

# After the event: looking back and moving forward

Three panellists at our coaching for social impact event in March reflect on the issues arising from the day with **Carolyn Mumby**



**T**his title of this article reflects that it is both a retrospective reflection on our recent coaching for social impact event, and that the phrase 'after the event' often denotes an insight realised too late. As a group of practitioners, something we very much want the coaching profession to avoid is realising with hindsight that we have missed a crucial opportunity for coaching to play a significant role in impacting social change. In this sense, the event is part of an ongoing stream of information-sharing, in the hope of stimulating further engagement of multiple stakeholders with the key questions we face as coaches and communities, as we move forward to take action for social change.

The aim of our event was to gather and showcase something of what we already know is working in terms of coaching for social impact, and to connect with others engaged (or desiring to engage) in this work, as well as highlighting the power of coaching to funders and commissioners of services.

Dr Ana Paula Nacif explained the rationale for the report launched at the event, sharing an overview of its content and key ideas.' She highlighted why coaching can be an excellent approach for bringing about social change and social impact, shared examples of best practice and reflected on the challenges and opportunities for practitioners, researchers and commissioners.

Dr Suzanne Triggs shared her award-winning experience of applying a social impact model of coaching in the field of social work and showed how activating personal power led to a transformation in social power for both clients and the social workers taking a coaching approach.

Catherine Macadam and Katharine Collins also drew on their experience of running community interest company (CIC) Coaching for Unpaid Carers to make the case for putting time

and energy into proper evaluation of coaching for social change, to demonstrate the impact and social value of this work and to argue for evaluation activity to be properly funded alongside service delivery.

It is powerful to identify not just the information that will provide a foundation for thinking and action, but also the important and yet unanswered questions. With information, good questions, and a strong network consisting of a diverse group of practitioners and people who have benefitted from coaching, we can be more creative and courageous in the continuing development of our profession, expanding its influence for the benefit of both individuals and our social networks and structures, and ultimately our world.

We were delighted, therefore, to be joined by two experienced thought leaders, Hany Shoukry and Judie Gannon, in our closing panel. Here, they reflect on the event and, along with Val Watson, BACP Coaching's lead on coaching for social impact, highlight what they gained from the presentations and questions raised by the participants, and share their freshest thinking on the important questions for us to think about together going forward.

#### **Carolyn Mumby**

Former Chair of BACP Coaching and co-facilitator of BACP Coaching's Coaching for Social Impact special interest group



## **Dr Hany Shoukry**

When I first became interested in the practice of coaching for social change, there were few documented stories and only a handful of research studies available on the topic. A decade later, coaching for social impact/change/justice has become a vibrant discourse within the coaching world. What once seemed like a rebellious, countercultural idea has now become central for several communities of practice, discussed in professional and academic conferences, documented in annual reports and practised explicitly or implicitly by many professionals. It has become the subject of awards, developing its delivery and evaluation frameworks, and is acknowledged in funded social care programmes. It feels like the coming of age of an exciting field of practice.

Coaching has always been centred around the individual. Its bias toward the individual is perhaps one of its unique selling points. However, we live in a world where all individuals are connected through a holistic global experience. Thus, the murder of George Floyd, the Russian war in Ukraine, or the financial crisis that is just starting will naturally feature in coaching conversations with those directly affected by them. But remarkably, they also appear in coaching sessions in countries and social groups that could not be further removed from their direct impact. Humans are beings of meaning; we make sense of our existence not only through our personal circumstances, or the challenges of our local context, but also through the global conditions that define our time. This also means that coaching for social impact goes beyond supporting affected individuals to change their conditions, to helping all individuals make sense of their place in a world that still suffers from too much oppression, war and environmental degradation. From this perspective, all coaching has a social impact, be it to reinforce or to challenge the status quo.

Listening to the different speakers in the event, it is energising to see how some core concepts are emerging, such as the centrality of empowerment to the coaching process, or how changing the narrative can enable coaching clients to reshape their story. I have experienced the positive impact of both concepts in my research and practice, alongside helping clients to critically examine their internalised assumptions, and supporting them in planning practical actions in what is often an unforgiving environment. The talks also emphasised a much-needed call for more evidence-based research on coaching for social impact, coupled with another reminder – from the audience – that both research and documented practice need to feature more diverse voices. I add my voice to both calls unreservedly.

How will/should coaching for social change develop in the coming years? I wish to highlight a few possible developments. First, to evolve from the duality of individual versus collective, into a more integral framework that transcends and includes both perspectives. It is important to recognise that while there

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is a growing wave of socially and environmentally aware values within many professions, including coaching, there is also a counter wave of resistance to the former, with voices complaining of normative ideals, positive discrimination and cancel culture. Advocates of coaching for social change may choose to just fight harder, but I believe a better option would be to understand how coaching can help bridge the gap. How to evolve our coaching frameworks so that they can span seamlessly across top-paid executives and financially deprived individuals, alpha males and domestically abused women, individualists and political activists, to name a few?

A second development is one around the business model; many social coaching initiatives are still taking place as pro bono activities, often funded by coaching or other businesses that adhere to the market's rules and values. A better future would be one where coaching for social impact is able to fund itself, thus attracting more practitioners and researchers.

A third development is one I am becoming increasingly interested in, which is the evolution of models that can help coaches and their clients to address the increasingly complex ethical dilemmas they face. Coaching through a social lens is an ethical maze, and the generally accepted models that many coaches use would often fail to support judgment when navigating it.

Finally, we need to connect more in communities of research and practice. But more importantly, we need to ensure that our communities are built with participatory principles and sustainable values, and that our research is done in critical and emancipatory ways that give voices to those who don't usually have a voice.



**Dr Hany Shoukry** is a researcher and practitioner of coaching. He is an honorary research associate at Oxford Brookes University, and his work focuses on the intersection between individual and society. Born in Egypt, he lives in the UK, and is also the group director of service management at Sky.

## Dr Judie Gannon

Like many who attended the BACP Coaching for Social Impact event, I have felt an increasing disquiet about the focus of much coaching practice and research, as if it was misaligned and not quite positioned with the widest impact in mind. In a world where so many communities, groups and individuals are estranged from the support and resources to live well, I welcome this shift in the focus of coaching and view it as addressing some of my unease. My sense, from the event and accompanying report,<sup>1</sup> and ongoing debates in the practitioner and academic literature, is that we now have a crucible for creating something new in the field of coaching. This prospect of refashioning the focus of coaching is an exciting prospect, which I know encourages and entices many to continue in this direction.

Particularly heartening was the diversity of the event's main sessions and the cases covered in the report. As a coach, educator and researcher, I was struck by how coaches are engaging with particular causes and social injustices, and leveraging their coaching insights and skill sets to make a difference. For example, at the event, we heard how coaching within existing professions as part of wider service commitments and as social enterprises close to communities and groups of individuals, is delivering social impact. The commitment of those finding ways to deliver coaching with specific groups and communities was uplifting, and demonstrates the creative nature of the coaching community and its practitioners. Recognising that coaching for social impact may involve working with a broader realm of different stakeholders and outfits, and in slightly different ways, will help the wider profession engage with this focus of coaching too.

The various coaching for social impact examples also show that the value of coaching appears to arise from the ways we can work with, rather than do to, individuals and communities who, for multiple reasons, may not have the resources to live well. From this perspective, there were multiple examples of how seemingly small acts of agency can have a profound impact. For me, this reinforces the ethos of coaching as focused on enhancing human functioning and potential, in ways that are truly meaningful and relevant to individuals. These examples contrast with the often heavy expectations, which might come from agencies or organisations with particular agendas, when engaging with those facing social exclusion and injustice.

Over the years, I have noticed the coaching profession can sometimes appear divisive and even partisan, and yet the tone of the BACP event was quite different. Participants and presenters all showed genuine curiosity about experiences, approaches and the questions raised. This did not mean that

differences were not evident but that the focus of value and process resulted in, to me, a different kind of dialogue from some other coaching events I have attended. I have reflected upon whether this was something to do with the way we were encouraged throughout the event to consider what parts of our own coaching work might have (further) social impact, and whether that would be on our proverbial doorsteps, within existing communities we are already aware of, or much further afield. I left the event even more inquisitive about the causes we pursue as coaches, in our pro bono or third-sector work. What does this part of our coaching practice mean to us, personally and professionally?

At another level, the event raised questions for me around how engagement in coaching for social change resonates across different parts of the profession, its commitment to accessibility, social justice issues and enthusiasm for social impact.

I am conscious that my overview of the BACP event and report may appear eulogistic; however, there are points of caution for us all to consider. As someone who has witnessed the abuses of mentoring for social change over the years, I am concerned that coaching could fall prey to the same exactitudes. We need to think carefully about how coaching for social change is evaluated and not fall prey to criteria that dissemble individuals' personal experiences and the value they attribute to coaching.

The BACP event and report mean we now have multiple concrete sources of evidence of coaching for social impact, as well as a growing force of keen and committed advocates. Sustaining focus and progress on coaching for social change will be a challenge, given the post-pandemic priorities facing organisations to adapt to new ways of working, reclaim performance targets and support employee and leader wellbeing. In addition, we will have to continually revisit questions about client readiness, coach training, supervision, and ongoing support for coaching programmes with social impact in mind. I recoil at the thought of some agencies and organisations crafting 'coaching on the cheap' in light of the evidence presented. Do we have the resolve to counter such moves? I hope we do, across all the different stakeholder groups involved in coaching. This will help retain the promise of the crucible created by the BACP Coaching for Social Impact group in March.



**Dr Judie Gannon is an academic in the International Centre for Coaching & Mentoring Studies, Oxford Brookes University, where she leads the doctorate in coaching and mentoring. Her research focuses on coaching and mentoring as forms of social movements and communities of practice.**

## Dr Val Watson

What impressed me most about the content of the day was the variety of ways in which coaching and coaching approaches were being used for the benefit of communities who are normally unrepresented and sometimes 'written off' as lacking in capacity to engage in coaching. There was a real sense in the content of people grasping the principles and signposts to empowerment for themselves and this having a great impact on their confidence as individuals, but also this increased confidence feeding back into their personal relationships and ultimately into their communities and their development. Essentially, though nothing new was said about empowerment, it was being offered through the use of coaching approaches in ways that were honest and respectful, with a basic assumption that people are capable and deserving of respect. Importantly, that they have something to offer and are not frozen/fixated in a deficit model.

The discussions throughout the day and the case studies reflected on sharpened my enthusiasm and encouraged me to consider a further review of some of my practice as a therapist. Clearly, there is a need for careful assessment of when and how to make use of coaching approaches, but maybe there is less of a need to be quite so circumspect if the relationship built in therapy is one that is deemed strong enough to consider some questions that might be helpful, especially when clients often bring socio-economic problems into a therapy space that cannot be properly addressed solely from an empathic counselling relationship. Yes, clients benefit from being listened to carefully and with sensitivity, but this can become very circular if some attention is not given at times to examining with them the structures and environments that are perpetuating, or even causing, their difficulties in their functioning: families, relationships and so on. I was also struck

by the creative ways in which the coaching approach can be used across boundaries: global – for example, Jacqueline Hill's report<sup>1</sup> – and institutional; and invite organisations to rethink their ways of working, employing or leading others. Throughout the event, the 'business case' for coaching and coaching approaches was made through the content of the report and the discussions among participants.

Some questions for us to consider going forward include: How might coaching for social impact justify and properly own its political agenda? Can a coach interested in coaching for social impact consider themselves to be politically neutral, and what implications does this have for the coaching profession? Is there a line between coaching and activism? Where is it? As philosopher Paulo Freire famously said: 'It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors.'<sup>2</sup> This concept of being oppressed sits within coaching for social impact practice. Where might coaches and their coachees/participants sit in relation to this? For example, what can or might an executive coach, who usually works solely with business leaders and CEOs whose aim is the furthering of capitalist economies and profit margins, offer to marginalised groups and communities? What are the implications for training and trainers of coaches if we are to fully embrace the notions of coaching for social impact? What are we assuming about the attitudes, perspective and attributes of coaches in general, and how are these the same as or different from coaches who espouse coaching for social impact perspectives and practices?



**Dr Val Watson is an independent counselling and psychotherapy practitioner, coach, supervisor, consultant and trainer. She has worked in education and training settings for over 30 years. Val has contributed a number of book chapters on race and counsellor education, and she is the BACP lead for the Coaching for Social Impact special interest group (SIG).**

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### Get involved

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