

**Case study article on Relational Mindfulness for coaches
at Imperial College London
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Building on her previous three-part series exploring relational mindfulness (RM), Emma Donaldson-Feilder, with Imperial College's Lindsay Comalie, shares how an RM programme has supported the College's coaches to gain insight and deepen their coaching practice

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Imperial College London's Coaching Academy was launched in 2009 and was one of the first of its kind within the higher education sector. Its 48 in-house coaches are drawn from all over the College community and a range of professional backgrounds, providing coaching alongside their 'day job'. The Academy provides ongoing continuing professional development for the coach community, offering supervision and three workshops each year to help coaches maintain and build their capabilities, learn about new approaches to coaching and build relationships within the coach community. When the pandemic lockdown happened in March 2020, Comalie, who leads the Academy, transitioned the coach CPD programme to be offered online.

Relational Mindfulness (RM) was an attractive proposition for Imperial coaches because of the focus on encouraging people to work mindfully and pay deeper attention to the quality of speaking and listening. In an environment where coaching had switched rapidly to virtual methods and coaches were having to adapt to a potential loss of cues such as body language or embodied insights, this felt very timely. Comalie was intending that the session would also enable the coaches to feel resourced for their own work during a challenging time, and to support their coaching clients.

The programme

It was agreed that the programme would be delivered in two half-day sessions: a full day online seemed too intense, but multiple shorter sessions would present scheduling challenges, so this was a good compromise. Having a week's gap between the sessions offered the advantage of allowing the coaches to engage in learning activities, and to reflect on and implement their learning from the first session before returning for the second.

The agreed aims for the programme were for participants to experience RM practice and how it can help coaches:

- Bring present moment, non-judgemental awareness to speaking and listening in our coaching work and beyond
- Build moment-by-moment awareness of our own and others' relational patterns
- Establish more resilient ways of being in relationship with our clients and others

- Develop supportive, collaborative relationships to enhance our coaching practice and what we embody for our clients.

See box for more about RM.

BOX 1

What is relational mindfulness?

The relational mindfulness (RM) programmes that Donaldson-Feilder offers incorporates a particular form of RM practice that is based on Insight Dialogue (ID), developed by Gregory Kramer (Kramer, 2007). This has a number of distinguishing characteristics, including:

- **Dialogic form of meditation, supported by silent/personal practice:** the formal guided practice of RM involves meditating together in dyads, small groups or a large group. Initially, there's usually a designated speaker and the other(s) is/are the listener(s). This separation of roles supports the meditative quality of the practice. The formal practice of RM always includes an initial period of silent/personal meditation to settle and ground the co-meditators, together with mindful pauses at regular intervals to bring them back into the moment if needed and deepen the meditational basis.
- **Six guidelines that anchor the meditative nature of the practice:**
 - the first two guidelines – *Pause* and *Relax/Allow* – ground RM practice in a mindful, non-judgemental, receptive awareness of the present moment.
 - The third and fourth guidelines – *Open* and *Attune to emergence* – mark the transition from personal to relational by expanding the awareness to include the other person or people, the flux and flow of the relational moment and the constantly changing nature of experience.
 - The final two guidelines – *Listen deeply* and *Speak the truth* – invite us to speak and listen as a form of meditation, bringing authenticity and full presence into each moment of dialogue.
- **Contemplation topics that steer the meditative sharing:** a contemplation topic or question offers those practising RM the opportunity to explore experientially the nature of being human and human relationships. It's designed to encourage a re-evaluation of assumptions, habits and patterns and an examination of aspects of the human experience in the moment.

For a longer explanation of RM, see Donaldson-Feilder's previous articles in Coaching at Work (links provided in reference list).

The delivery

The sessions were conducted on the Zoom video-conferencing platform during two consecutive weeks in July 2020. Some 20 coaches attended the first session, of whom 16 were able to attend the second. During the sessions, Donaldson-Feilder guided both individual and relational mindfulness practices. For the relational practice, having been guided into mindful awareness and given the contemplation topic/question, participants engaged in mindful dialogues in groups of three, with each triad practising in a separate Zoom breakout room. There was some input on relevant frameworks and models, but the emphasis of the sessions was on experiential learning, encouraging participants to engage with their felt sense and access the wisdom of their bodies and hearts as well as their minds.

Participants were invited to read the first of Donaldson-Feilder's *Coaching at Work* articles before the first session, the second article between the two sessions and the third after the second session. They were given guidance on buddying up with one another to engage in RM practice between and after the sessions, and on incorporating mindful

pauses into their lives. They also received a five-minute audio to help them practice pausing and relaxing/allowing before coaching sessions, meetings and other interactions.

Participants were asked to complete a reflection questionnaire before the first session and a feedback questionnaire after the second session. This included a research-based set of questions designed to measure participants' level of RM to see whether it changed over the period of the programme.

What participants valued

Participant feedback suggested that the programme created a space for coaches to feel calmer, more at ease and well-resourced amongst the busy working day, and to feel more confident about the richness that can be found in virtual coaching. It enabled the coaches to gain insight by bringing mindful awareness into moments of relational interaction:

"...deeper insights of how the relationship also supports the awareness. For instance, how seeing their beauty and vulnerabilities awakens my own, and increased awareness of my inner experiences (physical sensation, feelings) in response to the external... I now have a deeper appreciation of how I respond to the coaching relationship..."

The emphasis on attentive, mindful listening and allowing silence seemed to strike a chord with the coaches, several of whom felt reminded of the value for the coach and/or client of listening without interrupting:

"How listening can be so powerful and the use of silence..."

"Pausing and allowing my coachee the space to be and talk without feeling like I need to respond."

As part of this mindful listening, the invitation for coaches to slow down and not rush in with questions or comments seemed to be of particular value:

"Just how beneficial slowing down and pausing is and how doing this can beneficially influence interactions with others"

Although all the participants had some familiarity with mindfulness practice before the sessions, they appreciated being reminded of the value of being in the moment – and particularly bringing that into relational interactions, such as coaching sessions:

"Being in the moment and situation is very powerful..."

"...spending a few mindful moments at the beginning of a session could help anxious, agitated coachees"

There was some indication that participants felt that more RM would be of value to them and others in the Imperial coaching community:

"I think this was a particularly useful session that might be incorporated into future training and perhaps revisited as part of CPD in the next 12-24 months"

Improvements for next time

While the feedback was overwhelmingly positive (quantitative responses to the feedback questions all averaged over 4 out of 5), there were some useful comments about how the programme could be improved in future, including potentially more content input:

"...more on the use and applications in coaching sessions"

"...have an introductory part for those who have no idea about it..."

There was some indication that more could be done ahead of time to prepare participants for what to expect from the programme, particularly for those completely unfamiliar with the area:

"Possibly telling people that there is a meeting time between the sessions in advance."

BOX 2

Learning about offering sessions on Zoom

- Take breaks often. Regular short pauses are helpful to prevent Zoom-fatigue and support energy. Include an invitation for people to stretch and pay attention to what their body needs.
- Use the Zoom chat function for quick, simple sharing – such as feedback on a meditation practice – and save verbal input for more complex reflections. For the latter, allow plenty of time as the process of people unmuting themselves and sharing makes it rather slower than in in-person events.
- Offering sessions on Zoom gets easier as you get more familiar with the functionality!

Findings from the RM measure

Only a small sub-section of the participants completed the research-based set of questions both before and after the programme, so firm conclusions cannot be drawn from the results, but there did seem to be small improvements in participants' scores on non-judgemental acceptance and non-reactivity.

Conclusions

Experience of this programme suggests that RM has much to offer coaches in terms of insight, quality of attention and listening, and pausing, thereby helping them to enhance their coaching relationships and deepen their coaching practice – including when coaching virtually.

Emma Donaldson-Feilder is a chartered occupational psychologist, RM teacher, coaching psychologist, and coach supervisor who aims to support the development of kinder, wiser workplaces with more relational leadership and people management, and improved employee health and wellbeing. For more information about her and about RM, please visit <https://affinitycands.com>.

Lindsay Comalie is an experienced organisational development consultant, coach, coach supervisor and positive psychologist who aims to enable inclusive, collaborative, supportive and sustainable environments for optimum organisational performance; building lasting partnerships to make an impactful and positive difference. For more information: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/lindsaycomalie/>.

References and further information

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