

Acceptance and Commitment Coaching

Distinctive Features

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The world according to ACC

For many coachees, especially those in the business world, the Acceptance and Commitment Coaching (ACC) approach feels like a radical departure. They, like almost all of us, have been raised to believe a number of things about life and how to navigate it. For instance, one overwhelmingly popular belief – if not always expressed in exactly these terms – is that the key to fulfilment in life is to avoid discomfort and pursue “happiness”. When an attempt is made to define what is meant by happiness, it is normally described as a state where pleasant feelings and thoughts outnumber unpleasant feelings and thoughts.

A further belief – one that is popular in the Western world in general, but particularly fuels the worlds of business and sport – is that the achievement of “success” is the most reliable means of banishing unpleasant internal experiences and achieving happiness. In this context, success is often equated with status, influence, material reward and affirmation and esteem from others.

You can see how the combination of these two beliefs can tie people up in knots: perpetually chasing a definition of success almost entirely defined by factors external to the self, in pursuit of a state – “happiness” – which is by its nature ephemeral.

The ACC philosophy, while sometimes exploring ideas of the self and involving the kind of meditative exercises that can initially be met with scepticism, is determinedly pragmatic. It posits that uncomfortable, unwanted thoughts and feelings are an inevitable part of life; indeed, that a life that is fully lived,

rich, fun and fulfilling will necessarily involve willingly exposing oneself to this stuff. It also acknowledges that, as human beings, we are pretty much hard-wired to avoid unpleasant internal events. This natural inclination, and its limitations as a means of navigating through life, is beautifully captured in the story of “The Bear and the Blueberry Bush”.

Imagine you are following a path through a forest. You have been following the path for several hours and you are not 100% sure where you are going. Already on the journey there have been some really cool, fun moments – things you’ve seen that have been weird and beautiful. But there have been some unpleasant moments too – stuff that has been scary, and at times you’ve felt completely lost. Right now you know that you are a little bit tired and very hungry . . .

Then you come to a fork in the path – it splits off in two directions. When you look down one path you see, bathed in sunlight, a tall, lush, wild blueberry bush. When you look down the other path you see, snarling from the shadows, an enormous, hulking, grizzly bear. Which path do you choose?

Naturally, almost everybody who considers this question will choose the path with the blueberry bush. It’s no more than common sense from an evolutionary perspective. We have evolved to avoid things that are or feel threatening, while moving towards those that offer safety and security and nourishment. This has helped us to survive and prosper as a species, and remains a helpful guiding principle when applied to the external world. But it becomes a trap when we apply it too rigidly to our internal worlds – the world of thoughts, feelings, memories and sensations. If we always avoid situations that are challenging, a bit scary or that take us out of our comfort zones, our lives become very limited. Sure, it works in the short term – there is a sense of relief in not having to put up with those horrible thoughts and feelings. But in the long term?

Nothing changes. You don't connect, you don't do the stuff that matters most, you don't grow or develop or push yourself.

The role of the ACC coach is to propose to our coachees that it is not the presence of unwelcome thoughts and feelings that is problematic and that derails us in life, it is the way that we tend to respond to them. It is the impulse to push them away, deny them, struggle with them or avoid situations in which they might be evoked that keeps us stuck. In addition to this, our role is then to help them develop their *psychological flexibility*.

Psychological flexibility is the ability to fully connect with the present moment in order to engage behavioural patterns supporting movement towards valued ends. It is comprised of six processes: *acceptance*, *defusion*, *contact with the present moment*, *self-as-context*, *values* and *committed action*. These processes are set out visually in a hexagon, also known as the Hexaflex (see Figure 1.1).

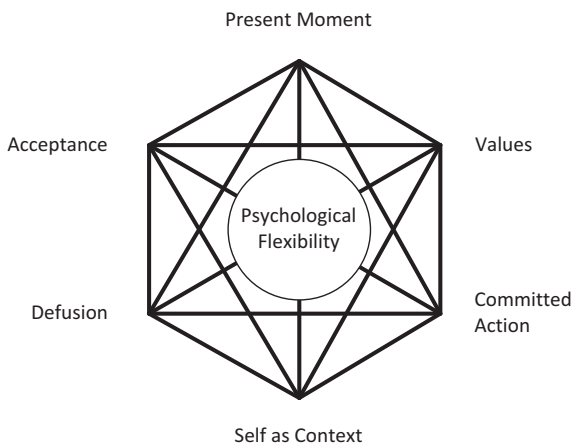


Figure 1.1 The ACT Hexaflex

As coaches we will be working with people who want more from their lives in some way – where they are now is not where they want to be. Perhaps they want to develop as leaders at work; perhaps they want to forge a new career entirely; perhaps they want to improve their performance in a sport or physical pursuit; perhaps they want to find a better balance between work life and personal life. For them, changing will mean stepping into the unknown, and doing that is bound to provoke some challenging or uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. The ACC approach is to consider these thoughts and feelings entirely normal and healthy. Indeed, they can be seen as “the price of admission” to a life that is rich, fulfilling, fun, challenging and fully lived. As you will see, a growing body of research suggests that helping coachees to develop their psychological flexibility is a proven, effective way of enabling them to consciously move towards their goals and values.