

Peter Clough<sup>1</sup>, Doug Strycharczyk<sup>2</sup>, Monika Czwerenko<sup>3</sup>,  
Sylwia Rybak<sup>4</sup>

## Building Coaching Relation – Mentally Tough & Mentally Sensitive Coachee

### Abstract

This paper explores the Mental Toughness model in a coaching process. Mental Toughness, a narrow personality trait, recently emerged as a significant factor in defining and measuring individual's mind-set and attitude. Authors argue that one of the key elements contributing to building successful coaching rapport with a coachee as well as to set a coachee onto a coaching journey is to understand the mental toughness level of the client. This paper will also explain what Mental Toughness is and its applications to all walks of life.

Keywords: mental toughness, growth, development, coaching, executive coaching

## Budowanie relacji coachingowej – klient odporny i klient wrażliwy psychicznie

### Abstrakt

Przedmiotem niniejszego opracowania jest analiza modelu odporności psychicznej (*Mental Toughness*) w procesie coachingowym. Odporność psychiczna, jako wąska cecha osobowości, od niedawna uważana jest za istotny czynnik w określaniu oraz pomiarze nastawienia i postaw jednostki. Autorzy twierdzą, że jednym z kluczowych elementów przyczyniających się do budowania udanej relacji coachingowej z klientem i przygotowania tego ostatniego do podróży z coachingiem jest określenie jego poziomu odporności psychicznej. W niniejszym opracowaniu wyjaśniono również, czym jest odporność psychiczna i przedstawiono jej zastosowanie we wszystkich dziedzinach życia.

Słowa kluczowe: odporność psychiczna, wzrost, rozwój, coaching, executive coaching

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<sup>1</sup> Manchester Metropolitan University, e-mail: p.clough@mmu.ac.uk

<sup>2</sup> AQR International, e-mail: : doug@aqr.co.uk

<sup>3</sup> AQR International, e-mail: monika@aqr.co.uk

<sup>4</sup> AQR International, e-mail: sylwia.aqr.co.uk

## Mental Toughness – Origins & Concept

If asked to participate in a discussion about mental toughness without having an agreed definition in front of you, most people would be able to do so. Mental Toughness is a concept we all seem to understand and the name does convey some sense of what the subject may be about. However, until 2002 it was a concept that had never been properly articulated or operationalised.

It is the result of bringing together the work of academics and practitioners which gives the concept a great deal of potency. Practitioners now have a better theoretical underpinning to their work.

Practitioners have generally focused on developing interventions, tools and techniques which seem to work without necessarily understanding fully why these work. Adding this kind of understanding helps everyone to apply what they do more effectively and more efficiently.

Mental toughness, we now understand, is a narrow personality trait which helps to explain how individuals respond to stress, pressure and challenge, irrespective of prevailing circumstance. Although its roots lie in resilience theory, mental toughness has emerged as a wider and potentially more useful concept.

Early definition of Mental Toughness describes Mental Toughness as

*The capacity for an individual to deal effectively with stressors, pressures and challenge and perform to the best of their abilities, irrespective of the circumstances in which they find themselves.* (Clough and Earle, 2002)

Further studies carried out on the Mental Toughness Model as developed by Professor Peter Clough confirmed that Mental Toughness is a micro personality trait, which means there is a genetically component in the level of mental toughness that an individual exhibits. We were able to offer a new definition of mental toughness.

*Mental Toughness is a personality trait which determines, in large part, how people respond to challenge, stress and pressure, irrespective of their circumstances.* (Clough and Strycharczyk, 2012)

In both definitions the key elements are:

**To a large extent** – it is known to be a large part of the answer to a lot of questions. It is not the whole of the answer for everyone. Nevertheless studies show that an individual's mental toughness can account for up to 25% of the variation in performance and is significant in wellbeing and positive behaviour.

**Irrespective of prevailing circumstances** – mentally tough individuals generally accept responsibility for their own performance. They show a real can do attitude. They do not seek to blame others for their shortcomings – *I would have done it if only my parents/teacher/co-workers would have helped me ...*

Initially working with athletes, Professor Peter Clough identified the core components of mental toughness and how to apply the concept. Work with AQR International around its application in a number of fields including the workplace led to the development of the MTQ48 measure in 2003 allowing effective assessment of mental toughness.

## The Theoretical Roots

There are two main theoretical roots to mental toughness, both emerging from health psychology:

- Resilience – Commitment, control – a passive concept
- Hardiness (Kobasa) – Commitment, control, challenge – who developed the idea of Hardiness – introducing a more positive and proactive element to the idea of resilience.

### Resilience

Most commonly defined as: The ability to recover quickly from change, setback or misfortune.

Researchers have found resilience to be a function of the individual's

- Accuracy of assessing events
- Ability to identify options and their flexibility in response
- Internal drive to complete tasks on time and on target

People could develop resilience by:

- Thinking positively about the problem or challenge – despite adversity  
**I can still do it**
- Focussing on what can be controlled rather than what cannot

Resilience seems to be a function of what we know as CONTROL & COMMITMENT.

In a sense it's a passive response. Something unwanted or adverse has happened, I don't like it and it's not what was expected but I can still achieve most or all of what I set out to do.

## Hardiness

Defined by Kobasa as "The ability to bear difficult conditions".

In her research on Resilience in the 1970s, Suzanne Kobasa made a number of important observations.

- Firstly she realised that there are significant individual differences in the way that people respond to stress. One study showed measurable differences among company executives' ability to deal with pressure – despite having comparable responsibilities, economic status and physical health, etc.
- Some individuals seem to cope better than others. These individuals, who she describes as hardy, were those whose cognitive strategies are better suited to dealing with stress. E.g., a hardy person was better at identifying the symptoms of stress and therefore was better able to work out what to do.
- She also noted that some people seemed to thrive on adversity and challenge. This was resilience+.

She called this concept Hardiness. Hardy individuals appeared to mentally transform stressors into something less threatening. She also speculated that Hardiness could be developed in individuals through carefully directed training.

Hardiness is a much less passive concept than resilience. It is an active response. This describes people who can also see adversity, difficulty and challenge as an opportunity to show what they can do.

Kobasa's work specifically suggested that it was related to CHALLENGE, CONTROL & COMMITMENT.

Two key players in the development of Mental Toughness

## Richard Dientsbier

Dienstbier is a significant figure. He is a North American Health psychologist who used the great outdoors to test out a number of hypotheses about the way people develop.

He demonstrated that Physiological Toughening often led to Psychological Toughening. He found that exposure to (physical) challenge could lead to emotional stability and immune system enhancement.

Dientsbier saw that some level of stressful simulation is needed for optimal performance. He found that stressful situations that are challenging but not overwhelming, may actually contribute to better physical and psychological health. In other words, facing up to challenge helps you to deal with challenge.

Dientsbier uses the term 'toughening' to describe what happens when challenging situations require active coping and problem solving. People who are stressed, but learn to adaptively work their way out of the problem, show a distinct psychobiological pattern. Overwhelming stress overtaxes the nervous system and leads to a variety of unwanted effects, including high blood pressure, sleep disorders, gastrointestinal problems, chronic anxiety, or depression.

However, individuals who learn to deal effectively with such crises – that is, develop good coping and mastery skills – show a more efficient and adaptive nervous system response that only lasts for the specific period of stress, and returns promptly to normal when the crisis is over.

Dientsbier showed that as an individual learns to cope with challenges in an adaptive way, a positive spiral develops: More effective coping leads to a smoother psychobiological stress response; the more this happens, the more the person learns to have faith in his or her own coping abilities – and so the stress response becomes even more adaptive and less disruptive.

Tough people are able to cope adaptively with adverse situations and are therefore less likely to succumb to stress-related illnesses. Dientsbier found that you could toughen up many individuals by exposing them to challenge, particularly by gently stretching their ability to cope with challenge and adversity!

This challenged so-called 'stress-management' programmes that rely mainly on relaxation or arousal-reduction techniques. He argued that using these techniques and therapies exclusively may actually work against developing true adaptive toughness. By portraying stress as something to be reduced or avoided at all costs, these approaches inhibit the learning of adaptive coping skills to deal with life's challenges.

Dientsbier carried out a number of interesting experiments both in the outdoors and in the laboratory. For instance, he would expose volunteers to ice cold baths for progressively longer and longer periods, whilst asking them to complete simple cognitive ability tests. Over time the test results would go up!

Overall Dientsbier makes an important contribution because he points to the possibility that Mental Toughness is capable of being developed where necessary.

## Jim Loehr Ed.D

Loehr, a leading sports psychologist, produced the first popular use of the term MENTAL TOUGHNESS.

He defined it as: “The ability to consistently perform towards the upper range of your capabilities, regardless of competitive circumstances” (1982)

He linked the concept of Mental Toughness with performance on the sports field. He identified 4 key notions and created a simple questionnaire. The notions were:

- Emotional Flexibility
- Emotional Responsiveness
- Emotional Strength
- Emotional Resilience

He suggested that Mental Toughness was an essential quality which existed in the minds of winners.

He too believed that it could be learned. Loehr worked with hundreds of elite athletes, many of whom became World Champions under his tutelage. Very quickly, his ideas were picked up by the sports community all over the world. By the year 2000, we see regular reference to the notion of mental toughness on the back (sports) pages of newspapers, but very little reference on the business pages.

Nevertheless, even in the Sports Arena, mental toughness became something to which there was frequent reference but is rarely defined. After Loehr we see several attempts to define Mental Toughness, including:

- Ability to rebound from failure
- Acquisition of superior mental skills
- Ability to cope with pressure, stress and adversity
- Insensitivity to severe pressure

All of these ideas contribute to a theme but don't really pin down the notion. Mental Toughness was poorly defined and provided a confused picture. It was often quoted – especially in sport – to explain why less talented teams and individuals outperform more talented opponents.

People knew the concept mattered but few could explain why.

## Professor Peter Clough Ph.D.

A sports and occupational psychologist, Clough found himself researching mental toughness in sport.

Working with golfers, soccer players and rugby players, he was particularly interested in the performance of place kickers in both Rugby codes. The place kicker has disproportionate value in a rugby team. Commonly they will score as many points as the rest of the team put together. They can be crucial to the success of the team. A sterling team performance can be undone by an ‘off day’ for the place kicker.

On the face of it, converting a place kick is a straightforward technical task. With training and practice, many kickers can be very effective on the practice field. It’s performing on the day of the match where things run less straightforwardly. Any rugby fan will confirm that when a place kicker misses a kick, he will often miss the next kick. And the converse applies too.

The same thing applies in many other sports – penalties in soccer, sinking a key 6 foot putt in golf, attempting a high jump record, etc. Clough found that the prevailing concepts of resilience and hardiness and mental toughness didn’t quite explain what he was observing. He hypothesized that “confidence” was also a factor in mental toughness.

Together with a colleague, Keith Earle, Clough developed a short 18 item measure to test his hypothesis. The results were encouraging. Clough & Earle set about developing a longer version of the questionnaire.

At the same time Clough was working with Doug Strycharczyk on a programme for the HM Customs & Excise(C&E) in the UK which involved assessing more than 700 senior managers using a range of tests, exercises and data which was comparatively clean and consistent. HM C&E agreed that they could gather data about the participants in the development centre programme, and asked participants to complete the new extended mental toughness measure. A number of other large organisations were persuaded to provide equivalent data. To this was added data from testing students.

The result was that the researchers were able to:

- Confirm the relevance of the confidence component
- Create and articulate a more complete picture of mental toughness
- Develop a reliable and valid questionnaire – MTQ48
- Begin to assess practical applications and apply a developmental approach

## 4 C’s

Mental toughness Model, as identified by Professor Peter Clough, is based on 4 main components:

Table 1. 4 main components of Mental Toughness Model

Mental Toughness Scale	What this means ... what does MTQ48 assess
CONTROL	<i>Life Control</i> – I really believe I can do it
	<i>Emotional Control</i> – I can manage my emotions and the emotions of others
COMMITMENT	<i>Goal Setting</i> – I promise to do it – I like working to goals
	<i>Achieving</i> – I'll do what it takes to keep my promises and achieve my goals
CHALLENGE	<i>Risk Taking</i> – I will push myself – I am driven to succeed
	<i>Learning from Experience</i> – even setbacks are opportunities for learning
CONFIDENCE	<i>In Abilities</i> – I believe I have the ability to do it – or can acquire the ability
	<i>Interpersonal Confidence</i> – I can influence others – I can stand my ground if needed.

Source: own elaboration.

Figure 1. Application of Mental Toughness Model



Source: own elaboration.



## Why is Mental Toughness Important?

Studies in the occupational, educational and sports worlds consistently show that Mental Toughness is directly related to:

- Performance. Individuals perform more effectively in terms of volume and quality of work.

In education, we see a clear correlation between mental toughness and performance in examinations and tests at all levels of education. These studies consistently show that around 25% of the variation in a person's performance in exams is explained by their mental toughness.

In the workplace, studies in call centres, managerial groups, etc. show similar patterns.

Moreover, when aggregated, we can observe similar patterns between the overall mental toughness of groups and organisations and their measured performance. Mental toughness is an organisational and cultural issue too.

- Positive Behaviour. The higher the level of Mental Toughness, the more the individual demonstrates positive behaviours.

They will adopt a 'can do' attitude and there is clear evidence that the higher the level of Mental Toughness, the more likely the individual will engage in activities with which they are associated (asking questions, engaging in discussion, volunteering to carry out tasks, etc.).

They are more likely to volunteer for things, to welcome change, to see the positives where other see the negatives and are more accepting of responsibility.

- Wellbeing. The greater the level of Mental Toughness, the greater the sense of well-being. This translates into outcomes like
  - Improved attendance/reduced absenteeism
  - Dealing more effectively with difficult days and adversity
  - Reductions in reported bullying
  - Being able to put setbacks into perspective and recover more quickly
  - Sleeping better
- Aspirations. Studies show that Mental Toughness appears to be positively correlated with career aspirations and aspirations in general. The mentally tough appear more ambitious than the average. For instance, in social work this can be particularly significant in areas of social and economic deprivation where the prevailing ethos might be one of despair or 'helplessness'.

- **Employability.** There is a clear relationship between an individual's Mental Toughness and their ability both to get a job and to get the job they want. Higher Mentally Tough persons are more competitive.

There is evidence to show that programmes in further and higher education which attend to qualifications and skills but not emotional resilience, do not deliver promised results.

This is particularly effective with the use of career guidance tools such as Carrus.

- **Completion/Drop-Out rates.** Several studies show a strong link between Mental Toughness and the extent to which a student will stick with a programme of study or work and will see it through to a conclusion.

This applies to project work in the workplace – mentally tough persons are more likely to complete a project on time and on target.

- **Other considerations**

Developing psychological or emotional resilience and Mental Toughness is a very important life skill. As Damian Allen, Director of Children's Services put it, 'Not only can we, in many cases, enhance a young person's performance, these particular skills are useful for just about everything else that person is going to have to do in life'.

## Measuring Mental Toughness

*If there is 'something' out there, we ought to be able to measure it.* This is one of the main principles of any science. Having defined Mental Toughness, Professor Peter Clough and his team created MTQ48 – valid and reliable psychometric measure which reliably assesses an individual (&group) level of Mental Toughness. It took more than 8 years of careful and innovative research for the tool to emerge; continues studies are carried on in relation to norming groups and language equivalency study.

The MTQ48 measures how people respond to stressors, challenge and pressure through 4 scales, as described above. This enables the coach to undertake a degree of analysis and feedback in an area important for the development and performance of many individuals. Mental Toughness appears to be more of a state than a trait and is well suited to responding to interventions.

## Using the Mental Toughness Model and the MTQ48 in Coaching and Mentoring

The Mental Toughness model provides an insight into how people respond to the world around them and helps individuals to be self-aware about the potential reasons for their responses. More specifically how and why they respond to events and situations which contain stressors, challenge, opportunity and pressure.

It is useful to understand that mental toughness is the element of personality which describes “how I think”. Much of the work in personality has focused on “how I act (or behave)” and this is the focus of a great deal of development activity. The two are related and mental toughness helps us to understand to large extent why I behave in a particular way and what might be preventing me from behaving differently. This is fundamental to coaching activity.

As described earlier in this article, this insight is provided to significant and valuable degree of detail – through the 4Cs and to a more detailed level given that each of the 4 components have subscales. This enables the coach to undertake a significant degree of analysis and feedback in an area important for the development and performance of many individuals.

A good deal of coaching and mentoring activity is focused on three areas:

- Improving or developing performance – including dealing or coping with specific events
- Creating or enhancing well-being
- Developing, usually positive, behaviours

Given that mental toughness is a significant factor for each of these areas, the model provides, for the coach and the coachee a useful framework for the exploration of an individual’s responses when facing those challenges and opportunities.

The MTQ48 questionnaire provides the ability to carry out some form of reliable and valid assessment which contributes to understanding what is going on.

Given that the coaching process and activities associated with it are themselves events, the model and measure have at least two opportunities to contribute to coaching and mentoring.

Firstly, by providing insight to the coaches response to the change or issue at the heart of the coaching activity.

Equally usefully, by providing insight to the coachees mind-set or attitude towards the coaching process or the coach. As with most such approaches, if the individual isn’t up for coaching or mentoring, they will get little from the process. That attitude can be determined to some extent by the individual’s mental toughness.

The mental toughness model, the 4Cs and the kind of reports that can be generated are described earlier in this article. Assuming that the coachee has completed the measure, the coach/mentor has an important source of information with which to proceed with coaching activity.

The first step should be to use the output from the measure to check:

- That the individual understands the model, its relevance to the task at hand, and the purpose of the questionnaire
- Agrees (or otherwise) with the outputs and what might be being suggested or implied

To create a degree of self-awareness that enables the individual and coach to feel that they can proceed usefully.

As with all feedback, the first step is to ensure that the use of the MTQ48 is relevant to the particular case. A high level of mental toughness is a quality that is not always needed in a particular role – many people will have the ‘right’ level of mental toughness to carry out their roles and lead a reasonably comfortable life.

In working with a coachee it is important, at the outset, to:

- provide feedback about the scores and what they indicate;
- check that the coachees are comfortable with that description of them at the present time – coachees will frequently challenge the picture that is being offered; That is perfectly fine. This is data for the coach.
- confirm that the description has or has not changed in recent times;
- If a change has occurred, to fully explore this.

Prior to a feedback session the coach should:

- plan the schedule to ensure that the coachee is given adequate time;
- read the relevant reports thoroughly and construct an outline plan for the session;
- identify ways of illustrating what he or she wishes to say;
- provide the coachee with a copy of the (candidate or development) report or with sufficient time to read it before the discussion.

### Is there evidence for mental toughness and its effectiveness in coaching?

The evidence into the relationship between coaching and mental toughness is encouraging. Studies do indicate a relationship between coaching and the elements that constitute mental toughness: self-efficacy, cognitive hardiness, enhanced

goal-striving, higher expectations about outcomes and environmental mastery (Grant, 2009). A 2007 study found that coaching can increase cognitive hardiness (mental toughness) and hopefulness in high school students (Green, Grant and Rynsaardt, 2007).

Coaching has also been shown to enhance goal striving (Spence and Grant, 2007), increase self-efficacy and heighten expectations about outcomes (Evers, Brouwers and Tomic, 2006). We can be reasonably confident that coaching has an important role to play in supporting people to develop appropriate levels of mental toughness and that this is useful to the coachee.

## How can a Coach Apply the Mental Toughness Model into their Work?

We set out below an illustration of how the model can be used to support a coaching process. There are many useful coaching models around. For the purpose of illustration we are using the GROW model but this works equally well with others such as OSCAR.

This material is drawn from AQR International's Coaching Workbook. This is a resource developed to support coaches and coachees on their journey.

The material is designed to support a flexible coaching approach for both parties to the coaching discussion. It is often used as a workbook for reflective notes when working with the support of a Coach.

It is particularly suited to the style of coaching that might use 'step by step' models and focus on goals and outcomes.

Coaching is a continuous process which is used to bring out the best performance in others. Coaches guide and support people who possess the knowledge, skills and abilities they need to perform effectively but may need help to:

- Recognise where they need to improve and develop their performance
- Overcome barriers to effective performance improvement
- Achieve long term and sustainable change
- Develop strategies that help sustain their potential

Identifying the outcome of a coaching intervention is often a vital component for measuring success.

One of Stephen Covey's 7 Habits states 'Start with the end in mind'. How often do you set out on a journey without knowing where you are heading off to? Rarely, we would guess. So this is sound advice and it is equally important that you enjoy the journey that takes you to your chosen destination.

Coaching is the very opposite of telling someone what to do. It is frequently described as non-directive. Although some would argue that simply by asking questions even open questions, the questioner is bringing some direction to the conversation. The best coaches use questions to:

- Raise self-awareness
- Develop understanding
- Provoke thinking
- Help to form actions

Coaching is based on the use of good open and structured questions. The material in AQR's workbook seeks to do that and provide the structure for the coachee to record and use the answers to those questions. This is illustrated below.

Primarily developed to support the work of the coach this workbook can, with careful use, be used as a standalone device by the coachee.

### **The GROW Coaching Model**

Firstly just a few words of introduction to the GROW model. The GROW Model (Whitmore 2002) is perhaps one of the more familiar models used to structure a coaching conversation that is focused around clear outcomes or goals.

It proposes that a coaching conversation can proceed purposefully through 4 distinct stages.

- **Goal** – At the start of the process we define the goal or outcome – this helps us to stay focussed
- **Reality** – This is about what is happening now that you would like to change and establishing what this would be like in the future.
- **Options** – Identifying and exploring the options available, barriers and how they might be overcome and challenges you might face.
- **Way Forward** – Commitment to specific actions and an action plan for building motivation.

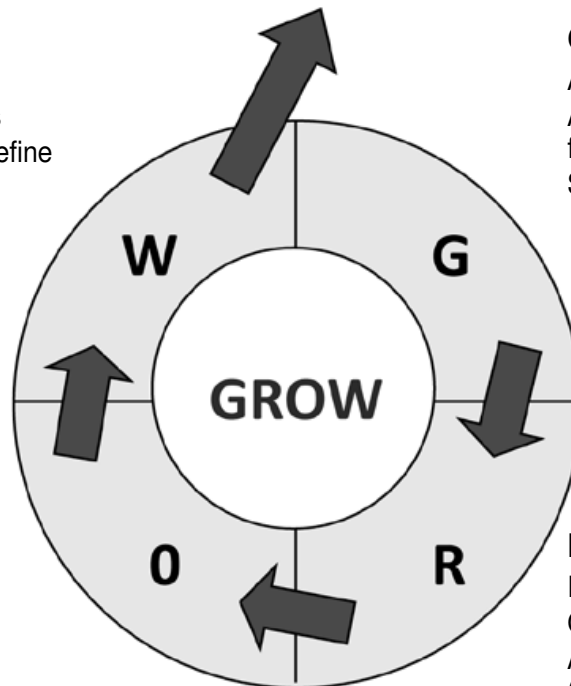
Whilst described as a linear process it is actually iterative and coaches may find themselves moving backwards and forwards between the stages to clarify and refine the best course of action.

This can be diagrammatically shown as in the Figure 2.

Figure 2. The GROW Model

**WRAP UP**

Commit to action  
Identify possible obstacles  
Make steps specific and define thinking  
Define Support



**GOAL**

Agree discussion topic  
Agree specific objectives for session  
Set long term aim if possible

**OPTIONS**

Cover full range of options  
Invite suggestions from coachee  
Offer suggestions  
Ensure choices are made

**REALITY**

Invite self assessment  
Offer examples of feedback  
Avoid or check assumptions (yours and others)  
Discard relevant history

Source: own elaboration.

### Preparing the Coachee for the Coaching experience

A fairly fundamental step – the coachee must be ready for the journey. The MTQ48 measure can provide insight here as to the potential state of readiness. Read it carefully before considering this:

To what extent am I in the right frame of mind to get the most from this coaching process?

What can I do to improve this?

“If you think you can, you can. If you think you can’t, you are probably right”. (Henry Ford)

## G – Goals

Take a moment to think about what you want to achieve personally, professionally or from the results of your Mental Toughness Questionnaire.

Consider any challenges you are facing or potential changes that you might need to respond to and when you are ready answer the following questions in the space below.

What specifically do you want to achieve from working through this guide?  
(short term/long term)

How will you measure it?

How will you know when you have achieved it?



When do you want to achieve it by?

How will you best use your time on this workbook?

### Goals – and Mental Toughness

Several of the components of Mental Toughness are relevant for this stage in the process.

#### Control

To launch the GROW process, you do need to have a sense that you know where you are going and that you believe that you can achieve. Others do it. So can you.

- To what extent do you believe that you are in control of your life and your environment? Or do you believe that it's the environment and other who shape you?
- It's hard to sets goals and targets. Will you give up in a fit of pique or do you have staying power?
- Will you be able to deal with all the actions you may have to implement?

#### Commitment

This is at the heart of this stage.

- To what extent are you prepared to set challenging goals and targets for yourself?
- Will you keep these at the front of your mind throughout the process?
- How determined are you to succeed?
- Will you be honest with yourself and monitor yourself against your goals and targets?

**Challenge?**

This is at the heart of the process of which this is the first stage?

- Does the process and the challenge that goes with it interest and excite you? Or does it already feel overwhelming?
- How do you feel about the prospect of change?
- Is there anything that concerns you about the process and the goals you are setting.
- How good is your planning? Have you set milestones for the bigger goals?

**Confidence**

- This is about your readiness to deal with setbacks and challenge and ridicule from others.
- Are you prepared to deal with those who don't agree with what you are doing?
- How will you deal with things that go wrong?

To what shall I attend to ensure that I am in the right frame of mind to set SMARTER goals?

**R – Reality**

Consider what has got in the way of you achieving these goals previously and what is happening in your current reality that has an impact on your personal and professional goals and objectives. Then answer the following questions in the space below:

What is happening right now? (What, when, where, how much?)

Who is involved/Who do you need to involve?

What are the consequences of your current situation?

What will help you move forward/What will constrain you? How did you get here?

How do you feel right now about your challenge (scale 1–10)?

### Reality – and Mental Toughness

The components of Mental Toughness that are relevant for this stage include:

#### **Control**

- To what extent do you feel in control of your life and your emotions? Is it enough to achieve your objectives?
- What has felt out your control until now? How can you extend your circle of influence and bring some of this under your control?
- Some of your reality will remain out of your control? How will you deal with that?

**Commitment**

- To what extent have you set goals and targets for yourself? How have you done?
- How easily do you give up?
- What can you do approach this more positively

**Challenge?**

- How have you responded to challenges like this before?
- What usually gets in the way of success? What typically helps you?
- What generally gets you interested and excited?
- What is it about this opportunity that is likely to get you “buzzing”? Why?

**Confidence**

- To what extent are you confident in your ability to succeed? What needs to be done to bolster that?
- How do you deal with those who aren’t convinced by what you are doing?
- When things have gone wrong how has that felt?
- How do you pick yourself up when things go wrong?

To what shall I attend to ensure that I am in the right frame of mind to create a reality where I am more likely to succeed?

Life is like a game of golf. Good golfers play the ball where it lies, not where they would like it to be.

**O – Options**

Reflect on the current reality and then answer the questions in the space below to help you consider the range of options you may have. Keep open to new possibilities rather than limiting yourself to the obvious ones. Changing your environment might help – go for a walk, play some music and let the responses emerge.

What could you do?

What have others done in similar situations?

What haven't you tried yet that might work?

How might someone else tackle this?

What if you had more resource available – time/money/people etc?

What are the costs and benefits of taking action or of not taking action?

### W – Way Forward

Having taken some time to reflect on the reality and options of the situation you now need to consider the next steps in the process and the action plan that will keep you motivated. Answer the following questions in the space below:

What option or combination of options will work best for you?

What action will you take and when will you take it?

What obstacles might you meet and how will you overcome them?

What support do you need and where will you get it?

On a scale of 1–10 how likely are you to take this action? What needs to happen to make it a 10?

How will you feel when you have taken this action?

### Options and the Way Forward – and Mental Toughness

The components of Mental Toughness that are relevant for this stage include:

#### **Control**

- To what extent are you happy to consider options? Or do you prefer to take things one a time?
- What can you bring into your control to ensure that you will succeed with your chosen path?
- How do others do what you have found hard until now?
- What remains out of your control? How will you deal with that?

#### **Commitment**

- To what extent have you set goals and targets for yourself? How have you done?

- Are you content that you explored and evaluated all options and you have selected the best one for your purpose? Are you hesitant in any way?
- To what extent does your plan feel like a picture of success for you?
- What factors will drive you forward to succeed.
- What can go wrong and how will you deal with these?
- Are you prepared to do what it takes to succeed? Is it important enough for you?

### **Challenge**

- To what extent does this represent an opportunity to improve your life, your work, everything?
- Can you visualise a better person emerging from this process?
- Did any other options promise the same?
- To what extent do you want to do this?

### **Confidence**

- There will be setbacks? To what extent are you prepared for those?
- Have you selected the best option?
- How will you deal with setbacks? Is there support you can turn to?
- Are you able to describe what you are going to do confidently to others .... and argue if they challenge you?
- Will you be able to persuade and convince others to help you and to support you?

To what shall I attend to ensure that I am in the right frame of mind to succeed?

## **A Case Study in Coaching Using MTQ48**

Mr X had been for 10 years a regional director for a large multinational operating in the educational and training field. His region had been acknowledged as the most successful of all the regional operations.



He had been particularly successful at developing the consultancy aspect of the business – a significant contributor to turnover and profitability. Following a global review of the operation the Board took a strategic decision to drop the provision of consultancy services and focus on product sales.

This created a problem for Mr X who argued that widening the offer was essential to doing business in his region. Also that this would demotivate staff who enjoyed the spread of work. At that point he acknowledged that he was angry, confused and not in the best frame of mind to make good decisions. Also concerned that his behaviour would impact on the staff, he felt coaching would be valuable in helping him to work through the situation and support him in identifying how he wanted to do respond to the situation

A structured coaching approach was used, based on the GROW model. This started by setting goals for the coaching sessions then looking at an analysis of the current situation, identifying preferred outcomes and finally enabling action plans to emerge. MTQ48 was used to help understand his current mind-set.

It was agreed at the outset that the most important outcome would be that the client felt that he wanted to know what to do in response to the prevailing situation and, if possible, to emerge with a plan of action.

Session One – The self-reflection process used a form of abbreviated SWOT analysis to identify what he liked and what he disliked about his current position. He concluded that the change of policy had created two sets of problems for him:

- Firstly he had abilities in an area that the organisation no longer wanted and didn't appear to value. He felt that he wasn't able to influence decisions made in any way.
- Secondly, he liked the freedom and the width of operation that he has previously enjoyed. Narrowing its focus diminished his feeling of contribution and success

The SWOT analysis helped to crystallise his thinking and enabled him to look at the current situation rationally. The next step was to investigate the impact on mind-set with MTQ48.

Session Two – focused on feedback and reflective discussion around the results of the MTQ48. This gave the client a framework and a set of language through which he could reflect on his mind-set.

Firstly, he observed his confidence had been diminished because he no longer felt valued. His sense of control had been affected by his seeming inability to influence the decisions made by the organisation. This had also impacted upon his emotional control.

He recognised that addressing this was a priority in order to respond rationally to what was now happening to him. He later said that the realisation of the extent of this impact on his mindset was the trigger for him to seriously consider his future in the organisation.

Session Three – focused on identifying options for the future and evaluating these to create an action plan. Having drawn up a mind map of the possible options he very quickly realised the most viable options for the future all involved leaving the organisation.

X made his decision; he now wanted to leave the organisation. The final discussion was around how he would present this to his current manager. His goal now was to form his own consultancy.

Since then X left the organisation and became involved in setting up a consultancy in partnership with another company. He reports now that he is much more confident about his future and his ability to control his own destiny.

## Mental Toughness and its Application to Coaches

There is significant benefit for the coach in embracing the mental toughness model and examining its application to themselves and their work. The work of a coach is challenging and has its own sources of stress – not least the need to make a difference with another person who may not always be receptive to what a coach can offer.

The model and measure can be extremely valuable to coaches in provoking thinking about their own qualities in this area – and guiding them towards developing their skills, behaviours and attributes.

Coaches who are mentally tough have the capability to withstand a significant amount of pressure. They have confidence in their abilities and are often willing to take on demanding tasks, believing they will succeed. They can usually shrug off criticism and not take others' comments to heart. They are likely to speak their mind when working in groups and are usually comfortable in many different social and work contexts. This positive approach to the coaching encounter is more likely to put the coachee at ease and allow the coaches themselves to have far more control.

More specifically coaches scoring high on mental toughness will tend to:

- set realistic goals, allowing them to avoid overwhelming coachees, or perhaps under-challenging the coachee;
- happily accept the more challenging encounters which offer them the opportunity to truly demonstrate their own abilities;

- feel in control, maintaining the belief that they can truly make a difference, despite setbacks.

Basically it can be argued that the coachee will respond better to a coach who is more confident, in control, committed and who is appropriately challenging.

We suggest that mental toughness and mental toughness development are as important for the coach as for the coachee. It is literally a matter of ‘practise what you preach’.

For coachees who may be mentally sensitive there a number of tools and techniques can be used to facilitate the achievement of a successful coaching session. Development of these is described next.

We remind users that mental toughness is not a universal panacea. The mentally tough coach will be better able to deal with the cut and thrust of challenging encounters but may not be as sensitive as some to the emotional content of their discussions. It may be harder for a truly mentally tough individual to fully empathize with the plight of someone who is, for example, very sensitive.

However, again, an understanding of your own mental toughness can be helpful. For example, a tough coach may need to clearly recognize that clients may not instantly have the resources to move their lives forward. It is indeed useful for such coaches to remind themselves of the fact that ‘if it appears to be a problem to the coachee, it is a problem’. Driving too hard or failing to acknowledge the coachees’ feelings will severely impact on the coaching process.

## Interventions

Feedback from practitioners show that most useful interventions for developing mental toughness fall under these broad headings. Most are experiential in nature:

1. **Positive Thinking** – recognising opportunity and possibility, not just threats
2. **Visualisation** – using the mind to create opportunity and a unique learning environment
3. **Anxiety control** – tools and techniques to help deal with anxiety and panic
4. **Goal setting** – scoping what the client wants to achieve and using that to create plans
5. **Attentional control** – focusing better and for longer

Developing client’s awareness about their own mental toughness is sometimes sufficient on its own to spur them to take action, particularly for those who emerge

as more mentally tough than the average but whose performance and behaviour doesn't currently reflect that.

Most mentors and coaches have a good understanding of the first four areas of intervention so we won't go into too much detail. A common blind spot is the area of attentional control.

### Positive Thinking

**Works on:** control, commitment, confidence, challenge

Many coaches will already be familiar with this approach, which encourages ideas, words and images into the mind conducive to performance, wellbeing, growth and success. We are all too often more aware in a negative than positive sense of our extraordinary power over ourselves – everything we know, feel and believe is based on our internal thoughts.

### Make it work

Help the client avoid negative thoughts and encourage positive thoughts using, for example: making positive affirmations, mental and physical thought-stopping, turning negatives into positives and 'think three positives'. Changing the self-talk is highly effective.

Researchers at the University of Parma using fMRI brain scans found a link between an individual's score on the Challenge scale in mental toughness and grey matter density in the fusiform gyrus – one of its functions lies in word recognition and how we respond emotionally to words.

**Fatal flaw:** Assuming it's easy to teach someone to think positively.

Most effective practices help a person to learn how to think more positively, which is why coaching is so helpful here.

### Visualisation

**Work on:** control, challenge and confidence

Again, many coaches will be already using these techniques but may not appreciate their usefulness in developing mental toughness. Most people don't have to learn how to visualise but may need to learn how to harness it for their benefit.

### Make it work

Encourage clients to use their mental voice to increase self-belief in their ability to deal with change, deadlines, and to use their imagination to relax. The imagination communicates with the mind at the deepest levels and visual imagery is far more potent than words alone. And we of course now know that practicing something mentally is as real to our minds as doing it for real. So it's powerful as

well as offering clients a safe way to experiment – seeing themselves as successful in tough situations, for example. Many of the sports-people during the Olympics this month will be familiar with this approach, it's widely used in sports to support 'anchoring' behaviour.

Guided imagery is a particular form of visualisation where the imagination is used to recreate relaxing situations.

### Anxiety control

**Works on:** control, confidence, challenge

This is possibly the best understood area of intervention used by most coaches and mentors. We know that physiological responses can help clients to manage mental responses such as worry, fear, negative self-talk) that can impact on interpersonal confidence, life control, emotional control and challenge.

### Make it work

Typically, coaches might introduce techniques for breathing and muscular relaxation. Other techniques which can also be very beneficial include self-hypnosis, controlled distraction, anchoring and learning to sleep more effectively.

A recent study at the University of Basel showed a close link between mental toughness, the ability to sleep and performance and wellbeing.

### Goal setting

**Works on:** control, commitment, challenge, confidence

Goal setting is a powerful means to develop mental toughness, for example, setting milestones can help them be realistic– 'eating the elephant a slice at a time', and achieve the right balance

### Attentional Control

**Works on:** Life Control (Self Efficacy), Commitment, Challenge and Confidence in Abilities (Self-esteem)

If there is one factor which is highly significant in enabling people to perform to their potential and feel less stressed in so doing, it is their ability to focus and to do so for a sustained period of time. This is particularly true for those whose life and work is centred around intellectual activity – reading, writing, studying etc. – as opposed to physical activity. And it is still important with the latter.

It has been variously estimated that the average attention span for a young person these days is around 8 minutes. Moreover we know that each time we break away from a piece of work we never return exactly to the point where we left off. We have to back track a little to 'tune in' again. Again estimates suggest that

you might have to re-visit up to 30% of the work you carried out before you broke off.

This means that a mental activity like writing a report or reading an important document, already stressful for many, can take much longer to complete than would otherwise be the case if we could concentrate fully on the task.

However research in the US and elsewhere, particularly in the sports world, shows that it is possible to develop a person's attention span to 45 minutes or more.

A key issue here is that Attentional Control is very much a learned experiential activity. You cannot teach someone to concentrate better.

It requires three elements:

- Practice – we learn to focus through repeated experimentation and purposeful exercise
- Reflection – as we develop it is important to take stock of what it is we are now doing that enables us to concentrate better
- Measurement – providing evidence that what we are now doing is somehow tangible and beneficial.

This area is extremely well suited to the support which can be provided by a skilled coach or facilitator.

Interventions fall into four broad groupings which essentially deal with interruptions and distractions:

***Developing Concentration.*** The interesting thing here is that often we can concentrate with amazing intensity when we want to or need to. Try interrupting a teenager who is hooked on computer games or ask someone a question during a football match.

### **Make it work**

The challenge here is to reproduce those moments of intense concentration, make the coachee self-aware about what they are now doing and what it is they are doing to achieve that state. Then to think about how they might reproduce that when needed in other circumstances.

There are several games and exercise which help to do this. Bop-iT – an inexpensive electronic toy which requires the player to follow a complex set of instructions to achieve a progressively higher score. Number grid exercise (see [www.aqr.exercises.com](http://www.aqr.exercises.com) for a beta version of such an exercise), Stroop tests, etc. And computer games such as space invaders can be helpful too if the coachee reflects on how they have suddenly achieved better scores. Better concentration will have been one of the factors.

Emptying the mind – learning to still the mind enhances concentration. Easier said than done. As soon as you say ‘don’t think about x!’ you can’t stop thinking about X.

### **Make it work**

Techniques range from yoga, meditation and mindfulness through to exercise like the stork stand.

Ask the coachee to stand on one leg with arms outstretched. Ask them to close their eyes and maintain balance. For most people, thinking about maintaining balance often means they lose their balance. If they learn not to think about it (perhaps by thinking about something else entirely) they are suddenly much more able to maintain the stork stand. If you speak with the coachee whilst doing this you will also find that the ability to maintain balance is enhanced. This is an example of the second broad grouping – Controlled Distraction.

***Controlled Distraction.*** It can sometimes be easier to think of, or do something else that is calming and which you know develops that state of mind.

### **Make it work**

These can be mental or physical tasks. Music is thought to work well for some – especially listening to lyrics of some songs. Looking at pictures of relaxing scenes etc. Physical tasks can include carrying out routine tasks – weeding a garden border, playing with a pet, etc.

Helping the coachee to identify those opportunities and with guided reflection to understand why and how they work for them.

***Managing Interruptions.*** When carrying out important and valuable work doing it in an environment free for interruption will be more than useful.

### **Make it work**

There are two elements to this. Firstly working with a coachee to identify what are the frequent sources on interruption which creates stress or pressure for them. Secondly to identify how (not whether!) they can create those opportunities for interruption free work.

### **Fatal Flaw**

The majority of these techniques rely firmly on experiential learning. Whereas concentration can be developed, it is extremely difficult to teach to someone. It is important to stress the need for practice, practice, practice and the need to monitor change (which is which using tools such as Bop-It and Number Grid exercises work so well – the coachee can see and measure progress).

Also managing coachees expectations for immediate results. That won't happen – but the rewards for perseverance are significant.

## Summary

In this article we've looked at the usefulness of the concept of mental toughness in the coaching and mentoring arena.

It is often said that stress, pressure and challenge is endemic in today's society.

While this emphasis on stress may over-inflate its importance, it is none the less obvious that many coaching sessions are instigated by clients under the umbrella of stress management.

There has been a considerable debate in the research literature as to what mental toughness actually is. It is obviously related to concepts such as reliance and hardiness, but provides a more specific hook onto which you can hang coaching interventions. The more mentally tough individual is better able to deal with the pressures of life and prosper within a competitive environment (e.g. Earle and Clough, 2001).

We believe the model of mental toughness and the mental toughness measure MTQ48 is a robust and useable tool. It has four main components: Control, Challenge, Commitment and Confidence. Our view that mental toughness can be developed is driven both by personal experience of working as coaches and from clear empirical evidence.

In conclusion, mental toughness coaching offers the coachee the ability to deal with a whole range of pressures better and to 'become the best that they can be'. It also provides the coach the opportunity to deal more effectively with the challenges and stresses that are often associated with this particular role.

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