hope creates both positive emotions and agency thinking. As we help the client articulate or visualise a desired future maybe we are activating both those things.

Bryant and Veroff<sup>7</sup> highlight the positive impact of savouring the future of well-being. Our enquiry suggests that as coaches we can





# “The simple fact of writing down a goal seems to stimulate a more hopeful mindset in the client”

through centring, mindfulness or an invitation to be present, seemed to increase engagement.

**5 Readiness for change** The enquiry highlighted the importance of biographies, informal information, website materials, reputation, published materials and welcome packs as the client gets ready for change. King<sup>12</sup> notes that the simple fact of writing down a goal seems to stimulate a more hopeful mindset, which evokes more creative pathways thinking, generating multiple solutions.

With hope comes positive affect, agentic thinking (the ability to be an agent of change) and pathways thinking (ideas of how to get there)<sup>13</sup>. The earlier we start raising hope in the process the better.

The enquiry also made us challenge the ‘sequencing’ of sessions. We queried the order in which we do things and concluded that we may be trying to set goals too early. For example, final sessions can be re-energised by meaningful goal setting.

**6 Physicalisation of goals** Considerable energy can be generated by physicalisation techniques. Many coaches are well versed in emotional intelligence and understand that there is much to be gleaned from studying postures and movements.

A well-trained coach can capture these and work with them, helping the client facilitate greater control over their body. NLP, somatic and ontological coach training teach these techniques.

All the coaches reported that using the body or stimulating

environments had increased energy, fresh thinking or connection with the goal. Being in nature increases expansive thinking. Keller et al<sup>14</sup> found that time spent outside boosted positivity, which increased thought-action repertoires and boosted working memory span, which is linked with intelligence.

**7 Connecting to context** The client’s relationship with the context around them, organisationally or globally, had the ability to drain or energise goal setting. Energy was created when the coach helped the client make a connection, by finding meaning for themselves and moving the



goal from an extrinsic position to a more intrinsic one. Energy drained if the organisational goal had no meaning for the client.

We found that often much needs to be done to align business and personal goals. Coaching questions that connect the goal to the transpersonal increase energy. The more the two can be meshed the greater a positive outcome for both.

## Conclusion

These seven ingredients help energise the goal-setting part of a coach’s practice. They could encourage coaches to help positive psychology achieve its goal of increasing worldwide levels of flourishing individuals – a noble goal indeed. ■

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