

Positive Psychology Coaching and its Impact on Midlife Executives

A Doctoral Project

Presented to the Faculty

School of Behavioral Sciences

California Southern University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

DOCTOR

OF

PSYCHOLOGY

By

Mickey Parsons

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CALIFORNIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY APPROVAL

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This study is dedicated to my family, both biological and of choice. First, in loving memory of my maternal grandmother, Martha L. Green, the most positive person I knew during my childhood. Her optimism and love created a strong sense of well-being and provided a firm foundation for her nine children and fifteen grandchildren to thrive. Next, my parents, Linda and Lamar Hixon and my sister, Tera Roberts, whose unconditional love and powerful support have had a profound influence on my work and life. And, Michael Prince, my husband and life partner of the past twenty years, who has been my coach, cheerleader, editor and constant supporter during the pursuit of my doctorate and beyond. Additionally, I'd like to thank Dr. Kate Andrews for her superior guidance as my committee chairperson, Dr. Michael Sikes for serving as my dissertation coach, and Dr. Rachel Elahee, my practicum supervisor, as well as my extended family of friends who have provided ongoing encouragement and laughter along the journey -- Donna Cooper, Kenneth Coleman, Patricia Reda, Steve Schumacher, Bart Bates, Don and Jan Patrick, Sean and Debbie Ryan, Carla Corley and Nicki Uchin.

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DOCTORAL PROJECT ABSTRACT

Title: Positive Psychology Coaching and its Impact on Midlife Executives

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Degree: Doctor of Psychology

Institution: California Southern University

Scope of Study: This study was designed to investigate the lived experiences of middle to executive level leaders who participated in positive psychology coaching during midlife.

Through personal interviews, participants shared comprehensive descriptions of their experiences in an effort to provide a deep understanding of the ways in which they benefited both personally and professionally while facing challenges typically associated with middle age.

Findings and Conclusions: This study generated three major findings that support this effort (1) participating in positive psychology executive coaching provides focus and confidence that facilitates personal and professional growth during midlife by helping clients identify and overcome real life and work challenges while pursuing their over-arching goals; (2) the coaching experience and associated results largely vary from participant to participant based on their wants, goals and aspirations for the future; and (3) the client's perception of coaching impact was tied, at least in part to the length of coaching, the quality of their relationship with the coach and a perceived positive experience. These results support the employment of positive psychology interventions as part of an executive coaching engagement, showing that to do so with midlife clients not only supports their goal achievement, but also facilitates resolution of other work and life challenges over time and within a quality client-coach relationship.

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CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The practice of executive and corporate coaching has soared over the past two decades, accounting for an ever-increasing percentage of the \$156.2 billion spent on employee learning in the United States (Miller, 2012). In fact, it was estimated that the number of business coaches grew by over 500% between 1992 and 2002 alone, with coaches charging from \$1,500 to \$15,000 per day for their services (Berglas, 2002). The shift of focus toward the development of human capital along with the need for flexible and customizable developmental processes has largely been credited with this accelerated movement toward coaching (Hollenbeck, 2002). Despite the ostensible need for, and growth of, executive coaching, limited empirical evidence was found regarding its methods or efficacy.

Coaching has largely emerged as a field of practice outside of the context of academic discipline and without significant attempts to systematically operationalize its various dimensions. In fact, Seligman (2011) stated, “coaching is a practice in search of a backbone” (p. 70), and suggested that positive psychology be embraced in order to provide a scientific, evidence-based platform, as well as a theoretical structure for coaching. Employing positive psychology as the methodology for coaching could provide parameters for practice while also serving to define a system of interventions and measurements for coaches to use. Additionally, as a science rooted in scientific evidence, coach training, accreditation, and credentialing guidelines could be better established.

The focus of this dissertation was to better understand the lived experiences of executives who participated in positive psychology coaching during midlife. Gaining a deeper understanding of the impact of positive psychology executive coaching will aid coaches and coach training

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organizations in better understanding the mechanisms of coaching effectiveness during a time of significant change, contemplation, and potential stress. According to Hermans and Oles (1999), midlife is a time when people work to reorganize personal meaning. During this developmental stage, we face physiological, psychological, and interpersonal changes as we work to reevaluate life goals and personal values, confront our inevitable death, and make plans for the second half of life.

Robinson (1995) identified four potential routes of career disillusionment during this period of midlife evaluation

1. Men and women realize that some aspirations such as becoming a CEO, a world-famous musician or athlete, or achieving great financial wealth may not be obtainable. Mourning this loss may cause distress or lead to the creation of new dreams that provide a sense of purpose and ultimate well-being.
2. Upon successfully achieving a life-long dream, people sometimes are disappointed to learn that it did not produce the anticipated level of satisfaction and happiness. This may lead to feelings of emptiness, incompleteness, and lack of direction.
3. When accomplishments are achieved and produce great satisfaction, many people become disillusioned and overwhelmed by continually trying to sustain their success.
4. After years of working to achieve a major goal, people may realize that the motivation was actually a parent, spouse, mentor, or someone aside from himself or herself. Therefore, they believe that they have wasted significant time and resources that could have been used to chart their own course.

In addition to midlife career disillusionment, issues concerning competitiveness, age, discrimination, physiological fatigue, and interpersonal challenges cause most to become introspective at a time when the pace of life also naturally slows. Jung (1933) suggested that these

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types of midlife stress and distress are essential for psychological growth. Brehoney (1996) also endorsed the gifts associated with embracing midlife, stating that learning through this difficult period provides the greatest opportunity for transformation, wisdom, depth of personality, and joy in life's second half. Therefore, by exploring the lived experiences of positive psychology executive coaching clients, we gain an understand of the process and its ability to help them successfully navigate the personal and professional challenges associated with midlife.

Problem Statement

The rapid development and practice of positive psychology coaching is resulting in a growing research base. However, there has been little investigation into the effects of positive psychology on leadership and executive coaching clients to date. A review of the executive coaching literature by Kauffman and Scouler (2004) highlights the lack of empirical data surrounding the influence of positive psychology coaching with executives by concluding that a majority of coaching practitioners still maintain a deficit-conflict viewpoint of clients and client situations. Therefore, this inquiry is intended to help fill an important gap in the literature by exploring the lived experiences of midlife executives who received positive-psychology-focused coaching. It investigates client perspectives to determine how their experiences compare with expectations of fostering social and cognitive skills such as hope and positive emotion, while helping them hone a positive vision of the future (Kauffman & Scouler, 2004).

Examining the lived experiences of middle and executive level leaders who participate in positive psychology coaching during midlife additionally provides a deeper understanding of the ways in which leaders benefit as they navigate both developmental and workplace challenges typically associated with middle age. For example, do participants believe coaching has helped direct them toward being of service to others and contributing to something beyond themselves

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and their families? If so, this would describe the successful resolution of the generativity versus self-absorption and stagnation psychosocial stage associated with midlife (Erikson, 1963).

Generally speaking, positive psychology approaches provide empirically sound assessment and intervention strategies that have been found to increase happiness, productivity, and life satisfaction, all of which reduce personal and professional stress associated with midlife (Kauffman & Scouler, 2004). Therefore, this investigation focused on executive coaching using positive psychology techniques such as values in action, gratitude, and strengths focus, as well as mindfulness and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) training in order to describe how these methodologies influence self-actualization and engagement, both personally and professionally.

Background of the Study

Modern coaching can be traced back to the first half of the 20th century with self-help gurus such as Andrew Carnegie, Napoleon Hill, and Norman Vincent Peal and psychological theorists such as Abraham Maslow (Wildflower, 2013). The recent International Coach Federation's Global Coaching Study (2012) estimated that the two-billion-dollar emerging industry comprises some 47,500 coaches worldwide. Nevertheless, there is currently little empirical data found concerning specific approaches, interventions, or standards that consistently produce efficacious results, especially in the area of executive and leadership coaching. Additionally, there are almost no data found regarding the perceptions, experiences, and cognitive representations of executive coaching clients in relation to their perceived benefits of the coaching process. Positive psychology, as introduced by Martin Seligman during his term as president of the American Psychological Association (APA), has been shown to be successful in developing people skills and improving functioning as part of therapeutic, coaching, and training

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interventions (Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011). However, the literature remains unclear as to whether there is a link between positive functioning and specific leadership behaviors and outcomes. Therefore, it is important to understand better how positive psychology as an executive coaching methodology helps clients to navigate successfully midlife developmental and workplace challenges.

Positive psychology is defined as the scientific study of strengths, virtues, positive emotions, traits, and values intended to enable individuals, organizations, and communities to thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Research in this area has shifted psychology from its traditionally pathological perspective to a model that revolves around positive emotions and character traits believed to promote optimism, satisfaction, and resiliency. From this positive psychology stance, then, the primary task of executive coaching is identifying and optimizing individual strengths. Over time, this leads to engagement, self-actualization, and leadership results that are more dynamic. Such growth is potentially significant for leaders navigating the sea of personal and professional change typically experienced during midlife.

According to Evers, Brouwers, and Tomic (2006), positive psychology coaching improves managerial effectiveness, self-efficacy, and productivity. Yet, Nelson and Hogan (2009) argued that coaching through a positive psychology lens may not always be appropriate and, in fact, could hinder personal and interpersonal learning and growth expected during the coaching engagement. Research recognizes that the demands of competition, limited resources, continual transformation, conflict, and chaos complicate the role of leadership (Cilliers & Coetzee, 2013). This suggests that effective executives must navigate between various leadership styles in order to manage organizational complexity, diverse interpersonal relationships, and fluctuating organizational stresses. While there is limited research supporting the concept of

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positive psychology executive coaching, some studies suggest it may result in organizational hope, optimism, and confidence, which lead to higher performance (Youssef & Luthans, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

While psychological investigations confirm the physiological, relational, intrapersonal and workplace challenges associated with midlife (Axelrod, 2005), how positive psychology coaching impacts these challenges remains largely under-theorized. In other words, how might mid-to-senior-level executives make sense of the myriad changes of midlife in order to avoid disillusionment and instead leverage themselves toward personal and professional transformation?

Therefore, this research project sought to understand how positive psychology coaching may enhance work engagement, productivity, and satisfaction by helping leaders navigate developmental struggles in order to invigorate energy and mental resilience. Indeed, how can positive psychology executive coaching guide leaders through a period of intense contemplation and evaluation and facilitate the pursuit of a meaningful second half of life? What other variables impact the client's perception of the coaching process?

Significance of the Study

According to the International Coach Federation (ICF), the primary reason most people seek coaching is for change (International Coach Federation, 2012). Clients may be seeking change in various aspects of their professional or personal life or both. Important factors for seeking coaching services include work/life balance, interpersonal and communication skills, work performance, career opportunities, wellness, management, organization, and more. Witherspoon and White (1996) indicated that the broad spectrum of executive coaching could be broken down into four general categories: skill development for a specific task, performance

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improvement, future job development, and the executive's agenda, which may include providing insight, perspective, feedback, or a sounding board partnership. While coaching in each of these areas helps leaders set and achieve goals, coaching with a positive coaching focus may also facilitate the client's quest for broader personal meaning. According to Seligman (2002), this happens when we use positive psychology tools such as signature strengths to forward knowledge, power, or goodness. Therefore, this study will explore the combined personal and professional benefits achieved by executives who participate in positive-psychology-focused coaching.

Anticipated results of this study included (a) better understanding of how positive psychology coaching may be effective as an approach to executive coaching, especially with midlife executives and (b) providing help to executive coaches and coach training organizations to gain a better understanding of executive client perspectives associated with long-term change and benefits of positive psychology coaching. Insights gained will provide coaches with a context for understanding the developmental issues facing midlife executives and how a positive psychology approach helps them shift toward generativity and engagement to achieve greater self-knowledge and create a more meaningful life.

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study will use a phenomenological approach in order to understand better the lived experience of executive leaders participating in positive psychology executive coaching. Positive psychology serves as the psychological theory and foundation for the study.

In 1998, when Martin Seligman was elected as the president of the American Psychology Association (APA), he extended a call for psychology to focus on well-being and happiness rather than psychological disorders and pathology (Seligman & Csiksztmihalyi, 2000). The continuous

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series of psychological research that followed is referred to collectively as ‘positive psychology.’

The interests of positive psychology are similar to those of humanistic psychology, but differ sharply in that positive psychology fully embraces an empirical approach as it distinguishes between subjective, psychological and social well-being. Specifically, positive psychology is defined as the scientific study of strengths, virtues, positive emotions, traits, and values intended to enable individuals, organizations, and communities to thrive (Seligman & Csikszmihalyi, 2000)

Research and interventions based on positive psychology theory are led by a catalog of core virtues and character strengths known as ‘Values in Action’ (VIA) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). VIA is comprised of 24 character strengths that have been proven to contribute to human happiness and well-being and include creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective, bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality, love kindness, social intelligence, citizenship, fairness, leadership, forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation, appreciation of beauty, gratitude and humor. Other positive psychological interventions center on gratitude, strengths focus, mindfulness meditation and Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT).

The focus throughout the analytic process was to uncover, through open-ended processes of thematic abstraction, reflection, and interpretation, the essential qualities of the experiences. This reflects the fundamental characteristics of the phenomenological approach.

Research Questions

The following research questions were examined throughout this study

1. In what ways do positive psychology executive coaching guide leaders through a period of intense contemplation and evaluations associated with midlife and facilitate both personal and professional transformation?
2. In what ways does the coaching experience vary from participant to participant?

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3. What other variables impact the client's perception of the coaching process?

Limitations of the Study

While issues surrounding positive psychology executive coaching are examined in detail and depth in this study, there were a number of limitations to this approach that were considered.

According to Anderson (2010), these limitations include

- Research quality is heavily dependent on the individual skills of the researcher and more easily influenced by the researcher's personal biases and idiosyncrasies.
- Rigor is more difficult to maintain, assess, and demonstrate.
- The volume of data makes analysis and interpretation time-consuming.
- Qualitative research is sometimes not as well understood and accepted as quantitative research within the scientific community.
- The researcher's presence during data gathering, which is often unavoidable in qualitative research, can affect the subjects' responses.
- Issues of anonymity and confidentiality can present problems when presenting findings.
- Findings can be more difficult and time-consuming to characterize in a visual way.
- Additionally, different participants have different coaches, which will likely promote disparity of experience.

Delimitations

This study is limited to describing the experiences of mid-to-senior-level executives at midlife and is not intended to generalize toward the larger population of persons receiving executive coaching.

Definitions and Key Terms

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- *ACT*: Acceptance and Commitment Training is an evidence based modern cognitive-behavior therapy approach that has been applied to coaching and organizational settings as well as therapy. ACT training involves the six domains of acceptance, defusion, values, and contact with the present moment, self-as-context and committed action and promotes enhanced performance and reduction of stress (Moran, 2010).
- *Coaching*: Collaborating with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential (International Coach Federation, 2015).
- *Executive coaching*: A formally defined helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a coach or consultant who uses behavioral techniques, tools, and methods to help the client achieve goals that presumably will improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and improve the effectiveness of the client's organization (Kilburg, 1996).
- *Flow*: A genuinely satisfying state of consciousness where concentration so focused that it amounts to absolute absorption in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).
- *Gratitude*: An emotional state and attitude toward life that is a source of strength and has been empirically linked to a sense of well-being and goal attainment (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000).
- *Midlife*: A chronologically and culturally defined central period of life, defined by the US Census Bureau as ranging from age 45 to 64 years (2014).
- *Mindfulness*: An attribute of consciousness believed to promote well-being that involves an active state of open attention to the present moment where an individual can observe their thoughts and feelings without judgment (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2013).

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- *Positive psychology*: The scientific study of strengths, virtues, positive emotions, traits, and values intended to enable individuals, organizations, and communities to thrive (Seligman & Csikszmihalyi, 2000).
- *Resilience*: An individual's ability to adapt to adversity, sometimes referred to as 'grit.' Factors such as positive attitude, optimism, and the ability to learn from failure and regulate emotions are often associated with resilience (Yates & Masten, 2004).
- *Thriving*: Also referred to as flourishing, thriving in a positive psychology framework refers to optimal functioning or high levels of well-being, which is the opposite of struggling, languishing or floundering (Compton & Hoffmann, 2013).
- *VIA Character Strengths*: An inventory of 24 character strengths that are universal across all aspects of life, such as work, school, family, friends and community. Character strengths are psychological ingredients or positive components for displaying goodness and serve as a pathway for well-being and developing a life with greater virtue. Signature strengths are the strongest and most natural identified as part of the VIA profile ("VIA Institute," 2015).

Organization of Remaining Chapters

Chapter Two represents an overview of current literature on the topics of professional coaching, positive psychology coaching, and challenges at midlife, which support the focus of this study or how positive psychology coaching impacts midlife executives. Chapter Three provides an overview of how the study was conducted. Insights into the chosen methodology and its significance are described in addition to specific information about the qualitative approach, study participants, data collection and data analysis. Chapter Four focuses on articulating the findings culled from this research project. Following a description of the subjects, which provides context

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from which results were drawn, research results are presented in detail according to research question and theme. Finally, Chapter Five provides a summary of the background and purpose of the study, including research questions, as well as an interpretation of the research and speculation for the meaning.

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CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This qualitative study was designed to determine how positive psychology coaching contributes to the personal and professional resilience of middle to senior-level executives. The study differs from much of the literature on executive coaching by exploring the lived experiences of leaders who participate in positive psychology coaching during midlife. Furthermore, the investigation sought to provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which leaders benefit from positive psychology coaching as they navigate both workplace and developmental challenges associated with middle age.

The role of the literature review in a phenomenological study

Although opinions differ about the extent of literature review needed before a phenomenological study begins, a review is necessary to provide rationale for the problem and position of the study within the ongoing evolution of literature concerning the topic (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, this review highlights sets of literature that have sought to address similar issues concerning coaching, positive psychology, and midlife challenges and to discuss any deficiencies in understanding or relating to the lived experiences of executives who have participated in positive psychology coaching.

Defining Professional Coaching

A review of the literature emphasized the lack of consensus on both the origin and definition of professional coaching. According to Passmore, Peterson and Freire (2013), the recent efforts to define coaching reflect the immature nature of the discipline and the desire to define boundaries or outline a trajectory for coaching as a distinct process or intervention. Tobias (1996) asserted that professional coaching originated in the late 1980s as a repackaging of

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workplace techniques and interventions borrowed from psychology, counseling, consulting, and learning theories. This claim, however, stands in opposition to a majority of the scholarly papers that have attempted to define the scope and nature of coaching and suggest that it remains distinctive in spite of areas of overlap and commonality with other interventions (Passmore et al., 2013). While initially developed to address organizational challenges, coaching has transcended to a widely accepted tool for professional development that is generally viewed favorably and often as a status symbol that is reserved for high-potential individuals (Joo, 2005). Of course, as professional coaching services have become mainstream, they are also found outside of the executive suite and corporate structures, working to promote awareness and action in everything from relationships and finance to health and wellness.

The diversity of multiple coaching applications with multiple clients and in multiple environments complicates efforts to establish a single overarching definition of the emerging profession (Passmore et al., 2013). In a frequently quoted early definition, Whitmore suggested “coaching is unlocking people’s potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them” (1992, p. 10). Other scholars have attempted to be more specific in defining the nature of coaching. For example, Grant and Stober offered the following definition “A collaborative and egalitarian relationship between a coach, who is not necessarily a domain-specific specialist, and client, which involves a systematic process that focuses on collaborative goal setting to construct solutions and employ goal attainment process with the aim of fostering the on-going self-directed learning and personal growth of the client” (Grant & Stober, 2006, p. 2).

While the ICF has worked to create a unified definition, standards, and certifications for coaching, still others have begun to mix psychological practice with organizational consulting,

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resulting in an expansion of the nature of the coaching debate. The new debate that has largely emerged from Australia, the United Kingdom, and Europe is coaching psychology (Passmore et al., 2013). The coaching psychology movement implies that psychologically trained practitioners facilitate coaching in a way that is aligned with psychological principles. According to Grant and Palmer, “Coaching Psychology is for enhancing well-being and performance in personal life and work domains, underpinned by models of coaching grounded in established adult learning or psychological principles” (2002, p.1). While evidence-based practice supported by quality research is key to a sustainable profession of coaching, surveys across the US have found only small differences in practice and outcome between coaching psychology coaches and coaches who embrace other frameworks. In fact, the various practitioners of coaching and coaching psychology appear to share more commonality than distinction, with both engaging similar behaviors, tactics, and interventions (Bono, Purvanova, Towler, & Peterson, 2009). While encouraging, there is still much work to be done in areas such as training standards and regulation as the discipline of professional coaching matures. By exploring the lived experiences of positive psychology executive coaching participants, this research project is a small step toward that end, as it will educate both coaches and coach educators to better understand the approach’s impact on personal and professional challenges at midlife.

Coaching: The “Why and How.” People engage in coaching for a variety of reasons. According to Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006), the most common goals of coaching center around strengthening business and interpersonal skills, increasing productivity and performance, and adopting new behaviors and attitudes that foster success. Likewise, people may seek coaching to “unlearn” or minimize negative behaviors or attitudes that no longer serve them. Similarly, organizations use coaching to promote leadership skills development and performance

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improvement (Grant, 2008). In addition to increased leadership effectiveness, byproducts of coaching may also include enhanced employee engagement, loyalty, retention, and emotional management, while reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Regardless of the “why” behind coaching, coaching sessions are most often conducted via face-to-face meetings, telephone, or video conference calls (ICF, 2015). The coach and client work collaboratively to establish the coaching agreement, which includes the scope of their work, intended outcomes, and frequency and duration of sessions. Once initiated, the coach may employ a variety of tools and strategies to provide objective assessment and observations in an effort to foster the clients’ awareness. The coach may also act as a sounding board for purposes of discovery, planning, and decision-making. The collaborative approach is designed to engage the client and move him or her forward in taking action toward his or her desired goals. In other words, professional coaches collaborate with clients to help them define “Point B” or their goal, then co-design and co-navigate the journey through coaching sessions (Moore & Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

Professional Coaching Models. One of the current challenges surrounding the coaching discipline is the lack of consensus about coaching models. In fact, numerous models are available to practitioners because many scholars have created their own independent approaches and classification systems for their specific coaching niche and/or training programs (Joo, 2005). In recent years, however, coaching models have begun to transcend practitioner-based models in favor of more scholarly, scientist-practitioner models that are theoretically informed and based on empirical evidence. At the same time, there has also been an increased awareness that perhaps no single model can suitably account for the dynamic depth and breadth of the nature of coaching (Stewart, O’Riordan, & Palmer, 2008). Therefore, the coaching community has largely

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accepted that practitioners may employ a variety of methodologies to meet their clients' specific needs.

For the purpose of this phenomenological investigation of the transformational aspects of executive coaching, models that illustrate human development and change within a positive psychology framework served as our research basis. Even with a growing database surrounding positive psychology, there is still little empirically-based research on the topic of positive psychology executive coaching. Therefore, various coaching models were presented that show alignment with positive psychology coaching tenants that align coaching's ability to help individuals thrive both personally and professionally.

Executive Coaching. As with professional coaching in general, the birth of executive coaching is difficult to pinpoint accurately. Significant literature references began to appear in the 1990s about the same time as Coach U, the first coach training program, was established (Leonard & Larson, 1998). As a decade characterized by the proliferation of news media, the Internet, mobilization of capital markets, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the 1990s was largely a prosperous period of rapid change (Stiglitz, 2003). In an effort to navigate the change, many corporate leaders were forced to evolve quickly or suffer the consequences, which reignited the 1970s concept of transformational leadership, and pushed them to become proactive change agents who were both comfortable and agile in the face of ongoing uncertainty (Bass, 1998). Over time, many leaders have turned to coaching in an effort to become more adept at managing change and organizational performance. In fact, Kilburg (2000) linked the environmental changes of the 1990s with the strategies and evolution of executive coaching. He believed the primary role of a coach was to help executives increase self-awareness through

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observation and reflection and to boost self-efficacy in order to leverage individual and organizational performance.

Almost a decade and a half later, coaching psychologist Anthony Grant (2013) supported Kilburg's assumption by finding that executive coaching during times of organizational change can indeed provide a wide range of positive effects. Grant demonstrated that executive coaching could increase work-related goal attainment, enhance solution-focused thinking, develop greater change readiness, increase leadership-efficacy and resilience, and decrease symptoms of depression. Additionally, the study has shown that the positive impact of executive coaching can stretch beyond work and into non-work areas such as family life. However, Grant cautioned that the success of coaching interventions is heavily dependent on a clearly defined focus on issues that are within the client's sphere of influence or control.

Today, the continued growing popularity of executive coaching may partially be explained by the need for customizable, pointed, and timely leadership development (Jarvis, 2004). Executive coaching has differentiated itself from models that are more traditional by its own flexibility. While group or classroom leadership development initiatives tend to occur outside the workplace and on a fixed agenda and time schedule, coaching can take place anytime, anywhere, on any schedule and focus on any topic agreed upon by the executive client and coach. Therefore, for many time-crunched executives, the flexible, often casual, and highly collaborative nature of coaching may provide further appeal from conventional leadership development programs. This notion is supported by Michelman (2004), who asserted that coaching leaders in the context of their jobs without removing them from their day-to-day responsibilities not only facilitates growth but also saves resources, including time and money.

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As with more general brands of professional coaching, numerous debates center on the various approaches and theoretical frameworks underpinning executive coaching. For example, Peltier (2001) highlighted five psychological approaches used in coaching, psychodynamic, behavioral, humanistic, cognitive-behavioral, and systems-oriented methodologies. Yet, as previously noted, many coaching models are based on non-psychological approaches such as adult learning or cultural perspectives (Stober & Grant, 2006). All the while, many executive coaches with psychological training integrate various theories to form their own multidisciplinary perspective on executive coaching. This trend was supported in a recent meta-analysis that suggested formal training in psychology as a cornerstone for the formal training of executive coaches (Garman, Whiston, & Zlatoper, 2000). With 25-50% of coaching clients demonstrating clinical symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress, understanding where to draw the line between coaching and more remedial psychotherapy is of significant importance (Grant in Coutu & Kauffman, 2009). In such cases, psychologically trained executive coaches are often better able to recognize symptoms of mental illness and appropriately refer clients to the proper level of care.

Further strengthening the link between coaching and psychological research is the concept of coaching psychology. Coaching psychology is “the science of coaching relationships designed to optimize health and well-being, founded upon evidence-based theories and fields” (Moore & Tschannen-Moran, 2010, p. 8). Currently, coaching psychology integrates more than fifteen theories and academic fields and is being built by both professional coaches and psychologists to serve as an empirical foundation for the emerging industry of coaching. As the search for an evidence-based framework for coaching has escalated, positive psychology, the scientific study of what is right with people, has been elevated as a natural bedfellow for

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coaching (Biswas-Diener, 2010). This study will focus on the application of the positive psychology framework to coaching, as a growing body of research supports the opinion that it helps to provide an empirical grounding for coaching, while at the same time helping professional coaching avoid the traps of slipping into pseudo-science, pop psychology, or self-help (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007).

Positive Psychology and Coaching

Positive psychology has an emphasis on the scientific study of what is right rather than what is wrong with people. It includes research about hope, happiness, strengths, resilience, courage, and other positive aspects of human functioning and flourishing (Biswas-Diener, 2010). The Positive Psychology Center (“UPENN,” 2014) similarly defines positive psychology as the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that empower people and their communities to thrive. Like humanistic psychology, the field of positive psychology is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, cultivating their best in order to enhance experiences of love, work, purpose, and play. Likewise, the Center’s director and positive psychology authority, Dr. Martin Seligman, espoused that positive psychology is a path to reducing suffering and promoting flourishing in the world (Seligman, 2011). According to Seligman, positive emotion, meaning, positive relationships, and positive accomplishment or mastery pull people forward into the future and away from distress, anxiety, and depression.

Of course, positive psychology owes much to its many intellectual forerunners, including figures in classical Greek thought, the humanistic movement, and even religious studies (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Positive psychology practitioners are by no means the first to suggest that there is tremendous value in discussing how people might achieve their highest potential or studying the impact of people at their best. However, positive psychologists do have the most sophisticated

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empirical methods of studying these topics. By relying on the scientific method, positive psychologists are able to arrive at insights that were previously out of bounds to faith, intuition, reasoning, and logic.

Although positive psychology techniques are now being promoted as a complement to more traditional forms of therapy, it was initially developed as a way to advance well-being and optimal functioning in healthy people. Therefore, for many people coaching has become the natural choice for serving as the applied arm or delivery system of positive psychology (Biswas-Diener, 2010). In fact, people with an interest in positive psychology often open coaching practices. Though positive psychology itself is an applied science, there is currently no consistent methodology for delivering positive psychology services. There are people, such as those at the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology, who use strengths-based science as the foundation of their organizational consulting work, while others integrate tenets of positive psychology into their psychotherapy practices (“CAPP,” 2015).

According to psychologist Carol Kauffman (2008), director of the Coaching and Positive Psychology Initiative at Harvard’s McLean Hospital, there are four primary techniques currently available for integrating the principles of positive psychology into coaching as well as more traditional types of individual or group therapy reversing the focus from negative to positive, developing a language of strength, balancing the positive, and negative and building strategies that foster hope.

Most people tend to dwell on negative events or emotions and ignore the positive ones, and both therapy and coaching can change this. One way to reverse the focus is to use techniques intended to shift attention to more positive aspects of life (Seligman, 2011). For example, take a mental snapshot each night and scan over the events of the day, thinking about what went right.

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Another tip is to compile “I did it” lists instead of only writing down “to do” ones that need to be done. About developing a language of strength, therapists and patients often talk about pain, conflict, and anger. Although these are all aspects of life, it may be harder for people to talk about or even identify more positive qualities and personal strengths. Kauffman (2008) and other positive psychology practitioners often use strength coaching while advising patients. Just as an athlete exercises certain muscles to become stronger, the theory is that people who use their strengths regularly will function better in life. To boost mental capacity, Kauffman recommends that people identify at least one top strength and then use it at least once per day.

When attempting to balance the positive and negative, it is important for people to identify and foster the positive for themselves and others in order to provide a balance to the negative (Seligman, 2011). For example, business executives may mix praise with constructive criticism when evaluating employees to nurture their growth. Additionally, finding ways to foster hope in someone may increase that person’s ability to deal with adversity and overcome a challenge. One way to cultivate hope is to reduce the scope of the problem, perhaps by breaking it down into components that can be tackled one at a time. Another way is to identify skills and coping mechanisms that would enable someone to overcome a particular challenge, and then provide a way to build them. These, along with other positive psychology methods, provide a foundation of support for individuals facing developmental challenges associated with midlife (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

Positive Psychology: A Strengths-based Approach. Theories that inform positive psychology coaching models are largely based on a strengths-based philosophy (Harris, Thorensenn, & Lopez, 2007). According to Linley and Harrington (2006), a strength is “a natural capacity for behaving, thinking, or feeling in a way that allows optimal functioning and

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performance in the pursuit of valued outcomes.” Therefore, a strength-based approach to coaching focuses on helping clients discover and deploy their strengths for maximum benefit. This concept is echoed by Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004), whose research found that coaches who encourage clients to engage their strengths more frequently resulted in the unleashing of greater potential and enhancement of their sense of well-being. By helping clients refine their strengths rather than solely focusing on skill and performance gap transformation, coaches promote successful goal attainment and self-efficacy, which enhances confidence and empowerment toward further action.

Thriving is a strength-based psychological construct often associated with positive psychology. In contrast to languishing, wherein people feel unmotivated and unable to move forward in their pursuits, thriving represents a deeper understanding that stimulates feelings of engagement with life and thereby facilitates progress forward (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). Since an individual’s sense of thriving is susceptible to change, it is important to investigate the relationship between positive psychology coaching and how it can promote a sense of thriving with midlife executives. This understanding may help organizations develop more effective human resource policies, including the inclusion of coaching as a formalized tool for personal, professional, and organizational development.

Fredrickson’s (2001) “broaden and build” model suggests that positive emotions appear to broaden people’s momentary through-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources. Using this approach during coaching may provide affirmative benefits such as an increased sense of energy and vitality in addition to promoting learning and connection to others. In other words, positive emotion may be the fuel for creating self-sustaining change. This concept is of importance to positive psychology executive coaching because it describes how

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positive emotions can serve as a foundational strength for clients working to enhance both performance and well-being via emotional management. Furthermore, the results of positive affect appear to be durable and cumulative over time, ultimately providing individuals with additional resources, also known as resilience, for managing future stressful and unpleasant events (Fredrickson, 2004).

The strength-focused psychological construct of resilience is characterized by two main factors the ability to rebound quickly from adverse situations and the ability to adapt to changing, stressful situations (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Resilient people tend to be optimistic, zestful, and energetic because they utilize their positive emotions and sense of humor to lessen the negative impact of stressful situations. Through positive psychology coaching, clients may be able to cultivate awareness and internal dialog so that they become more resilient and, thereby, set the stage for them and their organizations to thrive. Simple action steps such as recognizing emotional states, identifying opportunities and potential challenges, and developing action plans to forward goals provide a strong reserve and tools for building positive relationships that are necessary for both individual and organizational resilience (Spreitzer et al., 2005).

Positive Psychology Coaching at Midlife. Midlife can be a difficult and challenging period of adult development. Historically, men and women struggling with middle age challenges have sought support from family, friends, and psychotherapists (Biswas-Diener, 2010). However, over the last two decades people have increasingly sought the assistance of personal coaches to support them during midlife. As the coaching field grows in popularity, many therapists are also performing coaching as a way to diversify their practice and work with a higher-functioning population.

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For many people, the midlife passage is a particularly challenging period when questions of meaning arise (Fronczak, 2005). In addition to the physiological signs of aging that provide a daily reminder of one's mortality, midlife is a time of re-evaluating the past and realistically assessing the future. Psychological theory on adult development indicates that midlife can be a difficult transitional period, with opportunities for both transformation and stagnation. The adult development theories of Carl Jung, Erik Erikson, and Daniel Levinson each posit specific developmental tasks for people at midlife. The ideal resolution of the midlife transition requires a shift toward generativity and a re-engagement in the individuation process to achieve personal integration, greater self-knowledge, and a more meaningful life. Robert Biswas-Diener agreed, stating that while, "the notion of 'middle age' transcends both chronological advancement or physical maladies," both midlife and coaching are fundamentally about transformation (2010, p. 126). At this point in life, it is important for us to get serious about the business of living. In addition, while we must confront the realities of aging bodies, coaches can be influential in supporting clients through smooth, growth-filled, midlife experiences with grace.

Positive psychology may help people build resources and resiliency to buffer against midlife's inevitable challenges. Enhancing positive emotions increases one's thought and action repertoire and coping strategies (Fronczak, 2005). Therefore, positive psychology has the potential to build the necessary resources and coping strategies to prevent a midlife transition from turning into a midlife crisis. Additionally, professional coaching is an emerging field that seeks to help people decide what they really want from life and then supports them as they set out to actualize their vision. Therefore, utilizing an integrated theory and midlife interventions such as coaching helps to normalize the midlife transition, increasing positive emotions,

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facilitating personal integration, enhancing self-understanding, and nurturing the pursuit of a meaningful life.

According to Seligman (2007), positive psychology has the potential to provide a scientific and theoretical backbone for the field of coaching. First, positive psychology is the study of positive emotion, of engagement, and of meaning, the three aspects that make sense of the scientifically unwieldy notion of happiness. Positive psychology attempts to measure, classify, and build these three aspects of life. Practicing exactly these three endeavors may bring some order into chaos by limiting coaching's scope of practice. Second, as a science, positive psychology is rooted in empirical research. It uses traditional methods of psychometrically established measurement, of experiments, of longitudinal research, and of random assignment, placebo-controlled outcome studies to evaluate whether interventions work. It discards those that do not pass these gold standards as ineffective, and it hones those that do pass. Coaching with these evidence-based interventions and psychometrically established measures will help set the boundaries of responsible coaching practice. Finally, positive psychology can help guidelines for training and accreditation.

It is important to note that one need not be a licensed psychologist or mental health professional to practice positive psychology or coaching. Nor is positive psychology intended to be an umbrella for yet another self-interested guild. According to Seligman (2007), people who are adequately trained in the techniques of coaching and theories of positive psychology, who can validly measure positive states and traits, who can employ interventions that work, and who know when to refer a client for clinical interventions will be bona fide coaches of positive psychology.

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According to Biswas-Diener (2010), a primary objective of a coach's work is to help clients reframe common struggles as opportunities. This is not done in a naïve or unrealistic way, but in a way that looks at both sides of an issue. For example, we do not look at an auto accident or cancer as a fortunate situation or blessing in disguise, but as undeniable hardships associated with midlife. However, we would also continue to look for the good elsewhere, such as aspirations around professional endeavors, financial goals, and legacy building rather than remaining stuck.

As already noted, there is no clear consensus regarding when the midlife passage occurs. There is also an absence of agreement about whether the changes at midlife constitute a crisis or mere transition. Regardless of when it begins, and whether it is called a crisis or a transition, the midlife passage marks the beginning of what often is a difficult and challenging time in an individual's life. Oles (1999) outlined the enormity of the challenge in the following description of the midlife passage "A process of intensively difficult transition of the self dealing with a reinterpretation of time perspective, the confrontation with death as a future personal event, the reevaluation of life values and goals, and planning the second half of life" (p. 1059).

A person's challenges at midlife can be immense, and generally cover the three broad categories of physiological changes, changes in interpersonal relations, and intrapersonal challenges. It is toward the beginning of the midlife years that many people begin to notice that the subtle physiological signs of normal aging are not as subtle as they once were. One's appearance begins to change as wrinkles appear with greater frequency, the skin and muscle tone lose firmness, and one's hair begins to recede, thin, or turn gray (Fronczak, 2005). As the metabolism slows, it becomes increasingly more difficult to lose weight and stay in shape. These outward signs of aging, for some, serve as a constant reminder of the inevitableness of death.

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There is also a decrease in cardiovascular efficiency, slower response time, and a slow, gradual decline in athletic ability (Butler, 1989). Sexuality at midlife also begins to change, especially for men. Biologically, men reach their sexual peak in their late teens or early twenties, with many reporting a gradual decrease in libido and sexual performance from midlife forward. The combined outward and internal physiological changes at midlife can have a particularly negative impact on men who validate their self-esteem in terms of their youthful appearance and sexual functioning.

Interpersonally, many people find themselves married or in a similar long-term committed relationship that has become rampant with routine and predictable events. For some, changing partners may be seen as a way of revitalizing their personal lives. As an individual reaches middle age, his or her parents are usually fast approaching old age if they are alive at all. The death of a parent often marks a shift when a man begins to think more about his own mortality (Biswas-Diener, 2010). With the death of one parent, many of us may feel an increased sense of responsibility to support the remaining parent and, therefore, find ourselves caring for the parent and children. This creates a growing interdependence among family members and friends as they provide extra support and assistance.

Intrapersonally, midlife often becomes refocused on finding one's passion (Biswas-Diener, 2010). This seems especially true for those seeking coaching. Here people want to grow and find meaning beyond the cubicle and commute. This is also where the "gift" of midlife lies the opportunity for transformation. In fact, this type of work can be fun and invigorating. Rather than pathologizing the suffering that often accompanies the midlife transition, we can consciously embrace the opportunity for joy in life's second act and the learning, wisdom and depth of personality that awaken with such a proactive choice. In fact, coaches may be very

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helpful in initiating a process of self-understanding that enables clients to develop and implement a plan to maximize personal fulfillment, balance, and meaning.

Quality coaching could ease the transitions associated with midlife by normalizing the process and giving the client an opportunity to discuss his or her experience of midlife (Fronczak, 2005). As people encounter the physiological and sociological changes associated with the midlife transition, they may not have anyone with whom they can discuss their personal changes. Coaches provide a safe place to seek confidential support during a potentially turbulent transition. Coaches can also normalize the process by providing psychosocial information that reframes midlife from a time of personal struggle to an opportunity for significant personal growth in life's second half. Additionally, coaches who have already completed their own midlife transition may enhance their credibility and rapport by sharing relevant parts of their personal journey (Biswas-Diener, 2010). A client may sense a deeper level of empathy from the coach if he or she perceives the coach as someone who has successfully completed the midlife transition. According to Biswas-Diener (2010), efficaciously navigating midlife can be accomplished by addressing the two of concepts reconnecting with meaning (often work) and managing our fears. Doing so will help us enhance positive emotion, self-understanding, and being in "flow."

One of the potential pitfalls of middle age is a heightened awareness around a sense of meaning. Most of us want to provide quality goods or services, help others, and have a positive impact on our family and community. Achieving these facets helps us to feel successful and worthwhile. However, if we are discouraged in our work, we should take this time to help midlife clients examine where they are now compared to where they were at the beginning of their career (Biswas-Diener, 2010). We can help the client evaluate where things went astray by

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answering questions such as (1) What was initially attractive about my job? (2) When I began working, what did I expect or hope for out of my career? (3) What was exciting about my work when I first started out? and, (4) How are these seminal hopes and exciting job features similar and different from my current situation? This reappraisal of the past and evaluation of life structure help the client decide what changes need to be made during the second half of life. For example, she may decide next to realign with original initial values or create new values that fit better with this new stage of life. She may also take a strengths approach to work and finding meaning. Regardless of the approach, a key benefit of coaching during middle age is its ability to keep clients actively engaged in the process of developing their own lives (Fronczak, 2005).

During midlife coaching can also help clients explore possible new identities or navigate the discrepancies between their ideal self and the realities of a more down-to-earth self. This may include answering questions such as “Who am I?” and “How close am I to becoming whom I want to be, relative to who I was 10 years ago?” We and our clients may discover that we now hold positions of power, enjoy more respect, and have more achievements both personally and professionally as well as the knowledge, skills, and wisdom that come with age (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Such a feeling of pride may lead to increased positive emotions about the past, present, and future. The feelings of pride can be maintained between sessions by asking the client to make a nightly list of what went well that day and why, including where he experienced a feeling of personal accomplishment. Once the list is made, the client should compliment him or herself on the accomplishments and take a few minutes to savor and bring awareness to his or her resulting feelings. Research on a similar intervention indicates that after only one week of the intervention participants showed an increase in happiness and a decrease in depression at both three-month and six-month follow-ups (Seligman, 2011).

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Among fears associated with midlife, the fear of death is probably the greatest. According to the terror management theory (TMT), although no one likes to spend time contemplating death, we know that death is inevitable. Likewise, occasional reminders of death can motivate us to think and act in ways that spur us toward finding meaning in life (TMT, 2012). Because cultural values determine what is meaningful, they are also the basis for self-esteem. TMT describes self-esteem as being the personal, subjective measure of how well an individual is living up to his or her cultural values. Like cultural values, self-esteem acts to protect one against the terror of death. However, it functions to provide one's personal life with meaning while cultural values provide meaning to life in general. Coaching can help to increase meaning through the pursuit of values and strength-based goals as well as facilitating increased self-awareness and personal integration through positive psychology techniques.

Additional midlife fears include fear of losing a brighter past (i.e., the past was good, and life diminishes as we age), fear of having mis-lived the past (i.e., worry that our mistakes define our legacy), and fear of accepting the present (i.e., the courage to accept limitations, mistakes and the ways we have changed; Biswas-Diener, 2010). The first two fears are related to a focus on the past and regrets. Managing these fears may require below-the-surface thinking and a shift in focus toward core characteristics such as talents, strengths, and virtues. How we deal with our past is largely a matter of choice, and coaching can use the natural sense of urgency associated with middle age to motivate clients to fulfill their dreams and put their passions into action. This may mean writing a book, starting a charity, volunteering, or taking a dream family vacation. The final fear is focused on the present and is caused by anxiety about accepting our limitations in light of an accurate self-appraisal. Coaching can help facilitate progress with this fear through self-acceptance, honest feedback, reframing, and championing the client in order to shift his or

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her focus to growth and whole-life opportunities. Establishing clear, challenging, yet attainable goals that are intrinsically rewarding can help to create a sense of flow and positive well-being in the client (Seligman, 2011).

Ultimately, positive psychology coaching differs subtly from other forms of coaching because of its keen focus on strengths. It may be framed as having five basic tenets (a) humans have an innate drive to grow, change and overcome; (b) focusing on strengths is as powerful as, if not more powerful than, focusing on weaknesses in the achievement of success; (c) positivity in the form of hope or emotion is a powerful resource for facilitating change and achievement; (d) attention must be paid to both positive and negative aspects of life in order to address the complete person; and (e) scientifically derived knowledge and assessments give us unique ways of understanding both clients and the coaching process (Biswas-Diener, 2010). In the end, positive psychology coaching is a set of skills and tools based on empirical knowledge that can constitute its own distinct brand of coaching or be used as an adjunct to other models and practices in order to help clients successfully navigate midlife and beyond.

Summary of Positive Psychology Coaching Literature. The literature review reveals that the emerging coaching profession, while incomplete, is making solid strides forward in the areas of evidence-based research and developing unique theoretical frameworks. The merging of positive psychology and coaching is one example of this evolution. While many scholars believe the future of coaching depends on how well it embraces evidence-based practice and argue for more rigorous controlled studies, increased reliance on validated assessments and agreement around a central theoretical construct, others seem content with a multi-modal approach (Spence, 2007). Regardless of the educational or theoretical background of the coach, they customize and employ a variety of human development tools and models to build on client strengths.

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Positive psychology literature affirms that strengths-based coaching methodologies generate positive outcomes, including heightened productivity and learning, as well as improved relationships and self-reflection. Additionally, the impact of positive emotion promotes a sense of well-being, thriving, and resilience personally, professionally, and organizationally. However, to date there is little known about how positive psychology coaching can generate positive emotions. For example, how long do the results of coaching last? How long does it take to break dysfunctional habits and thoughts and move toward a state of thriving? In addition, specific to this study How does positive psychology coaching with midlife executives help them thrive both personally and professionally? Do the results vary from one participant to another? Finally, are there other variables at play that influence the client's perception of the coaching process?

Summary

This chapter reviews selected literature on coaching, positive psychology, and midlife challenges that inform my research on positive psychology executive coaching at midlife. As with many other concepts in psychological studies, scholars studying positive psychology and coaching have generated disagreements on fundamentals, such as the nature of and scope of coaching practice and governing theoretical frameworks. Although some scholars continue to question the efficacy of both positive psychology and coaching, a growing number of empirical studies have found an affirmative link between positive psychology coaching and thriving, both personally and professionally. For example, research from Grant (2013) and Biswas-Diener (2010) has consistently found that the impact of positive emotion generated via positive psychology coaching promotes a sense of well-being, thriving, and resilience personally, professionally, and organizationally. Similarly, Fredrickson's (2002) research demonstrates that positive emotions can counterbalance the physiological effects of negative emotions such as

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anger, fear, sadness, and anxiety, helping people recover more quickly from negative feelings. Coaching can also help to increase meaning through the pursuit of values and strength-based goals, as well as facilitating increased self-awareness and personal integration through positive psychology techniques. Therefore, it stands to reason that positive psychology executive coaching during midlife may facilitate one's ability to thrive throughout middle age and beyond. Verifying this connection is the purpose of this investigation.

This study centered on positive psychology and coaching to explore the lived experiences of executives who participate in positive-psychology-focused coaching at midlife. The objective was to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which leaders benefit from positive psychology coaching as they navigate both developmental and workplace challenges typically associated with middle age. It extends the literature on positive psychology executive coaching by giving a voice to client participants in an effort to clearly understand their perspective and perceived impact. It also explored how executive coaching that uses a positive psychology methodology influences self-actualization and engagement, both personally and professionally. It sought to provide insight regarding client perspectives associated with long-term change and benefits, in order to inform executive coaches, prospective clients, their organizations, and coach educators.

Chapter Three provides an overview of how the study was conducted. Insights into the chosen methodology and its significance are detailed in addition to specific details about the qualitative approach, study participants, data collection and data analysis. Chapter Four focuses on articulating the findings culled from this research project. Following a description of the subjects, which provides context from which results were drawn, research results are presented in detail according to research question and theme. Finally, Chapter Five provides a summary of the

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background and purpose of the study, including research questions, as well as an interpretation of the research and speculation for the meaning.

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CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Chapter Two discussed the significance of positive psychology and coaching as outlined in current literature that strengths-based coaching methodologies generate positive outcomes such as enhanced productivity, relationships, self-reflection, and learning. Although some scholars continue to question the efficacy of coaching and positive psychology, a growing number of studies have found an empirical link between positive psychology coaching and thriving (Grant, 2013). Additionally, coaching has been shown to increase meaning through the pursuit of values and strengths-based goals, as well as facilitating increased self-awareness.

This study was built on three key constructs, which were the focus of the literature review, professional coaching, positive psychology coaching, and challenges at midlife. The literature reflected in this review was primarily peer-reviewed articles and seminal books gleaned from electronic research databases, governmental and nongovernmental agency websites, and university websites. The time horizon searched was from 1937 to 2015, with a primary concentration that ranged from 2008 to 2014. Electronic databases searched as part of this literature review included ProQuest, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. Keywords used in the initial literature searches included *executive coaching*, *positive psychology coaching*, *positive emotions at midlife*, *resilience*, and *positive psychology*. A sample of the agency and university websites that were visited during the literature review include the American Psychological Association (APA), Occupational Safety and Health, Harvard Medical School's Institute of Coaching, the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Sydney. Excluded from this literature review were research, journal articles and books about coaching interventions outside of the positive psychology realm, group or team coaching, the

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role of the unconscious in coaching, and other psychological and personality factors since they were beyond the scope of the research.

This chapter provides an outline of the methodology of this study, including its rationale, goals, intended outcomes, and specific methods for data collection and analysis. Phenomenological inquiry was employed because it is effective in exploring meanings and perspectives of research participants (Creswell, 2013). This design method investigated the individual point of view and provided understanding and insight into the lived and experienced phenomena. In this study, positive psychology coaching was the phenomenon explored in an effort to understand what it is like for executives at midlife to participate and gain insights about how it impacted their perspective as well as work and personal lives. Interviews were conducted with executives who had participated in coaching interventions such as values in action, gratitude, strengths, mindfulness, and ACT training in an effort to better understand the effects that positive psychology coaching had on their behaviors, beliefs, actions, attitudes, confidence, and motivation both personally and professionally. The data were analyzed using NVivo software to code and identify specific themes and differences among individual experiences.

Qualitative Approach

Philosophy in research shapes how we formulate our research problems, how we frame research questions, and how we attain data to answer these questions (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, our philosophical assumptions are generally rooted in our education and training, then reinforced by the intellectual community in which we work. The most basic purpose of the phenomenological approach is to describe the universal essence of a given human experience. A phenomenological study describes the common meaning or lived experiences for several individuals as a concept. Therefore, this study focuses on describing what all participants have in

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common, as they experience the phenomenon of positive psychology executive coaching.

According to Moustakas (1994), the researcher collects data from people who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all individuals, thus, being able to describe the “what” of the experience as well as the “how.”

Transcendental or psychological phenomenology, therefore, is focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of participants (Creswell, 2013).

As noted in Chapter Two, qualitative research is a systematic scientific methodology that seeks to build a holistic description to inform the researcher’s understanding of a social or cultural phenomenon (Anderson, 2010). More specifically, McMillan and Schumacher (1993) defined qualitative research as “primarily an inductive process of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns (relationships) among categories” (p. 497). This definition implies that data and meaning emerge organically from the context of the research and emphasizes the importance of observing variables in their natural setting. Since both the researcher and interaction between variables are important parts of qualitative research, detailed data are gathered through open-ended questions that provide direct perceptions from research subjects.

Qualitative research is an umbrella term for a broad set of approaches and methodologies that vary in terms of focus, assumptions about the nature of knowledge, and the role of the researcher. Mason (2002) stated that all qualitative research methodologies have common elements, such as the following (a) they are concerned with how the phenomenon of interest (e.g. positive psychology coaching with midlife executives) is constituted, produced, experienced, understood, and interpreted; (b) they are based on research methods that are flexible and sensitive to the social context of the study; and (c) they are based on analytical methods, which consider the context, detail, and complexity of the situation and research environment. Because it

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encompasses a variety of accepted methods and structures, qualitative research is probably the most flexible of the various methodologies because of its open-ended nature and potential for uncovering meaning. The four most common types of qualitative research design are case study, grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology. This study followed the phenomenological approach.

Phenomenological inquiry is appropriate when exploring meanings and perspectives of research participants. A major concern of phenomenological analysis, according to Schwandt (2000), is to understand how the everyday, inter-subjective world is constituted. Here, the researcher first looks to the individual point of view to gain understanding of human phenomena as lived and experienced (Giorgi, 1985). Therefore, the major source of data for obtaining this inner perspective is interviewing. Patton (1990) noted that the interview allows researchers to determine what is on someone's mind, which is exactly what the target of the phenomenological study is—the perception of lived experience.

In this study, positive psychology coaching was the phenomenon explored in an effort to understand what ways the experience impacted midlife executive participants. Phenomenology answers the question “What is it like to have a certain experience?” It seeks to understand the phenomenon of a lived experience with the assumption that there is an essence to shared experience (Law et al., 1998). Therefore, this method was selected over quantitative or mixed designs because it matched the social and human issues associated with the midlife developmental stage and how people respond and adapt to physiological, psychological, and interpersonal changes as they age, reevaluate the first half of life, and make plans for the second. The phenomenological approach allows researchers to enter into an individual's life and use the self to interpret the individual's or group's experience.

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Using the psychological theory of positive psychology as its foundation, this investigation originated as an assumption that positive-psychology-focused coaching during midlife could serve as a springboard for helping leaders and executives successfully navigate personal and professional challenges often associated with this developmental stage. The goal of the study was to review and report on the perceptions and lived experiences of middle-aged executives who have various psychosocial, economic, and education levels as well as life experiences but are bound together by the common experience of having participated in positive psychology coaching.

Methodology

In this section, we review specific details about how the researcher planned and carried out the research, including criteria for study participants, the instrument used, data collection method, and data analysis. Study participants ranged from approximately 45 to 64 years and were either business owners or leaders with significant tenure. They each reported having participated in at least three months of coaching that employed positive psychology interventions. The instrument in this case was a semi-structured interview that was created as an extension of the literature review in Chapter Two. The data collection method was a telephone interview, which was recorded, transcribed, and approved by each participant prior to inclusion in the study. The analysis was conducted using NVivo software to code and identify common themes and differences among participant experiences.

Study Participants

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with midlife male and female executives (defined by the U.S. Census Bureau [2014], midlife ranging from age 45-64). The executives, all director to C-suite level or business owners, had been coached using a positive

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psychology approach that utilized interventions such as values in action, gratitude and strengths focus, mindfulness, or ACT training.

Polkinghorne (1988) suggested using between 5 and 25 participants for qualitative research, but according to Moustakas (1994), there is no 'one size fits all' sample size in qualitative research. Therefore, as part of this study, 12 participants were identified through contact with executive coaches who practiced positive psychology methodologies and have completed studies at institutions that offer master's level training in positive psychology coaching, such as MentorCoach, Life University, University of Sydney, and University. Two of the original ten volunteers were eliminated because their experience did not match the participant profile. Specifically, one participant engaged in career coaching rather than executive coaching and the other was unable to recall or describe any positive psychology activities or interventions that were used during their coaching process. In addition, the researcher used social media channels such as LinkedIn's positive psychology and coaching groups to identify potential participants. Participants were selected regardless of ethnic background, culture, or race. In preparation for the study, all participants received an email introduction and informed consent form and a follow-up letter of appreciation following their interviews. All interviews lasted one hour, were conducted by phone, and were recorded and transcribed, and approved by participants prior to inclusion in the study.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted via telephone bridge line and recorded to ensure accuracy. The researcher also took notes during the interviews. Afterward, the content of each interview was transcribed by the researcher. Participant approval of the transcribed interview was required for interview inclusion in the study.

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Safeguards that were used in storing gathered data in this study included the following Back-up copies of computer files were made, high quality audio recordings were used, a master list of information that was gathered was kept on file, and the anonymity of participants was kept by disguising their names by using fictitious initials on all documents. All data are currently stored in a locked file cabinet in the home of the researcher and will be kept for a period of five years from the date the dissertation is accepted. Specific interview protocol and questions are available in the appendix.

Instrument

Interview questions were open-ended and semi-structured in order to gain self-report information about experiences with positive psychology executive coaching and its impact on changes in behavior, beliefs, actions, attitudes, confidence, or motivation as related to personal and professional productivity and resilience. Sample inquiries from the interview included

- Tell me how your coaching experience has influenced your life personally.
- Please provide examples of one or more personal issues that were resolved as a result of your coaching.
- As a result of coaching, has your outlook for the future changed in any way? Please describe fully and provide examples.

The full instrument is included as Appendix D.

The literature review about professional coaching, positive psychology coaching, and challenges in midlife served as the foundation to explore the impact that positive psychology coaching has on midlife executives and, therefore, guided the design of questions used to interview research participants. While informal assumptions of the researcher are relevant in preparation for collection of data, the principles of phenomenological research posit that the information that is

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acquired as a result of interviews and contributions remains open-ended, free of bias, and free flowing (Creswell, 2013). All researchers have natural biases because of prior life experiences and interest in the research topic, but those biases were identified and bracketed during this research project to minimize impact. Once topics were determined through a thorough review of the literature and common themes of concern emerged, the essence of each theme continued to evolve throughout the research process.

The primary focus of the interviews was to describe in detail the specifics of the lived experience with positive psychology executive coaching. Questions designed to elicit examples of how the subjects resolved personal or professional issues as a result of coaching (questions 15 and 21) and whether the experience of coaching impacted their outlook about the future (question 14) were the core questions of the inquiry. The remainder of the interview questions provided depth and context for interpreting data, as well as structure and uniformity for a conversational style interview. As with Moustakas' suggestions (1994), interview questions were designed using an open-ended, semi-directive format in order to elicit meaningful responses that could be analyzed thematically and support accurate research inquiry. The questions not only worked to elicit descriptions of experience, but also sought to evoke interest and concern about the phenomenon.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2013) described a specific approach, advanced by Moustakas (1994), as a general plan for organization and analysis of data in phenomenological studies. This study followed their recommended steps, which were as follows: (a) researcher describes personal experience of the phenomenon through the epoche process, where he or she observes and listens with an attempt to minimize interpretation; (b) from interviews, the researcher learns about how individuals are experiencing the topic, then lists significant statements (i.e., horizontalization of data), giving equal

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value to each statement; (c) the researcher then reduces these statements into another list of non-overlapping statements, grouped into *meaning units*, and lists these units including the textural description of the experience, which includes what actually happened; (d) the researcher reflects personal experience, using a creative and divergent variation or structural description of how a phenomenon was experienced; (e) the researcher designs a brief description of the meaning and essence of the experience. The process concludes with a composite description of all of the experiences, written by the researcher.

By following Moustakas' process outlined above, the researcher created a brief summary of experiences that enables readers to understand the essence of the experience. The data gathered as part of this study were based on actual lived experiences that were portrayed by participants, rather than statistics. Likewise, instead of upholding or rejecting a hypothesis as we would in quantitative analysis, here, we follow the qualitative methodology of relying solely on descriptions that are systematically derived through participant perception (Creswell, 2013). The report then details the underlying structure and the validity of the experience described by the participants, helping readers relate to the feelings of the person who experienced the phenomenon.

In this study, the data were viewed individually by participant and then analyzed through comprehensive steps, meanings were interpreted, clusters of themes were identified, and then descriptions were examined meticulously. In analyzing the data, the following progression was used (a) create and organize data files; (b) read all notes, highlighting and adding margin notes, and forming categories; (c) describe the meanings of the experience for the researcher; (d) create a list of all statements of meaning for individuals; (e) group statements into meaning units; (f) develop textural descriptions, which describe what happened; (g) develop a structural description or how the phenomenon was experienced; (h) develop an overall description of the essence of the experience;

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(i) present narration of the essence of the experience; and (j) compare and analyze data to find common themes and differences (Creswell, 2013).

Summary

In phenomenology, researchers begin the investigation into others' lived experiences with one fundamental question 'What is the meaning or essence and structure of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or this group of people?' In this study, Husserl's (1970) inquiry philosophy was the paradigm or model of research. Husserl's theory of parts and wholes serves as a significant guiding principle in phenomenological research. According to Creswell (2013), Husserl provided many important perspectives in his science of phenomenology, including searching for essential, invariant structures (the essence or central underlying meaning of the experience), along with intentionality of consciousness, wherein experiences contain both the outward appearances and inward consciousness based on memories, images, and meaning of experiences for participants.

The specific phenomenological method that was used in this study is the psychological approach, which focuses not only on the meaning of experiences, but analyzes individual, not group, experiences as the central tenant of the study. Moustakas (1994) outlined the definition of the psychological approach of phenomenology by stating that this approach is used

to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual description, general or universal meanings are derived, in other words, these are the essences or structures of the experience." (p. 13)

Next, Chapter Four focuses on articulating the findings culled from this research project. Following a description of the subjects, which provides context from which results were drawn, research results are presented in detail according to research questions and themes. Then, Chapter

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Five provides a summary of the background and purpose of the study, including research questions, as well as an interpretation of the research and speculation of the meaning.

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CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Chapter Three outlined the methodology of this study, including its rationale, goals and intended outcomes, and specific methods for data collection and analysis. Chapter Four presents the results of the study. The chapter begins with information about the participants and the setting. A description of data collection and data analysis follow. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the results, based on analysis of the following three research questions

1. In what ways does positive psychology executive coaching guide leaders through a period of intense contemplation and evaluations associated with midlife and facilitate both personal and professional transformation?
2. In what ways does the coaching experience vary from participant to participant?
3. What other variables impact the client's perception of the coaching process?

The purpose of this research project was to obtain a detailed description of the personal and professional benefits achieved by executives who participated in positive psychology-focused coaching. Anticipated results of this study included (a) better understanding of how positive psychology coaching may be effective as an approach to executive coaching, especially with midlife executives; and (b) providing help to executive coaches and coach training organizations to gain a better understanding of executive client perspectives associated with long-term change and benefits of positive psychology coaching.

Subjects

In this study, the researcher selected subjects based on their experience with positive psychology-focused coaching during midlife. Both men and women of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds who had participated in positive psychology executive coaching were interviewed.

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Participants in this group ranged from age 43 to 65 and were able to recall their coaching experiences, as well as the effect that the experience may have had on their overall personal and professional lives. A total of three male and seven female volunteer participants formed the convenience sample for this project. As noted previously, two additional participants were eliminated for not matching participant criteria (one received career coaching rather than executive coaching and one did not receive positive psychology-focused coaching). A *convenience sample* is defined as a nonprobability sampling technique where subjects are selected because of their convenient accessibility (Creswell, 2013). Recruitment of subjects was accomplished through several venues, including (a) social media notices posted on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook; (b) email solicitations to positive psychology coaches listed in the International Society for Coaching Psychology's membership directory; (c) emails to researchers at Harvard's Institute of Coaching; and (d) personal solicitations through local EAP providers. Each respondent consented in writing to the conditions of the research, as outlined by the Institutional Review Board of California Southern University and received a summary of the results of the study upon written request. Following each initial interview and transcription, the researcher employed an ongoing methodological qualitative process. Table 1 presents an overview of participant demographics.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

Female	7	70
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	8	80
African American	2	20
Education		
BA	3	30
Master's	4	40
PhD	3	30
Household composition		
Self only	2	20
Self and partner	5	50
Self, partner, and children	3	30
Religious affiliation		
Christian	5	50
Unitarian	1	10
Spiritual	2	20
Did not answer / not religious	2	20

Data Collection

Every participant received an email introduction and informed consent form, as well as a follow-up letter of appreciation after the interviews. All interviews lasted 1 hour and were conducted by phone, recorded, and transcribed for approval by participants prior to inclusion in the study. The researcher conducted interviews via telephone bridge line, which were recorded to ensure accuracy. The researcher also took notes during the interviews, and afterward transcribed the content of each interview. Participant approval of the transcribed interview was required for interview inclusion in the study.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the following steps occurred. First, the researcher uploaded the data into NVivo 10 to aid with organization. The interviews were read and reread to gain an understanding of the content and to note any emerging patterns. The data were then broken down into individual units of meaning and assigned a code that described fragments. The codes were then organized into categories. The researcher then examined the categories for like meanings

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and grouped those together. These groups formed into themes. To report the results, the researcher textually and structurally analyzed each interview. Then, the themes were examined and organized by research questions. The researcher reported the themes and included quotations from the interviews to support the findings.

Participant 1: Textual Analysis

Participant 1 indicated that she used coaching on three occasions. She initially used coaching to deal with a challenge at work. The second time she employed coaching was to learn about coaching employees, and the last time was when she wanted to ensure that she could manage an employee situation. She chose her first coach because she knew that person faced a similar challenge. For her next two coaching episodes, she knew the person and believed in his ability. Coaching sessions lasted from 1 to 3 months. She was 50 when she began to work with a coach and indicated that for her, midlife was at 45. She reported no title changes during coaching. The positive psychology tools employed by her coaches were focused on identifying strengths and values. She also indicated that she was encouraged to feel grateful for her successes.

One of the valuable lessons she learned was to perceive conflict, challenges, and opportunities to learn. She reported that in order to track progress, she reported that the coach had specific lessons. Those lessons contained progress indicators and a test at the end of the coaching. She reported that during coaching, she always identified a specific goal. She reported that coaching provided tools to perform better in the short- and long-term. She learned strategies, such as time management, giving feedback, and conflict.

When asked about personal issues that were resolved by coaching, Participant 1 focused only on work-related tasks. She indicated that she felt much more confident after receiving

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coaching. Personally, she reported a willingness to ask for help, more energy, an ability to face challenges, and a feeling of peace that resulted from the coaching.

She stated that she now found herself looking as her self-coach rather than a director. She felt that she learned skills that helped resolve work-related issues such as follow-up, communication, and using agendas to track information. She felt coaching enabled her to better manage time, use creativity, and work well with a team. She reported that she now shares how she works with challenges with other professionals and feels that she is collaborative. She also felt that she learned to give constructive feedback in a timely manner. Overall, she reported that coaching helped her increase her confidence, strengthen her instincts, and add skills. She reported that she found coaching valuable and worth at least twice what she paid.

Participant 1: Structural Analysis

Overall for Participant 1, access to coaching helped her increase self-confidence and she learned to feel grateful for the things that went well and the strengths she had. Coaching caused her to do mindfulness exercises and appreciate her life. She reported that she was better able to face challenges and knew that she was able to reason through difficult situations. She learned to see challenging situations as an opportunity for growth and curiosity. When faced with challenges, she felt good about how she handled difficulty. She also believed that the coaching enabled her to feel empowered and to be a better leader. Participant 1 felt much more confident and purposeful in the actions and decisions she made. She found herself less stressed and optimistic about the future. One of her future goals included creating a training initiative that fosters a healthy work culture.

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Participant 2: Textual Analysis

Participant 2 began coaching because his supervisor identified performance and behavioral issues in managing staff. Working with the employee assistance program, he was referred to an executive coach. He worked with his coach for a period of 4 months, indicating that his work with the coach continues. He began coaching at the age of 57 and identified midlife between 40 and 45 years of age. He reported no job title changes. Positive psychology tools he reported using included a DISC assessment and a discussion of style strength and values. He and the coach worked together to track progress. His goals included correcting behavioral and performance deficiencies at work, aligning expectations with his supervisor, working effectively with staff, identifying blind spots in his behavior, and learning new techniques, approaches, philosophy, and concepts to improve his effectiveness as a leader. He reported that the coaching experience provided him increased relief, confirmation, validation, perspective, and reinforcement. He learned that there was nothing wrong with him; rather, it was a clash between his leadership style and the corporate culture. He was used to working at a rapid pace in a driven business setting.

Through coaching, Participant 2 learned that he needed to change his approach and become less of a driver and more of a facilitator. He needed to increase his patience and lower his expectations. He had to make a deliberate change. By working with the coach, he found that he was able to more effectively work with the staff and supervisor. He reported that he will focus on the longer view and working from a developmental perspective.

On a personal level, he felt validated, which lowered his anxiety level. He reported starting to work out regularly and that he no longer focused on the negative. He learned that he likes coaching and looks to the future thinking of teaching or consulting. He reported that he

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would manage coaching teachers and indicated he was not sure of how to attach a monetary value to what he received.

Participant 2: Structural Analysis

For Participant 2, coaching provided not only new knowledge of leadership, but also was an emotional experience. He had begun to doubt himself and worried that he might have some type of psychological issue. The coach was able to reassure him and show that it was a simple clash in style. He learned more about how his values affected his choices and decisions professionally and personally. He felt that he learned how to have patience and provide support for his employees. His new attitude focused on building up his employees rather than critiquing them. He had lower levels of anxiety and learned not to dwell on negative situations.

Emotionally, he reported feeling better. He learned that he did not need to feel responsible for everything that happens in his professional life. He felt confident that he was knowledgeable and capable and felt that he gained a new perspective on his life. He indicated that his employees said he was more consistent, positive, and less moody. Overall, he felt as if he was given every opportunity to come out of the experience feeling positive and better about himself. He learned to acknowledge his imperfections and indicated that the coach he worked with understood him, provided affirmation, and aided him in finding opportunities to improve his life. He stated that he did not know how to assign a dollar value to what he learned.

Participant 3: Textual Analysis

Participant 3 indicated that she was a counselor with a business background. She learned about coaching and thought it would be a good skill to add to her repertoire, deciding to work with a coach to learn more about what they did. She has worked with a variety of coaches with different styles and learned how coaching differs from person to person. She worked with her

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coach for approximately two years and was 52 years old, identifying midlife as 39 to 45 years old. Participant 3 is an entrepreneur who owns a small business and experienced no job title changes.

When asked about positive psychology, Participant 3 indicated that the coach used a variety of strategies including values in action, gratitude exercises, strength-focused assessments, mindfulness, and acceptance. She indicated that she worked on many different goals while being coached and currently is looking to incorporate humor and learn to be more spontaneous.

Coaching helped her learn to manage stress, communicate more effectively, and focus on areas that she felt needed improvement. She indicated that coaching helped her look forward to the future and that she learned how to get the most out of her own life. She indicated coaching was different from counseling in that it promoted immediate action. She felt coaching enabled her to reach out to other business organizations and make connections with others. She felt that because of the coaching, she was able to get herself to focus on learning skills and take more risks. She reported no clear management style but felt she could still do a better job managing her business. Her goals included continuing to grow her business, teaching and training, and developing herself as a professional.

Participant 3: Structural Analysis

Participant 3 found that coaching enabled her to gain support and provide it for others. She felt that she knew what her strengths are and was grateful for all the opportunities she had. She reported an increased level of happiness and less anxiety. Her stress levels lowered, she communicated better with her children, and felt that she was increasingly mindful. She reported that she took time to enjoy her life and understood what she values. Participant 3 indicated that she increased her ability to focus and was happier. She was aware that she could affect change in

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her own life and stated that receiving coaching has ignited her passion for positive psychology and coaching.

Participant 3 spoke about how she took what she learned from coaching and helped her children. She was able to have conversations with them about persistence, mindset, and ways to be successful. After receiving coaching, Participant 3 felt much more optimistic and aware of her life. She said that coaching enabled her to push her comfort zone and take chances. Overall, she indicated she was very satisfied with her life and explored what is to come. Her confidence increased and she felt that the coaching enabled her to make better decisions. The most important take away that she had from her coaching experience was enjoyment and personal development.

Participant 4: Textual Analysis

Participant 4 sought out coaching because she was a member of a psychology group that wanted to offer coaching. Even after that group no longer existed, she continued coaching in order to improve her business. She found the coach through investigation and recommendation and worked with her coach for 5–6 years. Participant 4 began coaching and defined midlife as 44 to 45 and her job title showed no change. During the coaching sessions, techniques used by the coach included mindfulness and focusing on creative strengths. To track progress, she checked in with the coach and reviewed notes. Her goals included learning about coaching, getting more clients, and growing her business. She reported that coaching increased her level of confidence and that she is much more confident in her ability to be successful. She indicated that she was able to reach out more for more business opportunities, including workshops and seminars.

Working with her coach enabled Participant 4 to understand herself professionally and personally. She felt that the coaching enabled her to take more chances and try new things. Since receiving coaching, she has led workshops, submitted proposals, met with clients, provided

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coaching, and looked for new opportunities. She gained a large deal of knowledge regarding how to be an effective coach and learned how to develop proposals and set appropriate rates for services. She increased her skills and felt that she was much more able to make decisions. As a leader, she defined herself as flexible and laid back. A significant occurrence was that she changed how she thought about work processes and business development. She felt able to more effectively market her business and access available work. She was able to write a book and wants to increase speaking engagements. Overall, she reported feeling confident in herself and her ability to achieve any goal. She felt that coaching was valuable but she does not know how to place a monetary value on the service.

Participant 4: Structural Analysis

Participant 4 felt that coaching helped her increase her level of mindfulness. She was also able to look at her personal life, lose weight, and get healthy. She felt that self-care was an area that was important to increase her sense of excitement about the future. An important step for her was learning to embrace her personal rhythm, in which she was able to work and learn how to be productive and creative even when she was feeling tired. She looked forward to the future and reported that she has a can-do attitude about being a coach and growing her business. Her levels of confidence and motivation increased and she looks forward to more challenges, while focusing on embracing her creative nature and having fun with her work. She now believes that she has something to offer and that she can support others. She reported being able to have big dreams of being on the Oprah Winfrey show and of having speaking engagements where she is paid well, and she wants to develop her reputation. She reported wanting to never retire, and to keep walking, talking, and speaking. She wanted people to remember her and her advice and use

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it to improve their lives. She reported knowing that people always have something new to learn and she is excited about her future.

Participant 5: Textual Analysis

Participant 5 chose to pursue coaching because the recession caused her client base to shrink. She was struggling and unsure of how to promote herself. She wanted ideas and guidance for business development and to gain an increased level of accountability to herself. She found her coach through her partner, who was trained as a coach. She worked with her coach during two different periods, spanning 3–4 years. She began working with the coach at the age of 55 and defined midlife occurring from 50 to 55 years of age. She did not report any job title changes during the period she received coaching. Her coach helped her identify positive strength, clarify values, and a focus on what was important to her. Her coach took notes that detailed the work and enabled her to track progress. Goals she worked on included generating short and long-term income, analyzing business priorities, developing tactics for reaching goals, and fulfilling creative potential. In addition, she wanted to develop a business partnership and ensure that her business was sustainable in the long term. Participant 5 also indicated that she went to work on productivity, learning to delegate, and dealing with her supervisor more effectively.

She indicated that coaching enabled her to think of herself as a professional and increased her ability to promote herself. She was able to deal with some personal issues, such as self-confidence, as well as work on professional goals. She reported an overall sense of well-being, increased energy, and higher resiliency. Participant 5 felt that her work habits improved and she had a willingness to take professional risks. She felt that she became a better manager and was more able to deal with difficult people. She also reported the ability to gather diverse clients as well as expanding her business.

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Participant 5 indicated an increase in her own confidence and her abilities. She was a more effective decision maker and found that her teamwork skills increased. She recalled attending conferences and connecting with local professionals to create a network. As a leader, she described herself as supportive and felt that at times she enabled her employees. Coaching, however, taught her to be the boss. Monetarily, she felt that the coaching was valuable and that she would recommend it to others.

Participant 5: Structural Analysis

For Participant 5, coaching enabled her to not only work on professional goals, but personal goals as well. She was able to focus on professional and personal issues and felt the coach was helpful as a sounding board, in which he helped her to deal with emotional lows and begin healthy habits. On a personal level, she realized that although she still struggled with self-esteem issues, she made progress. Coaching enabled her to feel more optimistic about the future and increase satisfaction with her life. She felt excited about the future and indicated that her increased self-confidence positively affected her marriage. The biggest changes she noticed were her comfort and confidence in creating goals and a willingness to try new things, including a 500-mile hike across Spain. She spoke about bettering relationships with family and friends and learning to not take relationships for granted. She learned to believe in her own values, skills, and abilities, which, in turn, increased her confidence. She talked about learning to just do things rather than overthinking them. She indicated she would absolutely use the coach again. Overall, she described the experience as positive.

Participant 6: Textual Analysis

Participant 6 indicated that coaching is provided by her place of employment and that it is a job requirement. She indicated that she has been working with her coach for almost 2 years.

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She was 48 when she began coaching and defined midlife between the ages of 45 and 65. She credits coaching with promotions that she has received. In her coaching sessions, she reported that her coach used the DISC to focus style and strengths. She also indicated they discussed values and how they can affect her personal and professional life. Goals included learning to listen better, respecting others, and improving her follow-through. She also worked on strategic thinking and personal development. Another area of focus included learning broader management skills. She learned from coaching that her personal and professional persona were highly similar. Through coaching, she found an increased level of organization and a lower level of stress. Personal growth included learning not to try to take on others' problems.

When Participant 6 began coaching, she had just left a position that was unfulfilling and frustrating. She believed that she would never be successful again. Coaching helped her stay focused and gave her a support system, which has enabled her to be optimistic. Participant 6 indicated that her overall sense of well-being has increased and that the work-related resiliency has also grown. Professionally, she has a renewed sense of purpose, increased job satisfaction, and excitement about the future. She indicated that she feels more confident and self-reliant. One of the areas of opportunity that she focused on was learning to be direct and focused on the business in front of her. She learned to increase her accountability, which has also positively affected her motivation. Coaching made her a more thoughtful leader and increased her ability to deal with difficult employees' situations. Skills that she addressed in coaching include technical skills and knowledge, decision-making, and teamwork. One of the areas she reported still working on was attention to detail. As a leader, she feels she is open and good with people. A benefit of coaching that she reported was her increased confidence; this confidence enabled her to share her skills with others. She was able to set professional development goals including

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company expansion. One of the major benefits of receiving coaching was an increase in her ability to work with people with different personalities. She reported that coaching is an important part of her life and that she hopes that her employer will continue to provide the service. Overall, she indicated that the value of coaching is not necessarily measurable.

However, she would expect to pay \$300 to \$400 per session.

Participant 6: Structural Analysis

Participant 6 found coaching to be extremely beneficial. She felt that because her style is to like harmony and she wishes for people to get along, she needed to learn how to listen and respect what others had to say. One of the benefits of coaching that she focused on was lower levels of stress at work and at home. One of the most important things that she spoke about was learning not to take on problems and solve them for others. At home, she noticed that listening and asking what the person's plan for dealing with a problem had improved her relationships. She learned to assess her own stress levels and respond accordingly. Her overall outlook is highly optimistic and her identity and life have increased her sense of well-being. Her increased level of self-confidence has positively affected her life and she believes that her life has a purpose and that she can make a difference for people. She is excited about her future and looks forward to what is to come. She feels her communication skills have improved, which has abled her to be direct and get her point across more easily. One of the things she reported truly enjoying through coaching was learning to see her successes and to celebrate them. She reported being grateful for the good things in her life.

Participant 7: Textual Analysis

Participant 7 sought coaching because she was promoted to a leadership position and was worried that she needed help in adjusting to operating as a leader. She found her coach on the

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Internet. She reported working with her coach for 2 years and is still working with that person. She was 41 when she began coaching and considered midlife between the ages of 50 to 60. She reported that her job title and responsibilities have changed since beginning coaching and credits that change to coaching techniques employed by her coach, which included gratitude exercises focusing on strength using the DISC and VIA. She found her coach to be easy to speak to and clear with his expectations. The goals she set included improving her confidence in her leadership skills and focusing on business ownership. Overall, she reported that coaching taught her to look at the big picture and to trust her instincts. She also learned to understand how her behavior could affect others. She indicated that coaching gave her a better view of her personal ability to be successful. When looking at how coaching influenced her personal life, she indicated that she can lose track of what she needs if several weeks passed with no coaching.

Participant 7 also noted that if she does not maintain a regular coaching schedule, her attitude can become negative. She tends to backslide if she does not attend regular coaching sessions. She reported that coaching aided her in identifying changes she needed to make in her business and has helped her plan personal growth opportunities. She also stated that her time-management skills have increased. When she initially became a leader in a corporate setting, she received a time limit for her success. She focused on that time limit to the exclusion of all else. Her coach convinced her to ignore the time and focus on just simply doing the job. By doing so, she began to perform well and move forward. She stated that coaching increased her confidence in her own abilities, her ability to make decisions, and her creativity. She also marked improvement regarding her flexibility, initiative, and ability to manage change.

Finally, coaching also had a significant influence on Participant 7's resilience. One of the solid skills learned through coaching was to help employees who were not doing well come up

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with a solid improvement plan. She indicated that at times, she still feels overwhelmed, but because her confidence and motivation levels have increased, she is able to work through those feelings. She believes that coaching had a tremendous value because it gave her a sounding board and support from a neutral third party. She said coaching is worth \$1 billion because it helps her be more effective in her professional life. She reported that she is considering additional coaching to focus on an inability to properly handle regular day-to-day issues.

Participant 7: Structural Analysis

Participant 7 focused on the effect of coaching in her professional life. She found that if she let too many weeks pass between coaching sessions, she backslid. She believed that after the sessions, she was initially motivated and focused. However, as time passed, she found her motivation slipping. She did not speak about how coaching affected her personal life other than to say that concepts such as well-being, energy, resiliency, sense of purpose, and satisfaction were important. She said, however, that she easily lost sight of them. The biggest changes that she noticed in herself are increased levels of confidence and motivation. She has plans for the future, including expanding her business and traveling the world. She mentioned the one thing that she does take away from coaching is feeling good about herself. After coaching, she reported feeling that she can do what she needs to do and believes that she has the capability to manage her professional life.

Participant 8: Textual Analysis

Participant 8 initially began working with a coach because his supervisor hired one to work with everyone in his company. He chose to continue with a separate coach because he found the experience valuable. He found his second coach through friends, working with the coaches for a period of 6 months. He was in his mid-40s when he began working with a coach

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and defined midlife as being 45 to 50 years old. He reported no job changes or title changes while receiving coaching.

When working with him, Participant 8's coach used values exercises and focused on locating his strength. He indicated that his coach used a scorecard where they wrote down initial goals and updated them as the work progressed. He would score himself on a scale of 1 to 10 at the beginning, middle, and end of the coaching. This enabled him to see his progress and to focus on areas that still needed work. His goals when beginning coaching were to increase sales while managing his employees and time. He also looked at creating personal balance in his life. He felt that coaching enabled him to balance work and personal time. He spent more time with friends and reached out to initiate contact. He reported an increase in confidence, both personally as well as professionally. He indicated that he feels optimistic and that work is going well. He learned to make time for family and friends and now schedules regular vacations. He reported feeling energized and satisfied with his life, noting that he still needs to focus on better balance and hopes to make more time for his musical hobbies. A take-away that he valued is that his personal life is just as important as his professional one. He reported that he could now sustain positive relationships with his friends and family. He believed coaching enabled him to manage his time more effectively and to work closely with team members.

Participant 8: Structural Analysis

It was evident that, for Participant 8, the most important part of coaching was learning to manage work-life balance. He indicated that before coaching, the majority of his focus and energy was on work. He realized that his focus on work negatively affected his home life and personal relationships. Coaching enabled him to learn to spend time with friends and to be proactive and reach out to them to arrange a time to meet. He stated that this proactivity had

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never happened before. He found that by spending more time with family and friends, he enjoyed work more. His coach suggested that he take three to four brief vacations throughout the year and he eagerly looked forward to these breaks. His renewed energy led to increased overall satisfaction with his life. He learned to be fully present in his personal relationships and to not be distracted by what was occurring at work. He spoke about his peers and said he added balance because when he looked at their lives, he realized they were workaholics. He felt many of them drank too much, struggled with insomnia, and never seemed to get away from work. He noted that having a pattern ages individuals quickly and it was not what he wished for himself.

Coaching enabled Participant 8 to take a personal inventory of who he was and who he wanted to be. In doing so, he was able to begin to affect change. He still struggles and tries to increase his work-life balance. However, his confidence increased because of the positive relationships he created with others. He looked forward to the future and traveling with his partner. He also began to look for ways where he could make a difference in the world.

Professionally, he felt as though he was a better manager. He wanted to be the kind of leader who empowers his employees to make decisions and solve their own problems. His levels of stress have gone down because he has learned to manage his time and conflicting priorities. He remarked that he is able to make better decisions about time and deciding what was critical and a priority versus something what is important. Overall, he believed he is a better team member because he does not tell people what to do. Rather, he enables them to find their personal solutions. He indicated that he was doing a quarterly check with his former coach in order to move forward. He believed that coaching improved his attitude by at least 50% and his confidence in his professional ability has grown. He believed having a coach with whom he could trust and talk with was highly important. To him, it felt like he had an extra person on his

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side who helped him manage his life and increase his level of fun. He indicated that he paid \$500 a month for coaching, but felt it was definitely worth that and even more.

Participant 9: Textual Analysis

Participant 9 initially sought out coaching because she had been downsized from her professional position because of contract cuts. She worked in retail and was looking for someone to help her manage her current life situation. She desired new direction. She found her coach on the website assessment.com and indicated that she had been working with her coach for a period of 12 years. She began working with the coach at the age of 45 and defined midlife as 60. She changed jobs and job titles several times, but felt that was not linked to coaching. Rather, it was because of the economic situation. She felt that coaching helped her understand the different skills she possessed and how to apply those skills in different settings. While receiving coaching, she reported using gratitude exercises, meditation, and DISC. She indicated that they did not use a scorecard, but set goals and commitments each session. In the beginning, her goals consisted of locating a satisfying job, creating a healthy lifestyle, and repairing her home. These goals were ongoing because of the economy and she found herself revisiting the goals several times. She felt that coaching increased her ability to make decisions and acknowledge the skills and knowledge she possessed. One of her major areas of concern consisted of two secrets. She learned to manage her fear of others learning about the secrets, which included a major depressive episode and having an employee threaten her life.

She reported that coaching increased her overall sense of well-being. She felt more resilient and able to handle situations that she might have previously viewed as threatening. Her sense of satisfaction with her life increased and she reported being excited for the future. She also stated that she regained her confidence and is more comfortable making presentations and

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taking meetings with clients. Other effects of receiving coaching included the realization that she could seek help with making decisions and that she was able to handle major changes and challenges. She reported learning skills, such as positive reinforcement, and creating situations for her employees to show their best abilities. Coaching helped her refine her management skills, have confidence, make decisions, use creativity, and create effective teams in the workplace. She indicated that coaching also enabled her to leave work at work and not bring conflicts or issues home at the end of the day.

As a manager, she reported that she delegated tasks and trusted the ability of her employees, but worked with the employees to ensure that they understood their assigned tasks. She indicated that she also uses coaching to manage her employees and credits it for her ability to regain control of her life and become who she used to be. She said she would absolutely use coaching again and that the value of coaching could not be measured monetarily.

Participant 9: Structural Analysis

Participant 9 felt that coaching helped her in a variety of ways. She learned how to be more accountable for her decisions and how to deal with fear. She indicated coaching influenced her ability to make decisions and believe in herself. She reported that coaching enabled her to be comfortable with who she was and centered in her daily life. She indicated that her coach reminded her that anything is possible and she never had to settle. She valued the fact that her coach was available to help her put situations into perspective.

Overall, she indicated that her sense of well-being increased, had higher levels of energy, was more resilient, and was satisfied where her life progressed. She expressed excitement for the future and regained this in social situations. Before she began coaching, she hated that she was only comfortable spending time with a few friends that she felt were safe. During the time of the

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interview, she feels at ease when meeting new people and enjoys her social life. Emotionally, she feels more able to deal with emotional hindrances and roadblocks. Coaching has taught her to how to stay positive and express gratitude for her life. She learned to see limiting beliefs that prevented her from dealing with situations in a positive manner. She would like to be more comfortable with life so that she can begin to travel, spend more time with friends, and publish some of her work. She credits coaching with an increased ability to retain her focus even when her surroundings are chaotic. She also stated that coaching aided her in rebuilding her confidence and lessening her fears. Her stress levels decreased while her motivation increased. She looks for new challenges and has learned to move on when necessary. Coaching has had a major influence on her life, enabling her to value and acknowledge her successes.

Participant 10: Textual Analysis

Participant 10 could not identify any trigger that made him seek out the services of a coach. He remembers hearing about coaching from people he respected and decided that could be helpful for his own growth. He found his coach through recommendations from friends combined with online research. He has undergone several stints of coaching during a span of 10 years. He continues to seek out self-development opportunities.

Participant 10 indicated that he was 50 years old when he began to work with the coach. He identified midlife as approximately 55 years old. He reported that his job title did change while he was undergoing coaching and credits coaching for the promotion. Although pursuing some development on his own, he felt the coaching program he was involved in changed his self-perception, confidence, and skills that were linked to his career. He reported that his coaches used a variety of techniques in order to help him understand whom he was and what he wanted to accomplish.

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For him, the coaching process was not highly structured and he had no specific objectives when he began coaching. Although he felt that coaching did effect his personal behavior, beliefs, actions, and attitudes, he could not pinpoint a specific example. He did report that in the work setting he was able to listen to people without becoming emotionally caught-up in a situation; rather, he was able to guide them to look at the facts and find possible solutions. He realized that coaching changed how he listened to the people on his team.

When asked about his leadership style, he described it as providing direction and support and being highly flexible. He felt that these were innate skills he already possessed. He did see that the coaching enabled him to deal with changes at work in a positive manner. The experience increased his confidence and left him feeling empowered. One of the most important skills he gained through coaching was an understanding of incremental change and how to create what he wished would happen. Overall, he believed the value he received from coaching was worth the money he spent.

Participant 10: Structural Analysis

For Participant 10, engaging coaching had an effect on his life. He spoke about learning to create peace, comfort, and harmony. He gave an example of learning what was important to himself and said after a period of self-exploration, “I stand for courage.” He indicated that on a personal level, coaching enabled him and his wife to find a way to support each other and communicate more effectively. He signified that coaching enabled him to have a more optimistic view of the future in the belief that he can create the future he wanted. He specified that coaching built on skills he already possessed. He believed that he learned a lot about relationships and self-development. His health and well-being improved. Overall, he reported that he was less influenced by others’ opinions and more confident about understanding how he felt, what he

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believed, and being able to make decisions based on those factors. He reported that he was able to bring creativity to his professional life and he became more comfortable with change. He felt that his ability to look at the bigger picture and possibilities enabled him to be successful through a period of change. Overall, he stated that coaching was an experience he would absolutely repeat, because it affected the way he felt, saw himself, and how he saw others.

Results Research Question 1

In what ways do positive psychology executive coaching guide leaders through a period of intense contemplation and evaluations associated with midlife and facilitate both personal and professional transformation?

A review of the literature confirmed that strengths-based coaching methodologies generate positive outcomes. These included enhanced productivity, relationships, self-reflection, and learning. Although some scholars continue to question the efficacy of coaching and positive psychology, a growing number of researchers have found an empirical link between both positive psychology coaching and thriving (Grant, 2013). Additionally, coaching has been shown to increase meaning through the pursuit of values and strengths-based goals, as well as facilitating increased self-awareness. The themes found that apply to this research question include (a) leveraging confidence and focus while identifying and overcoming challenges during the pursuit of goals, and (b) coaching techniques.

Theme 1: Identifying and Overcoming Challenges while Pursuing Goals

This theme arose out of the experiences of all of the participants. One of the commonalities shared by all was the desire to learn and grow. To do this, the participants found that coaching helped them identify goals and challenges that they could address in order to improve their lives both professionally and personally. The participants felt that the use of

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coaching enabled them to look at themselves and find areas that they felt needed improvement. By identifying goals, the participants were able to mark progress and use the coaching to both gain confidence and achieve their end result.

Participant 1 spoke about the first time he used coaching: “I encountered a significant challenge at work and was not sure my skills and patterns would achieve the best results for the team.” By clearly identifying his goal and the challenge linked to it, he was able to find a coach who had undergone similar experiences, which made him feel as if the coach would understand what he needed. When reflecting on the experience, Participant 1 stated, “I am now able to face conflict, to give negative feedback with confidence, and to be able to present my ideas with confidence.” Thus, he was able to undergo a personal transformation led by the coach and change behaviors that he felt were holding him back both professionally and personally. The experience was so positive that he used the services of a coach two more times.

Unlike Participant 1, Participant 10 said:

I didn't go into it with specific objectives. I identified what I wanted to be and what's important to me as part of exercises within the program. I saw coaching as building on what was already there while helping me identify meaning and maintain focus.

The use of the coach and the coaching process enabled him to identify areas that he felt needed improvement, providing the focus and structure for him to move forward. Participant 2 was not self-referred. He was having challenges at his place of employment. Participant 2 recollected: “My supervisor identified four performance/behavioral issues specific to leading/managing my staff, which he expected to be improved immediately. I developed an improvement plan, which included a contact of EAP. Through EAP, I was referred to an executive coach.” The goals he was working on were not self-imposed, rather they were areas identified by a supervisor that needed to be modified. For Participant 2, the coaching was a revelatory experience. He learned

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about himself and how to understand his personal values, strengths, and style. He spoke about how he was able to identify what changes he needed to make though working with a coach.

Participant 2 said:

self-assessment, it confirmed a personality, style, and set of values that had been firmly in place for me for a long time, and which were manifest [*sic*] in my behavior. These were in conflict with personality, style, and values of staff members, and my supervisor. This difference and conflict was exacerbated by a difference in expectations about the urgency of change to be made at work. For the first 7 months on the job, I was frequently frustrated with members of my staff, their performance, their attitude, in particular with regard to skill and sense of urgency. In response, I was more directive. They did not like that and complained to my boss. It was immediately clear that I had to change my approach from driver/coach to facilitator coach.

Participant 3 has used coaching several times. He indicated that, “there have been a lot of different goals.” He went on to speak about one of his recent goals: “recently my goal was to incorporate humor more, be more spontaneous. Some of the other goals have included setting aside time to work on my practice, outreach, and other business development activities.” He utilized coaching to address both business and personal goals. Participant 4 also talked about developing a personal goal that affected him professionally. He stated: “one issue is not taking chances or trying new things. As a result of coaching, I am confident to take chances and try new things.”

Participant 5 worked with the coach for a period of 3–4 years during two different phases. Her most recent set of goals was large, but by working with the coach, she was able to address them. When speaking about her goals, Participant 5 stated:

As entrepreneur [*sic*] I wanted to generate short term and long term income, figure out my business priorities, develop effective tactics for reaching my goals, develop a “just do it” attitude, while overcoming personal fears that got in my way. I wanted to fulfill my creative potential, develop a business partnership, long term sustainable business, more fun in my work and help with focusing – lots of ideas, but need to narrowing [*sic*] and moving them forward. I also wanted to work on self-worth issues that tended to bog [*sic*] me down. I also wanted help with discipline and productivity. This was my initial list of goals for coaching. Then as leader/manager I needed to learn to delegate more and work

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on my leadership style, be more decisive. I also needed to learn to manage up and deal with my boss more effectively. I also wanted to work on my time management, as not to be overwhelmed. There were also specific issues that we addressed underneath these. I wanted to develop a bigger picture focus rather than getting bogged down into the details.

By working with the coach, Participant 5 was able to focus clearly and identify goals, stating “at times, when my energy was low, my coach would provide support, helping me to focus more clearly and reestablish a positive mindset.” Working with the coach also allowed her to improve her quality of life, both professionally and personally. She felt that the aid of the coach helped her to see what changes needed to be made and understand how to make those changes.

A revelation for Participant 6 was how she thought of herself as two separate beings. She said, “I’ve always thought that I was different at work than I was at home, but through coaching I’ve learned that I’m really not.” Through coaching, she was able to realize that the faces she presented in public and private were actually similar and began to integrate the two further. This participant also noted that coaching inspired confidence and focus by stating, “the coaching helped me stay focused and moving forward toward both my goals and the company’s; coaching has provided me with a support system that has given me back my optimism and confidence.”

The participants were able to discover and change behavior and thought patterns that affected them. This occurred by setting goals for themselves and working towards those goals during coaching sessions. The participants identified challenges they faced and were able to use coaching and the coaching relationship to focus on those areas of opportunity.

Theme 2: Coaching Techniques

The participants spoke about many different techniques that their coaches used to help them effect change. All of the participants indicated that the coaches used a positive psychology strength-based approach to coaching. Four of the 10 participants reported that their coaches used

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DISC, six of 10 indicated that their coaches used VIA, and another two spoke about focusing on values clarification, while only one spoke about the use of a scorecard or 360-feedback to track changes. The remainder of the participants indicated their coaches used a more casual approach, such as notes or emails, to review progress. Five of the 10 respondents spoke about the use of gratitude exercises, while four of the 10 mentioned mindfulness exercises.

Participant 3 spoke about the use of ACT training. She indicated that training enabled her to learn:

to be more mindful of what I'm doing... to take that pause and know what I value. For example, I think about what are some of my values with my family... to have a good relationship with my kids. Then along the way things come up, stress and other things that can go wrong, so it's easy to react, but since I've been introduced to the concepts, I think about my values and how I want to respond...I can respond more accurately.

Taking that time to assess what she is doing and why she is doing it helped her improve her life and relationships. She went on to speak about using that training to learn to go beyond her comfort zone. She was able to join the Chamber of Commerce and network with others.

Participant 10 spoke of the Avatar program. He described the program and said,

they help you in a value neutral way to discover and become aware of the underlying beliefs that are implied by the way you currently see and live your life; they help you deliberately choose the beliefs you want to have and implement a new deliberately chosen belief system to be the driver of your life.

For him, the value neutral aspect of the training was important. He felt it let him clarify his own beliefs rather than guiding him towards someone else's. He remarked that a scorecard was not used because, "It was more about creating peace, comfort and harmony, and giving you the tools to create what you want." Another program that Participant 10 spoke of was the Landmark Education program. He said:

One of the key things I came away with from Landmark was the idea of addressing possibilities rather than change, that is, to stop thinking about trying to incrementally change a situation that is not satisfactory, but to instead create the possibility of what I

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want or want to live into. This is a concept that I generalized across my work as well as my personal life.

This training affected Participant 10 both personally and professionally. He was able to find a new way to deal with situations he found negative.

The DISC assessment was a tool employed by many the coaches. The participants indicated that the results of this assessment formed the basis of the coaching sessions. Participant 6 said, “we used DISC to focus on style and strengths.” Participant 7 said, “we discussed my strengths using DISC, in addition to VIA.” The other participants also commented on how helpful it was to focus on their strengths. By learning about their strengths, they were able to use those strengths to affect change in their lives. Participant 1 stated, “coaching and training focused on identifying strengths and values and helped me to see how that impacted my work.” By gaining an understanding of her personal values, she was able to understand how and why those values affected her daily life.

Eight of the participants spoke about values and their use during coaching. Those participants found the incorporation of values to be helpful. Participant 2 stated that, “we have discussed my values and how they are engaged both personally and through my current position.” Through gaining an understanding of themselves, the participants were able to better understand their behaviors and actions. This was especially helpful for Participant 2, because understand his values enabled him to see that those values clashed with the corporate culture where he worked. He described the situation:

Through the use of self-assessment, it confirmed a personality, style, and set of values that had been firmly in place for me for a long time, and which were manifest in my behavior. These were in conflict with personality, style, and values of staff members, and my supervisor.

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Once he clearly understood the conflict, he was able to effect changes and improve his work performance. By aligning his expectations with the corporate values, he was able to make the necessary changes. Participant 3 talked about values as well and stated:

I think about what are some of my values with my family... to have a good relationship with my kids. Then along the way things come up, stress and other things that can go wrong, so it's easy to react, but since I've been introduced to the concepts, I think about my values and how I want to respond.

Their coaches worked with the participants so that they could understand and identify values in order to understand what changes they were making and why.

Another technique employed by the coaches was being grateful. Even if the coach did not teach formal gratitude exercises, many spoke with their clients about being grateful. Participant 1 stated:

While we didn't do something labeled gratitude exercises, I was encouraged to feel grateful for what was going well and for the strengths I had. I was also taught to perceive conflict and other challenges as opportunities to be grateful for rather than negative things to delete from my experience. I regularly do mindfulness work and this was encouraged in the process.

For this client, the coach was able to teach the participants that even conflict can present an opportunity to learn and grow. Being grateful for the opportunity was important and could make the client reframe a situation. Participant 3 spoke about an interview she listened to and how that interview affected her:

For gratitude – I listened to an interview with Sonya (Lyubomirsky), she actually taught the class and it was great. She went over all of the positive psychology tools and what makes you happier. She talked about the gratitude list. I would then use these tools in my own life as well as during coaching.

Therefore, using gratitude could be formalized to help the participant see concretely what she needed to do. Participant 9 spoke about doing formal gratitude exercises and said, “Over time we have leveraged some gratitude exercises and acceptance discussions to help work

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through obstacles hindering me.” She was able to use the exercises to clearly see obstacles in her path. Once she identified those obstacles, she was able to work through them so she was no longer blocked.

Mindfulness was an option used by some of the coaches. Participant 4 said, “Mindfulness was more a part of it... Mindfulness and strengths, but not from the VIA standpoint, but creative strengths.” For this respondent, the use of mindfulness enabled her to focus on using her creative strengths, which was an area she had identified as important to her. Participant 3 spoke about mindfulness and stated, “I’ve learned to be more mindful of what I’m doing... to take that pause and know what I value.” This was important for her because she felt it enabled her to “make better decisions in the moment.”

For these individuals, the lessons they learned through the techniques, programs, and assessments the coaches employed had a large effect on their quality of life, personally and professionally. Using a positive psychology approach and focusing on what they could do enabled the participants to see the changes they needed to make and to feel like those changes would be positive and effective.

Research Question 1 Summary

An examination of the data surrounding Research Question 1 demonstrated that positive psychology interventions—including a strengths-based approach, gratitude and values focus (including VIA), ACT, and mindfulness—were important in providing a foundation of confidence and focus for the participant to use as a launching pad toward successful goal attainment. Interview data showed the power of employing positive psychology methodologies to generate positive outcomes related to professional and personal aspirations. Through positive psychology executive coaching, all participants were able to discover and change behavior and

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thought patterns that affected them. This change occurred by setting goals and working towards those goals during coaching sessions in a focused and purposeful manner. Through the process of identifying challenges and using the coaching process to focus on and master areas of opportunity, all 10 participants expressed an increased sense of confidence, empowerment, and motivation.

Results Research Question 2

In what ways does the coaching experience vary from participant to participant?

During midlife, many people begin to reassess personal meaning (Hermans & Oles, 1999). At this time, issues of physiological change, psychological reorganization, and interpersonal exchanges can undergo a metamorphosis, leading people to reevaluate their life goals and values as a basis for making plans for the second half of life. At this time, it is normal for individuals to also grapple with issues and thoughts about death and dying. Because of this, and competing challenges of work and personal life, researchers believe that the coaching experience will vary from participant to participant in an effort to match each individual's unique life track (Biswas-Diener, 2010). The themes found to address this research question were (a) results of coaching, and (b) wants, goals, and future aspirations.

Theme 1: Results of Coaching

The participants described the results of their coaching experiences in a variety of ways. The clients reported an affirmation of their capabilities, a better awareness, an increase in focus and creativity, becoming positive and optimistic, as well as increased motivation and accountability. Nine of the 10 respondents reported long lasting change; however, Participant 6 indicated that she could not maintain changes if she went too long between meetings with her coach.

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Participant 2 found the entire experience positive. He stated, “It [coaching] reaffirmed that I was a knowledgeable and capable professional.” He had been facing challenges at work and needed to believe in himself. The coaching experience aided him in understanding that he did have gifts to offer, he just needed to be able to reframe the way he shared his knowledge and capabilities. Participant 6 said, “I’ve been more intentional and thoughtful.” She felt that the experience was highly positive and it made her wish “to be learning something new all the time.” Participants 3 and 4 felt more aware of everything around them because of their coaching experiences. Participant 3 said, “I think it [coaching] gives you a level of awareness and helps you get outside of yourself a little bit.” She also learned about herself and stated, “I am more aware of what my mindset is, so I’m not so limited. Knowing how we can change has been very important.” The self-awareness she gained through coaching was of value to her, as it opened her horizons and made her see she was capable of change. Participant 4 reported, “I’m more aware of the needs and demands of the space I’m trying to work in and am more confident of my ability to be successful there.” She was able to see outside of herself and see how she fit into the bigger picture by gaining awareness of what was around her. Participant 4 also shared, “Insights include, trusting my creative nature and embracing it – as something I bring to work – Having fun with my work is another thing.” By becoming aware of her inner nature, she was able to take her strengths and transform how she thought about work.

Participant 10 said that she learned more about herself, stating, “I’m very intuitive and creative.” Because she became aware of this, she found that “it’s yet another perspective that I can bring to the situation, which is very helpful in identifying creative solutions.” Participant 4 also found strength in her creativity. She learned to use her creativity and went on to say, “I learned to embrace the process – embrace my personal rollercoaster ride – when feeling

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productive and creative – hit it and when I’m not, it’s okay.” For these participants, creativity became a strength to draw upon and use.

Participant 9 learned to appreciate her ability to focus on details and saw it as a strength, stating, “[I] have always been a bit zealous about details in the workplace.” For her, the behavior did not change, rather her appreciation of it evolved. She also spoke about another aspect of receiving coaching services. Participant 9 said,

Coaching has shown me how to maintain that positivity in that situation through gratitude, demonstrating accomplishments, and helping them understand why they hold these limiting beliefs (why do you think that, what do you think will happen, so what if it does, and then what, etc.) and turning situations into positive, open opportunities for success.

She was able to see that focusing on the positive aspect of a situation would make her achieve the success she desired. She realized the importance of her attitude and used that to drive her success at work.

Six of the 10 participants reported increased levels of motivation. These participants felt that the coaching had enabled them to gain perspective on the issues they faced. When

Participant 9 spoke about her motivation, she reported:

As to motivation level, my motivation has always been a factor of the challenges that surround me in the workplace. While I do seek out and create challenges when the need arises, through working with my coach I have learned to see the signs of when I have outgrown my surroundings and when it’s time to move on.

Not only had her motivation increased, but she also was able to identify when it was time for her to make changes. However, Participant 7 reported: “Coaching tends to have a temporary effect on my confidence or motivation. I tend to be very confident and motivated a couple days past my coaching session, and then I tend to revert back to self-doubting behavior.” Participant 7 is still working on maintaining her changes between sessions.

Participant 6 spoke about how accountability was woven into her motivation. She said:

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In the motivation piece, I've been surprised at how the accountability piece has supported my development. If I say on Tuesday that I'm going to do X, Y and Z about this issue, then the next time I meet with my coach, I'd better have done it. It increases my motivation because of the pressure and it's been positive overall, so I keep up with it.

Thus, linking the two together enabled her to focus on the changes she was making and encouraged her growth. Participant 4 linked motivation to confidence and stated, "confidence increased and motivation has increased – in fact, as confidence increased I'm more motivated to take on more challenging tasks." Her increased self-confidence had increased her motivation because she felt better about her capabilities. Although these participants had slightly different results from the increased motivation, for each of them, the steps they made were positive and influenced their lives.

Theme 2: Wants, Goals, and Future Aspirations

Because each of the participants was an individual separate from a group, one of the variations found in this group included differences in their future plans, goals, and wants. Participant 10 spoke about a wish to travel and an increase in personal freedom, while Participant 3 was interested in further training opportunities. Participant 1 stated, "The number one item on my list is fleshing out an initiative for a healthy workplace culture that encourages businesses to foster a culture of respect and support." She was eager to share what she learned and create change for others.

Participant 5 talked about an upcoming trip that was occurring because of coaching. She stated:

In less than 3 weeks I'm traveling to Europe and embarking on a 500 mile hike across Spain – while we never talked about anything like that, during coaching, somewhere along the line I decided that I wanted to set a physical goal for myself and I wouldn't be surprised if coaching in some way helped with that – setting goals, getting trained for this trip, deciding to do a big physical adventure at 60. It makes sense that the coaching experience fed into the ease with which I made the decision to move forward.

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She was able to take a goal she set during the coaching process and meet it. Participant 4 realized that she wanted to be a coach and, as a result, she was able to set a goal and reach it. She said, “I carried forward technical knowledge in how to do coaching – I moved from an academic knowledge of coaching to ability to coach and be flexible” She learned about herself during the coaching process and also found a career path that was a good fit for her. Participant 5 indicated that a goal was to “explore nonprofits.” Participants 1, 4, and 5 all wanted to effect change and help others. These participants were able to explore this option because of their personal experiences with coaching.

When it came to personal goals that the participants were setting for the future, all of the participants had different perspectives. Participant 5 said:

On my personal goals list, I want to be better about fostering connections with family and friends, relationships I tend to take for granted. And, I want to stay active physically; I’d like to do another biking trip with my spouse.

Participant 3 was more focused on business and stated: “I want to continue to grow and grow my business. Do some teaching and training. See where it goes - - focus on the business side is next.” Participant 8 had long term goals. He said:

I’d like to continue to hit the numbers and maybe make national sales manager at some point. Maybe when I retire, I could also give back by helping train, coach or support aspiring new sales people – I like that idea a lot.

Thus, while all the participants had goals for the future, they differed depending on what each saw as important.

Research Question 2 Summary

An examination of the data surrounding Research Question 2 demonstrated that clients seek coaching for a variety of reasons. While participants reported significant goal achievement in their specific areas of interest as well as enhanced confidence and awareness, their goals and

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areas of aspiration at least partially accounted for the variance of experience and results from participant to participant.

Results of Research Question 3

What other variables impact the client's perception of the coaching process?

Many areas of debate exist regarding the different approaches and frameworks utilized by coaches (Joo, 2005). The highly collaborative nature of coaching itself is believed to facilitate growth (Michelman, 2004). The use of positive psychology interventions in executive coaching enabled the participants to focus on strengths, better understand their values, and leverage confidence and focus in order to reach their goals and aspirations. However, because coaching is highly individualized, different variables may affect a participant's perceptions of coaching and associated results. The researcher anticipated that the client-coach relationship would be one such factor. The three themes identified included (a) time, (b) relationship with the coach, and (c) positive experience.

Theme 1: Time

Time was an important factor in coaching. Coaching involved a time commitment on the behalf of both the client and the coach. Eight of the 10 participants reported working with their coach for more than a year. Participant 9 reported, "I've been working with my coach on and off for 12 years." Participant 8 no longer works with his coach, but stated: "I've been thinking about a quarterly check-in with my old coach, too. I think that might keep me moving forward."

Participant 6 spoke in more detail and stated:

We all started out meeting twice each month, some people have went down to once per month, but I've kept mine at twice a month as we've opened up the new facility. I was hesitant [*sic*] in the beginning, but as time progressed I've become more comfortable with the person and the process.

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For her, the time was necessary to build trust in the process as well as the coach. For many of the respondents, their relationship with the coach was built over time to address ongoing issues. No participant complained about the time commitment and several participants remarked that it was helpful to have a neutral third party.

Theme 2: Relationship with Coach

One of the most important factors that influenced the client's perceptions of the coaching process was his or her opinions and thoughts about their coach. Participant 7 spoke about how his coach worked with him and said, "My coach introduced them to me after determining that I could benefit from these tools. He was straightforward about them and how we might use them."

Participant 2 found his coach to be an ally and someone who provided support and reassurance. Participant 2 stated that coaching, "provided relief, confirmation, validation, perspective, and reinforcement at work, which has led to less anxiety away from work." He was under a lot of duress at work and his coach provided the support to be successful. He continued on and stated that his coach provided, "reassurance that there is not something manifestly wrong with me—no deep seeded emotional issues that are pathological (contrary to what I had been told by my supervisor, and started to doubt)." At the end of his interview, Participant 2 said: "My coach quickly understood the situation, understood me, and was able to reaffirm me, while seeing opportunity to make things better. I looked forward to every conversation." His relationship with his coach was one where he felt supported and understood. Because of that support, he was able to make the personal changes he needed to in order to be successful at work.

Participant 1 was able to trust her coach and stated:

In the first instance, I knew the coach and knew he had also faced a similar challenge so I hired him to work with me. In the second and third cases, I knew the coach and was interested in working with him because of my faith in him and his work.

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For her, the personal relationship helped her build the coaching relationship. Participant 1 went on to say:

The main thing is that it [coaching] has taught me that an outside professional can help me through my specific problems by facilitating my own abilities and skills and augmenting them with his or her questions and ideas. This makes me feel more confident about facing future challenges.

The positive experience reinforced the value of a coach and increased her confidence in herself and in the process.

Participant 3 has had many coaching experiences. She spoke about finding her coaches and stated:

Going thru [*sic*] mentor coach, I've had the opportunity to work with several coaches – and experienced different personalities and coaching styles and learned a lot being the client of many different coaches. I'm also part of coaching group who meets to coach and support one another – you're paired with somebody and you coach one another weekly.

For Participant 3, the ability to work with a wide variety of coaches enabled her to observe many styles and find a coach who worked effectively with her. She continued on to say: “That’s a cool thing about coaching. It has a different place than counseling. A coaching exercise that can move you into action.” She valued the skills coaches brought to the process and said coaching was helpful.

Participant 4 engaged in a large deal of research to find the best coach possible. She spoke about the process and stated: “Prior knowledge – we didn't know who we were looking for originally. So, we had someone investigate coach's good coaches and come back with a report and recommendations. That's how I chose my coach – he's fab.” She wanted someone who was good at what they did and who she liked. Participant 5 indicated the she selected her coach because,

he was highly recommended by her after working closely on some joint projects. Plus, we'd collaborated on some editing projects, too. It was a good fit with a blend of life

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coaching, what it takes to be an entrepreneur, sensitivity to personal issues, etc., so it was a good mix.

It was import for Participant 5 to find someone who had similar experiences and could understand the issues she faced. Participant 1 also chose her coach because they had dealt with similar issues.

Participant 6 went through an assessment process and was matched with her coach based on the assessment. She said, “My coach is also an S/I – so we speak the same language.” She felt this helped her and the coach communicate effectively. Participant 8 worked with two coaches.

His company hired the first coach. Participant 8 said:

I probably would have hired my own coach from the beginning. It was great that my company picked up the tab for the first six months, but since I didn’t have any control over who my coach was, it took a while to develop trust and truly know that she wasn’t reporting everything I said back to my boss. Other than that, it was a very good experience.

Trust was essential for him as part of the coaching relationship.

Theme 3: Positive Experience

All 10 of the participants in the study had a positive experience with coaching. This overarching theme effected the participants on all levels. Every participant indicated that they would not hesitate to seek coaching at any time. Many of them formed long-term relationships with their coaches and spent years working on their personal issues. When speaking about working with her coach, Participant 9 reflected on the experience and stated, “I wouldn’t change a thing.” Participant 7 said that his coaching experience was, “worth a million dollars because it helps me effectively coach and deal with day to day work issues.”

Participant 5 had only one critique. She said, “In terms of the coaching process itself...I don’t think I have much that I’d change, except me – I’d be better with follow-up and doing all

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that I said I would do.” Her issue was not with the coach, but rather it was with her efforts while working with the coach. She went on to say:

It was a hugely positive experience and if I were talking with someone looking for a coach I’d say it so important to get the right fit and I feel very fortunate to have found a coach with the right skills, talents and personality. Combination of the hard/soft worked well for me.

Participant 4 indicated that “this coaching worked well with my personality – very flexible and free-flow, which is what coaching is supposed to be.” Participant 10 spoke about the experience and said: “It’s had a significant impact on my self-perception, confidence and what I was able to achieve. In his final comment, he attributed his success to the coaching and said, “I was driving a 94 Honda Accord when I first took the Landmark course and I now drive a BMW convertible.”

Research Question 3 Summary

An examination of the data surrounding Research Question 3 demonstrated that the client’s perception of coaching was influenced by a variety of factors, including the amount of time the participant spent in coaching, the quality of the coaching relationship, and the perceived experience. Coaching that lasted more than 6 months with a well-matched client and coach tended to produce a positive perception around the influence and results of coaching.

In this chapter, the researcher presented the results of this phenomenological study. The chapter began with a description of the participants and settings. Next, data collection and analysis were discussed. Finally, the chapter presented the results. First, the researcher recorded a textual and structural analysis of each interview, followed by an analysis of the themes. The themes were organized by research question. Chapter Five presents a discussion of the findings and outlines the limitations of the study, as well as implications and recommendations for future research.

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CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In Chapter Four, the results of the study were presented. The chapter began with textual and structural analysis of participants and the setting. A description of data collection and data analysis followed. The chapter concluded with a presentation of the results, which were based on analysis of the following three research questions

1. In what ways does positive psychology executive coaching guide leaders through a period of intense contemplation and evaluation associated with midlife and facilitate both personal and professional transformation?
2. In what ways does the coaching experience vary from participant to participant?
3. What other variables impact the client's perception of the coaching process?

The purpose of Chapter Five is to discuss research findings, link findings to the literature, and discuss implications for professional practice in addition to recommendations for future research. The chapter will conclude with a summary of insights and findings.

In review, a recent International Coach Federation's Global Coaching Study (2012) estimated that the two-billion-dollar emerging industry comprises some 47,500 coaches worldwide. However, there is currently little empirical data concerning specific approaches, interventions, or standards that consistently produce efficacious results, especially in the area of executive and leadership coaching. Additionally, there are almost no data regarding the perceptions, experiences, and cognitive representations of executive coaching clients in relation to their perceived benefits of the coaching process. Positive psychology, as introduced by Martin Seligman during his term as president of the American Psychological Association (APA), has been shown to be successful in developing people skills and improving functioning as part of

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therapeutic, coaching, and training interventions (Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011).

Nevertheless, the literature remains unclear about whether there is a link between positive functioning and specific leadership behaviors and outcomes. Therefore, it is important to understand better how positive psychology as an executive coaching methodology helps clients to navigate midlife developmental and workplace challenges successfully.

Therefore, this research project sought to understand how positive psychology coaching may enhance work engagement, productivity, and satisfaction by helping leaders navigate developmental struggles in order to invigorate energy and mental resilience. The study accomplishes this by obtaining a detailed description of the personal and professional benefits achieved by executives who participated in positive-psychology-focused coaching. As noted in Chapter Four, 9 of the 10 participants reported significant long-term coaching-related accomplishments, including heightened awareness, an increase in focus and creativity, becoming more optimistic, plus an increase in confidence, motivation, and accountability. Participant Two noted, “It [coaching] reaffirmed that I was a knowledgeable and capable professional.” Participant Six said, “I’ve been more intentional and thoughtful at home and at work.” She believed that the experience was highly positive, and it made her wish “to be learning something new all the time.” Participants Three and Four believed they were more aware of everything around them as a result of their coaching experiences. This awareness helped them feel more confident in their abilities to navigate forward. Participant Three said, “I think it [coaching] gives you a level of awareness and helps you get outside of yourself a little bit.” She also learned about herself and stated, “I am more aware of what my mindset is, so I’m not so limited. Knowing how we can change has been very important.” The self-awareness she gained through coaching was of value to her; it opened her horizons and made her see she was capable of change. Participant

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Four reported, “I’m more aware of the needs and demands of the space I’m trying to work in and am more confident of my ability to be successful there.” She was able to see outside of herself and see how she fit into the bigger picture by gaining awareness of what was around her. Finally, Participant Eight believed that coaching prepared him for achieving his long-term goals. He said, “I’d like to continue to hit the numbers and maybe make national sales manager at some point in the future.” These comments suggest that positive psychology coaching with midlife executives indeed has the potential to positively enhance the client’s ability to navigate developmental issues and invigorate resiliency necessary for success during the second half of life.

Discussion of Findings

There were three major findings in this study (a) participating in positive psychology executive coaching provides focus and confidence that facilitates personal and professional growth during midlife by helping clients identify and overcome real life and work challenges while pursuing their over-arching goals; (b) the coaching experience and associated results largely vary from participant to participant based on their wants, goals, and aspirations for the future; and (c) the client’s perception of coaching impact was tied, at least in part, to the length of coaching, the quality of their relationship with the coach, and a positive experience.

The first finding, participating in positive psychology executive coaching, provides focus and confidence that facilitates personal and professional growth during midlife by helping clients identify and overcome real life and work challenges while pursuing their over-arching goals, and demonstrates the power of focusing on strengths as a key component of coaching. In this study, all participants found strengths-focused positive psychology interventions to be highly effective in moving them toward their goals. This finding supports positive psychology research, which affirms that strengths-based methodologies generate positive outcomes, including heightened

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productivity and learning, as well as improved relationships and self-reflection (Biswas-Diener, 2010). All 10 subjects in this research project acknowledged that coaching helped them to identify goals and overcome challenges in order to improve their lives both personally and professionally, which supports Grant's (2013) findings that positive psychology coaching promotes a sense of well-being, thriving, and resilience personally, professionally, and organizationally. Research participants also consistently indicated that coaching helped them reframe common life and work struggles as opportunities for learning and growth, which is a primary coaching objective as outlined by Biswas-Diener (2010). Finally, all 10 subjects reported a significant increase in confidence and sense of empowerment during their coaching experience. This evidence underscores the very definition of positive psychology and aligns with research that purports coaching centered on strengths rather than gap transformation alone promotes successful goal attainment and self-efficacy, which enhances confidence and empowerment toward further action (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004).

In summary, this finding supports the notion that positive psychology coaching can indeed generate positive emotions and confidence to help midlife executives thrive both personally and professionally. It also further supports Seligman's (2007) claim that positive psychology has the potential to provide an effective scientific and theoretical basis for the field of coaching by focusing on positive emotion, engagement, and meaning because each research participant was coached using the evidence-based interventions of positive psychology.

The results associated with the second finding, the coaching experience, largely vary from participant to participant based on their wants, goals, and aspirations for the future, underscoring the broad spectrum of clients seeking change in various aspects of their professional and personal lives (International Coach Federation, 2012; Witherspoon & White,

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1996). In addition to goal achievement in specific areas of interest, research participants reported an expanded awareness and motivation as well as the ability and willingness to focus on and tackle other challenges along the way, which they believed supported the larger goals. These data support Seligman's (2002) assertion that positive psychology tools such as VIA signature strengths facilitate the client's quest for broader personal meaning and forward knowledge, power, and goodness. The findings also support Grant's (2013) view that the success of coaching interventions is heavily dependent on a clearly defined focus on issues within the client's sphere of influence or control. Finally, regardless of the "why" behind coaching, the coach and client work collaboratively to move him or her forward in taking action toward his or her desired goals. In other words, coaches collaborated with clients to help them define "point B" or their goal, then co-designed and co-navigated the journey through coaching sessions (Moore & Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

The third finding, the client's perception of coaching impact, was tied, at least in part, to the length of coaching, the quality of their relationship with the coach, and a perceived positive experience. The client's perception of coaching impact underscores the importance of the coaching relationship as a key success factor in the coaching experience. While there have been numerous debates about the various approaches and theoretical frameworks underpinning executive coaching and the coaching profession as a whole (Joo, 2005), data from this study suggest that the quality of the client-coach partnership may be of equal importance. In fact, data from the study suggest that the length of time a client engages in coaching is not only important for learning and execution, but also for building trust, momentum, and synergy with their coach. In short, the data indicate that coaching with a well-matched coach over time (six months to a year or longer) promotes a perception of perceived positive impact and accomplishment. It is

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important to note that, in some cases, the impact of coaching was specifically measured using self-report mechanisms such as scorecards and 360-degree feedback instruments, but not in all.

This finding also supports the Grant and Stober definition of coaching:

A collaborative and egalitarian relationship between a coach, who is not necessarily a domain-specific specialist, and client, which involves a systematic process that focuses on collaborative goal setting to construct solutions and employ goal attainment process with the aim of fostering the ongoing self-directed learning and personal growth of the client. (Grant & Stober, 2006, p. 2)

The study extends this definition by including the elements of time and quality of coaching the client-coach relationship as a factor that support coaching synergy and results. Nine of the 10 participants reported working with their coach for over one year. All 10 participants referenced the importance of a good client-coach match for a positive coaching experience. Participant Two stated, “My coach quickly understood the situation, understood me, and was able to reaffirm me while seeing opportunity to make things better. I looked forward to every conversation.” His relationship with his coach was one where he felt supported and understood. Because of that, he was able to make the personal changes he needed to in order to be successful at work. Participant Six went through an assessment process and was matched with her coach based on the assessment. She said, “My coach is also an S/I, so we speak the same language.” She believed this helped them connect and communicate effectively. Participant Eight noted, “trust was the most essential part of the coaching relationship.”

The findings of this project expand current research on positive psychology coaching by indicating positive impact in perceived goal achievement by providing an enhanced sense of confidence and well-being for individuals participating in positive-psychology-focused executive

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coaching for at least six months. While results were affected by the client's goals and aspirations as well as the quality of the client-coach relationship, data support Grant's (2013) findings that positive psychology coaching promotes a sense of well-being, thriving, and resilience personally, professionally, and organizationally. Results highlight the importance of a coaching framework and relationship, both of which should be given considerable attention by coaches and coach training organizations charged with equipping future coaches.

Strengths of the study included an in-depth analysis of the contexts of positive psychology coaching with midlife executives. The process of the study provided for a better understanding of the lived experiences and perceived impact clients experienced both professionally and personally at midlife. Weaknesses of the study included not having empirical data to support the findings. This can make the results subject to interpretation and, therefore, bias. In addition to traditional limitations associated with qualitative research and detailed in Chapter One, limitations specific to this study included not being able to generalize to other coaching populations and a lack of understanding around how participants having different coaches promoted disparity of experience. Additionally, we had no way of knowing whether the various coaches of the research subjects had successfully navigated their own midlife challenges. According to Biswas-Diener (2010), this would also have positively affected the coaching relationship and potentially the associated results. Finally, all participants in this study were highly successful in achieving their goals, and it would be enlightening to compare them to a control group who found the coaching process less successful or unsuccessful.

This study contributes to the field of psychology and the subfields of positive psychology and coaching by supporting and expanding current literature through its findings (a) participating in positive psychology executive coaching provides focus and confidence that facilitates personal

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and professional growth during midlife by helping clients identify and overcome real life and work challenges while pursuing their over-arching goals; (b) the coaching experience and associated results largely vary from participant to participant based on their wants, goals and aspirations for the future; and (c) the client's perception of coaching impact was tied, at least in part, to the length of coaching, the quality of their relationship with the coach, and a positive experience.

Implications and Recommendations

This study offers implications for research and applied practice of positive psychology executive coaching. Findings build on earlier research and supportively illustrate that positive psychology provides a viable framework for executive coaching at midlife. In fact, positive interventions employed during the executive coaching engagement facilitate both professional and personal growth as well as a sense of confidence and enhanced focus during a time of physiological, psychological, and social change. This is an important consideration for current practitioners of coaching and coaching psychology as well as for their training institutions in addition to corporate partners in human resources, talent development professionals, and anyone interested in empowering leaders at midlife. In light of the findings, coach accrediting organizations such as the International Coach Federation (ICF) and the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE) should consider promulgating positive psychology education as part of their coach training requirements. Furthermore, corporate consumers of coaching should strongly consider engaging executive coaches with training and expertise in the areas of positive assessment and positive psychology intervention in order to inspire midlife executives and promote individual (both professional and personal) and organizational growth. Additionally, it is critical to consider elements such as time, quality of relationships, specific goals, and future

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aspirations in addition to coaching frameworks, tools, and tactics. Therefore, in addition to making sure executive coaching goals align with corporate objectives, corporate consumers of coaching should also work to promote coaching success by ensuring a good client-coach match, perhaps by allowing the client to choose from several qualified coaches and giving them the necessary time to establish a trusting and synergistic partnership. Finally, coaches should be skilled in both the hard skills of coaching practice and soft skills of relationship building to maximize results.

Future research could empirically examine pre- and post-coaching intervention results while controlling for intra-coach disparity. Such a study would build on the data, which underscores the importance of the length of coaching and the quality of the client-coach relationship by comparing a variety of subjects being coached by a single coach as well as comparison groups exploring outcomes by coach. A longitudinal study could also provide insights into questions such as “How long do the results of coaching last?” and “How long does it take to break dysfunctional habits and thoughts and move toward a state of well-being and thriving?” Additionally, future qualitative research could expand on this study by identifying and exploring specific midlife challenges and details surrounding the impact that positive psychology coaching interventions provided.

Conclusion

In the past two decades, executive coaching has been a significant force within the areas of consulting psychology and corporate talent development. Indications are that this highly customizable approach to leadership and organizational development will continue to be influential in the decades ahead and, therefore, needs to embrace empirically sound methods of assessment and intervention. This study generated three major findings that support this effort (a)

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participating in positive psychology executive coaching provides focus and confidence that facilitates personal and professional growth during midlife by helping clients identify and overcome real life and work challenges while pursuing their over-arching goals; (b) the coaching experience and associated results largely vary from participant to participant based on their wants, goals, and aspirations for the future; and (c) the client's perception of coaching impact was tied, at least in part, to the length of coaching, the quality of their relationship with the coach, and a perceived positive experience. These results support the employment of positive psychology interventions as part of an executive coaching engagement, showing that to do so with midlife clients not only supports their goal achievement but also facilitates resolution of other work and life challenges over time and within a quality client-coach relationship.

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APPENDICIES

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. *Participants:*

Research participants will consist of midlife (age 45-64) male and female executives (Director to C-Suite level) who have been coached for a minimum of 3 months using a positive psychology approach that utilizes interventions such as values in action, gratitude and strengths focus, as well as mindfulness and ACT training.

After receiving institution review board (IRB) approval from the university, the researcher intends to gain access to a minimum of ten participants by contacting executive coaches who practice positive psychology methodologies and have completed studies at institutions such as MentorCoach, University of Sydney and University of Pennsylvania that offer master's level training in positive psychology coaching; the researcher will also identify participants via Social Media such as LinkedIn's positive psychology and coaching groups.

2. *Procedures:*

Participants will be asked a series of open-ended, semi-structured questions during an in depth interview lasting approximately one hour, in order to gain self-report information about experiences with positive psychology executive coaching and its impact on changes in behavior, beliefs, actions, attitudes, confidence or motivation as related to personal and professional productivity and resilience. All interviews will be conducted by phone and recorded and transcribed for approval by participants prior to inclusion of the study.

3. *Consent:*

Once potential participants are identified, the researcher will email each of them a brief overview of study goals and an informed consent form for review. If the participant decides to participate, he or she will be asked to sign and return the informed consent form that provides an overview of the purpose of the study, risks, benefits, and rights of voluntary participation and confidentiality (please see attached consent form). Participant rights include: the right to withdraw from the study or refuse to answer questions at any time with no penalty, the right to review written and recorded data and refuse its use in the study, the assurance that names, places, transcripts, and recordings of the interviews and all identifying information will be kept confidential. Informed consent will be obtained in writing from each participant in advance of interviews. Additionally, at the beginning of each interview, participants will have an opportunity to ask questions, express concerns, and clarify issues regarding the study and informed consent. Participants will also be given the opportunity to review and approve interview transcriptions prior to inclusion in the study.

4. *Risks:*

Potential risks of participation include the following:

- (1) Potential of revealing sensitive information about past personal experiences. Steps to minimize this risk include informing participants of this risk during initial meeting and reminding participants that they have the right to omit any questions they do not feel comfortable answering.
- (2) Potential of revealing identities of participants. Steps to minimize this risk include:

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- All identifying information will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's house for five years.
- All transcripts consent forms, and logs will be shredded five years after the study is completed. Only the principle researcher, his staff, advisors and dissertation committee will have access to it.
- All participants' identifying information such as signed consent forms will be kept in a separate locked cabinet from the interview data, in the researcher's house. Only the principle researcher, his staff, advisors and dissertation committee will have access to it.
- Names of participants, places, and identifying information on transcribed data will be omitted or changed.
- All of the audio-recorded interviews will be transcribed using strict confidentiality guidelines.

(3) Time demand on participants. The participants will be required to set aside approximately 2-3 total hours of time spent being interviewed, reviewing informed consent form and reviewing/editing interview transcripts. Steps to minimize this risk include:

- Researcher will be accommodating to participant's schedule when arranging interview times and make schedule changes or adjustments to fit the participant's need.
- Researcher will also come prepared and ready to interview at the scheduled times. This includes setting up recording equipment and preparing interview topics to be discussed before the scheduled interview times.

5. **Safeguards:**

((See 4(10) above)) All identifying information will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's house for five years. All transcripts consent forms, and logs will be shredded five years after the study is completed. Only the principle researcher, his staff, advisors and dissertation committee will have access to it. All participants' identifying information such as signed consent forms will be kept in a separate locked cabinet from the interview data, in the researcher's house. Only the principle researcher, his staff, advisors and dissertation committee will have access to it. Names of participants, places, and identifying information on transcribed data will be omitted or changed. All of the audio-recorded interviews will be transcribed using strict confidentiality guidelines.

6. **Benefits:**

The results of this study may add to the current body of knowledge about the positive psychology approach to executive coaching. Anticipated results of this study include: 1) better understanding of how positive psychology coaching may be effective as an approach to executive coaching, especially with midlife executives, and 2) providing help to executive coaches and coach training organizations to gain a better understanding of executive client perspectives associated with long term change and benefits of positive psychology coaching.

7. **Post-Implementation Interview**

Study participants will receive a written thank you letter and an executive summary of study outcomes within 90 days of successful dissertation defense.

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8. *Attachments:*

Include in this application all of the following supplementary information:

- a. Informed consent form
- b. Verbatim instructions to the participants regarding their participation
- c. All research instruments to be used in carrying out this study.

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form:

I have been informed that this research project is being conducted by Mickey Parsons, as part of the requirement of the doctorate degree in Psychology at the School of Behavioral Sciences, California Southern University. I understand that his study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Kate Andrews, Doctoral Project Chair, at the School of Behavioral Sciences, at California Southern University.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I understand that I may refuse to participate or withdraw from this study at any time. I also have the right to decline to answer any question(s) that I do not want to answer. I understand that I have been invited to participate in this study to provide information regarding my experience with positive psychology focused executive coaching.

I agree to complete up to 2 hour(s) of recorded telephone interview, in which I will be asked a series of questions about my experience with executive coaching and its impact on my life, career and leadership capacity. I understand that the questions will focus on understanding how coaching may or may not have enhanced work engagement; productivity and satisfaction as well as invigorated energy and mental resilience. I understand that I may be contacted by phone for up to 1 month after the interview to answer follow-up question or to clarify my earlier responses. Additionally, I will receive a copy of the interview transcript prior to its inclusion in the study.

I understand that no information gathered from my participation in the study will be released to others without my written permission or as required by law. I understand that if the findings of the study are published or presented to a professional audience, no personally identifying information will be released. The data will be stored in a secure and locked location for five years after which the data will be destroyed.

I understand that the researcher will answer questions I have at any time about the project or about my participation. I may contact him/her at mickey@mickeyparsons.com or 770-451-0505. If I have questions about the study or about my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Chairperson of the California Southern University Institutional Review Board, c/o Dr. John Minchin at California Southern University, 930 Roosevelt, Irvine, CA 92620, irb@calsothern.edu.

I understand to my satisfaction the information in the consent form regarding my participation in the research project. All of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have received a copy of this informed consent form, which I have read and understand. I hereby consent to participate in the research described.

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Subjects Signature

Date

Witness

Date

Appendix C: Verbatim instructions to the participants regarding their participation

May I please speak to _____?

My name is Mickey Parsons and I am a doctoral student at California Southern University’s School of Behavioral Sciences. I am conducting research as part of my dissertation research **on the impact of positive psychology executive coaching**. At an earlier time you indicated that you would be willing to participate in the research by **discussing your experience with executive coaching and its impact on my life, career and leadership capacity**.

Is this a convenient time to continue?

- 1 – Yes Go to Background
- 2 – No Go to Better time

Better Time

The interview would last about 60 minutes, and can be arranged for a time convenient to your schedule. Is there another time we could contact you?

- 1 – Yes Schedule appointment
- 2 - No Thank you for your time

Background

Involvement in this interview is entirely voluntary. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions that you do not wish to answer and may terminate the interview at any time. All information you provide will be considered confidential. The interview will take about **60** minutes.

This study has been reviewed and received ethical clearance as part of the International Review Board approval process, so should you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, you may contact the Chairperson of the California Southern University Institutional Review Board at irb@calsothern.edu. You may also contact my dissertation Chairperson, Dr. Kate Andrews at kate.andrews@my.calsothern.edu or 760-822-3051.

Are you ready to continue?

- 1 – Yes Go to begin interview



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- 2 - No Go to better time
- 3 – Wants more info Go to details

Details

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of middle and executive level leaders who participate in positive psychology coaching during midlife. The data collected will be used to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which leaders benefit from positive psychology coaching as they navigate both developmental and workplace challenges typically associated with middle age. The study will focus on executive coaching using positive psychology interventions such as values in action, gratitude and strengths focus, as well as mindfulness and ACT training. Moreover, the study will explore how executive coaching that uses a positive psychology methodology influences self-actualization and engagement both personally and professionally. Individual respondents will not be identified by name.

Are you ready to continue?

- 1- Yes Go to begin interview
- 2 – No Go to better time

Begin Interview

I will begin the recording and start the interview now.

Appendix D: Research instrument – Interview Questionnaire

1. Demographics: Male/Female, Current Age, Location, Ethnicity, Education level, Household composition, Current profession and employment status, Religious affiliation
2. Describe what led you to seek coaching initially.
3. How did you identify and engage your specific coach?
4. How long did you work with your coach?
5. What was your age when you began working with your coach?
6. What age range would you consider midlife?
7. What was your job title during coaching?
8. Has your job title changed since coaching? If so, do you credit coaching with this change?

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9. Did your coach use any of the following positive psychology tools or practices: VIA Character Survey (Values in Action), gratitude exercises, strengths-focused assessments or assignments, mindfulness meditation activities, or acceptance and commitment therapy/training? If so, explain how these were introduced.
10. Did your coach use a scorecard or other mechanism to keep track of progress?
11. Articulate specific goals identified at the beginning of your coaching.
12. Tell me how your coaching experience has influenced your life personally.
13. Please provide examples of one or more personal issues that were resolved as a result of your coaching.
14. As a result of coaching, has your outlook about the future changed in any way? Please describe fully and provide examples.
15. Please describe how coaching enhanced or impacted your personal life (Probe using the following areas if necessary and ask to give an example of each where possible)
 - a. Overall Sense of Well-Being
 - b. Energy
 - c. Mental Resiliency
 - d. Sense of Purpose or Meaning
 - e. Sense of Life Satisfaction
 - f. Sense of Excitement about the future
 - g. Social Relationships
 - h. Emotional Development
 - i. Health and Physical Well-Being
 - j. Sense of Optimism about the future compared to your peers
16. What changes, if any did coaching have on your personal behavior, beliefs, actions or attitudes. Describe. Give Examples.
17. What changes, if any did coaching have on your personal confidence or motivation level? Describe. Give Examples.
18. If you were to create a “personal bucket list” of experiences and achievements for the future, what would you include on this list?
19. In what ways have you been able to bring the insights from coaching to your work?
20. Give me one or more examples of work-related issues that were resolved as a result of your coaching.

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21. Please describe how coaching enhanced or impacted your work or professional life (Probe using the following areas if necessary and ask to give an example of each where possible)
- Technical Skills/Knowledge
 - Confidence in Abilities
 - Decision Making
 - Attention to Detail
 - Innovation and Creativity
 - Flexibility, Initiative and Ability to Manage Change
 - Teamwork skills
 - Work Resilience
 - Continuous Learning and Professional Development
22. Describe your leadership or management style.
23. Describe any specific changes in your leadership and management ability that has resulted either directly or indirectly from your coaching experience.
24. What changes, if any did coaching have on your professional or workplace behavior, beliefs, actions or attitudes. Describe. Give Example.
25. What changes, if any did coaching have on your professional or workplace confidence or motivation level? Describe. Give Example.
26. If you were to create a “professional bucket list” of experiences and achievements for the future, what would you include on this list?
27. What was your favorite thing or ‘takeaway’ from your coaching experience?
28. If you had to do it all over again, would you (seek coaching)? (Why/Why Not)
29. If you could assign a dollar value to your coaching experience, what would it be? (How does this align with the actual cost?)
30. If you did seek coaching again for some issue, what would you change or want to be different?

Thank you _____. This concludes our interview. Within 30-days I will send you a written transcript for approval and editing before the results are confidentially included in my research. Do you have any questions at this point?

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Appendix E: Follow-up: Letter of Appreciation

Dear _____,

I would like to express my sincere appreciation for your participation in my doctoral dissertation research project: How positive psychology coaching impacts midlife executives.

With your help, I believe this study will serve to assist coaches and coach training organizations as they strive to better serve clients in the future. To that end, I've attached a copy of the transcript from our interview. Please review it carefully, noting any changes or clarifications that you would like to include and return it to me within 72 hours. Also, let me know if you have any additional remaining questions.

With gratitude,

Mickey Parsons, PsyDc, MCC, CEAP

Doctoral Candidate