

# WEAVING SCIENCE INTO COACHING

## The Findings of a Study into How to Utilise the ‘Broaden & Build Theory’ in Person-Centred Coaching

### ABSTRACT

Situated within the field of Positive Psychology is Barbara Fredrickson’s ‘Broaden and Build’ theory (2001). This theory is based on rigorous research that supports the value of building positive emotions. The ‘Broaden and Build’ theory (B&BT), showed potential to enhance coaching, being that both fields focus on “*enhancing well-being and performance*” (Palmer & Whybrow, 2007, p.3). There were however, few guidelines in the literature as to ‘how’ this theory could be applied in a Person-Centred coaching context. This exploratory study aimed at establishing; compatibility between these theories then, how as coach, interventions that cultivate positive emotion could be woven through a foundation of Person-Centred coaching, without compromising the latter’s humanistic values and principled stance not to be directive.

### WHAT IS THE ‘BROADEN AND BUILD’ THEORY (B&BT)?

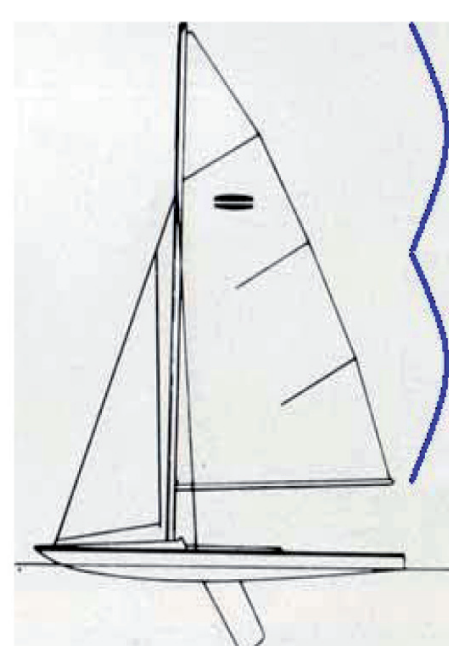
Fredrickson’s theory states that increasing positive emotions has a ‘broaden’ effect which, “*momentarily expands people’s attention and thinking*”. Whilst this can be fleeting, a ‘build’ effect occurs where “*over time positive emotions prompt growth in personal and social resources that increase well-being*” (www.PositivtyRatio.com). Fredrickson suggests that whilst each positive emotion is beneficial in itself, together, they spark a positive mood state that builds in an upward spiral until it reaches a ‘tipping point’. Once this point is reached, a person is leveraged from a state of languishing in repeated patterns, to flourishing, enabling them access to a wider range of possibilities previously hidden from view (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Fredrickson also claims that building positive emotion has an ‘undo’ effect, reducing the impact of negative emotion.

### WHAT IS PERSON-CENTRED COACHING (PCC)?

The PCC approach, based on Person-Centred theory (Rogers, C. 1957, 1959), is commonly used in coaching. A coach within this approach aims to provide a range of “*necessary and sufficient*” conditions being; unconditional positive regard, congruence and empathy, within an authentic relationship with the coachee (Rogers, 1957, p.96). The coach is positioned ‘out of the person’s way’ in order to facilitate access to their ‘inner voice’. This voice is viewed as “*that self one truly is*”, ‘the expert’, containing knowledge and answers to what constitutes happiness and fulfillment for that person (Rogers, 1961, p.164, Worsley, 2004). Central to this approach, is the belief that growth occurs naturally once blocks to the innate drive to actualize one’s potential dissolve, freeing the person to move forward automatically, as opposed to the coach holding any mandate or directing outcomes (Stober & Grant, 2006).

### ARE PERSON-CENTRED COACHING & THE ‘BROADEN & BUILD THEORY’ IN FACT COMPATIBLE?

**FIGURES 1 & 2** – The yachts represent each field and summarise the essential components, in order to assess compatibility.



**FIGURE 1: The ‘Broaden & Build Theory’ (Sails) ‘winds of positivity’ for our human sails.**

**‘Introduces the Positive’** – ‘what is possible’ based on empirical studies revealing what works.

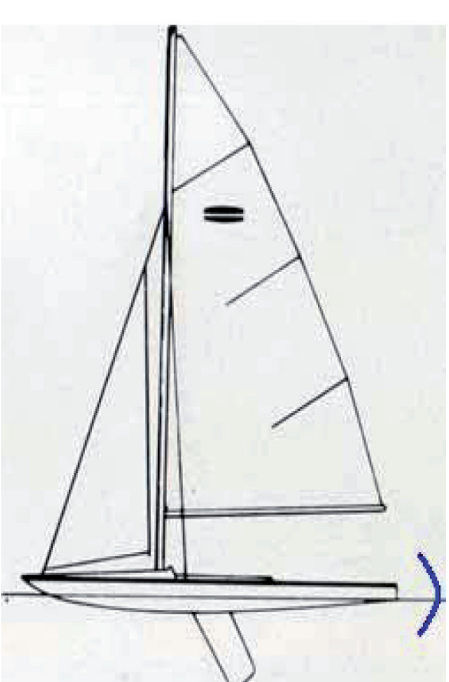
**Coach Positioning** – potential for authoritative/expert stance.

**Mandate** – to inspire positivity and direct purposeful change through positive focus.

To “*strengthen already existing positive aspects rather than teaching the reinterpretation of negative aspects*” (Seligman et al. 2006, p.780).

**Attention on** – positive. Acknowledges necessary negativity but does not address it.

**Limitation** – potential for an over-focus on the positive and thus not integrating negative material at expense of growth.



**FIGURE 2: Person-Centred Coaching (hull) a foundation & stabilizing aspect.**

**‘Integrates the Negative’** – based on what client brings to work on.

**Coach Positioning** – equal, collaborative & client centered.

**Mandate** – to emancipate individuals from constraints/blocks, by providing optimal conditions. Trusts growth, positivity and flourishing will result.

**Attention on** – integration, growth, learning and meaning making.

**Limitation** – subject to ‘negativity bias’ & unspoken cultural views on happiness.

### WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Whilst there are similar roots and basic premises held by the B&BT and PCC, a key difference is evident. PCC holds a principled stance to be **non-directive** in order to work with what the person chooses and to facilitate hearing their ‘own inner voice’ (Rogers, 1959, 1961). The B&BT on the other hand, is potentially **directive** in nature, holding a mandate to build positive emotion. This brought into question whether they were compatible, as operationalisation of the B&BT constructs involved the PC coach directing the client’s attention to the positive.

### HOW DIRECTIVE IS NON-DIRECTIVE COACHING?

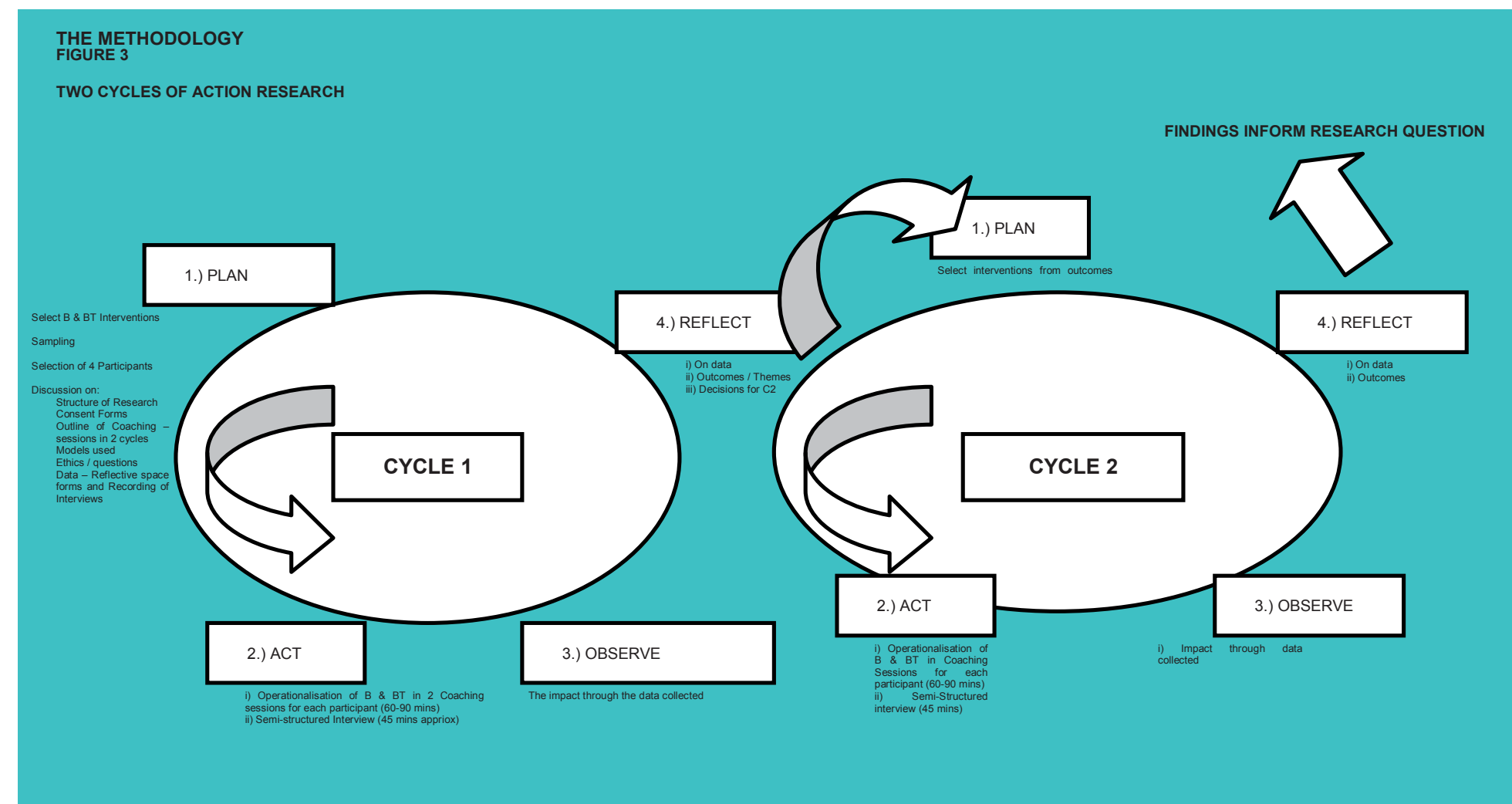
Controversy exists as to what constitutes directivity in coaching. The more classical person-centred orientation, positions the coach at the non-directive end of a continuum, where reflective listening is the only intervention utilised (Merry, 2004). At the other end of the continuum are the more process directed approaches, where a technique is offered in a facilitative way rather than from a diagnostic stance. Rogers (1961) emphasized non-directivity in order to support the dissolving of constraints, espousing simply ‘being present’ as opposed to the use of techniques. However, if interventions were used, Rogers believed they needed to be “*an expression of the necessary and sufficient conditions that constitute the therapeutic conditions*” (Rogers, 1957, p.82). Stober and Grant, (2006) state, directive and non-directive coaching approaches are not “*categorically different*”, lying on a continuum determined by the skilled practitioner’s preferred approach (p.363).

### TO PROCEED OR NOT TO PROCEED ...

The decision to proceed was based on an extensive review of the literature, revealing as summarised by Joseph (2010); that techniques are considered permissible in Person-Centred coaching if utilised as an “*expression of the meta-theoretical assumptions of the PC theory*”, then they will not contravene principled non-directivity (p.73).

As utilising the B&BT interventions would involve **directing** the participant’s attention to the positive, careful consideration was given to the selection of interventions based on their suitability to be operationalised from PCC’s **non-directive stance**.

**FIGURE 3:**



### INTERVENTIONS UTILISED

Three constructs from the B&BT were selected and interventions designed in the form of positive questions. These were woven into Person-Centred coaching in the following ways in C1 = Cycle 1, C2 = Cycle 2.

#### • Cultivating Positivity

- Setting a ‘scene or foundation of positivity’ at the outset, facilitated through a set of positive introductory questions.
- ‘Shining a torchlight’ on potential and possibilities, by using positive questions that were probing and hypothetical in nature.
- ‘What is right’ – to highlight positives using language of ‘strength and vision’, and attention to positives.
- Savouring & Celebrating – questions to extrapolate out ‘the good’.
- Future Possibilities – questions to build on positives now in view.

#### • Finding/Making Meaning in Present or Past Circumstances

Positive questions, probing and reflective in design, to cultivate positive emotions indirectly, through finding positive meaning in present or past circumstances.

#### • Reducing Negativity

PCC – through reflective conversations that facilitated critical reflection on beliefs and assumptions blocking the participant and facilitated transformational learning. These questions were reflective and probing in design

B&BT – cultivating positivity through positive questions woven into the reflective conversations.

B&BT – reducing gratuitous negativity by disputing negative thinking.

### PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

#### A) CULTIVATING POSITIVITY

What worked B&B	Interventions Utilised	Outcome	What was different as coach	What changed for the participant
i) Setting ‘scene of positivity’	C1 Set of positive questions utilised at outset of coaching	Contributed positively to PC core conditions AND	Mindfulness of the positive Expedited rapport	Enjoyment of coaching process expressed Defences and anxiety lowered
ii) ‘Shining a torchlight’ on positives	C1&2 Positive questions	C1 Reduced anxiety C1&2 Enhanced safety = Enhanced rapport building	Heightened and expedited awareness Of positives for both participant & coach	Sudden and powerful shifts in awareness Transformational learning and change
iii) ‘What is right’ to highlight positives	C1&2 Language of ‘strength and vision’ Questions/reflections for attention to positives	Built positive emotion through attention to successes strengths positives amidst challenges Positive emotion built resilience	C1 Rapid shifts/change C1&2 Increase in self-awareness, Esteem & positivity evident C2 Resilience building	Ability to ‘see possibilities previously out of sight’ Closer social connections Increased confidence /skills More open-minded, peaceful Increase in resilience and ability to cope Increased optimism
Savouring & Celebrating	C2 Questions to extrapolate out ‘the good’	Enhanced pleasurable feelings	Reduced impact of negativity, increased positivity	Ability to recognise then prioritise what’s important Increase in happiness & inner peace
Future Possibilities	C2 Questions to build on positives now ‘in view’	Fleshed out positive potentialities	Enhanced ability to take current positives into future	Wider views of what is possible for the future Increased clarity, motivation & belief in success

#### B) FINDING/MAKING POSITIVE MEANING

What worked	Interventions Utilised	Outcome	What changed - coach	What changed - participant
A space to reflect on challenges in current or past circumstances re life/self PCC & B&BT	C1&2 Reflective questions woven into a reflective discourse	Facilitated reflective learning and subsequent growth	Support participants’ angst, process negatives whilst weaving in language of strength and positive	Found positive meaning Integration/wholeness More resilient
	C1&2 Sub-questions to elicit learning, positives or gifts	Potent in reducing negativity	Cultivated positive emotion process more positive and spiritual	An increase in positive emotion

#### C) REDUCING NEGATIVITY

What worked	Interventions Utilised	Outcome	What changed - coach	What changed - participant
Reflective questions exposed negative perceptions & constraints dissolved blocks. PCC Reduced negativity B&B Increased positivity	C1&C2 Set of reflective & probing questions woven into reflective discourse	Enhanced participants’ reflexivity in exploration and assessment of their challenges (Cox et al. 2010)	Revealed limiting beliefs Dissolved constraints Addressed negativity bias Found positive meaning Revealed negative habits	Actions occurring spontaneously devoid of thinking Broadened picture of options & possibilities Enhanced self belief and ability to achieve Increased resilience

### CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the ‘Broaden and Build’ theoretical constructs were able to be woven through a foundation of Person-Centred coaching, without compromising the latter’s humanistic values and principled stance not to be directive. PCC’s focus of working with what the client brings and integrating the negative, together with the B&BT’s infusion of positivity, enhanced PCC core conditions, worked well for the participants and was potent in facilitating change and enhancing well-being. Also evident, were outcomes for the participants that B. Fredrickson stated would occur when positive emotion is cultivated.



**FIGURE 4**

The B&BT showed itself to be applicable in PCC, flowing effortlessly within the coaching dialogue.

PCC and the B&BT showed compatibility in that together they created a balance; PCC integrating the negative and B&BT infusing positivity. B&BT enhanced PCC core conditions and led to expedient change.

Like the needed balance between the sails and the hull of a yacht, together these theories provided a balance that showed itself to be potent with an apparent catalytic effect. This facilitated transformational shifts, change, growth and flourishing. The expedient and positive impact of this on the participants was both evident and surprising.

The B&BT interventions utilised as an “*expression of the meta-theoretical assumptions of the PC theory*” (Joseph 2010, p.73) showed applicability across the coaching spectrum, in that in this study they evidenced efficacy in enhancing skills and work performance, supporting transition and in facilitating expedient developmental and transformational change.

### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

An enhancement in well-being for all participants was evidenced however, the degree of ‘what led to what’ is inconclusive. Future research could monitor the ratio of focus in the coaching conversation through measures to isolate the B&BT interventions and in doing so, determine its impact and added value.

Further B&BT interventions could also be utilised in this coaching context and genre, so further research could identify additional tools that are compatible with the PCC approach.

According to Martin Seligman, Positive Psychology currently sits at a crossroad, having gone some way towards redressing the pathological over-focus of mainstream psychology, it is reviewing its way forward. One of the pathways identified is to now focus on “*introducing the positive and integrating the negative*” (Joseph & Linley, 2006, p.7). In this study, Positive Psychology has demonstrated its contribution to PCC as an empirically validated evidence base to support PCC’s efficacy. Perhaps theoretically grounded PCC could contribute its expertise in ‘integrating the negative’ and become a vehicle to take Positive Psychology’s empirical research out into mainstream society.

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