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individual coaching & coaching development

Currents in Coaching Research Newsletter

The Measure of Coaching: Looking for the Methodology that is "Just Right"

I admit that I was caught by Colleen Harding's title, "Researcher as Goldilocks: Searching for a method that is just right for coaching and mentoring study" (1) for two reasons. One is that I can't resist fairy tales. The second is that the question of appropriate methods for the study of coaching is both complex and intriguing and I'm interested in current thinking that rests on scholarship. The introduction to coaching research class which I teach for the University of Texas at Dallas is, as I caution learners, a "speed dating" version of the possibilities. Many learners express an interest in and comfort with numbers and want to demonstrate coaching impact quantitatively. While numeric research has its place, I don't believe that numbers alone are necessarily the most explanatory, persuasive or insightful way to understand a phenomenon in coaching. Thus, Harding's article, which explores the territory of methodological decision-making and weighs three qualitative approaches as applied to a single coaching question, provides a useful alternative or complement to quantitative measurement.

The Decision Process

Harding notes that calls for more research in the coaching literature reflect a spectrum of preferences and values, ranging from an objectivist perspective which relies on quantitative outcome measures of rigorous, controlled interventions to constructivist and naturalistic forms of inquiry. Harding notes that researchers at the positivist end of the spectrum regard measurement as "fundamental to scientific activity" with mathematics, statistical tests and probability conferring "additional credibility" (p13). Researchers who believe that truth and meaning are socially constructed by the participants in an event may be more inclined toward a qualitative approach, with the researcher, as interpreter, being an integral element of the process. Mixed methods designs, combining both quantitative and qualitative strategies, may be best suited to address some research questions. Harding suggests that researchers must be aware of and work through their philosophical positions as an essential precursor to making the practical decisions of designing an approach to researching a coaching phenomenon.

Harding introduces her study example with a research question: "How are coaching and mentoring being used to support the alignment of academic staff and institutional strategy during a period of significant organizational change?" (p.14). The study takes place at a university in England, although the question itself could be easily transposed to a non-academic setting. As a first step in the methodological decision making process, Harding

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Researcher's Haiku

leaving academia-
joining my friends:
birds, trees, and wind.

David Rosen in Frog Pond vol 32:3, 2009

(Readers are invited to e-mail their researcher's haiku - original or otherwise-for inclusion in future issues. Your feedback on this issue is welcome, too!)

References

(1) Colleen Harding (2009).

Researcher as Goldilocks: search for a methodology that is "just right" for a coaching and mentoring study. International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring. Special Issue No. 3. November 2009. Retrieved 6/29/10 from:

<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/>

considers the implications of the question. What is this study about? What types of phenomenon (e.g. faculty emotions, tensions between different groups within the university staffing) might emerge? How are these best measured? As Harding considers the responses to her self-posed questions, she sees that a constructivist approach might be best suited to capitalize on the participants' meaning making of a complex and systemic experience. She considers her own role in the research process, recognizing that the characteristics of the researcher are an integral component of the data collection and interpretation processes.

Too Hot, Too Cold, Just Right

Following the Goldilocks metaphor, Harding weighs three methodological approaches to her research project: action research, grounded theory and case study. She considers each with respect to which characteristics might misfit and which best fit the study objectives.

Action research may be "too hot" insofar as it is lengthy, time consuming, iterative, requires a considerable amount of work by all participants and may challenge the impartiality of a researcher who is also employed by the organization. It is "too cold" because characteristics of the research site may limit the applicability of the findings. It is "just right" because action research addresses real world problems and the experiences of participants, entails a collaborative approach which might temper the potential for researcher bias, and has the potential to provide useful data to help answer the question of how coaching and mentoring are supporting the alignment of staff and institutional strategy.

Grounded theory seemed "too big" to Harding given the evolving structure and nature of the such research, the potential for researcher bias and the solo researcher vs. collaborative approach. However, it is an appropriate strategy for uncovering the social processes which underlie behavior and would not be constrained by current theoretical constructs.

Case study can be useful in understanding how context and behavior influence each other. For Harding's study, however, finding ways to confine the large number of variables and data points and avoid being biased by her insider knowledge suggested this method might be "too big". As with action research, the particularity of the setting might also make it "too small" to constitute a significant contribution to the field.

Conclusion

Harding does not reveal her choice of "just right". Instead, she uses the example to effectively demonstrate that selection of the right research method is a process which requires weighing a number of factors, including the research question, researcher characteristics and preferences, to assess and choose the right fit for a research design.

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