



# Coaches in on the act

Coaching is a powerful tool for personal and professional development, but there are times when employees want more than development from their coaches. Iain McCormick discusses an exciting new approach for in-house coaches working with staff who are troubled by frustrations and unwanted thoughts.

**A** recent study by the UK Institute for Employment suggests that there has been considerable growth in the use of internal coaching programmes within organisations in the last few years. These programmes involve team leaders, managers and HR specialists being trained and supervised to operate as internal coaches.

There are many benefits from using internal coaches including: managers and HR specialists are familiar with the organisational needs and culture so they can easily understand the coaching issues; the cost of in-house coaches is typically far lower than external professionals; the organisation can build its capability and core competencies using coaching; the in-house coaches can integrate

their work with other HR systems such as performance appraisal and succession planning.

Coaching is a powerful tool for personal and professional development. However, there are times when employees want more than development from their coaches—for example, when they are troubled with frustrations, distress and unwanted thoughts.

Over the last year there has been an increase in the number of coaches being trained in newer and more powerful evidence-based approaches to dealing with these types of issues. The most prominent newer approach is Acceptance and Commitment Training. Acceptance and Commitment Training, or ACT (pronounced as a single word not as separate initials), is a form of cognitive-behavioural therapy.

It is a practical and highly effective way to deal with a wide range of personal challenges and to build wellbeing and productivity. ACT is a very useful approach for in-house coaches with staff who experience unhelpful levels of frustration, fear, doubt, insecurity, self-destructive habits or poor performance.

Today's work environment leads to many problems or difficulties that almost inevitably give rise to negative thoughts, feeling and emotions. When this happens the in-house coach will find that most people try to avoid, escape or block the feelings. Typically, these efforts to avoid bad feelings make them worse—the avoidance fuels the fire. The solution becomes the problem!

ACT is based on two goals: to effectively defuse or let go of painful thoughts, feelings and images; and to create a fulfilling and productive life.

Steven Hayes, the founder of ACT, and Russ Harris, a well known writer and teacher in the field, suggest that ACT has the following core elements:

1. **Clean versus dirty thoughts and emotions.** Some of our thoughts and emotions are useful and constructive so we call these clean. Some are unhelpful, destructive and unproductive so we call these dirty. Making this distinction is critical to living a fulfilling and productive life.
2. **De-fusion** means connecting with thoughts and feelings in a new way. It is about learning to quietly observe and notice these thoughts and feelings without trying to do anything with them. In this way de-fusion results in them having less influence over us.
3. **Active acceptance** means deliberately allowing the thoughts and feelings that we have to be there without fighting them. It is about making room for unpleasant feelings and urges instead of trying to run from them or to suppress them.
4. **Contact with the present moment.** This means focusing on what is happening right now instead of escaping to the past or wishing for the future. It means being right here, right now. Staying in touch with the present moment is also known as mindfulness.
5. **The observing self** is that part of human consciousness that can quietly watch thoughts and feelings go by. Strengthening our observing self can help us to simply watch our emotions rather than being driven to act on them.
6. **Knowing your values.** Understanding what is important to you and knowing what kind of life you want to live is central to ACT.
7. **Committed action** is what you decide to do in order to live a fulfilling and productive life.

To illustrate how ACT can be used by in-house coaches, consider the following cases.

### Sam's list of frustrations

#### Clean frustration

Feeling like the board did not understand the company very well.

Feeling like he, Sam, wanted to have more say in the company's financial strategy.

Wanting to take greater control over the company direction.

#### Dirty frustration

Beating himself up for taking on this position in a start up company.

Delaying writing the board papers.

Getting angry and frustrated with the CEO's and the chairman's phone calls.

### Case study: Dealing with dirty frustration.

Sam was the chief financial officer of a technology start up company and he went to see his trusted in-house coach because the CEO and board of directors seriously frustrated him.

The board consisted of a number of wealthy older men who had invested in the company in the hope of making a handsome profit as soon as possible. This put lots of pressure on Sam. His frustration had developed to the point where he dreaded board meetings and so he constantly deferred his preparation of financial board papers. Both the CEO and chairman of the board would regularly ring Sam in the weeks leading up to board meeting to ask how he was going with the board paper preparation.

Sam decided he needed to do something about the situation and so went to see his coach. The coach spent some time with Sam helping him to work out what was clean frustration and what was dirty frustration. Sam drew up the lists in the table above.

As Sam worked with the coach he came to de-fuse the dirty frustration and get some distance from it. He found that the less he beat himself up about the situation the more he was able to work with the CEO and chairman to talk about strategic issues. He embraced his clean frustration and carefully confronted the board with his issues.

After this, the issues started to resolve themselves so Sam and the CEO were able to jointly run a two-day strategic planning retreat for the senior management team and the board. This was an outstanding success and resulted in Sam convincing the board of the need for a slower, more considered growth plan for the company. Sam achieved what he wanted and the board seemed pleased too.

### Case study: Dealing with acceptance

Luke was a successful accountant in a large corporate. He originally came to see his coach about a conflict he had with the sales team and their sales forecasting. However, the focus of coaching soon moved to his frustration in dealing with his wife, Isabella.

Luke was a hard-working, driven, successful individual and he felt very frustrated by Isabella's laid-back approach to her life and



Lily felt she spent nearly all her waking time thinking and worrying about work. Her coach introduced the idea of mindfulness, but it seemed a strange concept to Lily at first.

to bringing up their children. Luke would come home from a hard day at work and find that the breakfast dishes were not done. Isabella would be playing with the children and they would all be having a wonderful fun time. Luke felt a wide range of emotions: frustration at Isabella's laziness, envy at her lifestyle, worry that the children were learning to be lazy and so on.

Using the ACT model, the coach explored the ways Luke had tried to change Isabella's behaviour. He had tried to be rational with her, he had pleaded with her, he had got angry with her, but little had changed. He had been trying to change her for the last

eight years and, by his own calculation, had met with very little success!

The coach posed the question: "If you have tried all these ways to change Isabella for eight years with almost no success, what does this suggest to you?" Luke thought for some time then said: "I probably never will change her!"

From that time on Luke focused on accepting Isabella more as she was. He used a range of de-fusion techniques to help let go of his frustrations and this helped. He found that this improved the relationship a lot and slowly Isabella became more aware of his preferences rather than being

defensive about his demands.

In a three-month follow up session, Luke told his coach he had started to really understand the difference between what can and cannot be changed. In doing this, he had come to focus on the elements of this family relationship he could change—like enjoying more time with the children or doing the breakfast dishes when he came home—and focusing less on the things he could not change—like Isabella's personality!

**Case study: Using mindfulness**

Lily was a very successful account executive in a large advertising agency. She came to

**Satisfied you're paying staff at the right market rates?**

**We have the market data you need to make informed decisions about pay for your staff.**

- + Directors' Fees Report 2012
- + CEO and Top Executive Remuneration Report 2012
- + NZ Benchmark Remuneration Report 2012
- + Private Sector Corporate Services Remuneration Report 2012

**Remuneration Survey Reports available now!** Pricing available on request. Contact Market Information Manager, Alex Botha, on 09 303 4045 or [surveys@strategicpay.co.nz](mailto:surveys@strategicpay.co.nz)

**strategicPAY**   
VALUING PERFORMANCE

Auckland  
ph 09 303 4045  
[www.strategicpay.co.nz](http://www.strategicpay.co.nz)

Wellington  
ph 04 473 2313  
[info@strategicpay.co.nz](mailto:info@strategicpay.co.nz)

Dunedin  
ph 03 479 0637

Helping organisations **succeed** through the **performance of people**



see her coach in order to better deal with the stresses and strains of her job. She had recently been given several of the largest and most complex clients in the agency to deal with. There was a lot of pressure, as these clients always wanted more imaginative and creative advertising for less money.

Lily felt she spent nearly all her waking time thinking and worrying about work. Her coach introduced the idea of mindfulness, but it seemed a strange concept to Lily at first. She struggled to understand how staying in the present moment was going to help her deal with the future. Over a series of sessions the coach encouraged her to take some time out each weekend to spend on her own and to just be present. She undertook a series of activities from walking along the beachfront to watching a sunset.

Once she had undertaken a number of the exercises she began to understand the ability of mindfulness to restore a sense of balance in her life. The coach then taught her a mindfulness meditation exercise and she started to practice this once a day.

On these occasions she simply observed her breathing and when she started to think about upcoming stressful events at work, she made room for these feelings, then watched them flow away during the meditation session. This helped her to de-fuse from them and to accept the highs and lows of her new job. More importantly she came to understand the importance of restoring her energy and balance through mindfulness.

#### Case study: The importance of values

Chloe was a very frustrated procurement manager. She had been trying to purchase a specialist glass product for a major construction project and she was unable to get the sort of performance specifications she needed for it. The project manager she worked for was getting impatient and Chloe felt bad. For the three weeks before she saw her

coach she had been suffering from insomnia.

Her coach began by asking Chloe about what sort of manager she wanted to be and what she really wanted to achieve in her job. After a number of sessions Chloe came up with the following list of values: *authenticity*—to be true to herself, genuine and truthful to her beliefs and values; *balance*, which she defined as understanding the forces in her life and being in harmony with them, being emotionally safe and satisfied; *service*—to work for the good of others, to be helpful and to serve other people.

The coach then asked Chloe if she was living by these values and Chloe admitted that she was not. She then worked with the coach to find ways to better live by her values. Over the next month she made a number of changes. She clearly expressed her frustration to the glass supplier who was totally unresponsive. She gave up on that supplier and was able to find a UK company who could supply the right product—being authentic and true to herself enabled her to be much more assertive.

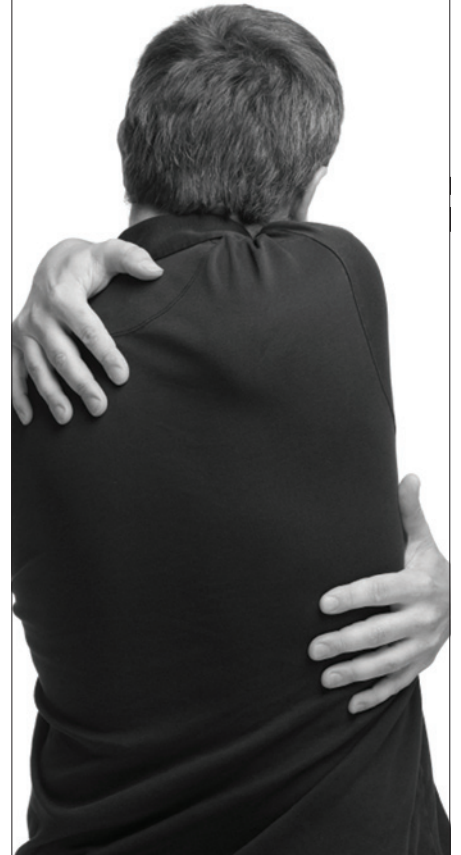
She took some outstanding annual leave and went to a health spa, practiced yoga and meditation for a week and felt a much greater sense of balance in her life. Upon her return to work she spent time to better understand her colleagues, to be more helpful and less self-centred. After six months coaching she felt she had made excellent progress by more fully understanding and living by her values.

As I said at the outset, in-house coaching is a powerful tool for personal and professional development, but there are many times when employees want more. If they are troubled with frustrations, stress and unwanted thoughts, the combination of coaching with ACT can have very beneficial results. **et**

Iain McCormick PhD heads ExecutiveCoachingCentre.com and runs training and supervision for in-house coaches in ACT.



## John Smith, Self Hugger



**Life is sweetest  
when you are  
doing what  
you love.**

**We get that.**

Experience the Difference.  
Call us 09 424 8367  
or take a peek at our website.

[www.edenfx.co.nz](http://www.edenfx.co.nz)

  
A New World of Recruitment  
HSE HEALTH ENVIRON TECH EXEC