

Dr. Klára Valentinyi Dr. Veresné¹ – Mahboobeh Mazaheri² – Dr. Erika Varga³

Coaching Methods to Achieve Resilience and Flexibility at Work

SUMMARY

Resilience and flexibility constitute fundamental components to foster employee satisfaction and problem-solving. Although a range of methods exists to enhance employees' resilience and adaptability, coaching remains an underexplored and underutilized methodology. The present research investigated the role of coaching in promoting resilience at work, and increasing employees' awareness of work-related challenges as a means of enabling more effective problem-solving and decision-making. Data were collected through a short questionnaire, interviews and coaching sessions involving employees from Iran and neighboring regions. It has been found that prior to the coaching sessions, participants exhibited ambivalent or negative affective responses toward their occupational roles and demonstrated limited awareness of the variables behind these feelings. Following the coaching session, participants reported enhanced clarity, resilience, flexibility and problem-solving skill regarding their dissatisfaction, and they identified actions and solutions. These findings suggest that coaching serves as an effective method for cultivating resilience and enhancing problem-solving capabilities by promoting reflective awareness and action.

Keywords: employee satisfaction, resilience, employee awareness, coaching, problem-solving skills

JEL codes: J01, J21, J24

INTRODUCTION

Job satisfaction and resilience

Job satisfaction is crucial in all jobs. Employees feel satisfied at work if their skills, goals and aspirations are aligned with the goals of the organization, they are respected and have a meaningful, well-paying and inspiring job, but it is equally important for them to grow professionally, know their future in the context of organizational and individual goals, beliefs and values, personal interests and capabilities (Baxi – Atre, 2024; Armstrong, 2006). They need to have a sense of job security, respect and importance, otherwise, employees will feel disappointment, lose their motivation, their performance and productivity will deteriorate (Baruch, 1996). Employees often face difficulties to achieve all these at work. However, a resilient em-

ployee can find solutions to cope with the challenges arising at work (Dias – Palmer – Nardi, 2017).

What is resilience?

Resilience is

1. the ability that helps us cope with difficulties and stress in life and to adapt to these challenges,
2. the ability of an individual to bounce back from a low point in life in a way that strengthens him, this is 'the ability to thrive',
3. realistic optimism,
4. reconciliation with the past,
5. reconciliation with the present,
6. the combination of inner strength, self-confidence, positive self-image and optimism that enables a person to adapt flexibly and effectively to stressful and difficult life situations,
7. problem-solving skills,
8. solution-oriented thinking,
9. the use of inner skills, resources,
10. self-discipline,
11. self-confidence,
12. healthy relationships,
13. a lifelong protective mechanism (Resilience 2, no year).

A resilient person

- can adapt to difficult situations,
- can accept that there are situations in life that he cannot change,
- becomes aware of these situations and is not burying his head in the sand,
- can get out of a dead end while facing the problem,
- can deal effectively with stress and pressure,
- becomes stronger after a major challenge,
- is effective at problem-solving,
- is aware that he does not have to put up with everything, and he should not fight unnecessary windmill battles,
- can balance at work despite difficult external and internal circumstances,
- can motivate himself to find the solutions,
- can set goals and work towards them,
- can find the right resources and support in difficult situations in life,
- can handle feedback and constructive criticism, and takes advice to improve,
- can see the positive side of things, even when he is in a difficult situation,
- is grateful for the good things in life and can see things in his life to be grateful for (Resilience 1, no year).

¹ Associate professor, Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Department of Foreign Languages, 2100 Gödöllő, Páter Károly utca 1., veresne.valentinyi.klara@uni-mate.hu

² PhD-student, Doctoral School of Economic and Rural Sciences, Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, 2100 Gödöllő, Páter Károly utca 1.

³ Associate professor, Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Department of Foreign Languages, 2100 Gödöllő, Páter Károly utca 1.,

A method to achieve resilience: coaching

Coaching is gaining grounds at work to find solutions for workplace challenges (Stevens, 1998; Minzlaff – Palmer – Travis, 2024; Grant, 2017). The objectives of coaching coincide with the objectives and characteristics of resilience.

ICF coach competences

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) is a prominent international organization for coaches. ICF is committed to setting coaching standards and benchmarks, together with creating a worldwide network of coaches. ICF defines coaching as follows: ‘Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires clients to maximize their personal and professional potential. The process of coaching often unlocks previously untapped sources of imagination, productivity and leadership. We all have goals we want to reach, challenges we’re striving to overcome and times when we feel stuck. Partnering with a coach can change the client’s life, setting the client on a path to greater personal and professional fulfillment.’ (ICF, no year)

The coaching session is a two-way and dynamic process, collaborative and supportive relationship between the coach and the client or coachee. The client’s cognitive barriers relative to the topic of the session are removed by becoming aware of the client’s inner self, cognitive resources and true desire, and consequently, the coachee will determine an action in line of which he takes concrete steps to solve his problem and find solutions himself (ICF, no year).

ICF has determined the core values, competencies and behaviors of an ICF coach. Each value, competence and behaviour are equally important, aspirational, and they complement each other. ICF coaches are expected to embody ICF core values, adopt and demonstrate ICF core competencies in their coaching sessions in order to be successful and effective. The coach:

- demonstrates coaching ethics and standards;
- embodies, develops and maintains a coaching mindset that is open, curious, flexible and client-centered;
- establishes and maintains the coaching agreement about the coaching relationship, process, plans and goals;
- cultivates trust and safety by creating a safe, supportive environment that allows the client to share freely;
- maintains a relationship of mutual respect and trust;
- maintains presence, being fully conscious and present with the client, employs a style that is open, flexible, grounded and confident;
- communicates effectively, listens actively and focuses on what the client is and is not saying to fully understand the client;
- evokes awareness of the clients by facilitating client insight and learning by using tools and techniques such as powerful questioning, silence, metaphor or analogy;
- cultivates and facilitates client growth and learning;
- promotes client autonomy in the coaching process. (ICF Coach competences, no year)

Coaching

Coaching is useful for employees to help with the challenges at work, increase motivation, enhance performance and productivity, improve job communication, resolve organizational conflicts, find solutions to difficulties etc. (Gasparovich et al., 2023; Kauffeld et al., 2022; Spurk et al., 2015; Terblanche,

2020). Coaching is a series of coaching techniques which help to become aware of and remove the employee’s cognitive and workplace obstacles (Rutigliano – Hyland, 2013; ICF Coach competences, no year), and cope with challenges in the employee’s career (Burnett – Evans, 2016). *Table 1* summarizes the major similarities between the features of resilience and coaching.

Table 1. Major similarities between resilience and coaching

	resilience	coaching
1. coping with difficulties and stress in life and to adapt to these challenges	X	X
2. realistic optimism, can see the positive side of things, even when he is in a difficult situation	X	X
3. reconciliation with the past and present	X	X
4. inner strength, self-confidence, positive self-image	X	X
5. flexibility and effectiveness in stressful and difficult situations	X	X
6. good problem-solving skills	X	X
7. solution-oriented thinking	X	X
8. the use of inner resources	X	X
9. self-discipline	X	X
10. self-motivation to find the solutions	X	X
11. setting goals and working towards them	X	X
12. handling feedback	X	X
13. being grateful for the good things in life and noticing things to be grateful for.	X	X

Source: Authors’ own editing

Research gap

Coaching has been a relatively new method to help employees at work, there is a big potential to use it in organizations. However, because of its novelty, very little research has examined the effectiveness of coaching to cope difficulties at work, such as achieving resilience (Stevens, 1998; Minzlaff – Palmer – Travis, 2024; Grant, 2017). In our research, we aim to fill this gap and investigate how coaching tools can be used to foster resilience at work.

Assumptions, research questions and hypotheses

It has been assumed that coaching removes cognitive and workplace obstacles to resilience, it helps employees to become aware of the problems and find the solutions, it empowers, motivates and encourages employees to take action by discovering their cognitive resources, making them aware of their professional successes in the past and becoming more resilient i.e. self-confident, motivated, realistically optimistic, pro-active, and developing good problem-solving skills.

Research questions

Based on the above, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. How do employees in Iran and neighboring countries feel about their work? Are they satisfied at work? Are they resilient?

2. Is coaching effective in recognizing and removing cognitive and workplace obstacles to achieve job satisfaction and resilience? After coaching, do they feel more empowered and motivated to overcome difficulties and achieve resilience at work?

Hypotheses

Based on the above research questions, the following hypotheses have been set up:

Hypothesis 1. Employees in Iran and neighboring countries are satisfied with their work, they are resilient when they face challenges, i.e. they can adapt to challenges and solve the problems at work.

Hypothesis 2. Coaching is effective in removing cognitive and workplace obstacles. After the coaching sessions, employees feel emotionally and cognitively more empowered and motivated to achieve resilience, have a realistic picture of the workplace and find solutions.

THE DESIGN OF THE RESEARCH

Population

Our research examined employee's attitude, feelings, job satisfaction, resilience and flexibility at work. The sample of the research was 60 employees in different organizations in Iran and neighboring countries.

Materials and methods

The research included three stages: stage 1.) a qualitative questionnaire survey (H1), stage 2.) interviews (H1), and stage 3.) coaching sessions (H2).

The first stage of research

The first stage of research was a questionnaire survey, which had 4 questions and was sent to 60 employees, of whom 30 employees filled in the questionnaire. The responses were anonymous, no demographic data were asked. The questionnaire served to examine Hypothesis 1.

Results of the questionnaire

The questions and results of the questionnaire are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The results of the questionnaire

question	yes answers	no answers
1. Have you ever felt that there are obstacles for you at work?	30 (100%)	0
2. If so, do these obstacles have a negative impact on your work?	30 (100%)	0
3. Do you feel satisfied at work?	10 (33%)	20 (67%)
4. Do you feel that you can adapt to challenges and solve your problems at work?	11 (37%)	19 (63%)

Source: Authors' own editing

Our data showed that all the employees (100%) see obstacles (q1) at work, which have negative impacts on their work (100%) (q2). They do not feel satisfied at work (67%) (q3), and they feel that they cannot adapt to challenges and solve their problems at work (63%) (q4).

The findings of the questionnaire survey refuted Hypothesis 1.

The second stage of research

At this stage, 13 employees volunteered from the 30 employees who filled in the questionnaire. They were interviewed in person. The interviews were max. 10 minutes long.

Interview questions

Two interview questions were asked from each of the interviewees, of which one question was open-ended. They were the following:

1. Are the existing obstacles related to your organization or to you (your personal or professional background)?
2. Please specify, what obstacles do you have at work?

Results of the interviews

Table 3 and Table 4 show the answers to the interview questions. In Table 4, the answers have been grouped thematically, as we were trying to identify the common and significant answers. The answers have been edited linguistically, since most of the employees did not speak English well.

Table 3. Responses to question 1. in the interview

Question 1.	organization	you
Are the existing obstacles related to the organization or to you (your personal or professional background)?	11 (85%)	2 (15%)

Source: Authors' own editing

Table 4. Responses to question 2. in the interview

Please specify, what obstacles do you have at work?
The management and the organization do not support employees
1. The organization does not have funds for the career promotion of employees.
2. There are no training courses for employees.
3. The management does not really bother about employees.
4. I do not trust in the senior managers.
5. I do not have support from the CEO.
6. The CEO refuses to solve the problems.
7. There are very high expectations at work.
8. Individual goals and values are not aligned with the goals and values of the job and the organization.
9. I have tried to talk to the management, but it was not successful, I do not want to repeat it.
10. It is useless to talk about the problems.
11. My boss does not accept my suggestions. He never pays any attention to me.
12. Nobody helps me to reduce to reduce my fears, anxiety, to increase my confidence.
13. I have no hope that my salary will be increased.
14. I have no hope that I will be respected more in the organization.
15. I feel alone in my career.
16. There are a lot of other problems in the organization.

Lack of personal ambitions
1. I am not motivated and enthusiastic to face new challenges, responsibilities, grow and learn.
2. I do not want a new job.
3. I don't want to be responsible for anything.
Dilemmas and fears
1. I do not have sufficient experience.
2. I do not have not enough soft skills and competences needed for job promotion.
3. I don't consider myself worthy of a job promotion.
4. I have a fear of accepting new responsibilities and risks.
5. I have a fear of not having enough self-knowledge, confidence and self-awareness needed for a new job.
6. I have a fear of not succeeding in my career.
Others (burnout)
1. I do not find enjoyment and purpose in work except to earn money.
2. I am tired.
3. I do not see the meaning of life.
4. I am a human being, not a source of profit for the organization.
Factors outside of the organization: family and the country
1. There are very high expectations from my family, they only want me to bring home more money.
2. Family do not support me.
3. There is no work-life balance in my life.
4. I have a fear of being unable to meet the expectations of my family.
5. There is no stability in the economic and political situations of the country.

Source: Authors' own editing

To sum up, the findings of the interviews gave a bleak picture of workplace obstacles, challenges and satisfaction (q1). 85% of the respondents felt that the obstacles are related to the company, whereas only 15% said that their personal background is the root cause of workplace difficulties. Our findings show that the management and the organization do not support employees, they have a lot of bad experiences. At the same time, the personal and individual background of employees make their situation even more difficult and complicated (q2): some of the employees lack personal ambitions, have dilemmas and fears, some of them seem to have burnout, and do not get support from the family. There are quite a few cognitive and individual barriers, and workplace obstacles, most of the employees are demotivated and frustrated.

The findings of the interview refuted Hypothesis 1., and consequently, confirmed the results of the questionnaire.

The third stage of research

The interviews were followed by a 15-minute long coaching session with each of the 13 interviewees, the focus of the sessions was how they can overcome cognitive and workplace obstacles. At the end of the coaching session, two questions were asked:

1. After the coaching session, what solutions can you see to remove the personal and organizational obstacles?
2. How do you feel now?

Table 5 shows the answers of the employees thematically grouped, and edited.

Table 5. Employee's solutions to workplace problems

Development of better communication with the management, senior managers and colleagues
1. I need to learn how to communicate effectively with the senior manager, the CEO, and my team and colleagues.
2. I need to develop effective communication and relationship with the management.
3. I need to learn how to have a direct and transparent conversation with the senior manager.
4. I need to learn soft skills (presentation and negotiation skills).
Professional development is crucial
1. I need to learn more job skills and competences.
2. I need learn from others' work experiences.
3. I need to learn to align my individual goals and values with job and organization goals and values.
Improve work-life balance and determine balance between family and personal goals
1. I need to learn more life skills in order to discuss my job with family, and if necessary, be happy at work without family support.
2. I need to find work-life balance, to determine professional and personal goals and values, and align these goals and values.
3. I need to learn how to give enough time for personal growth and development.
4. I need to pay attention to myself: I need more recreation and rest, spending more time alone (more me-time), more time with family, more communication with children, more time with peers and friends, improving emotional relationship and repairing emotional wounds of the past, go to medical check-ups and psychoanalysis sessions, more exercising and improving my physical condition, using relaxation exercises such as yoga, meditation, and breathing exercises, and staying away from the media, news, social networks.

Results of the coaching sessions

To sum up the findings of stage three of the research, we can conclude that employees felt more empowered and motivated after coaching, and they found solutions to their problems, such as development of better communication with the management, senior managers and colleagues, commitment to professional development, the need to improve work-life balance and balance between family and personal goals. All of them felt much better and more optimistic at this point. The findings of the coaching session confirmed Hypothesis 2.: coaching can be effective to remove and cope with mental and organizational obstacles, find solution relying on internal resources, i.e. to make employees more resilient in difficult work situations. Our findings are consistent with the research of Grant (2017) and Minzlaff – Palmer – Travis (2024).

Conclusions and suggestions

Based on the results of the questionnaire, interviews and coaching sessions, it can be claimed that employees in Iran and neighboring countries seem to be demotivated and unhappy regarding their workplace (H1, questionnaire and interview results). At the same time, coaching techniques proved to be useful to remove cognitive barriers, find solutions to challeng-

es, create a sense of empowerment and motivation, i.e. to be more resilient (H2, coaching).

As a result of coaching, employees felt proactive and motivated, less disappointed and indifferent, because they have found solutions themselves relying on their own mental resources and determining the action to be taken: develop communication, professional and soft skills, improve workplace processes, determine work-life balance and balance between family and personal goals.

Based on our research findings, we came to the conclusion that coaching develops awareness and helps to remove cognitive and organizational obstacles resulting from organizational traditions and past experiences, and to find solutions to problems by opening up new perspectives. By removing cognitive and organizational obstacles by coaching, motivation to solve a problem by themselves is increased, resilience is achieved easier.

Based on our research results and despite the its limitations (due to the small number of the sample), the introduction of coaching into organizations is highly recommended, since it seems to be an effective method for personal and organizational problem-solving. The research should be extended to a bigger population and in other countries.

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